

On the (Im)Possibility of Narrating Violence from the Perpetrator's Point of View: The Case of Martín Kohan's *Dos Veces Junio*

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On the (Im)Possibility of Narrating Violence from the Perpetrator's Point of View: The Case of Martín Kohan's *Dos Veces Junio*

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Acts of violence grounded in historical events are a common subject across different forms of fictional narrative – from literature and film to television, comic books, and video games. Readers of narrative fiction are accustomed to encountering violent historical contexts such as the Holocaust, or the genocide in Rwanda, or the military dictatorship in Argentina on the page. Violence can also be a mode of representation, that is, the manner of its representation in fiction can itself be violent. Whether as a subject or as a mode of representation, it tends to have an intense emotional effect on readers and is usually perceived as a transgression (of the rules of society, or of the limits of the body, to name just two instances). Depictions of violence are often explicit and detailed; as such they carry the danger of reproducing physical violence on another level, including potentially negative emotional effects (fear, disgust, anger) on the reader-witness.

Most narratives about violent events set in the historical past focus on the victims (Suleiman, 2009). This is the case, for example, in autobiographical witness literature on the Holocaust. First-person memoirs by Robert Antelme, Ruth Klüger, and Primo Levi, or works of semi-autobiographical fiction by Jorge Semprun, among others, present extreme violence, torture, and mass murder from the point of view of those who suffered it and survived.¹ Their narratives focus on the physical and psychological effect of violence on the victims, probing what happens to human beings when they are exposed to extreme violence. To use admittedly simplified terms, the ethical – the outward – purpose of these texts is to bear witness, to show readers the awful consequences of violence, and to encourage them to stand up against instances of violence and inhumanity in the world.

Pure fiction (that does not, as opposed to memoir or autobiographical fiction, refer to historical events) often makes use of other, ethically less unambiguous, ways of

¹ See, among others, Antelme, 1947; Klüger, 1992; Levi, 1947; Semprun, 1963.

representing violence.² As Mandy Dröscher-Teille writes in her introduction to a recent study of violence in literature:

Gewalt muss nicht ‚offensichtlich‘ moralisch verurteilt werden, um eine kritische Perspektive auf sie zu erzeugen. Letztere lässt sich auch über eine scheinbar affirmative Haltung zur Gewalt herstellen, etwa, wenn Gewalt ästhetisch überzeichnet wird. Gerade in der Ambivalenz, Gewalt zu kritisieren, indem diese provokativ inszeniert wird, liegt ein Potenzial zur Reflexion. Dieses reflexive Moment kann wiederum sowohl über eine ästhetische Formung der Gewalt als auch über eine inhaltliche Darstellung von Gewaltformen herausgebildet werden. (Dröscher-Teille, 2021)³

Though the manner of representing violence may be highly nuanced, it is however unusual to present historical violence from the point of view of the perpetrators. This is particularly the case with fiction that addresses specific forms of historical violence: organized mass violence, genocide, and other crimes against humanity.

If it is considered abhorrent, even impossible, to narrate these forms of violence without the (at least implicit) ethical intent to criticize it, does that make certain works of fiction impossible? Here I use the term *impossible fictions* in the sense of the ethical limits of representation. In some cases, it would seem *impossible* (that is, “unacceptable” from a moral perspective) to depict historical violence in a certain manner. Depending on the individual work, fictional renderings of such violence from the point of view of the perpetrators could be deemed impossible for a wide range of potential consequences – for example, out of concern that readers might be inspired to emulate violent behavior or become desensitized to it (Zipfel, 2019). By this logic, the depiction of certain kinds of historical violence in fiction is only *possible* (that is, acceptable from a moral perspective) if it serves an ethical purpose. Dröscher-Teille notes, however, that moral condemnation may be couched in an “apparently affirmative” account. Here it is helpful to present the definition of narrative put forward by Hanna Meretoja and her colleagues in their book on the ethics of storytelling: “a mode of engagement and imagination that is an event in the present, oriented simultaneously towards both the past and the future.” (Meretoja and Davis, 2018, p. 7) This definition implies that memory practices such as narrating acts of violence set in the past not only represent the past but also have an effect on the present that could extend to the future (especially in influencing the behavior and perception of readers).

² See, among others, Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* (2004) in which he describes, one by one, the brutal murder of 112 women (in “The Part about the Crimes”). For the analysis of another example see also Seauve (2020).

³ “Violence need not be morally condemned outright for it to generate a critical perspective. Even an apparently affirmative attitude toward violence – for example, the aesthetic exaggeration of violence – can create the latter [i.e., a critical perspective]. There is a potential for reflection precisely in the ambivalence of criticizing violence by staging it provocatively. This reflexive moment can in turn be developed both through an aesthetic shaping of violence as well as through a thematic presentation of forms of violence.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Martín Kohan's 2002 novel *Dos veces junio* offers an opportunity to probe the question of the "impossibility" of narratives of historical violence told primarily from the point of view of the perpetrators (Rothberg, 2019). The extreme difficulty of this mode of representation lies in the fact that the narrator himself expresses (or tolerates) ethically unacceptable violent attitudes and actions. Autodiegetic narratives typically invite the reader to identify with the narrator, to develop empathy toward him. *The Living Handbook of Narratology* even states that narratives in general teach empathy (Keen, 2020). But granting this voice to a perpetrator or complicit bystander breaks a taboo by inviting the reader to empathize with an evil character. In a text examining Holocaust narratives from the point of view of the perpetrators, Jenni Adams notes that "fear of contagion arguably underlies the unease surrounding imaginative engagements with perpetrator perspectives, engagements potentially facilitated by the techniques of narrative fiction – rendering such fiction a particular ground for ethical contention." (Adams, 2015) Contagion here refers to the danger that violent behavior and thought could potentially rub off on the reader. Another aspect of the taboo involves neglecting the voice of the victims in order to give voice instead to the wrongdoers. They are thus given the space that (historically speaking) they have already taken away from the victims.

Shifting the center of interest from the victim to the reader, we might ask the following: In a work of fiction told from the point of view of a perpetrator – in an *impossible fiction* – what is supposed to happen (emotionally) to the reader? I venture to answer that the presumed ethical impossibility of this narrative point of view actually harbors in its very transgression the possibility of arousing a strong emotional reaction in the reader. When handled deftly, as Kohan does in *Dos veces junio*, fiction that narrates historical violence from the perpetrator's point of view can indeed have an ethical impact on the reader, not only in the present but also in the future.

The depiction of violence in *Dos veces junio*

The title of Kohan's novel, which could be translated as "Two Times June," refers to two historical soccer games held during successive World Cups – both of which were lost by the Argentinian national team (Kohan, 2002). The two dates – June 10, 1978 and June 30, 1982 – frame the plot of the novel, which is set in Buenos Aires. The title already lays bare one of the techniques of the text, bringing seemingly minor themes (soccer) to the fore while the issues of omnipresent but hidden violence and oppression are kept beneath the surface.

The novel consists of short narrative fragments, sometimes only a few lines, rarely more than a page long. Most of these are told by an autodiegetic narrator, a young man and military recruit working as a chauffeur to a military doctor under the last dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). Miguel Dalmaroni, in his study of the role of critique and memory in Argentine literature, rhetorically declares that this narrative point of view is impossible and that Kohan's narrator is therefore "impossible": The notion of the "impossible," for Dalmaroni, rests on the problem of realism. He begins by expressing disbelief that a realistic (and reliable) narrator would present the events in as detached a way as Kohan's protagonist presents them. But he quickly admits that this narrative point of view actually reproduces an attitude toward historic reality that did – and does – exist. It is, he writes, the view of a "historic Other." Even if we *would like* this narrator to be impossible, this Other and his attitudes are in fact all too real (Dalmaroni, 2004, p. 164)

A few of the narrative fragments in Kohan's novel are told from a heterodiegetic point of view that is internally focalized on a nameless woman – a pregnant prisoner held in a clandestine detention center in Buenos Aires. She is subjected to heavy torture and, in the end, probably murdered. Other narrative fragments have a heterodiegetic neutral narrator and an external focus, supplying facts and figures that mostly revolve around soccer (see Simpson, 2014).⁴ The text fragments are arranged in a loose and not always chronological order, which results in a consistent story but nevertheless contains many breaks and jumps in narrative flow, challenging the reader to actively connect these fragments and grasp the plot, particularly its hidden aspects.

The very first sentences of the novel, which begins in *medias res*, expose the protagonist's attitude toward the crimes of the regime, his complete lack of compassion, and his opportunism. The opening mentions the misspelling of the Spanish word *empezar* (to begin), which is, in a notebook the narrator finds on a desk, written with an *s* instead of a *z*, and the narrator's irrepressible urge to correct it:

El cuaderno de notas estaba abierto, en medio de la mesa. Había una sola frase escrita en esas dos páginas que quedaban a la vista. Decía: "¿A partir de qué edad se puede empesar a torturar a un niño?" . . . Mi pulso por entonces ya era bueno. Era capaz de enhebrar un hilo hasta en las agujas más pequeñas. Por eso pude agregar el trazo faltante a la letra ese, y que no se notara que había habido una corrección posterior. Desde siempre parecía haber sido una zeta, tal la gracia de la colita que yo adosé en la parte de abajo de la letra. Ahora la ese era una zeta, como corresponde. Pocas cosas me contrarían tanto como las faltas de ortografía. (Kohan 2002, p. 7-8)⁵

⁴ For a more detailed investigation on the role of soccer in the novel, see Simson, 2014, p. 305-332.

As the plot unfolds, the facts behind that disturbing question – “From what age can one begin torturing a child?”– come into focus (see Filinich, 2016). The prisoner, an opponent of the regime, gives birth in captivity, and her torturers want to determine whether they can hurt her newborn in order to force its mother at last into betraying her comrades. The prisoner herself has already been tortured in every way imaginable – rape, waterboarding, beatings, electroshocks, mock executions – not only during her pregnancy but also shortly after giving birth. This extreme violence is conveyed either (in a rather indirect way) from her point of view or by means of neutrally worded short doctor’s “recommendations” for how to proceed with the prisoner’s torture:

El doctor Padilla recomendó, ante todo para evitar un mal momento a los interesados, que nadie hiciera uso de la detenida, hasta tanto no pasaran unos treinta días desde el alumbramiento. Aclaró que a sus palabras había que tomarlas como una recomendación general, pero que luego cada uno era dueño de su vida. . . . El doctor Padilla aclaró que el trato rectal con la detenida no debía traer consecuencias negativas, siempre y cuando se prescindiera en lo posible de efectuar movimientos demasiado bruscos. En esta clase de movimientos, sin embargo, radicaba el mayor interés de los muchos que la buscaban. (p. 19-20)⁶

Celia Duperron notes how Kohan’s use of medical and technical discourse neutralizes meaning and emphasizes the significance of euphemism for the mode of the implicit that prevails in the text (Duperron, 2016). The technocratic language; the emotional distance between the language used and the acts it describes; the casual way in which Doctor Padilla’s “recommendations” are introduced into the text – all of these devices require readers to bring conscientiousness and accuracy to the page, refraining from overreading such passages while at the same time identifying their central importance for the text. And indeed, this implicit depiction of violence, along with the text’s fragmented structure, mirrors the clandestine nature of the state terror practiced by the military junta in Argentina from 1976 to 1983. The generous space given over to seemingly incidental information about soccer, cars, and the military draws attention to the fact that, under the dictatorship, “normal

⁵ “The notebook lay open, in the middle of the table. There was a single sentence written on the two pages that were visible. It read: ‘From what age can one begin torturing a child?’ [...] My pulse was good by then. I would have been able to thread even the smallest needle. That’s why I was able to add the missing stroke to the [letter] s [changing *empesar* to *empezar*] without leaving any hint that the correction had been made later. It seemed to have always been a z, such was the grace of the little tail that I appended to the bottom of the letter. Now the letter was a z, as it was meant to be. Few things annoy me as much as misspellings.”

⁶ “Dr. Padilla recommended, above all to avoid a bad situation for the parties involved, that no one should make use of the detainee until thirty days had passed after the birth. He made it clear that his words were to be taken as a general recommendation, but that each was master of his own affairs [...] Dr. Padilla clarified that rectal handling of the detainee should not have any negative consequences, as long as overly abrupt movements were for the most part avoided. In this type of movement, however, lay the greatest interest of the many who went to see her.”

life" continued even as the state secretly abducted, tortured, and murdered citizens by the tens of thousands.

The main narrator does not trouble himself with the ethical implications of the question regarding the torture of children. His boss, Doctor Mesiano, is attending the World Cup final (Argentina vs. Italy), and the protagonist must locate him as quickly as possible in order to obtain an answer to the question at hand. It is only the next morning that the doctor gives his response: it depends, he says, not on the age but on the weight of the child. Claiming that the baby is too light, Mesiano takes it with him and – as we learn later – gives it to his childless sister. It is rather unclear what kind of reasoning is involved here: An assessment of the vulnerability of the child? Its chances of survival? Or more likely, pure self-interest and the desire to claim the child as an "asset"? Is there potential moral ambiguity here? Does the doctor protect the child from torture by stealing it? What seems, in any case, most chilling here is the way abduction rests on a pretext of medical "ethics". The protagonist, for his part, does not seem to grasp that an abduction is taking place, or at least he does not narrate it openly; he merely mentions that the doctor is carrying a "thing" out of the prison. While Doctors Padilla and Mesiano are arguing about the baby, the woman herself pleads with the protagonist through a crack in the door of her cell. She tries to convince him to help her. With characteristic impassivity, the narrator recounts:

Sin esperar a que yo dijera nada, ella empezó a contar las cosas que estaban pasando. Siempre con esa voz ronca que sin esforzarse me llegaba con toda claridad. La voz ronca me fue diciendo cada cosa que le habían hecho. En un momento no quise escuchar más y le dije: "Callate, vos. Callate la boca". Pero no me moví. No me moví porque si me movía capaz que sentía el tirón en el pulóver, de ella que me agarraba. Y no quería. Tampoco quería escucharla más, pero ella seguía hablando. Yo no me moví y ella siguió hablando. (p. 97)⁷

In the protagonist's summary of the conversation, the violence done to the young woman forms a blank space that underscores his own complete denial of the facts. He does not want to hear her voice. He does not want to feel her touch. He refuses to help the victim. Indeed, his reaction to her story is to inflict further violence on her – verbal violence.

"En unos meses te largan", me dijo. "En unos meses estás afuera y sos el de siempre." Ningún otro habló, si es que había algún otro cerca, ninguno chistó, ninguno silbó, y ella me seguía diciendo: "A vos no te va a pasar nada". Quería que avisara en qué lugar

⁷ "Without waiting for me to say anything, she began to recount the things that were happening. Always in that husky voice that came through to me so clearly without any effort. The hoarse voice kept telling me everything that had been done to her. At one point I didn't want to listen anymore, and I told her: 'Hey you, shut up. Shut your mouth.' But I didn't move. I didn't move because, if I had moved I might have felt the tug on my pullover, the tug of her grabbing me. And I didn't want to. I didn't want to listen to her anymore either, but she kept talking. I didn't move, and she kept talking."

la tenían. "Nada más que eso, no hace falta que digas quién sos." Yo le dije que se callara. Le dije que estaba harto de escucharla. Me pidió que le salvara al hijo, que llamara desde un teléfono público para decir dónde los tenían y que después cortara la comunicación. "Estás muerta, hija de puta", le decía yo, y ella me decía que avisara por el hijo. "Callate de una vez", le dije yo, "no hables más, hija de puta, no ves que ya estás muerta". Y ella me pedía por el hijo y por los compañeros. (p. 99)⁸

At this point in the novel, the reader is well aware of the physical violence that the woman has endured. The text makes it very clear that the narrator, too, knows all the details of her torture. But as a narrator, he refuses to act as a witness. He will not acknowledge the woman's suffering. But, in that his response to her request is nonetheless so violent, the moral force of her appeal becomes clear.

During the 1978 soccer match, while the protagonist waits outside the stadium for Doctor Mesiano and his son, he witnesses several disturbing incidents. One of these involves a stray dog resembling a German shepherd. He observes it playing with a golden ring inscribed with the words "Raul y Susana 1973." Instead of pocketing the ring, which he himself says is possibly valuable, the protagonist buries it deep in the sand with his boot, as if to remove the traces of a crime. The engraved names and the date suggest an engagement or wedding ring – possibly belonging to a (young) couple who were "disappeared" by the regime. Could it have even belonged to the unnamed prisoner herself, or to the father of her newborn? Even the dog seems paradoxically to be something (a German shepherd) that it is not, as the narrator tells us. This detail is symptomatic of the protagonist's averted gaze: he registers and recounts numerous minute details while missing the central point. Whether or not the dog is a German Shepherd is beside the point. The narrator fails to formulate the idea that the ring refers to a couple: two people who are now missing it and who now may themselves be missing, two people who may well have been kidnapped and/or murdered. Faced with his muteness, it is up to the reader to interpret what the protagonist himself has merely observed. At the same time, his instinct to bury the ring betrays a deeper reading of the situation and becomes a potent symbol of his denial.

⁸ "In a few months you'll be out," she told me. "In a few months you'll be out, and you'll be the same as always." No one else spoke, if there was anyone else around, no one squealed, no one whistled, and she kept telling me, "Nothing is going to happen to you." She wanted me to let people know where she was being held. "Nothing more than that; you don't need to say who you are." I told her to shut up. I told her I was tired of listening to her. She asked me to save her son [the baby], to call from a payphone to say where they were holding them and then hang up. "You're dead, bitch," I kept telling her, and she kept telling me to call about the son. "Shut up already," I told her, "don't talk anymore, bitch; don't you see you're already dead?" And she begged me for her son and for her companions."

The ethical potential of the narrator as bystander

In their widely discussed book on dealing with the Nazi past in Germany, Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider identify and criticize an all-too-common and all-too-sophisticated tendency in contemporary Germany to identify with the victims:

Allerdings hat sich dieses Mitfühlen und Mitleiden zu einem Identifizierungswunsch mit den Opfern entwickelt, und nicht nur individuell, auch gesellschaftlich ist daraus eine Art geliehene Identität erwachsen – ein Identitätswunsch, der die Opfer zwar umarmt, während die Täter und ihre Taten anonymisiert und pauschal verurteilt werden. Eine solche Erinnerungskultur hat ihr beunruhigendes, ihr subversives Potential verloren. (Jureit and Schneider, 2011, p. 36)⁹

Setting aside all due skepticism about a critique of German approaches to the past, Jureit and Schneider's point about the absence of perpetrators in German memory culture remains pertinent and can be extended to other historical contexts as well. It may be more convenient to identify with the victims than to ask the troubling question of what the perpetrators themselves may have felt. Certainly, it is tempting to marginalize perpetrators as deviants and monsters – just as it is tempting to deny that, however mystifying, man's violence to man is a part of the human condition. As Theresa Koloma Beck writes:

[D]ie Fähigkeit des Menschen zu Gewalt und seine gleichzeitige Verletzlichkeit durch Gewalt [sind] Teil der conditio humana . . . und [lassen] sich weder durch Kultur noch durch Fortschritt überwinden. . . . Die Frage, wie sich angesichts dieser grundsätzlichen Gewaltfähigkeit menschliches Zusammenleben organisieren lässt, stellt sich deshalb immer und überall. (Koloma Beck, 2017, p. 16)¹⁰

In his groundbreaking 1992 study *Ordinary Men*, historian Christopher Browning stressed that the German reserve policemen committing mass murder on the eastern front during World War II were not inhuman, evil psychopaths. He noted that the members of Reserve Police Battalion 101 mostly consisted of men too old for the normal German army (and therefore too old to have even been steeped in Nazi ideology as children). Yet they murdered tens of thousands of Jewish civilians – men, women, and children. His conclusion: "If the men of Reserve Police Battalion

⁹ "However, this sympathy and compassion has developed into a desire to identify with the victims, and not only individually, but also socially, a kind of borrowed identity has grown out of this – an identity desire that embraces the victims, to be sure, while the perpetrators and their deeds are anonymized and condemned across the board. Such a culture of remembrance has lost its *disturbing, its subversive, potential*" (my emphasis).

¹⁰ "Man's capacity for violence and his simultaneous vulnerability to violence are part of the human condition [...] and cannot be overcome by culture or progress [...] The question of how human coexistence can be organized in view of this fundamental capacity for violence therefore arises always and everywhere."

101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" (Browning, 1992, p. 189) Their atrocities stemmed from a conventional obedience to authority and a desire to be accepted by their peers, not from a particularly fervid embrace of Nazi ideology. When a work of fiction presents a perpetrator-narrator as pure evil – an inhuman psychopath – readers can withhold empathy from that figure altogether. There is, after all, little difficulty in distancing oneself emotionally from a fiend. A prominent example of this is the novel *Les Bienveillantes* by Jonathan Littell in which the reader is forced into a tense attitude towards the text and the protagonist: on the one hand, the narrator repeatedly invites him to an identificatory reading, but such a reading is ruled out by the monstrosity of his deeds and his thinking (see Seauve, 2017). Developing strong (negative) feelings toward such a protagonist, rejecting his logic and his feelings, and emphasizing the moral gulf between the reader and the narrator makes it possible to complete the novel, overcome negative emotions, and reestablish a sense of emotional and ethical equilibrium.

The narrator-protagonist of Kohan's novel is both a collaborator and a bystander. He is guilty both because he acts (he drives the doctor around and does his bidding) and because he does not (he refuses to help a torture victim). He expresses his low opinion of emotion in unequivocal terms: "*Todo lo sentimental me ha resultado siempre despreciable. Tanto más durante aquel año en el que fui soldado: un año transcurrido entre las armas y los hombres.*" (Kohan, 2002, p. 35)¹¹ And yet this man's declaration that he considers feelings to be "contemptible" by no means suggests a lack of emotion on his part, as Brigitte Andriaesen has claimed (2009). His abhorrence of sentimentality is itself an emotional reaction. The associations of masculinity (*los hombres*), violence (*las armas*), and imperviousness to emotion are made explicit here. However, it is an implicit rule of the (masculine) suspension of emotion in the military context that is imposed on the protagonist from the outside, so we cannot be sure that this attitude is actually his own.

What is so disturbing about Kohan's novel is not so much a lack of *feelings* on the narrator's part as the way his feelings seem misplaced, wrong. When he reads the question about the appropriateness of torturing a newborn, the only thing that bothers him is the misspelling of the word *empezar*. He later frets about whether he has crossed a line in correcting the mistake on his own initiative, all the while failing to express outrage that the regime he serves is perfectly willing to torture a child. As for the woman, he responds to her account of being tortured with fear and aggression – toward her, not toward the regime or his superior or even himself.

¹¹ "Everything emotional has always been contemptible to me. All the more during that year in which I was a soldier: a year spent among weapons and men."

These misplaced feelings render it *impossible* for the reader to identify with the protagonist; his emotional reactions make almost no sense at all. Were he a violent perpetrator who took pleasure in torturing his victims, the reader would have a ready outlet for feelings of hatred or disgust. But the out-of-place nature of the protagonist's own emotional reactions pose a greater challenge: how does one respond to such a protagonist? The incongruity between the appalling facts he describes and his own emotions (or lack thereof) elicits irritation and above all confusion. This is all the more so because the form of the text – a narrative told in the protagonist's own voice – would normally invite a reader to identify with him. Additionally, the protagonist categorically refuses to acknowledge the victim's suffering, to fulfill his task as a narrator: to bear witness to and verbalize the violence she recounts to him. Paradoxically, the blank spaces formed by his silence about the violence she endures serve to focus the reader's attention on that very violence. They provide insight not only into how the regime masks this violence but also into how it justifies it to itself.

By offering an ambiguous narrator in place of a purely evil protagonist-narrator, Martín Kohan puts his readers in a decidedly uncomfortable position. If we understand fiction as a consequence-free realm for rehearsing reality, the position of bystander is the one in which readers are in fact most likely to find themselves – be it in politics or in everyday life. This bystander is no hero, but he is also not a complete villain; he is merely an opportunist and a coward. This character – and, with it, the novel's invitation to look at the world through his eyes – reminds readers of their own position as *implicated subjects*, to use a term recently developed by Michael Rothberg. The notion puts a name on the fact that most people are in some way implicated in current or past crimes, or at least political injustices, such as structural racism or discrimination of LGBTQ+-people. "Implicated subjects," writes Rothberg, "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes." (Rothberg, 2019, p. 1)

More important than whether we identify with victims or perpetrators, for Rothberg, is the importance of recognizing ourselves as part of the system and structures that make violence possible (synchronic perspective) or have made it possible in the past (diachronic perspective). As a result, the *implicated subject*, according to Rothberg, is less an individual to be held responsible than a category of analysis (p. 7). Kohan's novel perfectly illustrates the category of the bystander as implicated subject insofar as even the main narrator's emotions are disconnected from the violence he witnesses; he is physically present in violent situations, present at sites of violence, but in many other ways he seems detached. This takes the concept of the

implicated subject to the extreme and – by offering the narrative point of view – implicates the reader, who temporarily stands in his shoes.

One of *Dos veces junio's* strategies for guiding the reader's attention and emotional reactions is to vaguely insinuate violent events before quickly redirecting the focus toward seemingly secondary details. This deflecting technique comes into play, for example, when the protagonist enters the detention center and, instead of describing what is happening inside, provides insignificant details about the building and its furnishings. Another instance occurs when the prisoner starts telling the narrator about the tortures she has endured, but he does not share what she says with the reader. Instead, he imagines what Doctor Mesiano is doing, wonders how his conversation with Doctor Padilla is going, and speculates about whether his boss will still ask him to drive him to Mass. The second obvious strategy of exerting an emotional impact on the reader is the presentation of the protagonist-narrator's permanently displaced emotions, which produces a strong sense of disorientation and irritation. Where violence is described, the respective narrators couch that violence in distanced, coded, technical language. In sum, the text is dominated by a mode of implicit writing that leaves the explicit violence, terror, and fear largely to the reader's imagination.

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By pressing us to imagine ourselves in the role of a complicit bystander – or by forcing us to struggle not to – Martín Kohan's narrative strategy in *Dos veces junio* poses a supremely uncomfortable question: how would we react in a similar situation? Clearly the behavior and especially the attitude of the narrator are ethically problematic, but he is not killing or torturing people directly. He is merely tolerating, or perhaps deliberately overlooking, such behavior. His most violent *act*, if one can call it that, is his refusal to help the women in the detention center. As to the reader's identification with the narrator: it is far easier to say with certainty "I would never be capable of torturing and killing someone" than to say in all honesty "I would never refuse to help someone by just walking away." The apparent ethical impossibility of the perpetrator's point of view thus potentially offers the reader an emotional – and ethical – experience. This effect is both more complex and more future-oriented than the one generated by identifying with and empathizing with the victim (Of course, readers may simultaneously feel empathy for the victim). A close examination of the bystander's point of view makes us aware as readers of our own position as *implicated subjects*. Indeed, a work like *Dos veces junio* with its *impossible narrator* can contribute to a culture of remembrance that unfolds the subversive and disturbing potential that Schröder and Jureit call for in their book. It

could even be read as part of a productive culture of remembrance insofar as it turns not only toward the past but also toward the future.

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PLAN

- The depiction of violence in *Dos veces junio*
- The ethical potential of the narrator as bystander

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[Voir ses autres contributions](#)

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