Memory, Catastrophe and Narratives of Pain: Primo Levi, Riobaldo and The Ghosts in the Experience of Trauma / *Memória, catástrofe e narrativas da dor: Primo Levi, Riobaldo e os fantasmas na experiência do trauma*

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the narrative of pain and trauma in witness and fictional works, taking as object of analysis memorialistic texts of the Italian writer Primo Levi, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, and Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande Sertão*: Veredas [*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*], especially the memories described by its protagonist Riobaldo Tatarana. Therefore, we propose a multidisciplinary approach, with theoretical scopes of narrative and knowledge about affection and memory, taking into perspective the phantasmatic figures that these texts bring. The correspondences and approximations between the discourses in analysis reveal effective bonds that unite them, provided they are read under horizons that amplify their messages, redefine their contours and engage in symbolic encounters that enrich the perception of the production of the investigated authors.
KEYWORDS: Memory; Primo Levi; Guimarães Rosa

RESUMO
Este artigo problematiza a narrativa da dor e do trauma em obras testemunhais e em trabalhos ficcionais, tomando como objetos de análise textos memorialísticos do escritor italiano Primo Levi, sobrevivente dos campos de concentração nazistas, e o romance Grande sertão: veredas*, de Guimarães Rosa, em especial as lembranças descritas por seu protagonista, o personagem Riobaldo Tatarana. Para tanto, propomos uma abordagem multidisciplinar, com escopos teóricos da narrativa e dos conhecimentos sobre afeto e memória, tendo em perspectiva as figuras fantasmáticas que esses textos trazem. As correspondências e aproximações entre os discursos em análise revelam efetivos laços que os unem, desde que lidos sob horizontes que ampliem suas mensagens, redefinam seus contornos e apostem em encontros simbólicos que enriqueçam o olhar a respeito da produção dos autores investigados.*
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Memória; Primo Levi; Guimarães Rosa

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Introduction

By its own definition, narration is an art. As we know, the Latin word *ars* corresponds to the Greek word *téchne,* which shows that, in every narrative, there is an underlying set of techniques which allows the construction of the story. What writers, poets, screenwriters, cinematographers, journalists and adpeople, among many others, have in common is that they are part of the narrative universe. Descriptors of objects, facts, memories, stories, scenes, images, reminiscences and ideas, they live by recording, remembering, telling and writing stories (real, false, fictitious), generally unto the frail support of the screen or on paper. The itinerary of these writers, poets, cinematographers and adpeopel is very similar to what Milan Kundera (2003)[1] called "complexity" in his essays on The Art of the Novel: the irrepressible auto-creative labor, which makes the exercise of writing necessary to the subjective construction of self and to the objective construction of the world.

When thinking the art of narrating from the "spirit of the novel" point of view, Kundera said that this is similar to the "spirit of complexity." For him, every novel tells the reader "things are not as simple as you think" (KUNDERA, 2003, p.21).[2] Complication, complexity and confusion, as is well known, are experiences that constitute the practical character of life. The poet Roberto Juarroz highlighted, in turn, the ethical and aesthetical character of this complexity: the capacity of telling and narrating the storm, the chaos in the world and in the "interior." When forged in difficulty, the text, as well as life, may be read and loved, stated Juarroz (2009), under the sun and under the rain, under the scream and under the night, under the narrow time or under the minimal spaces of the undertones. Juarroz writes: "The service asked of men / Is nothing more than continuing the narrative, / With any argument. / Or also with none."[3]

Besides the character of confusion, complication and complexity of life, and, starting from this demand for the permanent "service" of "continuing the narrative," the

[1] KUNDERA, Milan. *The Art of Novel*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003.
[2] For reference, see footnote 1.
[3] In Portuguese: "O serviço que se pede ao homem / É nada mais que continuar a narração, / Com qualquer argumento. // Ou também sem nenhum."

complexity of the art of narration may also be comprehended as resilience, which is the capacity of psycho-affective compensation towards traumatic events; that is, the restoration of self-love by revisiting experiences (negative), manner of bearing uncomfortable, disagreeable and chaotic memories. It is common that the wounded person be cared for through the increment of presences around him, as well as through speech, writing, painting, the interaction with resilience factors (or tutors), which become a means of self-improvement and self-awareness, of reclaiming self-development, of realigning with the self, and also of the necessary auto-fiction. These media act in a discrete and subtle manner. We note here an amendment between the art of narrating and the very notion of complexity: the Latin word *textus* originates from the Indo-European root *teks-,* "weave, make," where we also find the Portuguese word *tela* (canvas, screen) (*teks-la-,* "woven"); the words tectonic and architect also encompass the idea of something that "drives the construction." The text is a cloth or warp, a collection of threads which are placed parallel to each other to form a canvas. The warp does not ensure consistency, even though it is the basis and foundation for the art of weaving. In order for the text or narrative to be consistent, it is necessary to construct a lattice, or a group of threads which, crossed and interlaced, form a canvas or a novella.

The notion of complexity, in its turn, comes from "complexus, 'that which weaves together', and responds to the appeal of the Latin verb *complexere* 'embrace'. The complex thought is a thought which embraces. It extends itself in ethics and solidarity" (MORIN *apud* CASTRO, 1997, p.11).[4] The image of the narrative as a form of survival is clearly shown in the moral of Scheherazade's story, who has her head preserved and life spared under the condition of performing the "service" requested, that is, "nothing more than continuing the narrative": "With any argument. Or also with none." (JUARROZ, 2009, p.13).[5] It is from the complexity present in this art of narrating experiences of pain, which we intend to approach the narrative issues (in this case, through speech and text) of the traumas experienced by the Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi (1919-1987) and by the

[4] In Portuguese: "complexus 'o que tece em conjunto', e responde ao apelo do verbo latino complexere 'abraçar'. O pensamento complex é um pensamento que pratica o abraço. Ele se prolonga na ética e na solidariedade."

[5] In Portuguese: "Com qualquer argumento. Ou também sem nenhum."

character Riobaldo Tatarana, from the book *Grande Sertão*: Veredas (1956) [*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1963],[6] by Guimarães Rosa. It is evident that we must underline the considerable difference between Levi's autobiography and the romanticized biography of Riobaldo. The traumas both suffered may be equal, but the causes and consequences of these experiences for each subject of the narratives are different. We do not intend to confuse or disregard the specificity of the narrative of a real Auschwitz survivor by comparing it to the narrative of Riobaldo, a fictitious character. In both cases it is possible to find recurrences of that which was called, in the twentieth century, Testimonial Literature. "The testimonials of fictional characters as documental have been inserted into a narrative genre of notable relevance since the end of World War II. This is due to the great incidence of wars and genocides in the twentieth century, which was propitious to the emergence of testimonials" (FATINI, 2011, p.39).[7] It regards the discursive genre which articulates the relations between literature, violence and trauma. It regards speaking or writing about these "fragments, or pieces shattered by the force of occurrences," which "never manage to crystalize as comprehension or memory" (NETROVISKI; SELIGMANN, 2000, p.10).[8]

The representation of catastrophic events was especially important to give voice to a multitude of social subordinates, homeless people, children, women and men victims of violation, war, survivors of dictatorships and ethnic massacres, campesinos or city dwellers, among other martyred, of experiences facing extreme events, of which the most catastrophic was that of Shoah, the Jewish Holocaust, which victimized approximately six million people. One of the rare survivors of the Auschwitz concentration camps, Primo Levi (1919-1987), wrote the book *Is This a Man?* (1947/2013),[9] a paradigmatic work of the testimonial genre. Levi narrates in this book his experiences of deprivation, pain, torture, forced labor and the murder of Jews with no trials whatsoever. When, in 1987, Primo Levi

[6] ROSA, J. G. *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. Translated by James L. Taylor and Harriet De Onís. New York, NY: Knopf, 1963.
[7] In Portuguese: "Os testemunhos de caráter ficcional como documental se inserem no gênero narrativo cuja relevância é notável desde o final da Segunda Guerra. Isso porque, em virtude da grande incidência de guerras e genocídios no século XX, que se mostrou propício ao afloramento do testemunho."
[8] In Portuguese: "fragmentos, ou cacos esmagados pela força de ocorrências"; "nunca chegam a se cristalizar em compreensão ou lembrança."
[9] LEVI, P. *Is this a man?* London: Abacus, 2013.

fell from the apartment landing on the building where he lived, in an elegant neighborhood in Turin, his hometown, his gesture (suicide?) seemed to reaffirm the traumatic fate that followed many of the survivors of the Jewish extermination during World War II.

Primo Levi survived the Nazi concentration camps and, afterwards, put himself in "service" of the narrative, retelling the weight of his memories. This narrative, according to him, was his way of justifying the fact that he survived when many he knew died. Since the first moment of his liberation by the Soviet troops from the Auschwitz camp, in Poland, in the beginning of 1945, until his death, the mission of narrating never left him. The trauma had become a ghost which haunted his life and his writings. Suicide was not an occasional and rare 'out' among those who escaped, for the most varied reasons, from the gas chambers, from crematoriums, from the SS firing squads (elite troop from the Nazi Reich), from hunger and from diseases. With the prisoner number 174.517 tattooed on his arm, Levi surrendered himself to the service of telling the humiliations suffered, the impotence in face of the loss of family members, the dignity and his own identity, which, in turn, seemed "tattooed" to his memory:

> The Russians can come now: they will only find us, the slave, the worn-out, worthy of the unarmed death which awaits us. To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment (LEVI, 2013, p.177).[10]

The association of memory, study of catastrophe and the pain in Primo Levi is inextricable, and surfaces through his books and statements in the forty years following his liberation from Auschwitz. It is possible to synthesize this association by means of a problem posed by Levi himself: "Have we – we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand our experience?" (LEVI, 2017, p.25).[11] We comprehend that the act of remembering inevitably produces some sort of differentiation when elaborated in a narrative, like in the case of testimonial literature. "On the

[10] For reference, see footnote 9.
[11] LEVI, P. The *Drowned and the Saved*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

phenomenological level, on which we have situated ourselves here, we say that we remember what we have done, experienced, or learned in a particular instance" (RICOEUR, 2004, p.23).[12] In memory there are a series of mechanisms involved that include predispositions and reinterpretations of the past when these are carried out in the present. It is an inexact equation, most of the time. "In this way, a good share of the search for the past is placed under the sign of the task not to forget. More generally, the obsession of forgetting, past, present, and future, accompanies the light of happy memory with the shadow cast by an unhappy memory" (RICOEUR, 2004, p.30).[13] A personal memory carries a subjective charge which is particular and ample, which interferes in the results of the narrative, what it approaches or neglects, in the motivations that makes it exist and be enunciated as such. "It is by modifying its distance with respect to the present that an event takes its place in time" (RICOUER, 2010, p.38).[14]

In Testimonial Literature, according to Seligmann-Silva (2009), this "particular instance" of the narrator fluctuates between the "necessity" and the "impossibility" of recalling the trauma. The condition of Nazi concentration camps survivors is complex and difficult to narrate because it is bristling with trauma and shadows. "Primo Levi is the perfect example of the witness," ponders Agamben (2002),[15] observing that when Levi goes back home, "he tirelessly recounts his experiences to everyone" (p.16). While telling, he seeks the chance to face all the specters and ghosts which surround him. Remembering is not only to forget, but also to comprehend and rationalize. "What is at stake in the so-called Testimonial Literature, be it in form of an uncontrollable necessity of narrating, or under the omens of the desire to transmit what happened to each individual, and also for a generation, are the marks left by an encounter with what is real" (MACÊDO, 2014, p.44).[16]

It is about a reality which is reworked in the registry of the narrative, that is, in a way, a reconstruction. "Primary remembrance is a positive modification of the impression,

[12] RICOEUR, P. *Memory, History, Forggeting*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
[13] Fo reference, see footnote 12.
[14] RICOEUR. P. *Time and Marrative*: volume 3. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
[15] AGAMBEN, G. *Remnants of Auschwitz*: the witness and the archive. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2002.
[16] In Portuguese: "O que está em jogo na chamada literatura de testemunho: seja na forma de uma necessidade incontrolável de narrar, ou sob os auspícios do desejo de transmitir o que foi para cada um, e também para uma geração, as marcas de um encontro com o real."

not something different from it. In contrast to the representation of the past by images, primary remembrance shares with the living present the privilege of the originary, although in a continually weakening mode" (RICOEUR, 2010, p.30).[17] As LaCapra argues so well when he writes about primary memory: "Memory implies, almost invariably, lapses which relate to forms of denial, repression, suppression and evasion, but it also poses immediacy and a power which can be impressive" (1998, p.35).[18]

One of Primo Levi's differential is his total conscience of how such mechanisms acted and the fact that he took into account this knowledge when elaborating his memoirs. "There are some known mechanisms which falsify memories in particular conditions: the traumas, not only cerebral; the interference of other 'concurrent' memories; abnormal states of conscience; suppressions; repressions" (LEVI, 2017, p.17).[19] Repressions, as Freud (1990)[20] points out, are not eliminations, but oblivion, rests that may appear at any moment to haunt those who fight, even unconsciously, to forget them. Agamben defines this nebulous space in traumatic memories as a "remnant," a "lacuna." "The discrepancy in question concerns the very structure of testimony. [...] The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (AGAMBEN, 2002, p.12).[21]

The existent tension between what happened and what to recall does not happen without the scarring of reliving the past. "Fidelity to the past, not being an end on its own, seeks to transform the present" (GAGNEBIN, 2009, p.55).[22] This transformation, in Levi's case, occurred in a manner he considered wrongful, as if it was some kind of self-betrayal. The writer, however, faces his own fears in name of an unsigned commitment, an auto-imposed mission, a job he took on the responsibility to fulfill, even when such posture exacted an appallingly high price. "The best way to defend one-self from the invasion of difficult memories is to bar its entrance, to extend a sanitary chord along the limit. It is

[17] For rereferense, see footnote 14.
[18] LACAPRA, D. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1998.
[19] For reference, see footote 11.
[20] FREUD, S. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York (NY): Norton, W.W. Company, 1990.
[21] For reference, see footote 15.
[22] In Portuguese: "A fidelidade ao passado, não sendo um fim em si, visa à transformação do presente."

easier to deny entry to a memory than to get rid of it after it is registered" (LEVI, 2017, p.23).[23]

The uncomfortable memory is recurring; it arises from darkness. "Anyone who suffers an injustice or an injury does not need to elaborate lies to exculpate himself of a guilt he does not have (...); but this does not exclude the fact that his memories may also be altered" (LEVI, 2017, p.24).[24] Even under pressure – more from him than any other who could be asking for his testimonials –, Primo Levi continues eager to tell and narrate. It is the role which belongs to him and he embraces it. This also happens because the ex-prisoner faces a risk which accompanies him and that resurfaces periodically: the fear of not being believed, of being the target of skepticism and discredit. His affliction is greater because, so as not to let these painful memories die, he has to keep renewing it constantly. This process triggers another phenomenon in Levi's testimonial literature. His memories become, little by little, ever so phantasmatic. "As a matter of fact, every discussion on the aesthetic of the unrepresentable, of the unsayable, or of the sublime, is very present in the current research on the literature of the concentration camps" (GAGNEBIN, 2009, p.79).[25] Levi states that he stopped telling his relatives what he had suffered because the stories disturbed them or were greeted with insufferable doses of skepticism. "We know that we will have difficulty in being understood, and this is as it should be," Levi resigns (2013, p.21).[26] Traumatic dreams were interwoven in the memories. It was a memory that

> […] arose in the form of nocturnal dreams produced by the prisoners' despair. Almost all the survivors, orally or in their written memoirs, remember a dream which frequently recurred during the nights of imprisonment, varied in its detail but uniform in its substance: they had returned home and with passion and relief were describing their past sufferings, addressing themselves to a loved one, and were not believed, indeed were not even listened to. In the most typical and cruelest form, the interlocutor turned and left in silence (LEVI, 2017, pp.7-8).[27]

[23] For reference, see footote 11.
[24] For reference, see footote 11.
[25] In Portuguese: "Aliás, toda discussão de uma estética do irrepresentável, do indizível, ou do sublime, está muito presente nas pesquisas atuais sobre a literatura dos campos de concentração."
[26] For reference, see footote 9.
[27] For reference, see footote 11.

Levi asks himself: "Why does it happen? Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?" (LEVI, 2013, p.65).[28] The ghost of the uncomfortable memory appears, then, in two dimensions. They are internal and external to his narrative of the concentration camps. The traumatized survivor needs to narrate to face his nightmares which are continuously present; the survivor must narrate to convince others that these nightmares, even through the filter of the past, did occur. Levi makes clear his necessity to justify his survival after "diving and coming back," after not submerging and drowning like so many others did and who could no longer testify. He made the voices of his ghosts his own. The dead speak through the text of the Italian writer. Men, women and children who succumbed in Auschwitz speak. "What we saw does not resemble any spectacle I had ever seen or heard told" (LEVI, 2013, p.188).[29]

> It is neither easy nor agreeable to dredge this abyss of viciousness, and yet I think it must be done, because what could be perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, could overwhelm us and our children. One is tempted to turn away with a grimace and close one's mind: this is a temptation one must resist (LEVI, 2017, p.41).[30]

Painful, yet necessary. Levi understands that this necessity goes beyond his own will.

> We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse "on behalf of third parties," the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death (LEVI, 2017, p.67).[31]

The writer shows himself as someone impelled to the function of narrating. "To me, it was about things that I carried, things that invaded me and I had to let out: to speak them,

[28] For reference, see footote 9.
[29] For reference, see footote 9.
[30] For reference, see footote 11.
[31] For reference, see footote 11.

or better yet, scream them in broad daylight; but those who scream in broad daylight talk to everyone and no one, shout in the desert" (LEVI, 2017, pp.137-138).[32] It is impossible to approach Levi's memorialistic and testimonial work if this perspective is not taken into account. The art of narrating gains the contour of a woven and narrated testimony:

> That is why they urge us to narrate and formulate questions, sometimes embarrassing us; it's not always easy to answer certain whys, we are not historians nor philosophers but witnesses, and besides it is not a rule that the history of human things should obey rigorous logical schemes (LEVI, 2017, p.122).[33]

The testimonial narrative that Primo Levi left about Shoah and the concentration camps where mass murder was perpetrated is inserted in a registry which, narrated, becomes a historical element, without, however, distancing itself of its aesthetic nature, in a text which, besides clear, is moving in many aspects. It is the life story that the main character – unfortunately real – tells of himself. A narrative act in which fictional creations, equally moved by trauma and by the compelling necessity to relate his experiences, serves as a narrative enterprise.

The Traumas of Riobaldo

One who knows that the "history of human things does not obey logical schemes" is Riobaldo Tatarana, a character created by João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967) in *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (1963).[34] Seligmann-Silva (2009, p.133) , in an article which deals precisely with Riobaldo's testimonial and confessional gesture, observe that Guimarães Rosa managed to channel into his 1956 romance "the fantastic forces of rhetoric in both the confessions as well as the testimonies" (2009, p.133).[35] He points out:

[32] For reference, see footote 11.
[33] For reference, see footote 11.
[34] For reference, see footnote 6.
[35] In Portuguese: "as fantásticas forças retóricas tanto da confissão, como do testemunho."

> Riobaldo is the first to admit that his narrative is fragmented. It is saturated with emotions. It is the *mise en scène* of a traumatic memory, marked by "literality," that is, by its tendency to be a fragment, a piece of the past. Its narrative threads execute leaps, as does the universe of our memories, commanded by both the principle of elected affinities, as well as by emotional demands (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2009, p.135).[36]

We see in Riobaldo's own words that he feels the "necessity" and "impossibility" of narrating and reworking traumas, infernos, losses and pacts.

> I go through an experience, and in the very midst of it I am blind. I can see only the beginning and the end. You know how it is: a person wants to swim across a river and does, but comes out on the other side at a point lower down, not at all where he expected. Isn't life really a dangerous business? (ROSA, 1963, p.33).[37]

The danger of living, as we know, is one of the central themes of *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. "Riobaldo's turbulent trajectory implies stumbles, passage rites, tragic fatalities and crossings" (FANTINI, 2011, p.45).[38] Riobaldo takes on the difficult task of telling what he saw, felt, deduced and lived in the backlands. During his childhood, he was a poor boy and a bastard; in youth, a mere jagunço (gunman), "a very transitory man"; after a pact, fearing he would go back to poverty, he evoked the "Devil," in the "sertão" (backlands), and he becomes, henceforth, the chief "White Urutu" (rattlesnake), bold leader of the gunmen who aim to fight the gunman business itself. Riobaldo recounts, throughout his account, his inner ghosts: the poor childhood, the illiterate mother, his bastard condition, the successive flights, the devil, the blame, the fears and the love squandered and lost. Riobaldo speaks of himself: "Ah, don't speak to me of him. That unhappy, unruly one – that poor ill-fated boy…" (ROSA, 1963, p.16).[39]

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[36] In Portuguese: "Riobaldo é o primeiro a afirmar que sua narrativa é fragmentada. Ela é saturada de emoções. Trata-se da mise en scène de uma memória traumática, marcada pela "literalidade", ou seja, por sua tendência ao fragmento, a ser caco do passado. A construção narrativa é o meio de articular estes fragmentos. Seu fio narrativo executa saltos, assim como o universo de nossa memória o faz, comandada tanto pelo princípio das afinidades eletivas, como por exigências emocionais."

[37] For reference, see footnote 6.

[38] In Portuguese: "A atribulada trajetória de Riobaldo implica tropeços, ritos de passagem, fatalidades trágicas e travessias."

[39] For reference, see footnote 6.

Riobaldo is sustained by an indecisive narrative flow, in a permanent coming and going, characterized by gaps, mismatches, restlessness, returns and repetitions. Riobaldo realizes we live at the mercy of the unpredictable and frightening course of life: "Living is a dangerous business, isn't it? Because we are still ignorant. Because learning-to-live is living itself. The sertão produced me, then it swallowed me, then it spat me from its hot mouth. Do you believe my story?" (ROSA, 1963, p.546).[40] In other words, and enlightened by Benjamin, we may say that Riobaldo understands that experience and dives into it, emerging henceforth, imprinting his narrative with the marks of the narrator, "like the hand of the potter on the clay of the vase" (BENJAMIN, 2008, p.206).[41]

In Riobaldo's trauma, in his dialogue-monologue with images of evil, the same appears represented by Hermógenes, personification of his personal ghost and enemy of the forces of good. "I had courageously gone forward to overthrow Hermógenes and rid the gerais of outlawry" (ROSA, 1963, p.488).[42] Riobaldo tells of a land dominated by the gunmen and colonels who dispute among them land and power. The gunmen are just the rope of a tug-of-war, almost slaves of the great landowners, anonymous people, with no belongings, no surnames and no identity: "Tom, Dick, and Harry – ordinary people" (ROSA, 1963, p.50).[43]

The transition process between the rectifying inhumanity and the growing humanization is basically verified in the narrating possibility of his story. Riobaldo finds, in the trustworthy outsider, someone deserving of listening to his stories, without criticism or judgment, the possibility of an opening. "The voice that appears along the text is the voice of a person with gaps, therefore incomplete and melancholic, who gradually learns about himself and about the other, due to mediation and ethical secrecy" (FANTINI, 2011, p.49).[44] Riobaldo tells his listener: "Listen to me, think and think again, and repeat it, then

[40] For reference, see footnote 6.
[41] BENJAMIN, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproductibility and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
[42] For reference, see footnote 6.
[43] For reference, see footnote 6.
[44] In Portuguese: "A voz que se enuncia ao longo do texto é a de um sujeito com lacunas, portanto faltante e melancólico, que paulatinamente aprende sobre si mesmo e sobre o outro, graças à mediação e ao sigilo ético."

you will be helping me" (ROSA, 1963, p.93).[45] The listener helps Riobaldo understand himself, or the experience lived.

The narrative of *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* blooms from the hard and painful experience of Riobaldo in the backlands. According to Fantini, the documental substrate of the Rosean novel is the First Brazilian Republic (1890-1945), characterized by the politics of *Coronelismo,* especially in the agropastoral regions of the interior of the country. "Ah, life was something else for the backlander. Politics! All politics and potent leaderships," and: "still big farmers reign – all owners of valiant households, groups of men with blunderbuss and shotguns" (ROSA, 1963, p.563).[46] What Riobaldo narrated was the reality of the backlands of Minas and of other places in Brazil, at that time. "The sertão. You know, sir, the sertão is where the strong and shrewd call the tune. God himself, when he comes here, had better come armed!" (ROSA, 1963, p.18).[47]

The deepest catastrophe, however, lived by Riobaldo, from our point of view, has to do with the loss of Diadorim, his greatest love. It is both an intimate catastrophe (the denial of his capacity to open to love and the subsequent break of this barrier: Diadorin was, after all, the gunman Reinaldo, his partner, almost a brother, for whom Riobaldo nurtured feelings of carnal love) as well as an external catastrophe, since he loses this love at the battle of Tamanduá-Tão. "Riobaldo is not a complete person" (RONCARI, 2004, p.60).[48] His tragedy, besides external is internal: his desire for Diadorim. "[M]y desire was to place my fingers lightly, so lightly, over his soft eyes" (ROSA, 1963, p.37).[49] Riobaldo stowed, dwelled on and hid the attraction he felt, denied it even when he thought of carrying it out in secrecy, repressed himself, as if he were sick. Riobaldo tells the listener his trauma, translated in the suffering and in the incapacity to let himself be guided by his heart, or to allow himself to be carried by his passions: the pain of not being able to contain the passion he nurtured for Diadorim. Diadorim's "green eyes" appear as a summons for the experience of a "green beauty," the flame of discovery, the difficult road from fragmentation to self-

[45] For reference, see footnote 6.
[46] For reference, see footnote 6.
[47] For reference, see footnote 6.
[48] In Portuguese: "Riobaldo não é um sujeito pronto."
[49] For reference, see footnote 6.

knowledge, the search for an internal cure, the capacity of intellectually investigating the mystery.

> It was Diadorim who reminded Riobaldo that they followed opposing and contrary models than that which was expected: 'In times of need, you think of your mother; I think of my father…' Diadorim, a woman, was guided by the paternal model, masculine, though we never find out why she transvested as a gunman; and Riobaldo followed the maternal model, feminine, guided by his affections, and lived the emptiness of being fatherless, which compelled him to look for this model outside, among other men who crossed his path and whom he admired, respected and hated. That is why Diadorim and Riobaldo complemented each other as opposing halves which attracted and repelled themselves, like a love which should be less the result of a choice than a condemnation: the attraction of opposites. Riobaldo's reaction to Diadorim's word was rather unreasonable; he practically negates what the friend said: "Don't speak of those, Diadorim… To be silent is the same as speaking of the dead" (RONCARI, 2004, p.61).[50]

To Roncari, Riobaldo's reaction was unreasonable, since Diadorim had touched with precision a delicate point, one of Riobaldo's "repressed demons." When speaking of his mother, Diadorim broached affections, traditions, values, poverty. Riobaldo reminisced about his traumatic life in poverty; his godfather, Selorico Mendes, who was in fact his father, but did not recognize him. Mendes was a godfather who gave him, according to the stories told, the mythical vision of the gunmen and, perhaps, nothing more. Up to this point in the narrative, however, Riobaldo doesn't yet know that the traumas related to his mother will find a mirror in the figure and death of Diadorim. "The topic of guilt is recurring throughout his testimony" (BOLLE, 2004, p.206).[51] Riobaldo's traumas are exposed through a great and intricate web of paths and roads (from the backlands and from the

[50] In Portuguese: "Foi Diadorim que recordou a Riobaldo que seguiam modelos opostos e contrários ao normalmente esperado: 'Em hora de desânimo, você lembra de sua mãe; eu lembro de meu pai…' Diadorim, uma mulher, orientava-se pelo modelo paterno, masculino, sem ficarmos sabendo em nenhum momento por que se travestia de jagunço; e Riobaldo seguia o modelo materno, feminino, guiado pelos afetos, e vivia o vazio da falta do pai, o que o obrigava a buscá-lo fora, entre os outros homens que cruzavam o seu caminho, e que ele admirava, respeitava ou odiava. Por isso Diadorim e Riobaldo complementavam-se como metades opostas que se atraiam e se repeliam, como um amor cuja efetivação deveria ser menos o resultado de uma escolha da vontade do que de uma condenação: a atração pelo contrário. A reação de Riobaldo diante do que disse mais acima Diadorim foi um tanto descabida; ele quase arrenega o que o amigo disse: 'Não fale nesses Diadorim…Ficar calado é que é falar nos mortos'."

[51] In Portuguese: "O topos da culpa é recorrente ao longo de todo o seu depoimento."

narrative). According to Bolle (2004, pp.88-89), the "web of narrative" and the labyrinthine composition woven by Riobaldo, the "multiple roads of communication," show the fragmentation of his own spirit, as well as a fragmentation of memory, divided into a thousand pieces of memories lived.

Levi and Riobaldo: Witnesses of Catastrophes

> The specificity of testimony consists in the fact that the assertion of reality is inseparable from its being paired with the self-designation of the testifying subject. The typical formulation of testimony proceeds from this pairing: I was there. What is attested to is indivisibly the reality of the past thing and the presence of the narrator at the place of its occurrence. And it is the witness who first declares himself to be a witness. He names himself (RICOEUR, 2004, pp.163-164).[52]

This eye witness condition is undertaken from the beginning by Primo Levi and Riobaldo Tatarana. They carry it to the end of their days, carry a solid and profound conscience of this role, knowing well the risks taken when narrating what they went through, what they colluded with, and what they saw. Both face the terrors and fears of the narrative in a courageous manner, without discarding their own vulnerability. For both, memory is a suspicious source. In their personal recollections, they examine the events carefully, in a circular manner, non-linear, trying to order the immense fragmentation of the memories.

Unlike the other survivors, Levi and Riobaldo speak frankly to the meanders of memories, to the tracks their experiences imprinted in retrospective vision, about all the events. When commenting on Walter Benjamin's texts, Gagnebin points out: "The demand of memory, which various of Benjamin's text forcibly emphasize, should take into account the great difficulties which weigh upon the possibility of narration, upon the possibility of common experience, finally, upon the possibility of transmission and of remembrance"

[52] For reference, see footnote 12.

(2009, p.54).[53] Levi accepts this difficulty and tries to overcome it, knowing in advance that he will not achieve total success in such an endeavor.

> So our nights drag on. The dream of Tantalus and the dream of the story are woven into a texture of more indistinct image: the suffering of the day, composed of hunger, blows, cold, exhaustion, fear and promiscuity, turns at night-time into shapeless nightmares of unheard-of violence, which in free life would only occur during a fever (LEVI, 2013, p.65).[54]

Levi and Riobaldo fit into what Bolle (2004) calls the "history of sufferings." The importance given to the act of narrating that which was seen and lived, that which was suffered and witnessed, is a terrifying and painful mission; the type of discharge that Riobaldo and Levi will have to execute for the rest of their days. Will this be the price to pay for the "privilege" of surviving? In several moments, Primo Levi asks himself the reason destiny spared him, the reason for not having died when arriving at Auschwitz, for not falling in disgrace with a guard who might have killed him, for not being "drawn," chosen to die. This, literally, would haunt him until the end. "Today I think that if for no other reason than that an Auschwitz existed, no one in our age should speak of Providence. But without doubt in that hour the memory of biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity passed like a wind through all our minds" (LEVI, 2013, p.187).[55]

Levi and Riobaldo must live with other ghosts besides these ones. We can gather these ghosts, nightmares and personal enemies, not always palpable, in a group of factors connected to the ten months Levi lived in "hell," or in Riobaldo's long years of service as a gunman. In both cases, there are indelible marks of an initiation through suffering and ordeals in hell. Both Levi and Riobaldo speak of men, women and children they met and whose lives were lost in front of their eyes; they create a representation for the faces of the "catrumanos" (bumpkins), the tragedy they were part of and now propose to redeem. In Levi, the pale faces, the sound of coughing from the dying, the odors of fluids of lives at an

[53] In Portuguese: "A exigência de memória, que vários textos de Benjamin ressaltam com força, deve levar em conta as grandes dificuldades que pesam sobre a possibilidade de narração, sobre a possibilidade da experiência comum, enfim, sobre a possibilidade da transmissão e do lembrar."
[54] For reference, see footnote 9.
[55] For reference, see footnote 9.

end, the acts of despair; in Riobaldo, the poverty, the neglect, his mother's misery, as well as the pact and the loss of Diadorim. In him we still have other traumatic events, such as the extermination of the horses, the drought and the hunger, the crossing of Liso do Sussuarão, the fear of becoming a ploughman or a "caretaker." Both in Levi and in Riobaldo, constantly present – and returning frequently in the construction of their discourses –, is the imagery of hell. This recurrence is the mark which catalysis the traumas which are transfigured into ghosts – into the ghosts present in the narratives.

The imagery of hell and the ghosts are joined at equidistant points. This imagery is described in the whirlwind of sensations that take over both their recollections. It appears in the moment they narrate, like "scraping and cleaning the inside of an underground petrol tank" (LEVI, 2013, p.1270);[56] they return from the dive into the underground of subjective circles, similar to living-dead, and evoke speeches of burials in life and after death, copies of men and women destined to eternal damnation, ghosts that roam with no rest paying for their mistakes, true suffering souls: beings that err with no certain path, like a traveler lost at sea or in the backlands. In Levi and in Riobaldo lies the commitment to not allow hell to become only shadows of a forgotten horror. That is what moves Levi to write and Riobaldo to tell. The ghosts which torment them are the same ones that drive them to testify.

> This is hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this. A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water, and we wait for something which will certainly be terrible, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen. What can one think about? One cannot think anymore, it is like being already dead (LEVI, 2013, pp.15-16).[57]

Conclusion: The Presence of Ghosts

We return to the importance and attention of the narrative and of the narration as potency and act of continuing life, and above all, of the resilience and the suffering of existence. To resist death, for both narrators, is not to accept the victory of the ghosts. They

[56] For reference, see footnote 9.
[57] For reference, see footnote 9.

multiply, and the battle against them is unceasing, happening in various spaces simultaneously. It is necessary to be wary of hell and of the imagery of hell and of the ghosts so as not to retreat in their presence, no matter the battleground. In Levi and in Riobaldo there is the duty to narrate continuously, which defies them to construct a story inhabited by ghosts, people who one day had a place in the world, with families, homes, histories and feelings.

These narratives demand from the authors more than the act of cataloguing episodes, requiring the capacity of discernment and comprehension. Only in this way will the descriptions of the people chosen at random to die, of the mountains of human ash spread throughout the Polish camps, of the looting of gold inlays from the piles of cadavers, of the total lack of communication among people who were no longer sure if they were alive make any sense. Even when this sense is flawed, as Levi himself always emphasizes in his texts; even when the discursive construction is insufficient to impart the real dimension of the tragedy; even when erring by stereotyping and when it is impossible to escape simplification, these explanations must be reared in a logical and intelligible manner so that they may perform, although tenuously, the role of reproducing that which cannot be reproduced. This road leads, inevitably, to a complex and painful historiographical exercise. "The truth of history is in this 'interim', where the work proposes terms without being able to create an object that may substitute this relation." (CERTEAU, 1990, p.30).[58]

Ricoeur (2010)[59] had already alerted to discourses that are too rigid in their evidences and internal coherences. Commenting on the plane of fiction, the philosopher points out the existent relations between the world (imaginary or real) and the embodiment of such narrative in a text. This intersection, which seems to point to an improper fusion, in reality reveals the interstices of discourses which do not happen in an unequivocal manner. When thinking about remembrances that transform into embodied discursive records, this dynamic becomes ever more complex, requiring analysis parameters which are not simplified. "Misuse begins as soon as the notion of 'testimony' is severed from the

[58] CERTEAU, M. *The Writing of History*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992.
[59] For reference, see footnote 14.

narrative context that supports it as documentary proof in service of the explanatory comprehension of a course of action" (RICOEUR, 2010, p.92).[60]

"We also tend to simplify history […]" Levi (2017, p.27)[61] alerts. "Today – in this real today, while I'm sitting at a desk, writing –, today, even I am not certain these facts truly happened" (LEVI, 2013, p.120).[62] In memorialistic and testimonial stories, supported by the historical vision which helps to confer greater vraisemblance and credibility, these objects of the accounts – such as they happen, by other roads, other discourses, like the religious, scientific, journalistic – must be elected and explored, concentrating around them the narrative order. This does not guarantee the fidelity to the facts – and what instrument would be able to? –, but confers them apprehensibility, conditions of being recognized and debated, redeemed or even given new meanings. "And finally, among the testimonies, written or spoken, some are unconsciously stylized, in which convention prevails over genuine memory" (LEVI, 2017, p.56).[63] Levi identifies this tortuous but natural path. "The bearer of the memory wanted to become a non-bearer and succeeded: negating its existence by force, expelled from him the toxic memory as he expels an excretion or a parasite" (LEVI, 2017, p.23).[64]

The embodiment of the Shoah narrative in Primo Levi – and, according to Agamben (2002)[65] and LaCapra (1998),[66] in other testimonial stories from concentration camp survivors – transits in a series of intervenient variants which shape and modulate the narratives about this past of profound pain. The trauma (MACÊDO, 2014), the oblivion (RICOEUR, 2004),[67] the play between memory and forgetfulness (GAGNEBIN, 2009), the relation with the other (CERTEAU, 1992)[68] are inserted in diverse points, conditioned by its own essence. The variety of formats and narrative strategies which Levi and Riobaldo utilize in this journey of remembrance and understanding of the tragedies they witnessed

[60] For reference, see footnote 14.
[61] For reference, see footnote 11.
[62] For reference, see footnote 9.
[63] For reference, see footnote 11.
[64] For reference, see footnote 11.
[65] For reference, see footnote 15.
[66] For reference, see footnote 18.
[67] For reference, see footnote 12.
[68] For reference, see footnote 58.

show the unceasing effort of both to prevent that which was seen and lived (in Auschwitz or in the backlands) from being lost in the shades of memory.

Statement of authorship and responsibility for published content.
We declare that both authors had access to the research *corpus*, participated actively in the discussion of the results and conducted the review and approval process of the paper's final version.

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