

MEMORIAL NARRATIVES: THE POLITICAL DUTY OF TELLING A STORY*

NARRATIVA MEMORIAL: O DEVER POLÍTICO DE SE CONTAR UMA ESTÓRIA

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ABSTRACT *Isak Dinesen, quoted by Hannah Arendt, asserts that all misfortunes can be borne when a story is told about them. This assertion will serve as the pole star of this article which, based on the conceptual framework of Arendt, Walter Benjamin and Beatriz Sarlo, will seek to explain the relationship between narrative and the construction of collective memory and how this relationship brings at its core a political duty: to keep alive the memory of dark times that elapsed during states of exception, such as totalitarianism and civil-military dictatorships that devastated some Latin American countries. I will use the work of Primo Levi, *If this is a man* and Assis Brasil, *Os que bebem como os cães*, to exemplify the potency that exists within the literary genre, the focus of my reflections: the narrative. Thus, I will try to explain how the memorial narratives collaborate in the redemocratization process, by exposing the atrocious actions committed against Democratic States of Law. In this argumentative fringe, we ask ourselves: what is the locus that the narrative occupies within the Brazilian public space in the post-military civil dictatorship period? Were the narratives*

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able to contribute to the realization of the imperative: “so that it is not forgotten, so that it never happens again”?

Keywords: *Narrative. Memory. Nazism. Civil-military dictatorship.*

RESUMO *Isak Dinesen, citada por Hannah Arendt, assevera que todas as desgraças podem ser suportadas quando se narra uma estória a respeito delas. Essa assertiva servirá de estrela polar do presente artigo, que, a partir do arcabouço conceitual de Arendt, Walter Benjamin e Beatriz Sarlo, buscará explicitar a relação entre a narrativa e a edificação da memória coletiva e de que forma essa relação traz em seu cerne um dever político: manter viva a memória de tempos sombrios transcorridos durante a vigência de estados de exceção, a exemplo do totalitarismo e de ditaduras civis-militares que assolaram alguns países da América Latina. Utilizar-me-ei das obras Isto é um homem?, de Primo Levi, e Os que bebem como os cães, de Assis Brasil, para exemplificar a potência que há no gênero literário, foco de minhas reflexões: a narrativa. Assim, procurarei explicitar de que forma as narrativas memoriais colaboram no processo de redemocratização ao expor as ações atrozes cometidas contra Estados Democráticos de Direito. Nessa franja argumentativa, nos questionamos: qual o lócus que a narrativa ocupa no interior do espaço público brasileiro no período pós-ditadura civil-militar? As narrativas foram capazes de contribuir na efetivação do imperativo “para que não se esqueça, para que nunca mais aconteça”?*

Palavras-chave: *Narrativa. Memória. Nazismo. Ditadura civil-militar.*

*No philosophy,
no analysis,
no aphorism,
be it ever so profound,
can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story.
(Hannah Arendt)*

Memorial narratives are powerful tools that can help us understand who we are and where we want to go as a collective body. They are essential for the development of the culture of each people. This role attributed to narratives is due to the fact that they can help us deal with the past, by ensuring that it

is not forgotten, it does not perish, but remains alive as a memory. Memorial narratives bequeath experiences that teach us how to deal with the present time and also with those to come. The act of telling a story¹ tensions the past, which, without this tension, would not have the strength to serve as a conductor, a compass guiding our actions in the public space and, consequently, create collective identities and memories.²

We are aware that some facts that occurred in the history of humanity, especially in the last century, could be described as unspeakable, such as the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis in the concentration camps, or the torture and deaths carried out in the basements of the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) during the period of Brazilian civil-military dictatorship. However, those *unspeakable* events need to be transubstantiated into *narratable* events and, in this way, brought to the surface of the common world, as a way of reconciling ourselves with *dark times*, so that the possibility of them returning is mitigated. This is how future generations will build a link with the past, by interchanging today with yesterday, so that the past has a pedagogical role: teaching future generations about the mistakes made, so that they do not return, in a kind of eternal baleful return.

Narrative e memory: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and Beatriz Sarlo

In her text “*Truth and Politics*”, compiled in “*Between Past and Future*”, Hannah Arendt leads us to understand the constitutive features of her notion of memorial narrative. For Arendt, that one who says what something is, that is, who talks about reality, always tells a story that has a humanly understandable meaning. It is within this assertion that Arendt uses the words of Isak Dinesen, for whom “all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story

1 Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between the concepts of “history” and “story”. For her, “History based on the manifest assumption that no matter how haphazard single actions may appear in the present and in their singularity, they inevitably lead to a sequence of events forming a story that can be rendered through ineligible narrative the moment the events are removed into the past became the great dimension in which men could become ‘reconciled’ with reality (Hegel), the reality of human affairs, i.e., of things which owe their existence exclusively to men” (Arendt, 1968, p. 85).

2 We cannot subsume individual memory into collective memory. Although there are traits that bring them together, they have different natures. For Paul Ricœur, “Entre les deux pôles de la mémoire individuelle et de la mémoire collective, n’existe-t-il pas un plan intermédiaire de référence où s’opèrent concrètement les échanges entre la mémoire vive des personnes individuelles et la mémoire publique des communautés auxquelles nous appartenons? Ce plan est celui de la relation aux proches, à qui nous sommes en droit d’attribuer une mémoire d’un genre distinct. Les proches, ces gens qui comptent pour nous et pour qui nous comptons sont situés sur une gamme de variation des distances dans le rapport entre le soi et les autres” (Ricœur, 2000, p. 161).

about them” (Arendt, 1968, p. 262). Arendt complements Dinesen’s words and states that joy and happiness only become understandable to human beings when one can talk about these feelings and tell a story about them.

And who is the person who tells these stories, who narrates deeds, joys and sufferings? For Arendt, the narrator is a storyteller who has the ability to represent human experiences, such as suffering and joy, through narratives. With the act of narrating, the storyteller “[...] creates the possibility of understanding and thinking about the event” (Nascimento, 2018, p. 287), since stories, when narrating past events, create a web of relationships from which common memories are fostered between different generations. In this way, “the responsibility of older generations in telling stories to new generations becomes evident, so that they also become responsible for new threads in the common world” (Nascimento, 2018, p. 287).

Arendt’s comprehension of the performativity of the storyteller, the narrator, provides us with argumentative tools that help us understand the philosophical movement that the thinker carries out in her work *Rahel Varnhagen: the life of a German Jew woman in the era of Romanticism*. In this, Arendt seeks to “tell the story of Rahel’s life as she herself could have done” (Arendt, 1974, p. 12). In *Rahel Varnhagen*, we have a clear example of the way Hannah Arendt uses the narrative genre. In this work, Arendt delves into the depths of Rahel’s existentiality to narrate the stories of a Jewish woman who sought to reconnect with herself, within a society that only granted her importance if she annulled herself as a Jew. For many years, assimilation seemed to Rahel the only way to be accepted in German society at the time of Romanticism, until she managed to assert herself in the world. Thus, in the words of Rahel, narrated by Arendt, “The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life - have been born Jewess - this I should on no account now wish to have missed.” (Arendt, 1974, p. 17). In *Rahel Varnhagen* and in works such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *On Revolution*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Men in Dark Times*, our thinker positions herself as a storyteller, as a *pearl diver* who dives into the depths of the waters of the past to bring to light past experiences, with the aim of problematizing today’s time. The *pearl diver* has a firm conviction that “[...] although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes [...]” (Arendt, 1968, p. 206). And it is precisely these new forms and contours, brought about by sea-change, that prevent the past from coming to the surface of the present in its primordial nature, although

it is capable of retaining indispensable traces of life experiences, which are waiting for the pearl fisherwoman, so that she may descend into the depths of the sea of the past and bring them to the world of the living, the world of now.

After having delved into the way Hannah Arendt understands what the memorial narrative is, I will turn to the reflections of Walter Benjamin, which influenced Arendt so much on this topic. In his text entitled “The Storyteller”, written in 1936, Benjamin traces the lines that explain his understanding of the ability of telling stories. For Benjamin, the art of narrating must actualize interchanges of experiences. Often, people involved in suffering do not have the possibility to be narrators of their own experiences, leaving someone else, the storytellers, with the duty to tell the stories. This occurred, for example, with the combatants of the First World War (1914-1918), whose silence expressed that they returned from the battlefields poorer in communicable experience, as Benjamin highlights. It is evident that, for there to be a narrative, experiences must necessarily be communicable.

For Benjamin, the narrative has an artisanal process of communication, since the task of communicating the *pure nature* of the things narrated is not delegated to it, as a newsletter or a report does. On the contrary, the content of the narratives is taken from the experiences of the storyteller himself and other people and, since the narrative content sprouts from the lived experience, the narrative never ends: “It retains its strength and even after a long time it is still capable of developments” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 146). The narrator, like a *pearl diver*, dives into his own stories and those of other people and then removes these stories from his possessions, delivering them to the appreciation of a large number of listeners. We thus have an explanation of the relationship between the listener and the one who narrates. This relationship, according to Benjamin, is unpretentious, since it is dominated by the listener’s pure interest in preserving what was narrated: “The cardinal point for the willing listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story. Memory is the epic faculty par excellence.” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 153). Therefore, this naive relationship leads us to the heart of the purpose of telling a story: to transmit and keep, in the treasures of memory, a misfortune or a joy that someone has experienced.

In the eyes of Beatriz Sarlo,³ remembering, through memorial narratives, is characterized as a natural activity and takes us by surprise without us having or not the desire to bring something from the past to our presence, something

3 Writer and literary critic, Beatriz Sarlo was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1941. Her literary work is extremely rich and vast, having as one of the founding themes of her reflections the question of the events

similar that occurs when, for example, we smell an odor: we cannot not pre-sense a smell. These are sensations that take us by storm and invade us even when we do not call them upon. However, warns Beatriz Sarlo, this naturalness of the act of remembering only becomes effective under *normal* subjective (cognitive health) and political (democratic regimes) conditions: under these conditions, the past frequently presents itself to the present, that is, the memory is a contemporary partner of all individuals.

Sarlo emphatically warns us that for memory to happen *naturally* there must be *normal* conditions, because the opposite of that warning points to the fact that in *non-normal* conditions, such as those employed by states of exception, it becomes a very difficult task bringing the past before our eyes. It is from this perspective that activating the memory, through testimonial narratives, became a duty after the end of the military dictatorships that devastated countries like Argentina and several others in Latin America that were under the empire of violence and censorship. “The testimony made it possible to condemn the terrorism of state; the idea of ‘never again’ is sustained because we know what we mean when we wish it not to be repeated [...] acts of memory were a central part of the democratic transition [...]” (Sarlo, 2016, p. 24, our translation).

The memory, in these circumstances, comes to be understood as a duty, since remembering has gained the status of an activity that restores social and community ties that were lost during the period of exile or due to violent practices carried out by States.⁴ Unfortunately, Brazil has not yet understood the powerful force of the duty of memory and, therefore, still uses strategies that result in the narratives of the dictatorial period being muted and, consequently, social and community ties remaining frayed. A consideration we can make to understand why Brazil has not yet adhered to the vigor of the duty of memory is the fear of triggering conflicts, which is a more than pertinent feeling, because, if a consensus is reached on the resumption of memories originating from a painful past, there is no way to ensure that they will gravitate to peaceful soil.⁵

that have occurred and stored in memory, fundamentally those which concern the civil-military dictatorships that plagued some Latin American countries.

4 “Las dictaduras representaran, em el sentido más fuerte, una quiebra época (como la gran guerra); sin embargo, las transiciones democráticas no enmudecieron por la enormidad de esa ruptura. Por el contrario, em cuanto disputaron las condiciones de la transición, los discursos comenzaron a circular y demostraron ser indispensables para la restauración de una esfera pública de derechos” (Sarlo, 2016, p. 62).

5 For Peter J. Verovšek, in his article *Unexpected Support for European Integration: Memory, Rupture, and Totalitarianism in Arendt's Political Theory*, demonstrates that the collective memory is an important source for although collective memory is an important source for social stability, which gives it a positive conception, since it is one of the maintainers of collective identity, it also has a negative conception, since it is capable of feeding hatred, by making something atrocious, committed in the past, not be forgotten, maintaining the “cycles of hatred” (Verovšek, 2014, p. 390). However, in our understanding, its positive side must stand out over the negative side, because the collective identity, fostered by the exercise of memory, has a nuclear

On the contrary, memory is a field of conflicts and divergent opinions, because, on the one hand, it is desired that the facts of the past are not forgotten and that they should even be narrated, disseminated, discussed and even taught as a school subject; and, on the other hand, there are those who try to remove the traumatic weight of the past, by exposing that the number of victims is not as extensive as what is being propagated or that both sides – coup plotters and guerrillas – have their share of blame, so that the best thing for the health of a collective body is to forget and, therefore, do not feed hatred about what has already ended.⁶ In fact, the conflicting nature that characterizes the field of memory is due to the fact that the memorial narratives is always fragmented, since it does not operate on something that is present, but on something that no longer exists. The sources of memory have a lacunose characteristic, either because many of the eyewitnesses are no longer with us, as they have passed away, or because many documents have been lost or manipulated since their origin. Facts and events do not reach us intact and homogeneous, but full of gaps that allow for varied interpretations, which open up a field of disputes that are often full of ideologies and particular interests that do not aim to maintain collective memory.

But defenders of the duty of memory, those who believe in its power to restore social and civic ties, must not weaken in the face of the threat of an imminent conflict, as this, the conflict, is a constitutive part of the movement to bring before oneself a past which is, because it has already taken place, fragmented. On the contrary, as Beatriz Sarlo attests, its defenders must ensure that the function of the memorial narrative is fulfilled, that is, founding a present in a close relationship with a past, so that atrocities like those carried out during the dictatorships that devastated much of Latin American countries do not happen again. It is necessary to recognize that “Memory is a common good, a duty (as was said in the European case) and a legal, moral and political necessity” (Sarlo, 2016, p. 62, our translation). It is a legal necessity since there are still those who directly contributed to the crimes perpetrated by dictatorships that remain unpunished; it is moral, considering that a society which supports torture and demands military intervention is not capable of facing head-on the

importance for the constitution of a people, because the denial of the atrocious past, instead of constituting a social peace, leads to an alienation of a country in relation to the facts that should be remembered and, if necessary, punished, so that similar phenomena are inhibited from returning to the public scene.

- 6 “Como es evidente, el campo de la memoria es un campo de conflictos que tienen lugar entre quienes mantienen el recuerdo de los crímenes de estado y quienes proponen pasar a otra etapa, cerrando el caso más monstruoso de nuestra historia. Pero también es un campo de conflictos entre los que sostenemos que el terrorismo de estado es un capítulo que debe quedar jurídicamente abierto, y que lo sucedido durante la dictadura militar debe ser enseñado, difundido, discutido, comenzando por la escuela” (Sarlo, 2016, p. 24).

ailments of corruption that destroy the social fabric; it is political, because, by mitigating the overwhelming force of collective memory, at the same time the public sphere is being emptied, since memory only comes to fruition when many people talk about a fact or an event, causing this fact or event to take the place of a factual truth.

Talking about an event that occurred, in addition to stimulating the development of what Arendt calls factual truth, promotes the survival of the world. Faced with such an assertion, we can say that the construction of factual truth takes place on two fronts that ultimately intersect. First, facts and events must be understood as the result of what human beings carry out together, which constitutes the true contexture of the public domain. Second, factual truths require testimony from other people, since these truths come from circumstantial events, in which many actors and spectators are involved. These facts, to become truths, need to be supported by evidence from eyewitnesses, records and documents, that is, there is a need to build an argument about them, to talk about what happened. In other words, the actions of human beings together constitute what Arendt calls facts and events, which, in order to be elevated to the level of factual truths, require many people to talk about them and, thus, give their verifiable testimony. Therefore, testimony elevates a fact to the category of factual truth and this, after going through the process of de-sense and de-spatialization,⁷ will become another artifact of the *memory palace*: a raw material that will be manipulated by the faculty of thought, in the search to signify reality. In view of the foregoing, we realize that, for Hannah Arendt, every thought always implies memory, as every thought is a *re-thinking*. Thus, “the result of understanding [thinking] is meaning, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer” (Arendt, 2005, p. 309).

Narrating the events that occurred during the dictatorial period in Argentina (1976-1983) had the aim of bringing to light the crimes committed during that historical moment. The act of narrating was experienced without suspicion regarding the veracity of its content, its central role in the reconstruction of the

7 According to Bethânia Assy, “The difference between the mere apprehension of an image and the deliberative act of remembering through the activity of thinking leads, by analogy, to reconsider the distinction between passive and active perception”. Thus, “The ability to de-sense a sense-object, itself never apparent to the spirit, transforms the object, apparent to the senses, into an image that belongs to the imagination. This operation, carried out by what Arendt calls ‘reproductive imagination’, leads us to the idea that the warehouse of memory reflects a passive perception, that is, the ‘even more elementary ability to *de-sense* and be present before (and not only in) your spirit what is physically absent’. On the other hand, despite being directly dependent on the reproductive imagination, Arendt names a ‘productive imagination’, which promotes deliberative selection, relocation and the attribution of meaning to an image” (Assy, 2015, p. 62 e 63).

social fabric and, therefore, as an unquestionable piece in the accusation and trial of those involved in the deaths, disappearances and torture of thousands of Argentines. The same cannot be said about the Brazilian experience after the civil-military dictatorship, since, after more than forty years, Brazil was condemned by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights regarding the lack of investigation of those responsible for the torture and death of the journalist Vladimir Herzog in 1975, a full proof that there is little space in our public sphere for memorial narratives of victims of violence, which means that the social fabric continues to crumble, constituting fertile soil for the proliferation of the imaginary that all our country's misfortunes will be suppressed by military intervention.

By silencing memorial narratives, we do not allow new generations to exercise their right to signify facts according to their own perspective. For Benjamin, "[...] there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply" (Benjamin, 2003, p. 390). The right that each new generation has to interpret facts according to their own perspective is narrated by Eduardo Jardim, on the occasion of the reception of Antonio Callado's work by one of his grandchildren, a narrative that I transcribe below:

Ten years after Callado's death, a film was made in his honor, directed by José Joffily, *The passion according to Callado*. In addition to photos and scenes from other films, the documentary contains several testimonies. They are speeches from friends, his wife, journalist Ana Arruda, one of his daughters, actress Tessy Callado (who remembers the suicide of her sister Tony in 1980), and his grandchildren. It was an opportunity to celebrate the writer's personality and work. The set keeps a certain formality. Only in the widow's speech and in João Ubaldo Ribeiro's statement the writer's pessimism is mentioned, but this does not lead to further questions. His frustrated dreams, the harsh assessment of leftist movements does not appear. Perhaps because this approach required a review of recent history which, at the time the film was made, was of no interest. *Only one statement contrasts, from a young man, Júlio Callado, one of the writer's grandchildren, who states that his generation no longer recognized itself in his grandfather's literature. His statement suggests the possibility of taking a distance, which would be the first requirement for understanding what happened in those dark times. This done, it would present the possibility of asking ourselves how the experiences of that time still reverberate in our* (Jardim, 2017, p. 52-53. Our highlights).

The past must be constantly revisited, with the aim of giving new meaning to the present, as it propels us forward. This effect of the past is represented by the Angel by Swiss artist Paul Klee (1879-1940), an image used by Walter Benjamin to indicate that the present not only operates on the construction of

the past, but it is also its duty to do so. Klee's Angel is the Angel of history, who at the same time has his face turned towards what was, that is, the past, something prevents him from continuing in that position, once a strong wind drives him forward and does not allow him to remain in the yesterday: it is the wind of progress, it is the wind of tomorrow.

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus novus*. It represents an angel who seems to want to move away from something he is staring at. His eyes wide open, his mouth dilated, his wings open. Such must be the aspect of the angel of History. His face is directed towards the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe, which tirelessly piles ruin upon ruin and throws it at his feet. He would like to stop himself to awaken the dead ones and gather the vanquished ones, but a storm blows from paradise and clings to his wings so tightly that he can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly drives him into the future, to which he turns his back, while the pile of ruins grows into the sky. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 2003, p. 392).

Therefore, stories are constituted as open narratives that, because they are open, do not close the image of the past in a single representation, but constantly reconstruct this image. The "historical subjects of the present give another interpretation to the past" (Garnebin, 2015, p. 11). From this perspective, Beatriz Sarlo, quoting Paolo Rossi, points out that "Memory, as has been said, 'colonizes the past and organizes it based on the conceptions and emotions of the present'" (Sarlo, 2016, p. 92, our translation), that is, each one of us, when carrying out our remembrance activity, reconstructs the past from our point of view - those who have relatives who were victims of the atrocities of the dictatorship look to the past with the intention of trying to do justice to their loved ones; Those who are interested in the subject look at what happened with a researcher's interest. However, no one has the right to manipulate and modify the raw material of the elapsed fact, because in this way, they would be acting as a liar,⁸ someone who deliberately wants to modify the past and, consequently, the raw material of remembering.

The narrative memory: a resistance to *silencing policies*

*You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find warm food*

⁸ Liars are true actors who intend to change the world, as they intend to transform factual truth into an opinion, erasing the difference between these two phenomena of public life. The "[...] factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion" (Arendt, 1968, p. 243).

*And friendly faces when you return home.
 Consider if this is a man
 Who works in mud,
 Who knows no peace,
 Who fights for a crust of bread,
 Who dies by a yes or no.
 Consider if this is a woman
 Without hair, without name,
 Without the strength to remember,
 Empty are her eyes, cold her womb,
 Like a frog in winter.
 (Primo Levi)*

The Holocaust appears in the eyes of post-modern thinkers – Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas, Zygmunt Bauman, Viktor Frankl, Hans Jonas, Giorgio Agamben – as a watershed, a historical and conceptual landmark, since this event came to be installed at the center of our conflagration, occupying a nuclear-negative position in the 20th century. The Holocaust, therefore, has a neuralgic importance in the construction of collective memory not only in Europe, but in all continents that, after the Second World War, were flooded by regimes of exception, such as the civil-military dictatorships of South America, which, in some way, can be understood in the same phenomenological roll of the events as the events that culminated in the Nazi horrors,⁹ as the Holocaust offers itself as a model for other crimes.¹⁰

To seek reconciling with realities constructed by the practices of regimes of exception, disguised as democracy,¹¹ reports from survivors of the horrors perpetrated by these regimes are used, in the effort to turn a phrase into an apodictic sentence: “All misfortunes can be endured if you put them in a story or tell a story about them” (Arendt, 1968, p. 262).

The Jewish-Italian chemist Primo Levi (1919-1987), who remained eleven months (February 1944 to January 1945) in the Auschwitz III (Monowitz) concentration camp, points out to us that, with the end of World War II and, consequently, from the horrors practiced in the concentration camps, defined

9 According to Arendt, “It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form though not necessarily the cruelest-only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past” (Arendt, 1962, p. 460) and, thus, the dictatorships of South America can be seen as political phenomena forged within the scope of these true trances.

10 “El ‘deber de memoria’ que impone el Holocausto a la historia europea fue acompañado por la atención prestada a las memorias de los sobrevivientes y las huellas dejadas por las víctimas” (Sarlo, 2016, p. 56).

11 According to Agamben, “[...] «lo stato di eccezione [...] è diventato la regola» (Benjamin 11, p. 697), esso non soltanto si presenta sempre più come una tecnica di governo e non come una misura eccezionale, ma lascia anche apparire alla luce la sua natura di paradigma costitutivo dell’ordine giuridico” (Agamben, 2018, p. 180).

by him as the image of hell,¹² the generation of survivors was left with the need to tell others what had happened, to turn the listeners into partakers in the experiences that took place in the concentration camps. This need led Primo Levi to narrate his stories in the form of books, which, in some way, were already being prepared during the days he was imprisoned in the concentration camp. In one of these books, Levi puts us before an uncomfortable question, which is the title of this work: *If this is a man*. This question is based on the horrendous practices carried out by Nazi officers: the slow destruction of the humanity of camp prisoners, transforming them into docile beings, without “[...] acts of revolt, nor words of defiance, nor a glance of judgment” (Levi, 1994, p. 135). Men with pale faces, sordid and miserable dolls that resembled ghosts. Men who were separated from their wives, their children, who had their heads shaved and their clothes and shoes removed. They had no right to communicate with other prisoners, since talking about memories was an imminent risk of death, nor could they be called by their names. Primo Levi, during the time he spent in the Monowitz camp, like the other prisoners, was identified by a number: 174,517. “*Häftling* [prisoner]: I learned that I am a *Häftling*. My name is 174,517; we were baptized, we will carry this mark tattooed on our left arm until we die” (Levi, 1959, p. 22).

Through these memorial narratives, Primo Levi makes us realize the limits of our language to describe the annihilation of men in concentration camps, to tell in story form the most miserable human condition, in which nothing else belongs to you, in which notions of *good* and *evil*, *right* and *wrong* have lost all meaning, since the moral world is not capable of surviving in a space delimited by barbed wire fences and where “everything is possible”, including making a person’s humanity be annihilated. From this report, Levi wonders whether, faced with such a human situation, it is worth retaining some type of memory.

To this question, I am convinced that I can answer yes. We are convinced that no human experience is empty of content, that they all deserve to be analyzed; that fundamental values (although not always positive) can be extracted from this particular world that we are describing. We would like to draw attention to the fact that the Camp was also (and markedly) a remarkable biological and social experience (Levi, 1994, p.79, our translation).

12 “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. Someone sits down on the ground. The time passes drop by drop” (Levi, 1959, p. 15).

I agree with Primo Levi in relation to his assertion that all human experiences must be remembered, so that some of them do not happen again. Levi, with his works, makes us understand that even the greatest misfortunes need to be narrated and, therefore, remembered, so that future generations do not make the same mistakes. Those who have no memory endlessly repeat the same actions... even the most atrocious ones. Primo Levi makes us realize that giving a voice to survivors is a peculiarity of the post-war period and also, why not say, of the post-dictatorships, even if this voice comes from the mouth of a character¹³ of a novel written by Assis Brasil, despite being fiction, it meets an indisputable factual reality: the horrors of remaining trapped, in an inhumane situation, for an immeasurable time.

Jeremias, 42 years old, married, father of a daughter and Literature teacher, is the main character in Assis Brasil's *Os que bebem como os cães* (*The ones who drink like the dogs*, in a free translation), written in 1975. However, the character's identity is only revealed almost at the end of the book, because within the 160 pages that make up this novel the focus is not on building the image of a specific subject, but pointing to the fact that this narrative can be the description of thousands of people who lived, for years, in the prisons of the civil-military dictatorships that devastated South America, including Brazil, in the middle of the 20th century.¹⁴

The work is divided into three themes: *A Cela* (The Cell), *O Pátio* (The Prison Yard), *O Grito* (The Scream). In this sequence, what Assis Brasil constructs is a harrowing and, at times, desperate narrative, of *someone* who is imprisoned in a four-meter-square, dark *Cell*, with at their feet only sand smelling of mold and that *someone's* own excrement, who, because their hands are handcuffed behind their back during the entire time they spend in the cell – a time that is impossible to measure due to the lack of existential references¹⁵ –, is not allowed to do their physiological needs in an appropriate

13 "What permeates the entire storyline, and its characters is the risk of losing the past, by losing memory or simply not having it" (Magalhães, 2006, p. 52).

14 "*Os que bebem como os cães* appears on the surface as a narrative about the sufferings of a nameless prisoner, in a nameless prison. However, what makes this work special is the political and historical context in which it comes to life: the period of military dictatorship in Brazil. From the recognition of this fact, it is clear that the author actually denounces the abuses committed by the State to maintain power" (Sousa; Frota, 2021, p. 60).

15 In the cell, everything was done so that there was no possibility of the prisoners reconnecting with reality and, consequently, recovering their memories, which could lead to some type of action adverse to the order in the prison. "That was it: they didn't want men to know how many days, weeks, months had passed there – no relationship with reality should be admitted. And they knew that the bowl of soup would be the first object to awaken to a relationship with reality. That's why prison staff served it at uncertain times, several times a day or every two days, either only in the morning, or only in the afternoon." (Brasil, 2013, p. 52). However, Jeremias begins to understand the need to reconnect with time, as this movement leads him to regain his memory. "He had to measure his time as the first step to understanding his new condition – the scream, the men, the

place, being necessary to eliminate urine and feces on the prison uniform itself. Sometimes, that *someone* is taken to the prison yard, where they find other *someones* who are in the same situation as them: arrested, handcuffed and subjected to subhuman conditions. In the prison yard, in a collective tank, they have the opportunity to bathe and wash their vestments. It is in this same prison yard that an episode takes place, which will gradually give a new meaning to Jeremias' narrative: one of the prisoners lets out a scream – “Mommy!” – which causes Jeremiah to be shaken from his numbness and begin to reflect on the meaning of this scream, which, as he goes to the prison yard, changes to “God!”, “Maria”, “Dulce”, “Live, men!” – these last two being pronounced by Jeremiah. Such screams, even though they are muffled by the truculence of the guards, who interrupt these demonstrations with aggressions and the silencing of these voices through adhesive plasters placed over prisoners' mouths, have some effect on those undead: the possibility of resuming part of their past, that had been erased from their memories, like the passing of a sponge over a blackboard that erases everything that had previously been written on it.¹⁶

At the beginning, (he) didn't identify what they were saying or trying to say. Little by little, one or another louder scream, began to understand, began to understand and was filled with remorse, as if had voluntarily forgotten his entire past life.

The man, who was almost in front of him, was the one who shouted the loudest, or he heard better because he was closer

– Mommy! – the man shouted.

And the guard pushed his head under the tap until he gave up his gesture.

But others, as if awakened by their companion's scream, began to shout:

– Mom!

Others said more quietly and with more fervor:

– My mother.

– Maria... my Maria.

And the strong arms made yet another head bow under his despair.

When the guards considered that the improvised bath had already ended, they replaced the adhesive tape in men's mouths. He already had his adhesive tape, before he even thought about saying a word. But the others' scream had opened something in his brain: he had a past, but he couldn't remember anything (Brasil, 2013, p. 12).

prison yard, that false air of freedom, a sky without stars and birds, had given him the sense and the harmonic guideline that led to the superior meaning of the word God [...] I have to measure my time and only then I will be able to understand what happened to me, why I am here, why I don't remember the past. I must measure my time" (Brasil, 2013, p. 55).

16 “If only I could think about the past. In your past. But everything seemed to be a blank slate behind – where was the woman who is my mother left? The men in the prison yard were shouting for no name. Why? The guards sponged my past, washed my mind – I just must bear the handcuffs, the dark, the tank, the sensitive and beautiful water – and the scream, the scream of sad men, the screams, not of despair, but of hope. Yes, HOPE” (Brasil, 2013, p. 57).

The fact that the *Screams of the Prison Yard* bring a kind of awakening to Jeremias, reconnecting him with his own consciousness, is the reason that, when faced with voices that articulate words that apparently had no meaning, they make him reflect and realize that He lost track of who he is and the meaning of the words “Mommy”, “God!”, “Dulce!”... Thus, Jeremias, faced with these screams, makes some discoveries: he realizes that the lack of meaning of these words and the lack of perception regarding the entire time he has already spent in the cell, or how long it takes to go back to drinking a bowl of soup like a dog¹⁷ – because, as his hands were handcuffed behind his back, he had to sip the soup with his tongue –, they are the result of some narcotic being placed in both the tank water and the soup, so that the prisoners lose consciousness of who they are. The water from the tank and the soup are the reservoirs of forgetfulness for the character of the novel, configuring them as his river *Lethe*:¹⁸ a place that stores a liquid that the dead ones need to sip to forget their previous lives.

I wait, I must wait, I must hold on. Or will I go back to drinking the contaminated water from the tank, to sink into numbness? Or will I drink the disgusting soup again, only to be forgotten? If he could resist by drinking only the water from his small fountain [which he created with rainwater that fell through a leak and filled a hole dug in the floor of the cell], he would discover more, more about himself and about men. If he could hold out a little longer, if he could (Brasil, 2013, p. 122).

The themes of the work follow one another. However, what catches my attention is an element present in the narrative of this writer from Piauí: the need for a propitious environment for the character’s memory to begin to be recovered, at first in a disorderly and fragmented way, until he reacquires consciousness of who he really was. This favorable environment appears in two moments of the work: in the first, it is built in the prison yard, with the presence of other *someones* who shout words that are initially meaningless;

17 “He sipped the hot liquid: on his knees, hands cuffed behind him – he had already achieved relative ease, so that the food went down without choking. The tongue seemed to have grown a foot long and picked up the slime and carried it into the throat, just like an elephant’s trunk or an anteater’s tongue. And he heard his own noise as he fed rhythmically, mouthful after mouthful, a domesticated and active dog. Only a leash and a tail were missing. He could even grunt and choose the corner for his needs” (Brasil, 2013, p. 54). This narrative by Assis Brasil is in line with a report by Primo Levi about the conditions of prisoners in concentration camps. According to Levi, “those newly arrived at the camp were forced to slurp the soup like a dog, as they were not offered any spoon. He would have to win it over, buy it with a piece of bread.” (Levi, 1994, p. 09).

18 “According to genealogy and theogony, Leth comes from the lineage of Night (in Greek *Nyx*, *Nox* in Latin), [...] [whose] mother is Discord (in Greek, *Eris*, in Latin, *Discordia*) – the dark point in this kinship. But in the interpretation of this myth, genealogy plays only a small role, as ‘Lethe’ (*he* or *she*) is above all the name of a river in the underworld, which gives oblivion to the souls of the dead. In this image and field of images, forgetfulness is entirely submerged in the liquid element of water. There is a deep meaning in the symbolism of these magical waters. In its soft flow, the hard contours of the memory of reality are dissolved, and thus, they are *liquidated*” (Weinrich, 2004, p. 06).

later, this environment is forged in the cell, with the presence of two rats that appear to lick the remains of soup left by Jeremias. In these two scenarios, what is relevant to my research is the adequate space for recovering memory, which is simply the presence of others, even if not all of these *others* are human beings. Thus, Arendt's assertion is ratified, which points to the fact that the world only has meaning and appears to human beings as it really is, that is, an immortal abode of mortal beings, when many inhabit it and narrate the stories that transpired at its core. When experiences about the world are not narrated, it loses all reality and becomes just a pile of meaningless objects.¹⁹ Within Assis Brasil's fictional work, the men in the prison yard and the rats in the cell are configured as the plurality that is the law of the land, which ratifies the existence of a reality attested by us, and the voice that resonates through the mouths of the prisoners in the prison yard, in the form of inarticulate screams, is the resumption of the narrative about the reality that surrounds them.

When bending myself at the work *Os que bebem como os cães*, I realize that, for memory to be mitigated and public space to become a desert, it is necessary to build public policies for silencing the narratives. In Brazil, these policies are carried out either explicitly or implicitly. Explicitly, through violent acts carried out in prisons, such as torture, rape and murder, or through the implementation of laws and decrees (executive orders), such as the Amnesty Law. The Amnesty Law was promulgated by the dictator João Batista Figueiredo (1918-1999) on August 28, 1979, and although it should be considered an important milestone in the redemocratization process – by allowing exiles and banished people to return to Brazil, illegal immigrants left of hiding from the police, defendants having their cases in military courts annulled, prisoners being released from prisons and police stations – one cannot lose sight of how much evil there is in its creation and, mainly, in its perpetuation.²⁰ The Amnesty Law is an effective

19 "If someone wants to see and experience the world as it 'really' is, he can do so only by **understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates them**, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk *about* it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides." (Arendt, 2005, p. 128. Emphasis added).

20 "The STF (Brazilian Supreme Federal Court) decided yesterday that the Amnesty Law cannot be changed to enable the punishment of State agents who carried out torture during the military dictatorship (1964-1985). The ministers (justices) denied, by 7 votes to 2, a request from the OAB (Brazilian Bar Association) that questioned the extension of the legislation, enacted in 1979 by the João Figueiredo government. The entity argued that torture is a common and imprescriptible crime and, therefore, whoever committed it could not benefit from forgiveness. The thesis, however, did not prevail. The trial, considered historic by the ministers themselves, ends a controversy that divided the Lula government. After two days of trial and more than ten hours of discussion, the court understood that the Amnesty Law was 'bilateral' and the result of a political agreement resulting from a 'broad debate' held by Brazilian society" (Folha de S.Paulo, 2010).

policy of silencing, as it causes forgetfulness, which is possible and therefore, should not be feared or denied, to become a social pathology through the implementation and maintenance of this Law, which, by hindering us from properly narrating the facts that occurred during the civil-military dictatorship, imposes on us the belief that “both sides” had their share of the blame. Thus, the Amnesty Law, drawn up and promulgated by those who violently took, through a coup, the political power of our country into their hands, fosters a collective amnesia through the silencing of our narratives about what happened during the years of 1964 and 1988.²¹ In my understanding, although the Amnesty Law had benefited a large part of those persecuted by the dictatorship, this “benefit” is configured as a necessary side effect so that the Amnesty Law could achieve its main objective, that is, to prevent the main responsible for more than two decades of violent violations of human and political rights were tried and punished: civilians, military personnel and companies.

When used implicitly, *silencing policies* seek to disqualify the content of the narratives of those who were arrested and tortured and who had their political and civil rights revoked. *Silencing policies* are intended to erase our recent past, making us look forward, because, as Regina Duarte, former Secretary of Culture of the Bolsonaro Government, reminded us, “we are a country of the future!”.

The special secretary for Culture minimized criticism regarding Bolsonaro’s praise for the military dictatorship in an interview with CNN Brasil.

“There was torture. Stalin, how many deaths? Hitler, how many deaths? I don’t want to drag a cemetery of death on my back. I’m light, I’m alive! Let’s stay alive! Why look back?”

“You have to look forward, you have to love the country. Keep demanding things that happened in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s? Folks, let’s move forward.” And she finished by singing “Pra Frente Brasil”, the Brazilian team’s jingle during the 1970 World Cup (Folha de S.Paulo, 2020).

The narrative of *Assis Brasil* fills us with a repugnant anguish, as we well know that it is not a mere fiction created by the mind of a singular writer from Piauí, but is configured as a literary work that allows us to understand a reality experienced by a large part of the Brazilian population between the years 1964

21 For Daniel Aarão Reis, observing how and when the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship occurred, which according to this author happened through the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, is not an easy task, as some thinkers see the end of the dictatorship in the process of political opening. In this sense, it appears as one of the most difficult questions to define how “the dictatorship was extinguished, redefining itself, transforming itself, slowly transitioning to the democratic regime, changing its skin like a chameleon changing colors, in a slow metamorphosis that to this day gives rise to controversies regarding how much it effectively ended” (Reis, 2014, p. 15).

to 1988, which did not bow before the brutality of a policy of violence carried out by the Brazilian State. The book by the author from Piauí is not only a literary work, but constitutes an explanation of experiences lived in cells and basements of the DOPS, which, unfortunately, still take root in our political scenario, causing our public spaces to be covered with a thick layer of infertile land, which transforms our public spheres into deserts within which authentic political experiences, which are carried out through words and actions, are undermined.

Incomplete narratives

One of the most effective ways to deliberately erase or alter the past is to disqualify the content of the narrative and, consequently, the person who tells a story. When, in December 2020, former president Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a confessed admirer of the torturer Brilhante Ustra (1932-2015) – former colonel of the Brazilian Army and former head of torture and murder centers, the DOI-CODI of II Exército (Army) –, declares to journalists that he is awaiting x-rays to prove the torture and violence suffered by former president Dilma Rousseff, which culminated in the fracture of her jaw, this statement is a clear and flagrant attempt to remove the *storyteller* from his duty and the right to narrate to future generations the misfortunes that have occurred. This type of silencing policy hinders one from bearing the weight of a dark and violent past, in addition to opening the door for erroneous interpretations to be encouraged, such as those that say that in March 1964 there was a “revolution” that saved Brazil from the communist threat.

The offensive against the storyteller can be even more bruising, going beyond the act of mocking and disbelieving the narratives spoken by victims of torture, turning into the burning of files, that is, the violent silencing of stories. This risk materialized on the occasion of the murder of former Colonel Paulo Malhães (1937-2014) in his family farm, on April 25, 2014, a month after he testified before the National Truth Commission and detailed how torture and disappearances of bodies were carried out during the civil-military dictatorship. He feared for his life after his testimony had produced damning evidence about the actions of the military during the dictatorial period. His murder – which was never clarified – occurred under circumstances that point to a premeditated crime, as Malhães was asphyxiated with a pillow after a group of men entered his house in the rural area of Nova Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro, tying his wife and his farm caretaker and left them locked in separate rooms.

For memorial narratives to perform their duty, the voices that tell stories must resonate without the violent hindrance of those who deliberately want future generations to be unaware of their past and unable to build a collective body on the republican bases. There are certainly narratives that tell stories of misfortune that are capable of fracturing human dignity. However, these same misfortunes can be endured and human dignity, once fractured, can be reconstituted, if there is an awareness of what happened through narratives. “Stories [...] can be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair this broken dignity” (Adichie, 2009, n.p.).

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