



The abjection in *If this is a man?* by Primo Levi

A abjeção em *É isto um homem?* de Primo Levi

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Abstract: This work aims to analyze the testimony *If this is a man?* by Primo Levi, an Italian Jew who was taken to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland in 1944, where he remained for months until the arrival of the red army in January 1945. The analysis of the work shows the different forms of abjection that Levi and other prisoners were subjected to since prison, transport to the concentration camp, until the release of prisoners at the end of the war. In the analysis, the abject could be understood as an unconscious process of the human psyche that can be imposed on another human being as a way to dehumanize it, in addition to also serving as a resistance tool for those who were unable to testify. To address the concept of the abject, we rely on the critical fortune of Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Georges Bataille, among others.

Keywords: Primo Levi. Abject. Testimony.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a obra de testemunho *É isto um homem?*, de Primo Levi, um judeu italiano que foi levado para o campo de concentração de Auschwitz na Polônia no ano de 1944, onde permaneceu durante meses até a chegada do exército vermelho em janeiro de 1945. A análise da obra mostra as diferentes formas de abjeção que Levi e demais prisioneiros foram submetidos desde a prisão, o transporte para o campo de concentração, até a libertação dos prisioneiros ao final da guerra. Na análise, o abjeto poderia ser compreendido como um processo inconsciente da psique humana que pode ser imposto a outro ser humano como forma de desumanizá-lo, além de também servir como uma ferramenta de resistência para aqueles que não tiveram condições de testemunhar. Para tratar do

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conceito de abjeto, nos apoiamos na fortuna crítica de Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Georges Bataille, entre outros.

Palavras-chave: Primo Levi. Abjeto. Testemunho.

Introduction

Much more than a testimony, *If this is a man?* is an essay on human essence and a sober and impartial analysis of the unfathomable horrors to which Jewish people was subjected to. Pioneer and literary canon, *If this is a man?* it is a portrait beyond Nazi war crimes, but an in-depth study of humanity and inevitable organization of society even in catastrophes.

In this work, we seek to analyze the work of Primo Levi as a testimony from the perspective of an abject process that begins long before the limit event such as Auschwitz occurred and that victimized millions of Jews during the second world war. When speaking of the abject, we assume a chain of expressions and actions of disgust and eschatology, from the Greek *skátós*, excrement. Abjection, therefore, can be understood as the manifestation of resistance inherent to being, the result of violence and dehumanization driven to the body of victim, which, in addition to words, bears its testimony through the wounds, blood, excrement and rot, which does not mean death.

The typology of Gil (2009) was adopted to classify the research methodology, specifying its characteristics as to the ends and means, in this way, the research can be called bibliographic and qualitative. For the development of the discussions, bibliographies will be used to help in the analysis of the concepts of abjection, authors such as Julia Kristeva, Georges Bataille, Barbara Harlow, among others, were used. This work is the product of research and debates present in the scientific initiation research group called *Configurações de Resistência em Narrativas Anglófonas Contemporâneas* (CRENAC) coordinated by professor Dr. Ana Lília Carvalho Rocha and funded by PROPESP-UFPA.

During the bibliographies systematization process, the organization of this work took place as follows: In the first section we present and debate about the various concepts of abject proposed by Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Georges Bataille; the second section of this work will analyze the work *If this is a man?* by Primo Levi from the perspective of the abject, previously proposed, showing the different abjection processes that motivated the Nazis to segregate and murder thousands of Jews since the beginning of the second world war.



1 The Abject

This section is dedicated to addressing the different views of abjection, a concept that is very recurrent in contemporary philosophical, social and political currents, since taken as a paradigm, it reveals a deep individual and collective subjective experience. In view of the objective of this work, it will always seek to maintain a direct relationship between the abject being and concentration camps, especially in the figure of the Jewish people, represented in this work by Primo Levi's *Zeugnis*.

First of all, it takes the thought of Julia Kristeva (1982) in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, pioneer in studies on abjection, her theory was largely based on psychoanalysis proposed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Jacques-Marie Émile Lacan (1901-1981). The author's approach takes an individual dimension of the construction and subjective constitution of the abject, taking into account a structure of the human unconscious and its possibility to interpret the subject.

According to Kristeva (1982) abject is something that we all feel the eternal need to purge in order to finally feel our human essence, it is something rejected from which we cannot separate, from which we do not protect ourselves in the same way as from an object. The abject is a condition where subjectivity is disturbed and meaning then collapses, producing panic and pointing to the fragility of life, of bodily limits.

Still according to the author, an object is represented in the real, material world and therefore can thus be understood and perceived by the human condition in its entirety, what it differs from abject. The abject according to Kristeva¹ would be a "pseudo-object" of primary representation or in the author's words: "the ability of the speaking being, always haunted by the other, to divide, reject, repel."

In a Freudian psychoanalytical approach, Kristeva² reinforces the difference between object and abject by saying that the subject is summarily moved by desire and although "there are lives that are not supported by desire, since desire is related to objects. Such lives are therefore based on exclusion." The abject, therefore, could not belong anywhere because its existence denies the existence of the "being" that is moved substantially by desires. This "exclusion" on which life is based is the place of abjection³ a place that "is never just one, neither homogeneous, cannot be totalized, but essentially divisible, foldable and catastrophic. A divider of territories, languages,

¹ KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 12.

² KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 6.

³ KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 8.



functions ..." The abject marks its border because "dejection never stops demarcating your universe" and therefore will always threaten existence.

The abject, however, is foreign to the subject and at the same time closely linked to it, representing a danger it brings to identity. All of this can be summed up with casual encounters with the abject through excrement and bodily fluids like blood, feces, sweat, lifeless bodies, infection, diseases, corpses and etc. or as the author calls it "phantasmatic substance" in which the subject struggles to get rid of at all costs. The feeling of threat and therefore, of implacable danger it is also represented like: "[...] the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its exterior, life by death [...]"⁴

The author makes a representation of what would be the "eternal confrontation" of the human psyche against everything that opposes the subconscious, such as rot, death and even other human beings. Something that the German Nazi state started to treat as public policy, calling it a "racial hygiene" policy, to eliminate people that it considered sub-race and who were "infesting" the "purity" of the German race. This pseudo-science based on eugenics, started long before Hitler came to power in 1933 and served the purpose of cleaning society from what confronted it in an abject way such as: Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and any human characteristic considered an impurity before a Germanic ideal.

According to Kristeva⁵ is the awareness that all human beings inevitably share a way of joint consciousness through abjection, a universal phenomenon that takes on "specific forms" and different codes according to the symbolic system of each individual. The abject, therefore, is born at the moment that the "symbolic and / or social dimensions of men are constituted."

This intimate relationship with the abject still translates, for example, in the author's words, into a "threat from within", which denies the abject's exclusive relationship to external factors. The author uses female menstrual blood as an example as well as urine, feces, phlegm; a "horror" that comes from "within" from each individual and produced by itself. This binary relation of "inside" and "outside" reaches a new level because according to⁶ the abject is also "coextensive to the social and symbolic order, both at the individual and the collective level". In other words, the abject represented in the individual and autonomous body also changes at the moment of its inclusion or exclusion in society.

⁴ KRISTEVA, 1982, p .71.

⁵ KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 68.

⁶ KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 68.



Kristeva in her book *Power of horror* (1982) continues to emphasize the inevitable process of abjection that all lives go through and share in a common way and going further, the author shows that the encounter with the abject also takes place in everyday life when addressing aversion certain types of food as an "archaic form of abjection". These casual encounters, although it seems minimized when compared to excrement and waste, still show a "disturbance in the tranquility" of the being, taking him out of his unconscious "comfort zone".

In addition to casual encounters with the abject, Kristeva (1982) still ends up representing a crude manifestation of the unconscious process of abjection, the corpse. A denial of being prior to itself, a maximum representation of the abject in the real and material world. According to the author, the mere encounter with the lifeless body sends the human being to the primordial and pre-symbolic chaotic fields of nature.

By the same token, Kristeva (1982) argues that the corpse violently confronts the being and reveals that the abject externalized by the wound, pus, secretion, fluids, etc. does not necessarily mean death. The corpse represents the absence of a limit and denies the meaning, deeply linking the abject to the body, for the author it is the deep aesthetic of the abject and for this reason, it has a close relationship with war, where bodies can be counted and confronted in a limit state of men.

In addition to Kristeva, Judith Butler distinguishes her thinking about abject in the book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* first published in 1995. Butler tries to seek a new meaning to the ways in which the abject can be thought, without giving up the metaphysical and psychoanalytical approach, for this the author argues that:

How could such constitutive exclusions be less permanent, more dynamic? How could the excluded return, not as psychosis or as a figure of the psychotic within politics, but as one who was silent, who was rejected from the realm of political significance? When and where is the social content assigned to the 'real' place and then placed in the position of the unspeakable? Isn't there a difference between a theory that states that, in principle, every discourse operates through exclusion and a theory that attributes this 'external' social and specific positions? As long as a specific use of psychoanalysis serves to exclude certain social and sexual positions from the domain of intelligibility, psychoanalysis



seems to be at the service of the normalizing law that it seeks to question.⁷

For Butler, the abject that appears in the human symbolic field had been oppressed by ideological and political issues, before manifesting itself in reality. In the position defended by Kristeva (1982) the abject has a structure located in the real world, which could prevent, for example, its entry and convergence in human language and, consequently producing culture.

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Butler (2011) makes use of his concept of abject to discuss identity and gender issues in the figure of the homosexual. Homosexuality would become a "threat" to heterosexuality through a denial of the male body through feminization and sterilization, represented in the figure of the "gay man" for example. Therefore, according to the author, there is a heteronormative strategy to "restrain" these threats to the norm, resulting in the abjection of these bodies and homosexual identities.

In addition, Butler reflects on the logic of the rejection produced by the abject and proposed by Kristeva (1982), understanding it as indescribable, unspeakable, not able to express in words, indefinite and horrific. For Butler, the abject could not happen this way because still using heteronormativity as an example, the author tells us that "the abjection of homosexuality can only occur through identification with abjection, an identification that must be rejected ..."⁸

Following Butler's (2011) considerations, heteronormativity is sustained by a coherence between sex, gender, desire and sexual practice. Without this pre-established coherent relationship, there is "subversion", "disturbance" of an order. The author calls those that alter the heteronormative convergence of "abject bodies". These bodies would not have "importance" or "intelligence" within a social environment and for that reason, it would be on the margins of society and would be constantly victims of violence.

In the aspect of "abject bodies" we can draw a parallel between the personification of the Jewish people before the social and ideological control of the third German Reich by imposing the constant violence and persecution against people who would be on the margins of that society, which saw the Jew, Gypsy, sick and other people as an affront to social normativity in that period. In more recent reflections⁹ the author warns

⁷ BUTLER, 2011, p. 269-270.

⁸ BUTLER, 2011, p. 74.

⁹ BUTLER, 2016.



of the broad concept that involves the understanding of "abject bodies". The abject, in Butler,¹⁰ "relates to all types of bodies whose lives are not considered lives and whose materiality is understood as not important" These "abject bodies" defended by the author, are not exempt from insertion into society, even if other social groups may consider them marginal and abject. Raising her argument about abject inserted in the social field, the author proposes the called "abject zones" that exist within this medium and likewise represent a "threat" to the order and integrity of the subjects, but with a possibility of psychotic distinction in which the subject fantasizes abjection.¹¹ These "abject zones" proposed by Butler (2011) are part of a broad social process and which, as Kristeva (1982) proposed, concern a subjective constitution, but that permeate the social sphere from the moment that the construction of individual bodies and positions, reaffirm their existence within society through culture and thus, become a threatening collective presence to different social classes that hold cultural power.

Entering the great possibilities that the concept of abject can take, another important author who could conceptualize the abject was Georges Bataille (1986). In several texts and works, the author approaches the abject inserted within a context of social exclusion and in material and immaterial relations based in metaphysical aspects on Gnosticism. For Bataille, the abject maintains its unassailable and unthinkable structure as thought by Kristeva (1982) and Butler (2011) seen previously.

Bataille (1986) was able to differentiate his thinking by defining the abject as an "inversion of hierarchy" and elevating this concept to the metaphysical field. The metaphysical aspect surrounding the concept of abject proposed by Bataille (1986) concerns the characteristics naturally understood as beautiful / ugly, high / down and other opposing conceptions that coexist. In the text *the language of flowers* (1986) the author associates flowers as a material product and its irreparably beauty as an ideal. (BATAILLE, 1986c, p. 16) "when it is said that flowers are beautiful it is because it seems to conform to what it should be, that is, because it is represent the human ideal."

Still using the text, *the language of flowers* (1986) Bataille argues that we reduce the human perception because we consider "the intelligible signs that allow us to distinguish different elements (in this case, to distinguish one flower from another). Even so, there is no way to reduce the sensitive experience to purely interpretative modes, it would be necessary to ignore the order of the aspect of what can be clearly

¹⁰ BUTLER, 2002b, p. 161.

¹¹ BUTLER, 2011, p. 187.



seen with the human eye, so, according to the author, we have a "decisive and inexplicable mental state" that "cannot be properly expressed through language."¹²

To better elucidate Bataille's (1986) arguments, we can say in other words that we accept that every flower is beautiful, but inevitably any flower rots. The flower is then "betrayed" for its unconditional aspect of beauty in the face of human sight. According to Bataille "the flower seems to return suddenly to the its primitive spoil: the most ideal is quickly reduced to a rag of ethereal filth". It takes the flower not in its beautiful aspect, but in what brings it to its lowest side, conceiving it "not as the more or less mediocre expression of an angelic ideal but, on the contrary, as a filthy and resplendent sacrilege."¹³

In another text called *the factory chimney*, Bataille (1986) once again exemplifies his conception of abject and low materialism, going against the so-called "beauty of the industrial revolution" and his conception based on large factories, buildings and accumulation of people in concrete cities. The author calls this "beauty" before human eyes as a "sclerotic admiration" (understood as a shallow perception of the human eye) in shape like the factory chimney, the title of his text.

Using the image of the chimney, the author proposes a wide perception of their meaning. According to him, we see not only "the sign of human work", but that we perceive "the atrocious projection of the nightmare that develops obscurely within this human as if it were a cancer". In front of the chimney, he argues, we should overcome the scientific way of seeing, which would lead us to describe it rationally as a "stone construction in the form of a tube intended for the evacuation of smoke at high heights, that is, as an abstraction", giving place to a mode of wild or childlike perception, attentive to the possibilities of "revealing a violent state of things." In the words of the author "The black smoke tilted by the wind, the large amounts of slag and filings are the only possible attributes to these gods of a disgusting Olympus."¹⁴

In using these texts to demonstrate the elevation and decay of practically all material forms, the author reflects that human existence could then be understood as an "elevation" to the detriment of other existences that were unable to rise. Bataille (1986) uses Darwin's notion and his theory of the evolution of species as an example, which was able to favor "the fittest" and the privileges that surround the human notion, just like the human erection, leaving the ground towards the sky, the "inferior" towards the "superior", the "down" towards the "high"; which would justify the privilege of

¹² BATAILLE, 1986c, p. 15.

¹³ BATAILLE, 1986c, p. 12.

¹⁴ BATAILLE, 2003a, p. 25.



the human head, reason located, to the detriment of the “low” parts: “with their feet in the mud and their heads more or less in the light, men obstinately imagined a flow that would raise them permanently, without return, towards pure space.”¹⁵

As Bataille argued, Darwin's theory had also been used as an assumption to prove pseudo-scientific experiments aimed at the "superiority" of one race in "inferiorization" of another:

If negatives qualities of the race could be located and eliminated in the germ cells, then the need for a Darwinian struggle for existence would be eliminated. A kinder and more "humane" form of selection might thereby replace the brutal force of natural selection; indeed, intelligent racial hygiene might eliminate the need for a struggle for existence altogether.¹⁶

As well as the people who became victims of the German Nazi state and as a society, the Jewish race was the main target of this ideology, it is necessary to think of another essential concept for Bataille, heterology, because the abject appears in Bataille's theory (1986) due to their interest not in the sensitive qualities called "superiors", but in those "obscure", the despised ideal human movements that escape the nobility, the "inferior part of being and society"

For Bataille, society can be reduced to purely homogeneous and heterogeneous elements. In other words, the process of assimilating food and after digestion, excreting (the homogeneous refers to assimilation processes, the heterogeneous refers to excretion movements) these movements are constant and have no end as long as the being is still alive. Bataille defines homogeneity as:

Homogeneity means, in this situation, the commensurability of the elements and the awareness of this commensurability: human relations are sustained by a reduction to fixed rules based on the awareness of the possible identity of people and delineated situations; in principle, all violence is excluded from this course of existence.¹⁷

Homogeneity can be measured, rationally understood from a social and scientific point of view. Whatever the scientific interest, he would always be focused on

¹⁵ BATAILLE, 1986f, p. 20.

¹⁶ PROCTOR, 1988, p.16.

¹⁷ BATAILLE, 1986h, p. 137-138, emphasis added.



homogeneous aspects of events, not being able to address what undoubtedly escapes, slides, runs away, and does not have a controllable form; excrement, the expulsion of fluids, the heterogeneous.

As a principle of comparison, we can say about the Nazi concentration camps like Auschwitz, because the concentration camp is according to Agamben (2002) the final place where all those who have no political and judicial apparatus are sent, a space in which the powers no longer interfere and where there is no other form of life than that reduced to biological characteristics. The concentration camp is the place where Bataille's heterogeneous and homogeneous mix and coexist, where abject has become the rule. In the words of "¹⁸ the heterogeneous is born through exclusion: "as a rule, homogeneous society excludes any heterogeneous element" so we can characterize heterogeneous human existences as something apart "something else, immeasurable"

The thought of is then based on recognizing in these abject, heterogeneous forms "positive values that they have in the affective experience." The recognition of these forms, the perception of their heterogeneous existence, then acquires a subversive character. This "lower" part of society, the excluded, the marginalized, those who "cause revulsion and in no way can be assimilated by humanity in its entirety" are examples given by the author in heterogeneous ways in the world and contain within themselves a subversive potential political, as compared by Bataille to communist workers:

Those in which the eruption force accumulates are necessarily listed below. Communist workers seem to the bourgeois as ugly and as dirty as the sexual and hairy parts or the lower parts: sooner or later a scandalous eruption will result in which the asexual and noble heads of the bourgeois will be beheaded.¹⁹

Thus, returning to the anti-Semitic arguments of the third German Reich, taking as its center of attention heterogeneous (Jewish) forms, could not live and prosper in society with abject, subversive and threatening forms of life, from the point of view of the German state. Oppression arises from the movement of attraction and repulsion characteristic of the heterogeneous ideal, since stability would depend on "general rules of oppression established in a society".²⁰

¹⁸ BATAILLE, 1986, p. 143-144.

¹⁹ BATAILLE, 1986i, p. 8.

²⁰ BATAILLE, 1970, p. 217.



The forces of oppression work, according to Bataille, in a particular way and are not forces that act on the oppressed in a simply coercive way; the strategies for subjecting these miserable forms would be much more “in the form of a ban on contact”.²¹ Thus, the excluded forms are relegated to the place of disgust and horror; of the untouchable, the concentration camp. The other “sovereign life forms” treated individually, can be recognized as autonomous and identifiable bodies, while the other people victims of oppression and persecution then become something that²² called “mass amorphous.”

For the author, the abject takes on an amorphous form possessing inferior territories with the potential to transgress an existence or a rejection of any kind of idealism. The “inferiority of matter” does not necessarily mean its unimportance, since superiority and inferiority are aspects that coexist and interact dynamically in a mutual relationship. It therefore exists because it is opposite concepts.

The association of this great amorphous mass with the working class or with other political minorities, such as blacks, Jews, homosexuals and other political and social groups persecuted by the Nazi regime is quite evident in the author's texts, making clear his understanding of abjection as a social process of exclusion. In this conception, the word *miserable*, when becoming synonymous with abject,

This word expresses, in the latter case, a rage crossed by disgust and reduced to silent horror: it implies an attitude dominated by a feeling of distress or excessive grandeur in relation to the sadness that is associated with all expanded human value. It appears, therefore, situated at the confluence of the multiple contradictory impulses required by the hopeless existence of human despair.²³

As discussed in this section, the concept of abject maintains particular and peculiar characteristics that add up and are related to the different approaches proposed by the authors, in the metaphysical, psychoanalytical, social and individual fields. The concept of the abject is broad and the subject of many contemporary debates and analyzes, thinking about abjection, will undoubtedly lead us to imagine worldly horrors and images of disgust and disgust that perfectly illustrate the popular and political / social imaginary of being. The abject is therefore a “non-quality” that

²¹ BATAILLE, 1970, p. 118.

²² BATAILLE, 1970, p. 217-218.

²³ BATAILLE, 1970, p. 218.



accompanies us intimately and serves the purpose of the unconscious, the inevitable degradation of the body and the finitude of man.

3 Analysis

In the context in which Primo Levi's testimony was written and in the growing outbreak of the second great war in the same period, abject thinking acquired a character and purpose no longer restricted to individual cognitive processes, but it became part of the daily life of all globe and especially in countries and peoples inserted in Europe in the 20th century.

As Agamben (2002a) argued the bare life is unprotected from legal apparatus and in a constant and permanent state of illegality in which the state machine had the final decision on how to treat these forms of life, deciding who lives or dies.

In addition to the gradual pariah state, the Jews were subject to all kinds of degradation and humiliation by the SS soldiers (*Schutzstaffel*) that after a profound misrepresentation and exposure to the various anti-Semitic and prejudiced advertisements and speeches, collective subjectivity was compromised and as Kristeva (1982) termed the meaning of abject, collapsed, allowing extreme violence and the lack of empathy and humanity in the soldiers who therefore had the conviction that they were at the service of a worthy interest and greater than the lives of others.

The main point of the dehumanization of being as mentioned Rego (2014) is the objectification of the other and to which adds Kristeva (1982) is the point of split and exclusion, where abjection lives, in individual convictions. The abject is first idealized in the human mind and in the case of the Jewish people in relation to their executioners, the abject also had a form in the "real world" for the Nazis, as Kristeva (1982) called a "pseudo-object"; something that can be damaged, attacked, molded and destroyed. No longer men, women, the elderly or children, but mere "pieces" that could either be used or discarded.

With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked "Wteviel Stuck?" The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty "pieces" and that all was in order. They then loaded us on to the buses and took us to the station of Carpi. Here the train was waiting for us, with our escort for the journey. Here we received the first blows: and it was so new and senseless that we felt no pain, neither in body



nor in spirit. Only a profound amazement: how can one hit a man without anger?²⁴

All those peoples who left thousands of wagons every day, represented nothing but the bodies of others who were unimportant, nor could they even be considered as lives as says Butler (2016). In the eyes of those who held the weapons, they were just abject material. For this reason, life and death coexisted in a random line for all those who got out of the wagons, as well as the communist workers, mentioned by Bataille (1970) in his sociological essays it named "Abjection and the miserable forms". The bodies could serve at work and it was a way in which the Reich could take advantage of cheap labor:

In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither they nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply. Today, however, we know that in that rapid and summary choice each one of us had been judged capable or not of working usefully for the Reich; we know that of our convoy no more than ninety-six men and twenty-nine women entered the respective camps of Monowitz-Buna and Birkenau, and that of all the others, more than five hundred in number, not one was living two days later. We also know that not even this tenuous principle of discrimination between fit and unfit was always followed, and that later the simpler method was often adopted of merely opening both the doors of the wagon without warning or instructions to the new arrivals. Those who by chance climbed down on one side of the convoy entered the camp; the others went to the gas chamber.²⁵

In this initial moment, Primo Levi describes in detail his impressions and the new discoveries, now as a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp, in Silesia, where Germans and Poles lived together. Levi also expertly witnesses the entire process of the gradual loss of his material identity and that of the other prisoners who arrived and lived there. Their names now replaced by numbers, their clothes and shoes replaced by striped robes and wooden sandals, their belongings confiscated and yet another series of embargoes and new laws that governed everyone. As reaffirmed by Butler (2011) we can make the parallel with his theory when saying that the

²⁴ LEVI, 1959, p. 7.

²⁵ LEVI, 1959, p. 11-12.



concentration camp was a great "object zone" where the "marginal bodies" were separated from society and reaffirmed and replaced in a new position and new social sphere where those who held power and cultural dominance could operate different forms of oppression in multiple and distinct forms of life

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term "extermination camp," and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: "to lie on the bottom."²⁶

The common subject at various times dealt with the so-called "selections" and the chimneys that blazed a dense black smoke. The concern that knew the sleep of many was legitimate, at any time, randomly and with an unknown criterion, anyone could be chosen in the calls and taken to die in the oven. This fascination, fear and ignorance about the chimney refers to what Bataille (1986) tried to call "low materialism". The chimney became a symbol of fear and death, black smoke could represent elsewhere, the daily work in an industry, coal mine or the pollution of large urban centers, but in that place, the smoke and the chimney built by bricks, demonstrated that thousands were being burned alive.

I still have quite confused ideas about this kind of danger. Everybody speaks about it indirectly, by allusions, and when I ask some question, they look at me and fall silent. Is it true what one hears of selections, of gas, of crematoriums? Crematoriums. The other one, Walter's neighbour wakes up startled and sits up: who is talking about the crematorium? what is happening? cannot a sleeping person be left in peace? He is a Polish Jew, albino, with an emaciated and goodnatured face, no longer young. His name is Schmulek, he is a smith. Walter tells him briefly. So, "der Italeyner" does not believe in selections. Schmulek wants to speak German but speaks Yiddish; I understand him with difficulty, only because he wants to be understood. He silences Walter with a sign, he will see about

²⁶ LEVI, 1959, p. 21-22.



persuading me: "Show me your number: you are 174517. This numbering began eighteen months ago and applies to Auschwitz and the dependent camps. There are now ten thousand of us here at Buna-Monowitz; perhaps thirty thousand between Auschwitz and Birkenau. Wo sind die Anderet Where are the others?" "Perhaps transferred to other camps?" I suggest. Schmulek shakes his head, he turns to Walter. "Er will nix verstayen" he does not want to understand.²⁷

How privileged are those who have something to eat, can give themselves the right to say they eat. Language as an abject weapon of disparity between the reality of those who can quench their hunger and thirst for those who eat and drink to survive the extreme. The word "eat" cannot be used to refer to the hot water with cabbage or potatoes that those in Auschwitz eat to avoid starving. That is not food, taking the sour and disgusting mixture for a few minutes does not mean eating.

The Kapo comes to us periodically and calls: "Wer hat noch zu jressen!" He does not say it from derision or to sneer, but because this way of eating on our feet, furiously, burning our mouths and throats, without time to breathe, really is "fressen," the way of eating of animals, and certainly not "essen," the human way of eating, seated in front of a table, religiously. "Fressen" is exactly the word, and is used currently among us.²⁸

There is a specific class of men, and especially at work, from which no one else dares to share strength. The so-called "Muselman", a term used by all prisoners to designate those who carry inevitable death on their faces, who have reached the level of complete loss of consciousness, spontaneity and will to live, work automatically and follow elementary human instincts like eating and drinking, without caring about anything or anyone. For Agamben (2002b) the origin of the term "Muselmann" derives from the literal meaning of the Arabic word "*Muslim*", the one who submits himself unconditionally to will of God, and is at the origin of the legends about the alleged Islamic fatalism. It is worth mentioning that "*Muslims*" submit to the will of God by their own choice, differentiating themselves from these inhuman and abject beings who roam the concentration camp, without the choice to behave like this. In the *Zeugnis* of Primo Levi:

²⁷ LEVI, 1959, p. 54.

²⁸ LEVI, 1959, p. 85.



But with the mussulmans, the men in decay, it is not even worth speaking, because one knows already that they will complain and will speak about what they used to eat at home. Even less worthwhile is it to make friends with them, because they have no distinguished acquaintances in camp, they do not gain any extra rations, they do not work in profitable Kommandos and they know no secret method of organizing. And in any case, one knows that they are only here on a visit, that in a few weeks nothing will remain of them but a handful of ashes in some near-by field and a crossed-out number on a register. Although engulfed and swept along without rest by the innumerable crowd of those similar to them, they suffer and drag themselves along in an opaque intimate solitude, and in solitude they die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone's memory.²⁹

The abject, the inhuman and death could be used as a nickname to designate all these beings that can no longer be called humans. The *Bare life* as a rule in the concentration camp according to Agamben (2002b) is a priori annulment of legal rights, giving way only to the condition of biological life in essence. It transforms the political paradigm by considering life and death as concepts. Without political value, life as "sacred" in its existence and in the sovereignty of the individual himself, is worthless and therefore can be eliminated. The "Muselmanns" were considered walking corpses, "autonomous zombies" who no longer think or act intelligently, the cruel portrait of an inhuman and abject process in its essence, the thought abject idealized by Kristeva (1982) materialized in flesh and bone. In the words of Agamben (2002a) Auschwitz represented much more than a death camp, it was a place of a scientifically controlled and thoughtless experiment, in which, in addition to life and death, the Jew and the other victims of extermination, becomes a "Muselmanns" and men who cannot be considered men, we call "non-man".

To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way. All the mussulmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run

²⁹ LEVI, 1959, p. 101-102.



down to the sea. On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal

incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of

laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selections or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmanner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. They crowd my memory with their faceless presences,

and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.³⁰

The "Muselmann" is the inevitable result of the concentration camp, the result of the Nazi biopolitical experiment, those who went to the bottom of the abyss and never returned. These zombified beings represent the abject in its essence and materiality, they were excluded, deprived of freedom and secreted from an outside world for so long that they no longer have humanity or purpose but the human animal instinct. For the other prisoners who still were conscious and kept the "disgust" in mind as result of human abjection, coexistence with the "Muselmanns" represented an enormous danger to the integrity, as over time, they could possibly succumb in the same way.

From these abject walking bodies, no testimony or feeling could be extracted, their history could only be superficially reported by third parties who survived the limit event called Auschwitz, such as Primo Levi. For Agamben (2002a) the full witness of the facts cannot testify, because succumbed, whoever does it, cannot fully testify because it did not experience the situation to the limit, this causes a "gap" in the testimony on two fronts, impossibilities of witnessing: the human language of the

³⁰ LEVI, 1959, p. 103.



survivor cannot put into words everything it was experienced and second, those of who had no language to witness, such as the "Muselmans".

Primo Levi's sobriety and deep understanding of the events is reflected in his writing and in the various reflections he had made during the days of confinement or later, showing incredible sensitivity about the cruel reality that surrounded him and oppressed everyone. Levi, while in the camp, remembered the life he left behind and how a new life started when he arrived in Auschwitz. The result of this human experiment called "concentration camp" was irreparable, but even with the evident denial of humanity, Levi retained much more than a "residue of unanswerable hope", kept the memory of a man who once was.

The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offence received or inflicted on someone else. The evil and insane SS men, the Kapos, the politicals, the criminals, the prominent, great and small, down to the indifferent slave Haftlinge, all the grades of the mad hierarchy created by the Germans paradoxically fraternize in a uniform internal desolation.³¹

In that life in limbo, the encounter with corpses was increasingly common, in addition to dealing with the brutal daily life in the concentration camp. According to Kristeva (1982) the primary example for what causes such an abject reaction is the corpse which traumatically reminds us of our own body materiality. The corpse is the ultimate representation of abjection, a hybrid element between the animated and the inorganic, a body without a soul, a "non-body". The corpse is the one that fell, that was detached from life, violently transforms the identity of those who confront it, as Kristeva mentions: "it is death infesting life". Primo Levi's work shows how abjection emerges from real violent contexts and how important it is to read his legacy in order to avoid such horror happens again.

4 Considerations

In the context of resistance literature, the testimonies produced after the Second World War and especially after the Nazi concentration camps, are still confirmed as inexhaustible sources for debates in the most diverse areas of knowledge. Discover this type of literature is, after all, knowing the history of those who were not allowed to speak, name, identity and life. The importance of an author like Primo Levi is imperative, the author as one of the pioneers, brought to the knowledge of the world

³¹ LEVI, 1959, p. 142.



the horrors to which those men, women and children were subjected to and how few returned to the world of the living. The literature of Primo Levi is important so that we never forget the horrors that man can impose to another man.

When analyzing the work *If this is a man?* under the eyes of the abject, we make a parallel with the fictional horror so well explored in classical literature, but that it will never be able to put in words disgust and the nameless in the same way as Auschwitz. Theorizing about abject is fundamental to the understanding of a fallen reality that goes unnoticed by many and that exists, not in the same way as in the 20th century, but that still produces horror and abjection in favor of a so-called healthy and harmonious society. Abject is an extremely relevant topic nowadays because it encompasses diverse concepts from sociology and philosophy, has its reflection mainly in a political context and directly impacting our lives.

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