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History as anguish: Empathic Unsettlement and Primo Levi's concept of "gray zone"

História como angústia: Inquietação empática e o conceito de "zona cinza", de Primo Levi

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a path of reasoning capable of showing how history can become personal inasmuch as it produces the experience of anguish. To attain this goal, based on two concrete personal experiences during the current political context of Brazil, it will take the following steps: history becomes personal, first as it helps build one's personality (as asserted in Johann Gustav Droysen's *Historik*), by the ability of historical knowledge — produced by research or received by its readers — has to be *morphological*; in other words, via its ability to find unity in what, at first glance, seems to be dispersed. Secondly, history can become personal as it produces empathy, considered under Dominick LaCapra's concept of *empathic unsettlement*. Finally, since LaCapra indicates that Primo Levi's concept of *gray zone* contains certain possibilities in terms of empathic unsettlement, the final section of this article carries out an exercise about this notion to show that this type of experiences — limited to two specific cases in this study — invite us to think that history becomes personal in as much as it produces anguish, a notion that permeates *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) — book that contains Primo Levi's classic chapter on the gray zone.

KEYWORDS

Theory of History; Morphology; Testimony

RESUMO

Pretendo neste artigo apresentar um caminho de argumentação que mostre como a história pode se tornar algo pessoal, na medida em que ela gera angústia. Para chegar a esse ponto, será necessário, a partir de duas experiências concretas e pessoais da atual circunstância política brasileira, percorrer os seguintes passos: em primeiro lugar, a história se torna pessoal na medida em que ela ajuda na construção da personalidade, no sentido proposto por Johann Gustav Droysen em sua *Historik*, ou seja, na capacidade que o conhecimento histórico, produzido pela pesquisa ou recebido pelo seu leitor, tem em ser *morfológico*, ou seja, em dar unidade ao que aparece disperso. Em segundo lugar, a história pode também se tornar pessoal quando produz empatia, aqui apresentada nos termos propostos no conceito de inquietação empática, *empathic unsettlement*, de Dominick LaCapra. Por fim, como LaCapra indica que o conceito de *zona cinza*, de Primo Levi, contém em si possibilidades de inquietação empática, faço, na última parte, um exercício com tal conceito, tentando mostrar que essa variedade – aqui limitada em dois casos – convida-nos a pensar que a história se torna pessoal quando gera angústia, termo que atravessa *Os afogados e os sobreviventes* (1986), livro no qual há o clássico capítulo sobre a zona cinza.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Teoria da história; Morfologia; Testemunho

La tortura (…) è il male massimo, peggiore ancora della pena di morte; distrugge il corpo del tormenato e lo spirito del tormentatore.
Primo Levi, 'I collezzionisti di tormenti´ (LEVI 2016, p.1558)

Morphology

When I first saw the question that gives title to this theme issue — "what makes history personal?" —, I was not capable of remembering any book, article, essay or chapter usually linked to Theory of History, either in connection to classical references or to more recent ones. In fact, I did remember a passage from Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a nonpolitical man*, which is: "(...) The times were such, that distinctions could no longer be perceived between what concerned an individual or not; everything was agitated and stirred; problems were jumbled up and could no longer be separated from each other" (MANN [1918] 2013, p. 18)[1].

1 - Free translation.

Thomas Mann was describing the context of World War I. Despite the differences in historical contexts, Mann's words immediately express what I feel when thinking about how history can become personal: a sense of fragility visible when we know it is impossible to separate the tranquility and monotony of daily routine from the turbulence of public events.

That was not the first time that Mann's words came to my mind. April 17, 2016.A Sunday, a rest day disrespected by Brazilian congressmen, assembled for a voting session whose result would impede Dilma Rousseff from continuing to take the chair of President of the Republic of Brazil, for which she had been democratically elected a year and a half before. Following the example of the congressmen, I also disrespected my rightful rest. I was scheduled to deliver a lecture — which was already prepared — on the following morning, in which I would present the concept of historicity to my students and we would discuss a Leopold von Ranke's text. But I was truly in anguish. The result of the voting session was predictable and I

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considered dishonest to find what was happening in my country so normal that I should simply present the lecture according to the program of my subject on Contemporary Historiography. Therefore, I decided to postpone the discussion for a week and started writing a 10-page text, which would be the topic of that class. I finished the text in time to leave home and join a few friends and thousands of people on that Sunday evening at one of the main Rio de Janeiro's squares, where citizens against the presidential impeachment tensely watched for a few hours the transmission of the voting session occurring in the federal capital city of Brasília.

The following morning, before beginning a four-hour conversation with my students about the events of the previous day, I wrote on the board a quote by Theodor Adorno that was fresh in my memory, since I had concluded the reading of *Minima Moralia* a few months before: "Thinking no longer means anything more than checking at each moment whether one can indeed think" (Adorno 2005, p. 197). At that moment we had no reasonable explanation to provide. Thus, I asked the students: can we talk about what happened? Then, I said that I would not analyze Ranke's text as previously scheduled, considering that we all surely feel the need to speak about Brazilian politics, and an old-school Prussian historian would have little to tell us at that moment. Therefore, a first attempt on the subject of this theme issue could be: history becomes personal when it affects us, when it establishes a compulsory relation with us, when something apparently distant, objective and incapable of reaching us ends up doing so, when we are completely affected by the flow of events.

After that, I did the best I could to be well informed and to identify a meaning in what happened, but I was not satisfied with the press coverage and with the analyses of that day. Then, I sought a more academic literature — which was not difficult to find, since publishers quickly filled the bookstores with works regarding the theme, while several articles were published on specialized journals. Two works, for instance,

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helped me to understand that April evening in 2016: *O Lulismo em crise* ["Lulism in crisis"] by André Singer; and *Valsa Brasileira* ["Brazilian waltz"] by Laura Carvalho. These two works are complementary, although sometimes divergent in their analyses about the political and economic crisis experienced in Brazil in recent years. Whether one agrees or not with their theses, they were both very useful to me as examples of how to employ a methodological approach in historical and social analysis. As time passed, some complex explanations about those events emerged, which seemed to confirm Wilhelm von Humboldt's famous statement on historical knowledge: "historical truth is, as it were, rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at distance" (HUMBOLDT [1821] 1967, p. 58).[2]

Now, thinking about it: what is the meaning of this effort to look for explanations? After all, if Ranke was not helpful then as a mediating element, the research work of Singer and Carvalho, in turn, did serve me well two years later. Everything, then, would be a matter of time. Thus, after building a certain intellectual stability, would history cease to be personal? Perhaps not the way I felt about this issue in April 2016, but in some other manner — and, in this case, it is truly ironic that another Prussian historian from the 19th century, Johann Gustav Droysen describes my elaboration on the texts by Singer and Carvalho. Droysen shows that as historian researches and acquire more knowledge, they gradually tend to admit how much one's subjectivity was already present since the beginning. Hayden White defines this process as the "phenomenology of reading", in which Droysen "(…) instructs historians in how to produce different kinds of moral perspectives in their readers (…)" (WHITE 1990, p.88). In this regard, Singer and Carvalho offered me two different moral perspectives on the scenario that I was living.

Morality in Droysen corresponds neither to dogmatism nor to moralism. The best definition of morality was well expressed in another sophisticated interpretation of his *Historik*: by recognizing the existence of a structure that conditions him, in

2 - For the role of such distance in knowledge, see the theme issue of History and Theory *fully dedicated to this topic. cf. HOLLANDER, Jaap den; PAUL, Herman; PETERS, Rik. Historical Distance: Reflections on a Metaphor.* History and Theory Theme Issue 50, n.4, December 2011.

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other words, by being capable of recognizing the assumptions behind his actions, a human being "(...) effectively fulfills his need to no longer abide as an apathetic victim of objective circumstances, and through the hermeneutical knowledge of such objective conditions of his life, simultaneously emancipates himself from them" (JAEGER 1994, p.66)[3]. And this can be perceived in the Brazilian case: André Singer (cf. SINGER 2018, p. 74-75), shows how Dilma Rousseff, 52 years later, made the same mistake as the former Brazilian president João Goulart, who was ousted from office by the military in 1964, not perceiving the internal contradictions and swings of the Brazilian bourgeoisie (considered as its speculative and productive sectors). By agreeing with Singer's reasoning, a reader attains conceptual clarity regarding the structure of a historical process and, consequently, political and moral responsibility, since they know which historical forces are in motion in an anguishing evening.

Thus, we may initially think that history becomes personal as one attains an awareness of the process in which he or she is already inserted. Then we could conclude: there is nothing unusual with what happened in a morning class at a small university in a peripheral country undergoing another of its many politically turbulent events — which are symptomatic of an almost structural instability in its presidential system. In this case, we may immediately refute the sketched idea presented above, which states that history becomes personal when it produces a sense of fragility in us. It is indeed the case of taking up responsibility for what determines us, and Droysen defines this position as the very "essence of subjectivity or, to be more exact, of *personality* [*Persönlichkeit*]" (*idem*, my emphasis); this could be an initial manner through which history becomes personal. Beyond being a reflex of immediate sensations, it is up to a human being to harness these initial impressions as material for "(...) discernment and comparison, judgment and conclusion and, [thus], in him or her alone, the sum of one' sensations are gathered into a *totality*" (DROYSEN [1857] 1977, p. 23)[4]. What was previously dispersed attains

3 - Free translation.

4 - Free translation.

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form and, for this reason, historical knowledge is *morphological* (cf. DROYSEN [1857] 1977, p.20). Here, personality consists in the ability to shape such fragmented impressions.[5]

Empathic unsettlement

That April weekend in 2016 was not the only moment when I felt the need for a sudden change of class plans in response to public events. In October 2018, a few days before the second round of the presidential election in Brazil — once again, on a Monday morning —, I had a scheduled lecture about the relationship between historiography and the social sciences based on the *Annales* School. Two days before, on Friday, one student[6], a black young man, was violently beaten while doing political propaganda with friends for Fernando Haddad, one of the candidates for the presidency. The courage of some of his friends prevented that aggression from reaching a more serious outcome.

Some of the victim's friends would be attending my class on Monday. As in April 2016, I considered insensible to deliver the lecture as if we were moving through life without major bumps. But at that moment, I could maintain the proposed discussion on historiography as a social science, with a change: instead of speaking about contributions of the *Annales* School, I decided to introduce my conspicuously upset students to Max Weber's concept of ideal type, and I started the lecture with a discussion on the term "fascism". I asked all attendees how they used to understand this term. Once again, the dialogue was quite intense. At the end, I proposed a reflection on its use based on an article written by Stefan Breuer (cf. BREUER 2008), in which he proposes an ideal type on fascism. The students reflected upon a general concern of the Brazilian people in 2018, a year in which the word "fascism" was the most consulted one on internet search engines nationwide,[7] besides the capability to speak about political violence. Once again, we were affected by history, for one student, history became personal in a particularly violent manner.

5 - Ethan Kleinberg (cf. KLEINBERG 2017, p.98) is correct to show that, for Droysen, the past is a unstable soil, since it never presents itself *in itself, but only based on a totality constructed by a historian: "the keen eye [das geschaffene Auge] cannot bear the sight of pure light; if turned directly to the sun, it will be blinded and, thence, only see its own ghosts" (DROYSEN [1857] 1977, p. 35). Maybe I did not fully absorb Kleinberg's text, but I did not perceive any elaboration on this ghost-metaphor in his reading of Droysen. His creative and interesting interpretation of history as hauntology would probably have something to say about it.*

6 - https://bit.ly/2RpF4EP. Access on December 3, 2019.

7 - NOVAES, Marina. "'O que é fascismo?': a maior dúvida dos brasileiros em 2018, segundo o Google". https://bit.ly/2riXPPF. Access on June 22, 2019.

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A few months later, as I was interested in the world's political context, I read *The New Faces of Fascism* by Enzo Traverso. This book would have certainly helped me to better prepare my October discussion on fascism, since I would then be knowledgeable of its definition about the rise of extreme-right populism in the European Union and the USA as a post-fascist phenomenon (Cf. TRAVERSO 2019, p. 4).[8]

I do not have the intention to engage in specialized debates on fascism, but I must call attention to Traverso's characterization of fascism as a *transhistorical* phenomenon (cf. TRAVERSO 2019, p.5). Such transhistorical feature does not mean this phenomenon is immune to the current circumstances and changes. Instead, as I learned in an article written by Dominick LaCapra, it appears as:

> (...) forces that **affect** the historian — forces that (...) may bring into question the possibilities of the historical enterprise and indicate the manner in which the historian, like others, is internally challenged by what has been figured in terms of the "transhistorically" (or structurally) traumatic, the dangerous supplement, the "extimate" other, the disorientingly uncanny (LaCAPRA 2009, p. 37-38, my emphasis).

8 - Traverso attempts to escape from a more historicist standing, which reduces fascism to the context in which it initially emerged (Europe in the 1920s and 1930s), but also from a mere transposition, at times, anachronistically, to the present days.

Based on my experience in 2016, I sought to gather some thoughts on how history can affect us and become personal. But it does so precisely in the sense of *personality* and *morphology* as defined by Droysen in the 19th century. Yet, now, it seems to me that we are facing a less stable way of being affected by history. Then, what would it mean to be internally challenged? In another article written by LaCapra, I found a potentially helpful passage: "affective involvement, I am suggesting, takes (or should take) the form of empathic unsettlement — or rather various forms of empathic unsettlement that differ with respect to victims, perpetrators, and the multiple ambiguous figures in Primo Levi´s gray zone" (LaCAPRA 2004, p. 135-136).

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LaCapra does not analyze the ambiguous figures of Primo Levi's gray zone[9] — and this indicates that it was not his intention to do so. Since I was interested in knowing how I could apply the concept of empathic unsettlement in the case of the figures characterized by Levi, I decided to carry out this exercise, bearing in mind that the empathy LaCapra speaks about can be a second way in which history may become personal.

Before taking this exercise forward, it is important to understand how the gray zone is both an ethical concept and a narrative necessity — something that can be observed in the beginning of the theme chapter: "Have we survivors succeeded in understanding and making other people understand our experience? What we commonly mean by the verb 'to understand' coincides with 'to simplify'" (LEVI 2015, p. 2430). Without failing to recognize the importance of simplifications, without which "(…) the world around us would be an endless and undefined tangle (…)" (idem), Levi is aware that such need turned into a "(…) Manichean tendency to shun nuance and complexity" (idem). Levi shows an acute concern with his historical circumstances by questioning the survivors' ability to make themselves understood by readers in the immediate postwar period.[10] In that period, cases of aggression and all type of threats were looming in the political field, including neo-fascist hostilities in Turin (Levi's city), the fear of a military coup in Italy, the far-reaching geopolitical Cold War conflict (cf. THOMSON 2014, pos. 7153-7156, 7232-7234 7476-7479, 7489-7490) and the grotesque and violent negationism of Robert Faurisson (cf. LEVI 2015, pp. 1265-1266). All these factors coexisted with what Annette Wieviorka calls "the era of the witness" (WIEVIORKA 2006, p. 97), a (positive, in my opinion) moment of democratization of historical actors but, also, a moment in which an impressive massification and simplification of narratives occurred — based on the success of the miniseries *Holocaust* (cf. LEVI 2015, pp. 1286-1293) as Levi pointed out. It was a strange mix of plentiful information and weak political stability.

9 - For quite insightful perspectives of what Traverso and LaCapra might would have called the transhistorical aspects of gray zone and Levi´s work in general, see Domenico Scarpa´s idea of Levi´s "historical translability" (cf. SCARPA 2015) and also Alberto Cavaglion´s study on the gray zone (cf. CAVAGLION 2006).

10 - For an excellent and illustrative analysis of the Italian context in which the concept of gray zone arose and circulated, cf. GORDON 2012, pos. 3038-3201. In his indispensable book about the Italian elaborations on the memories from the Holocaust, Gordon points out how the concept of gray zone sought to shun both psychological connotations ('we are all haunted by ghosts from the past', and so on) and relativisms ('we are all guilty, hence, no one is guilty'), thus setting limits to the debates on the construction of Italian national identity in its relation with different standings vis a vis resistance to Nazism. On that matter, also see PAVONE, 1998. For other insightful readings of the concept of gray zone and its relevance for Levi´s work: cf. LANGER 2001; MACÊDO 2014: pp. 127-148.

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Although we are no longer living in that war context and we are now fully immersed in a digital world, even though we are not facing circumstances so strikingly distant from those of the 1980s. The rise of right-wing populism, the preposterous historical distortions that seek to frame Nazism as a leftist movement,[11] and the numbness diagnosed by Carolyn J. Dean as "the fragility of empathy after the Holocaust" delimit the current landscape of comprehension (cf. DEAN 2004, p. 5-6).

In spite of such background *The Drowned and the Saved* can be understood as a book on the openness of readers to the experience it seeks to convey[12] and, therefore, as a work that can be examined based on the concept of empathic unsettlement. Levi attempts to produce an affect in association with a reflection on the possibility of such affect. This is evinced by the layout of the book's contents. Its preface and first chapter can be understood as two initial frames: in the preface, Levi questions the very possibility of bearing witness. Although he states that "(…) the most substantial material for reconstructing the truth about the camps is the survivor's memories", he also ponders that "Regardless of the pity and indignation they arouse, they should be read with a critical eye. The concentration camps were not always the best vantage point for knowing the camps: the prisoners, subjected to inhuman conditions, were rarely afforded a comprehensive view of their universe" (LEVI 2015, p. 2415).

This would not be the moment to deepen the subject, but such (lack of) conditions included, among other aspects, the fact that in addition to their situation of unspeakable hunger and cold, camp prisoners did not know where exactly in Europe they were, and if other camps existed. In his first chapter, entitled "The Memory of the Offense", Levi analyzes how the very remembrance of this experience — which was perceived in the worst conditions — was susceptible to many obstacles ranging between crystallization as a result of the passage of time and shaped by third-party narratives, and the essentially traumatic dimensions of the events (cf. LEVI 2007, p. 14):

11 - Recently, some Brazilians tried to explain to the German embassy that Nazism was a leftist movement. Few facts could possibly equal that in showing how delirious the extreme right-wing became in Brazil. https://bit.ly/2RmJcpb. Access on July 11, 2019.

12 - It is highly illuminating a paper from Martina Mengoni that unfourtanetly I have known only after submitting this paper. By reading it, one can learn how complex were the connections between Levi's book and the historical context in which the book was written. According to Mengoni, "Levi shaped 'The Drowned and the Saved' in a hybrid way. Histories, stories and questionings overlap and intersect, enabling readers to share in the various stages of both a journey and a reflection, an intersection of History and topics of discussion" (MENGONI 2015, p. 155).

"Human memory is a wonderful but fallible instrument" is one of his maxims (LEVI 2015, p. 2420). He was kind of asking himself: how reliable is my own point of view as I bear witness to the past?

If we take a closer look at the two final parts of the book — its additional frame, so to speak —, we will notice that these chapters are mirror-like to their readers. This fact is more evident in the postscript, which includes Levi's correspondence with German readers. But before this, the final chapter of the book, "Stereotypes", contains a shrewd survey of readers' expectations in regard to the account of a concentration camp survivor. Here, one finds the old hope for heroic and resistant behavior: "There is one question that we are always asked (…). It is not so much a question, than a cluster of questions. Why didn't you escape? Why didn't you rebel? Why didn't you avoid capture 'before'? (LEVI 2015, p. 2522). Levi carefully answers each of these predictable and frequent questions, always in a manner that may place his likely readers not only in the shoes of a camp survivor, but also within the scenario of his time. In the Cold War context, with its nuclear threat, Levi provocatively affirmed that we were as blind as our predecessors who lived in the 1920s and 30s. In the case of an eventual nuclear war, "Polynesia, New Zealand, Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica might be left unharmed. It is much easier to get passports and entry visas than it was then: why don't we go, why don't we leave our countries, why don't we escape 'before'? (LEVI 2015, p. 2534).[13] Now he is the provoker: how stable is our own position as readers living in the present?

13 - Now that global warming is awakening serious and well-founded apprehensions, we could not affirm that the end of the Cold War invalidated Levi's question.

Considering these two parameters for understanding the work, I will follow LaCapra's assertion as I will seek to elaborate on his indication about the ambiguous gray zone figures.

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Anguish

Which feeling or affect is Primo Levi trying to draw his readers? Surely, we could think on *shame*; but I believe both Giorgio Agamben (cf. AGAMBEN 2016, pp. 81-126) and Marco Belpoliti (cf. BELPOLITI 2015, p. 549-554)[14] advanced a lot in this field and I would not have much to add to their thoughts. Therefore, I prefer to highlight another affect, which is mentioned in the beginning of *The Drowned and the Saved*:

> This book (...) has an ambitious goal. It would like to answer the most urgent question, the question that distresses everyone [*una domanda che angoscia tutti*] who has had the opportunity to read our Stories: How much of the concentration-camp world is gone and will never return (...)? How much has returned or is returning? In a world teeming with threats, what can each of us do to make sure that at least this threat will be neutralized? (LEVI 2015, p.2418-2419).

I inserted the original Italian words between brackets to unveil a word that is not fully perceptible in the English translation: namely, *anguish ['angoscia']*. And this may be a third way in which history can become personal. Since we are striving here to think about possible ways in which history can become personal by an affect, *The Drowned and the Saved* is indeed a work that may contribute to our discussion. Levi sets out to provide an answer to a question: an anguish-ridden question shared by all — che angoscia tutti / distresses everyone. Reading his book may be helpful when such anguish is shared, since the very first beginning, between author and readers, between past and present, and — why not? — the future as well. In the passage above, the past was, is and might be present again. And a pathway to avoid the latter possibility may be the opening to such affect of anguish.

The word "anguish" is found not only in the beginning of *The Drowned and the Saved*. It appears in many passages along its chapters: I will give three examples. Here is the first one:

14 - In this sense, Belpoliti's keen remark about how shame is a look to the present, to a (moral) nakedness before the world, whereas guilt is a feeling linked to the past, can be considered as a distinction between "the past is" (shame) and "the past was" (guilt). However much a sense of guilt may still be present, it becomes stronger when, in most extreme cases, it does not admit any type of acquittal. The past was, and, since it was so severe in its past actuality, it does not admit another meaning; it is irrevocable and will not assume any other form beyond the form assumed in the subject's guilt. cf. BELPOLITI 2015, p. 550.

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> Anguish is familiar to everyone, starting in childhood, and everyone knows it is often blank and indistinct. Rarely does it bear a plainly written label, indicating its own cause; when it does, the label is often a lie. People can believe or say they are in anguish for one reason, and be so for another reason entirely (LEVI 2015, p. 2458).

Anguish is a *familiar* affect, but it is also the symptom of a distorted and misconceived representation. It embeds a sense of missing the target and directing us elsewhere. A second excerpt can be highlighted precisely from the chapter on shame:

> There were no colds or flus in the camps, but people died, at times suddenly. From diseases that doctors had never had the opportunity to study. Stomach ulcers and mental illness were cured (or at least the symptoms), but everyone suffered from an incessant malaise that poisoned our sleep and has no name (LEVI 2015, p. 2469).

Once more, Levi complements the excerpt by providing the possible name of such affect: "(...) it would be more accurate to see it as the atavistic anguish that reverberates in the second verse of the Genesis; the anguish, inscribed in each one of us, of the *tohu vaholu*, the formless and void universe (...)" (LEVI 2015, p. 2469). This passage is an addendum to Levi's classic reflection on the shame inherent to the act of surviving, i.e., the shame of speaking about an experience that was lived, literally witnessed but not personally felt: "Weeks and months before dying, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to measure, and to express themselves. We speak in their place, by proxy" (LEVI 2015, p. 2468-2469).[15]

Here, we find once more a tension created by Levi: anguish becomes the name for a totally exceptional diagnosis, whereas lending itself to the absence of form, to what has undefined limits or contours. Once more, I indicate his strategy: by referring to a phenomenon that "has no name", he reaches a pivotal religious reference of the Western tradition

15 - It is beyond the possibilities of this text to discuss the concept of witness, which nowadays counts on a vast literature. But I shall state here how I usually locate myself. In addition to the above-mentioned and absolutely necessary book by Wieviorka, in which one may learn about the historical emergence of the concept, a useful typology has been proposed by Aleida Assmann (ASSMANN 2007). According to her, a witness may be legal, religious, historical and moral. As I see it, a link between conceptual abstraction and historical mutation offers interesting coordinates to reflection about this discussion.

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(the Book of Genesis) and links it to our essence ("inscribed in each one of us"). Thus, anguish may serve as a destabilizing element, not necessarily for it has no name, but because it articulates a vertiginous game of approximation and distancing, since there is something in all of us that, under certain circumstances, may not have a name.

Finally, let us examine the third selected excerpt:

> The rise of the privileged — not only in the camps but in all human Society — is a disturbing [*angosciante*] but inevitable phenomenon (...) the hybrid category of inmate-functionaries is both its framework and its most disturbing [*inquietante*] feature. This category is a gray zone, with undefined contours, which both separates and connects the two exposing camps of masters and servants. It has an incredibly complicated internal structure, and harbors just enough to confound our need to judge (LEVI 2015, p. 2434-2435).

Therefore, the capacity to confound "our need to judge" could be originated precisely based on this constant shifting between approximation and detachment, which may destabilize any safe position from which a perspective can present, so to speak, the necessary critical self-confidence. If we agree with Lawrence Langer, this strategy of permanent oscillation between proximity and repulse constitutes the essence of memory in a state of anguish: "The seeds of anguished memory are sown in the barren belief that the very story you try to tell drives off the audience you seek to capture" (LANGER 1991, p. 61).

Two of the cases analyzed by Levi in his gray zone chapter enable us to think about the possibility of driving off the desired audience: the case of Chaim Rumkowski[16] and the case of the *Sonderkommando*.[17] It is not my intention to describe them here. Instead, I would like to show how Primo Levi seeks to present them to produce an affect in his readers:

16 - For an analysis of the gray zone concept in reference to Rumkowski, cf. MENGONI, Martina. Variazioni Rumkowski*: Primo Levi e la Zona Grigia. Torino: Zamorani, 2018.*

17 - I am leaving aside a classical gray zone case: the Kapos. But the Kapos also had many ambiguities. The best example of this is the fact that Levi included a figure he admired – Herman Langbein, a political prisoner – in the account on the administrative collaborators of the concentration camp.

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> In Rumkowski we see a reflection of ourselves. His ambiguity is ours (...) His fever is ours, the fever of Western Civilization that descends into hell with trumpets and drums (...) Like Rumkowski we, too, are so blinded by power and prestige that we forget our basic fragility. We make our deals with power, willingly or not, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the wall are the lords of death, and that not far away the train is waiting (LEVI 2015, p. 2454-2455).

"A reflection of ourselves": an empathic unsettlement, since Levi confronts us with someone who brings in himself the entire world of which he was a part, precisely because he was never able to control it, even though he may have tried to do so. For "men like him crowd around the foot of every absolute throne, trying to grab their tiny portion of power (…). None of this exonerates Rumkowski from his responsibility" (LEVI 2015, p. 2425).[18]

If we agree with Simona Forti's reasoning, Rumkowski is absolutely present as a form of exercising evil, understood as an "internalization of imperatives" (FORTI 2012, p. 385) and an "optimization of life" — which are not exclusive to the head-figure of the Łódź Ghetto — but, instead, as real and verifiable contemporary possibilities. If we should take historical agency for a pretense of controlling the historical process,[19] we would be refusing to feel the strength with which it affects us and makes us aware of being more determined than determinant — as the mechanical doll of E.T.A. Hoffmann' story *The Sandman*, which inspired Sigmund Freud in the writing of his famous essay on the uncanny. Would then Rumkowski not be our own double (cf. FREUD 2000, p.261)?

It is not incidentally that Freud cames to my mind. I recollected him for two reasons. Firstly, because LaCapra observes how trans-historical forces produce an effect of uncanniness. Secondly, because while preparing this study, I learned about the (above-mentioned) work by Ethan Kleinberg, which identifies a relation with the past based precisely on this feeling of *Unheimlichkeit*, the uncanny.

18 - Simona Forti's line of reasoning is highly interesting. For her, Primo Levi presents a concept of evil that is fully different from what she calls the "Dostoevsky paradigm": instead of speaking about deliberately exercised evil, one should consider evil in fragmented form, scattered amidst countless actors – and we would be among them in our attempts to optimize life (cf. FORTI 2012, p. 384-395).

19 - On the other hand, the attempt to eliminate each and every type of agency would equally restore the polarity Levi seeks to break away from. This is what may be seen, for instance, based on Jill Bennett's remarks about September 11, 2001, and how the way North Americans saw themselves as victims glossed over their share of political responsibility for the episode (cf. BENNETT 2005, p. 18-19).

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We may see how the uncanny can present itself with Kleinberg— as I pointed in LaCapra — an "inversion in which the 'other' turns to be the 'same'", a blurring of the frontier between imagination and reality (KLEINBERG 2017, pp. 17-18). This seems to be quite similar to the case of Rumkowski, i.e., to the illusion of somehow controlling the situation. It reminds me of a definition that appears in a series of interviews given by Primo Levi to the Italian writer Ferdinando Camon between 1982 and 1986. Levi affirms that the *Lager* were a sort of "distorting mirror" (LEVI 2018, p. 837; CAMON 1997, p.36).

Thus, the suspension of the ability to judge does not necessarily need to be considered as the absence of any type of enunciation, but, instead, as a form of criticism to the rigid positions expressed from a standpoint considered as safe, shielded and exempt from one's circumstances. Otherwise, Levi would not have done the following: a possible approximation between the typical structural features of contemporary society and the *Lager*'s organization — which, of course, does not amount to an absolute identity between the two of them.

As I gathered my thoughts on the experience of April 2016, I paid close attention to the morphological character of the personal dimension of history, i.e., to the capacity of shaping dispersed elements. But now I perceive its reverse side, so to speak: history may become strangely personal by distorting this form. After all, in German, the *Unheimlich* is a denial (*Un-*) of the familiar, a denial of what one is intimately acquainted with (*Heim*).[20]

But to what extent would it be empathic, at least in the terms proposed by LaCapra? Considering empathy as "(…) a virtual, but not a vicarious experience in that the historian puts him or herself in the other's position without taking the other's place or becoming a substitute or surrogate for the other who is authorized to speak in other's voice" (LaCAPRA 2004, p. 65), how could we possibly conceive Rumkowski as our reflex? Would not it be the case, instead, of him assuming our place? Would not we be speaking with his "voice"? Rumkowski drives

20 - For a possible connection between Kleinberg´s Hauntology, the concept of Unheimlichkeit *and Levi´s work, see: BASEVI, Anna.* O Estranho estrangeiro na obra de Primo Levi. *Tese de Doutorado (PhD-Thesis). Rio de Janeiro: Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras Neolatinas da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2017; BIASIN, Gian Paolo. The Haunted Journey of Primo Levi. In: KREMER, Roberta S (ed.)* Memory and Master*: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. For that matter, also very inspiring Robert S. C. Gordon´s study on the complex notion of "Home" in Primo Levi. GORDON, Robert S. C. How much home does a person need? Primo Levi and the ethics of Home.* Annali d´Italianistica, *v. 19 (2001).*

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us off — to use Langer's verb — because we cannot perceive in him a sign that we may be deluding ourselves in regard to the efficacy of our actions and the morality of our choices.

Another affect-experience can be noted in the pages that Levi dedicates to the members of the *Sonderkommando*. As we know, in exchange for a slightly less undignified material existence, they were in charge of the sinister task of removing the prisoners' bodies from the gas chambers. The passage below exposes the terms of the exercise Levi proposes to his readers:

> Imagine, if you can, spending months or years in a ghetto, tormented by chronic hunger, by exhaustion, by forced proximity to others, and by humiliation; seeing your loved ones die around you, one after the other; being cut off from the world, unable to either send or receive news; in the end being loaded onto a train, eighty or a hundred per boxcar; travelling around the unknown, blindly, for sleepless days and nights; and finally finding yourself cast within the walls of an indecipherable hell. At this point you are offered a chance of survival (...). The experiment I have proposed is not pleasant (...). Each individual is an object so complex that it is useless to try to predict behavior, especially in extreme situations; we cannot even predict our own behavior (LEVI 2015, p. 2448).

Firstly, it is important to point out how imagination is presented both as a possibility and a challenge. This apparently simple passage slowly starts to be peeled off, layer after layer, following each persecution stage, and inciting the reader to divest him or herself from a previous self-representation. As if saying, 'see what is left of oneself, of what we consider to be personal, when we lose the city where we live, the work we do to survive, our social life with our beloved ones', and so on. Secondly, this exercise seems to have been purposefully designed to confront its readers with a mindset in which one cannot predict outcomes, one cannot project behaviors, one cannot find a mirror for oneself in others and project one's image into the future.

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As I see it, this is the affect Levi's exercise seeks to elicit. But it is a tempting proposal; and those who should really think on the possibility of feeling empathy for the *Sonderkommando* may read the accounts of their (extremely rare) survivors. I chose to read *Eyewitness Auschwitz* by Filip Müller. His testimonials in Claude Lanzmann' *Shoah* are truly impressive. And his own book is also shocking, since we may find in it an expression of the aforementioned Primo Levi's ambiguity. In the last years of War, with the military defeat of Nazi Germany approaching, Müller remembers how many *Sonderkommando* members were seriously concerned about the decreasing number of prisoners transported to Auschwitz. After all, there would be no more work for them and "(…) as long as the death factories were still working flat, we did not have to fear for our lives" (MÜLLER 1979, p. 153). Can one somehow identify with and mirror oneself in a case such as this? It will depend, in a way, on what they — and only those who were in that situation — could feel and communicate in his testimonial.

Before judging Filip Müller, I consider it more interesting to declare and elaborate, even if briefly, based on my experience as a reader of his book: *Eyewitness Auschwitz* is not a repulsive book at all. Quite the opposite: his account has many touching moments, in which the readers' empathy is strongly stimulated with an intense emotional charge. It contains several passages in which Müller's text attains an empathic connection with his readers, precisely as it speaks about the world that was lost among people and their family ties, national identity, and religious community. In one passage, a mother slowly removes her daughter's clothes before both were shot, lying to the girl to spare her from suffering the awareness of imminent death (cf. MÜLLER 1979, p. 72). In a particularly moving passage, Müller narrates how some of his fellow Czech countrymen — upon entering the gas chamber under the blows of SS soldiers — sang the national anthem of their nation as well as the chant that later became the national anthem of the State of Israel: "It was as if they regarded the singing as a last kind of protest

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which they were determined to stifle if they could. To be allowed to die together was the only comfort left to these people (...)" (MÜLLER 1979, p. 110).

Religious, national and familial feelings produce empathy, and a reader may perfectly feel admiration, respect and emotion for the attitude of those Czech prisoners. But I do have some doubts if it would be a type of empathy capable of generating unsettlement. We may judge that their actions were "beautiful and touching". In the same passage, Müller highlights that singing the Israeli national anthem after the Czech anthem indicates a linkage between the past and the future, although those people did not live to know about the State of Israel foundation (cf. MÜLLER 1979, p. 110-111). A sense of historical process is restored in the middle of an atrocious reality; with it, anguish is mitigated and a glimmer of comfort, of *Heimlichkeit*, is offered to readers.

However, this book not always provides us the comfort of a touching situation such as the case above. In its account of the arrival of Greek Jews from Thessaloniki, we find a quite diverse narrative: since they were so distant from Central Europe, those Greeks "(...) had no premonition of the fate that awaited them" (MÜLLER 1979, p. 80). After enduring a dreadful 7-day journey from Greece to Poland, they were greeted with cynicism by SS officials who promised work for them in the camps. An impasse was felt among the newly-arrived Greeks: "Why, if they were urgently needed here, were they given no drinking water during their journey, and why were so many allowed to die? On the other hand, not one of them could have envisaged that a few hours later they would have been transformed into a handful of ashes" (MÜLLER 1979, p. 81).

Those Greeks perhaps will not make us ask "what should I do to preserve my dignity?", but instead "is it possible to act when a situation has reached a point of no return?". Müller *puts himself in the place* of someone who leads us to this question. Thus, empathy would be unsettling for it is difficult to us to think of the lack of imagination of the past and putting oneself

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in this place can be truly anguishing, since, the journey into the gray zone causes to us the feeling that we are walking inside a house of mirrors. But if the sight of Rumkowski can cause us repulsiveness after distorting our own image, then the sight of Müller — despite the fact that it may also shock us — can lead us to a place where one may glance at their own lack of imagination. Now, I honestly cannot think about anything more unsettling than that.

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