

## The Poetical Production of Political Prisoners during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship: Faced with the Problem of Representation

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### Abstract

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Authoritarian practices in societies reveal, as a symptom, a high rate of incarcerations due to ideological motivations and forces, whose victims are commonly called political prisoners. Despite receiving less attention than prose in this context, poetry has also become an important witness space for victims, establishing itself as a way of conserving the memory of the excluded/silenced. Among the limited vestiges of the prison experience during the Brazilian military dictatorship, poetical production, as a linguistic elaboration in the symbolic field, enables the outline of what cannot be said due to social and psychic impediments, showing the limits of language imposed in different ways. Considering this literary production, this work aims to investigate the theme of representation, in a psychoanalytic and historiographical approach, from the poetry written by political prisoners during the military dictatorship, such as Gilney Viana, José Emilson Ribeiro, Lara de Lemos, Oswald Barroso and Pedro Tierra. To support the discussion, authors such as Jacques Lacan (1988, 2009), Judith Butler (2020), Paul Ricoeur (2007) and Sigmund Freud (2010, 2011) will be consulted.

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**Keywords:** Representation; Literature and political prison; Brazilian poetry; Latin American dictatorships.

What is the unspeakable, the unrepresentable? At what point do the limits of language fall? Faced with questions like these, which permeate theories and studies on the Testimony, this article intends to trace a path in the poetical production of political prisoners during the period of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), in the context of Latin American dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, listing areas of word tension from the perspective of psychoanalysis. The problem of representation imposes itself as one of the oldest debates in the history of Western thought, especially at the point of impasse over the possibility of *representing, making present, presenting again, occupying a place* through language, putting into play the relationship between presence and absence. This is a topic of far-reaching historical scope, approached from a multitude of epistemological perspectives in different areas of knowledge, offering difficulties even of idiomatic nature, since words of different origins and meanings are translated into *representation* – from the Latin *repraesentare*, “making present”, but also “portrait”, “figure”, “outline”, to German *vertreten, darstellen* and *repräsentieren*, for example, which can be understood as “occupying a place”, “shaping like an image”, “transmitting the essence of something” etc. The notion of *mimesis* have also been, since ancient Greece, at the epicenter of the reflection on how language, especially from artistic creation, relates to reality, passing through the Platonic dimension of impoverished imitation in the face of the world of ideas and the Aristotelian revision with verisimilitude, which removes imitation from a plane of inferiority. The question still does not seem to have a settled point, being frequently rearticulated in the field of literature and, by extension, in other artistic expressions, orbiting the philosophy about the purpose of art.

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In the last century, the vast documentation and intense transmission of mass conflicts, wars, genocides, dictatorships and other forms of violence, reinforced by the dissemination of photographic, documentary and personal records, have again highlighted the reflection on the limits of representation of human atrocities. For several decades, Shoah has occupied a priority space in the reflection on ethical and ontological unrepresentability in the field of traditional historiography – often raised to the level of unrepresentable *par excellence*, which cannot be reduced to a mere discursive device. Even so, a large number of records, images, reports, testimonies and literary texts regarding Shoah were preserved and transmitted, even if these testimonies show a gap, as in Agamben's argument – based on Primo Levi's work –, in the face of “complete witnesses” (1999, 34), those who did not survive and, therefore, could not testify, in an insurmountable incommunicability.

This means to say that the fragments of the experience that were preserved make possible, from this limited symbolic set, the structuring of an imaginary of what this and many other terrifying processes of extermination were like. Such a mechanism of relationship with the world, obviously, is not exclusive to the representations of catastrophes, being even a *castrating* condition of language, but, in this case, it is above all an ethical – psychic and social need: it is necessary to witness. *Images malgré tout (Images in spite of all)*, borrowing the title of the Didi-Huberman's work, even though these images constitute Benjaminian glimpses of the past. If in studies on Testimony we come across categorical statements that *trauma is unrepresentable*, it is necessary to think about representation in social reality and in psychic reality from what survived the various modalities of forgetting.

The set of traces of horror is constantly confronted by forces that intend to obliterate the images of the past. It is a process inherent in the structuring of memory – forms of forgetting (degradation, elimination, concealment), which interfere with conservation, selection and accessibility operations – but which, in authoritarian governments, symptomatically affects the right to control them. For executioners, it is necessary to eliminate any possibility of representation by the victim, guaranteeing the permanence of only what serves their interests. The uses and abuses of memory, in the understanding of Ricoeur (2007), create obstacles for the adequate functioning of the mnemonic trace, either with impediments and interdictions, or through manipulations of narratives, or by *commanded* forgetting, as in amnesty, operating a far-reaching legal pardon, as if nothing had happened.

Among survivors of catastrophes, the statement that “no one could imagine what happened” is frequent, since the dimension of such horror could not be adequately represented or imagined. In the debate on photographic images of concentration camps, Didi-Huberman (2008) arguments about the issue with its opposite: *Auschwitz is only imaginable*. If the preserved image does not – and in no way would it, not even in other contexts – account for the lived experience, the sustained image allows us to imagine, or, better said, to inscribe a psychic trait in our imaginary constitution, viable to handle even of those who did not witness the event, *shaping the unimaginable*: “To remember, one must imagine” (2008, 30), according to Didi-Huberman. Susan Sontag, in an analysis of war photographs and their ability to represent the suffering of others, adds something similar: “To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture” (2003, 89). Representation, as a social and mnemonic trait, *re-presents, makes present*, in a tension between past and present.

The Brazilian military dictatorship has also been interpreted from the set of traces that escape censorship and interdictions of official bodies, which maneuver the narrative of the years of lead in the name of ideological conflicts of disputes in the field of memory. Since there is abundance of strategies to omit data on violence and repression by the national military forces during this period, advances towards this subterranean history took place through material resources obtained from the individual experiences of victims and survivors, transmitted almost always in a clandestine way. Although, the victims of political prison, as well as a certain portion of civil society, made an effort to establish a testimony in order to compose this image of the catastrophe, even if intransigently fragmented.

Towards a symbolic formulation that scales the experience of political prisons during the military dictatorship, the discursive universe of the incarcerated has testimonies, letters, interviews, narratives. In smaller numbers, there is also poetic production during or after imprisonment, which require the attention of researchers on government violence in that period. Such *forgetfulness* of poems written by political prisoners reveals the continuity of the impediment in the transmission of memory, already so compromised. These traits, established from the beginning under the psychic and social scars of censorship, of silencing and exclusion, remain at permanent risk of new impediments. Every memory can be obstructed at some point: forgetting is a statutory property – and its desired end, under the condition of an archive of *recognition, reencountering*, the memory of the first impression in a state of latency, available, if not accessible, according to Ricoeur (2007, 442).

As a consequence of this way of understanding memory, the present, at the very moment of its inscription, already becomes its own past. The notion of representation, in this understanding, goes hand in hand with the institution of memory.

The way in which incarcerations were carried out already shows, even before the most explicit acts of violence, a certain *frame* – to resort to the perspective that Judith Butler gives to the term to be framed (being framed, incriminated) –, an ethical and media perspective of a non-life, a non-livable life, not subject to mourning, and therefore, dispensable from care such as shelter, food, medical care, education, right to come and go, right of expression, protection against ill-treatment etc. (2009, 22). The scenario of physical and psychological torture established in prisons during the dictatorship, within the framework of severe violations of basic human rights, also calls into question the dilemma of the need and the impossibility of adequately representing horror. If, on the one hand, the violence of that time has been recurrently concealed, covered up and manipulated by the military, on the other hand, victims did not object to denouncing in social spaces<sup>2</sup>– community, legal, political, academic spaces – the abuses suffered by the State, leading to the public affliction about a suffering that is at the same time both individual and collective. The essentially incomplete representation of prison terror during the period of the Brazilian military dictatorship decisively depends on the reconstruction established by testimonies, letters, narratives, poems, escaping from the framework given by the State to the lives of prisoners. This process does not take place without returning to the scene of excruciating suffering, which resulted in permanent or long-term consequences in the lives of victims. By imposing in the position of authority over what is conserved and what is eliminated in official records, the Brazilian State has chosen, most of the time, especially in the advance of conservatism in recent years, not to recognize the memory of victims.

For Brazilian military forces, still shielded against the crimes committed during the dictatorship since the Amnesty Law (Law 6683, of August 28, 1979), prison scenes remain – and should remain – *unrepresentable* from the perspective of those incarcerated. This does not mean to say, I reiterate, that there are no images and texts about crimes during the dictatorship, but that the *framing*, in Judith Butler's terms, operates in such a way that the *framing* is not representable, since it is concerned with delimiting the scope of representability itself – what is seen from the framing that the State gives to the torture scenes are only the staging instruments, and not the state in the position of a playwright, as an anthropomorphic figure (2009, 73). Even if this form of power is not representable, this does not mean that it cannot be identified or exhibited. In other words, what is at stake in this framing systematized by the state power – in this possible representation between images and narratives – is a demarcation of which lives are livable and which are not, putting into question the capacity of the population to give an ethical response to the suffering of the other.

At this point, Judith Butler enters into dialogue with the theses of *Regarding the pain of others*, by Susan Sontag, for whom photography has lost its ability to infuriate, to provoke the public towards a sense of moral obligation in relation to the suffering of the other. Butler draws attention to the fact that, for Sontag, the ethical *pathos* is not exhausted in narratives, as it is in photographs. According to Sontag: “Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (2003, 89). For Butler, what matters in war photos is not only what they show, but how they show what they show, that is, they not only function as a receptacle for an interpretation, but they actively interpret, complying with the impositions of the state power (2009, 71).

The intensity of violence results not only in physical wounds, but also in psychological wounds, especially in the possibility of trauma incidence. Trauma is understood here as an excessive external stimulus that surprises and goes beyond the defense barriers of the psychic apparatus, resulting in a non-inscription as a common mnemonic trait, as asserted by Freud in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920), a work that performs significant changes in his psychoanalytic theory from the inclusion of the death drive in the horizon of drives. The notion of inscription has a sensitive materiality in the Freud's theory, as well as the entire structuring of the psychic apparatus, even compared to a child's toy called the Magic Block (in *Notizüber den “Wunderblock”*, 1925). The Magic Block is made up of layers of leaves, which are scratched with a blade. The magical effect occurs when leaves are lifted, which results in the erasure of what has been written, leaving the surface clean again for new records.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to highlight the fundamental work carried out by the National Truth Commission, created by Law 12.528/2011 and instituted on May 16, 2012, whose purpose was to investigate serious violations of Human Rights that occurred between September 18, 1946 and October 5, 1988. The three volumes of the National Truth Commission Report, as well as many documents and testimonies, can be accessed at the following address: <<http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br>>.

Freud's interest in this toy resides in the observation that, when looking under certain lighting conditions, one notices that the previously inscribed traits are preserved, even though the device is ready to receive new stimuli, which would be compared to the operation of the human psyche, in the relations between external and unconscious stimuli.

The notion of representation appears very early among Freud's interests, from the distinction between representation and affection, from studies on aphasias, in 1891, through the regime of transcriptions between psychic extracts, outlined in the well-known Letter 52 to Fliess. In his metapsychological articles of 1915, there is a fundamental split between two terms that were translated as "representation": *Repräsentanz*, as an endogenous stimulus, between the psychic and the somatic, and *Vorstellung*, as representative of the drive. *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, representatives of representation or psychic representatives of the drive – the lieutenant (or delegate) of the representation (Lacan 2008, 64) –, occupy the place of a representation or set of representations with drive investment, as a result of an economic, dynamic and topical force of energy, from the excitations that are born in the body and reach the psychic. In this sense, the notion of representation does not aim to account for the external reality, but for the internal one. The representation of the drive has a link with the inscribed mnemonic trace, but its content has no specular relationship with the outside world, that is, the representation libidinally reinvests the trace derived from sensations and *impressions (Eindruck)*, which come from external reality. We should not disregard; however, that what is at stake is a relationship between the body and the world, since external reality is intrusive to the internal world and endogenous demands are tyrannical. It is the shock-absorbing formations, in the conscious and unconscious psyche, that make life in society possible.

Trauma, as the intrusion of a foreign object with etiological value, prevents the association between the affect quotient (*Repräsentanz*) and a representation (*Vorstellung*). Affect is strangled, remaining uninscribed, like an amount of uninscribed energy, which will return in a second time, in the return of the traumatic, in delay (understood as *après-coup, nachträglich, a posteriori*; Lacan 2009, 222), indicating a lasting disturbance in the functioning of the psychic apparatus, a *Prägung* (minting/stamping) – the impression of an intensity, according to Lacan (2009, 220), which was not integrated into the subject's verbalized system, not reaching the symbolization –, as irruption of the real. It is in this sense that trauma is unrepresentable, that is, as a result of a psychic process that does not result in a mnemonic trace, thus escaping from the symbolic and imaginary. Although trauma analysis is a clinical task, and imposition, which may contain traces of violence, of a diagnosis on the subject is not adequate, in the testimonies of torture victims, it is possible to assume signs – and often clear manifestations – of possible psychic sequelae that remain even after release from prison, as evidence of the trauma incidence.

The unrepresentability of trauma, as the absence of a mnemonic trace, without association with *Vorstellung*, seems to be glimpsed in many of the poems by Lara de Lemos, arrested twice during the Brazilian military dictatorship, whose experience is the predominant theme in *Adagalavrada* (1981) and *Inventário do medo* (1997), as well as in the poetic production of other political prisoners:

CELAS - 12<sup>3</sup>

Urge o vazio da memória  
Há que ser duro como o cimento  
preciso como o alicate.

As palavras nomeiam o exato:  
muro, terra, cal  
catre, teia.

Subtrair a lágrima  
e o verter do sangue  
nas veias.

(Lemos 2017).

In the poem, memory is delineated by its space, which is both empty and hard, something between cutting, perforating, and necessary, urgent. To *name the exact*, the word collides with the obstruction of lips and teeth in bilabial articulation phonemes (/m/, /p/ and /b/ in **m**emória, **co**mo, **ci**mento, **p**reciso, **co**mo, **p**alavras, **no**meiam, **m**uro, **su**btrair, **lágr**ima), labiodental (/v/ in **v**azio, **pa**lavras, **v**erter, **ve**ias) and lingual-dental (/t/ and /d/ in **da**, **du**ro, **ci**mento, **alic**ate, **ex**ato, **te**rra, **ca**tre, **te**ia, **su**btrair, **ver**ter), and even in the occlusion between

<sup>3</sup> CELLS - 12: Urge the void of memory / It has to be hard as cement / precise as pliers. // The words name the exact: / wall, earth, lime / cot, web. // Subtract the tear / and the shedding of blood / in the veins.

tongue and the soft palate formed in velars (/k/ and /g/ in como, alicate, cal, catre, sangue), which result in the sound forcefulness of the poem. The phonetic shock that perforates the barriers of the vocal apparatus for the production of sounds goes back to the reaction of the psychic apparatus in the face of excessive disturbances from the external world that transposes the protection layer against stimuli. In this fracture, which floods the psyche with a counter-investment of defense, the inscription of a common mnemonic trace does not take place, leaving “the void of memory”, hard and perforating: the trauma, in the movement between web and vein, breaking the voiceless stop /t/ into voiced fricative /v/.

The absence of signifiers for certain human experiences reveals, in the Lacan's perspective, the encounter with the real, under the condition of a structural lack. The real is not symbolizable, it does not *name*, as it is expelled by the symbolic when it is established. The encounter with the real, for Lacan in his Seminar 11 (2008, 60), is a missed encounter, relating to the trauma for what is unassimilable and unrepresentable in it. From the encounter between the traumatic and the real, Lacan forges the term *troumatisme*. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the encounter with the real, the encounter, therefore, traumatic, as an impacting experience, is constitutive in the psychic reality of the subject. In the poem by Lara de Lemos, the word, in the last strophe, subtracts the tear and the shedding of blood, as in a substitutive symbolic operation, essential to human reality and fundamental in the isolation of cells.

The impasse of the limits of language, old in the history of literature, is a central theme in poems about prison during the Brazilian military dictatorship. The mismatch between the word and the experience of horror is repeatedly highlighted, presenting itself as an obstacle to representation, as observed in this other poem by Lara de Lemos:

#### DA RESISTÊNCIA<sup>4</sup>

Cantarei versos de pedras.

Não quero palavras débeis  
para falar do combate.  
Só peço palavras duras,  
uma linguagem que queime.

Pretendo a verdade pura:  
a faca que dilacere,  
o tiro que nos perfure,  
o raio que nos arrase.

Prefiro o punhal ou foice  
às palavras arredias.  
Não darei a outra face.

(Lemos 2017).

In the poetic production of Lara de Lemos, the tension between the suffering of the body and the production of the word is recurrent. Judith Butler, in her reading of the collection entitled *Poems from Guantánamo*, she observes an effort to leave a mark, “a trace of a living being”, as “a sign formed by a body, a sign that carries the life of the body”, and even if this body does not survive, “the words survive to say as much” (2009, 59). The body – understood by Butler in a key of social interrelationships –, undoubtedly vulnerable due to the way in which it is submitted to the forces of society, finds a *provisional survival* while breathing (2009, 61), in the *precarious condition of life*, but, through writing, it becomes an appeal, as a response capacity in the face of an unwanted submission, as it becomes a word. According to Butler's argument, we must ask ourselves whether the body that suffers torture is the same one that writes the poems (2009, 59). The issue echoes in the poem by José Emilson Ribeiro, arrested in 1973 in Itamaracá-PE, preserved by the *Poesia na Prisão* anthology (Tavares 1980):

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<sup>4</sup> RESISTANCE: I will sing verses of stones. // I don't want weak words / to talk about combat. / I only ask for harsh words, / a language that burns. / I claim the pure truth: / the knife that lacerates, / the shot that pierces, / the lightning that strikes. // I prefer the dagger or sickle / to awkward words. / I will not turn the other cheek.

A UM POETA COMBATENTE<sup>5</sup>  
(Fragmento)

Poeta, camarada meu, te trucidaram...  
só tua cabeça, ironicamente, intacta ficou.  
Teus dedos, vinte, decepados;  
como também, sob risos, foram  
teu pênis e testículos emasculados.  
Nenhuma palavra de tua boca saiu;  
nada te arrancaram os verdugos  
senão os órgãos fecundantes, Emanuel,  
e os dedos que ao povo escreviam.

Tenho o consolo triste porém convicto  
de tuas emulações proclamadas noutras bocas  
de teus dedos escreverem por outras mãos.

(Ribeiro as cited in Tavares, 1980, 123).

The writing of verses in and about political prison is markedly metapoetic. As a symptom, in *Poesia na Prisão*, there is an entire section dedicated to metapoems, entitled “Da poesia”, in which the poem by Emilson Ribeiro is found. It is also possible to detect metalanguage in most works published during and after incarceration. The prisoner who produces poems seems to have on the horizon the continuous task of signaling the poetic-political action in the fight against the dictatorship, at the same time that a memory trace of the violence and torture against himself and the other militants is established, that is, his testimony. The metalanguage in the poems of political prison touches the fundamental question in multiple ways: why to write poetry in a context so hostile to life? This question reverberates the sequence of questions by Raul Ellwanger, in the presentation of the *Poetas da dura noite* anthology: “Seria o jogo poético um lenitivo para suas dores, seriam suas odes canções de esperança, seriam suas rimas gritos de liberdade, seriam somente o derrame de suas tristezas, seriam apenas um consolo ante o andar lento do tempo encarcerado, seriam simples vocações poéticas e nada mais?” (“Would the poetic game be a relief for pain, would odes be songs of hope, would rhymes be cries of freedom, would they only be the representation of sorrows, a consolation in the face of the slow pace of time in prison, would they only be simple poetic vocations and nothing else?”, 2019, 8). Ellwanger's inquiries touch the subject of interest of this work.

The perception that there are limits to language is a common topic in literature, especially when it comes to the occurrences of great psychic tensions or that go beyond the imaginary consistency of the subject, as in the anguish resulting from amorous investments or in the face of the finitude of life, even in excesses of divine and sexual satisfaction – among other moments of enjoyment. Examples like these border energy overflow processes, such as “a language that burns”, in the psychic reality before the universe of inscribed representations, at the same time that it promotes the encounter with what is missing, which prevents the representation, the completeness, the full sense of lived experience. The subject, in his relationship with the world, comes up against the castrating limits of language, even if he wants the “pure truth”, finding only the knife, the shot, the devastating lightning. Literature, since it deals with the reordering of the symbolic world, presents itself as a space for the handling of holes in the chain of signifiers, in order to sketch an outline that seems, ultimately, unspeakable.

In addition to what prohibits representation from the perspective of a socially shared trace, the language in circulation, it is also necessary to pay attention to the limitations within the scope of the psychic representations of the tortured subject. Not every painful memory indicates the incidence of trauma. Trauma and memory are distinct operations in the psyche. Unpleasant experiences are inscribed as common memory, as a mnemonic trace, even though it can be covered up, repressed, that is, be affected by psychic operations. This means that the victim of torture can remember in detail the scenes of violence he went through, and still find the strangled affection, not inscribed, in the second stage of trauma, which manifests itself later, as a delay. In that second stage, some signifier is superinvested with that set of libidinal energy not adequately inscribed, flooding the psyche with a new discharge of anguish, dread, despair.

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<sup>5</sup> TO A COMBATANT POET (Fragment): Poet, my comrade, they slaughtered you... / only your head, ironically, was intact. / Your fingers, twenty, severed; / as well, under laughter, were / your penis and testicles emasculated. No word from your mouth came out; / the executioners took nothing from you / but the fertilizing organs, Emanuel, and the fingers that wrote to the people. // I have the sad but convinced consolation / of your emulations proclaimed in other mouths / of your fingers writing by other hands.

In the same way, the torture survivor can symptomatically manifest difficulties in dealing with such events from his past, and at the same time not manifest the intensity of the traumatic repetition. The symptom is the substitute that acts as a result of an impediment to the representation already inscribed, repressed by the defenses of the psychic apparatus, that is, although it is not configured as a *non-representation*, such as trauma, repression prevents access to the conflicting mnemonic trace, denying passage to the inscribed representation, which also results in a form of impediment.

Trauma, symptom, inhibition or any psychic operation that prevents the subject from narrating his story are subjects for individual clinical follow-up. What is being debated is not, based on psychoanalytic theory, the imposition of a diagnosis on torture victims, but rather the possibility of examining how something is represented, socially and psychically, and of denouncing the perverse physical and psychic effects of censorship and State violence. If framing, in the Butler's argument, "means to be subject to a con, to a tactic by which evidence is orchestrated so to make a false accusation appear true" (2009, 11), it is also possible to understand framing as the possibility of escaping, moving away, evading, providing a new trajectory, new interpretations of what previously manipulated the content. The leakage of photos and poems of Guantánamo prisoners or images of Abu Ghraib, examples managed by Butler, and the poems of political prisoners in the Brazilian military dictatorship expose the way in which the state power does not recognize these lives as worthy of preservation, not being subject to mourning—that is, a certain understanding of what life is. Here, images and poems are *incendiary acts* (Butler 2009, 62).

In the "Poemas do enforcado" series, dedicated to Vladimir Herzog, "tortured to death", Pedro Tierra, imprisoned from 1972 to 1977 and author of *Poemas do Povo da Noite* (1979), elaborates, as in many of his poems, the mismatch with the *mot juste*:

TOMÁS CARVALHAL – 1030<sup>6</sup>

I

Trabalhaste a palavra  
para o mundo de teus filhos.

A terra trabalhará em teu corpo  
um sol de manhãs e lágrimas.

Na pedra do túmulo,  
gravarei o endereço da morte:

Tomás Carvalhal – 1030  
esquina com Tutóia.

Sobrevivi. Levarei na pele, na alma  
o nome de meus mortos.

II

Não trago palavras,  
o impotente sopro dos humanos.

Ergo minhas mãos caladas.  
Tomaram a feição dos ferros.

Tenho machados nos pulsos  
e o gesto de afago

se fez gesto de morte.  
Não há palavra possível

entre o ferro e a carne

<sup>6</sup> TOMÁS CARVALHAL – 1030: I // You worked the word / for the world of your children. // The earth will work on your body / a sun of mornings and tears. // On the tombstone, / I will engrave the address of death: // Thomas Carvalhal – 1030 / corner with Tutóia. // I survived. I will take it in the skin, in the soul / the name of my dead. // II // I don't bring words, / the impotent breath of humans. // I raise my silent hands. / They took on the appearance of iron. // I have axes on my wrists / and the caressing gesture // death gesture was made. / No word possible // between iron and flesh / of the beasts. My language / is the fire, the tin fiber, / the blood of molten metals // in an endless river / accumulated hatred. // I don't bring words, / the mouth is dry, // unlearned the form of the song. / Grind the word, the gunpowder, // pain, the blood of 'suicides'. / in the shell of hands // I quench the thirst of orphans / with this honey of storms. // (October/75).

das feras. Minha linguagem  
 é o fogo, a fibra do estanho,  
 o sangue de metais fundidos  
 num rio infinito  
 de ódios acumulados.  
 Não trago palavras,  
 a boca está seca,  
 desapareceu a forma do canto.  
 Mói a palavra, a pólvora,  
 a dor, o sangue dos “suicidas”.  
 Na concha das mãos

sacio a sede dos órfãos  
 com este mel de tempestades.  
 (outubro/75).

(Tierra 1979, 96-97).

Pedro Tierra's poems reveal themselves, from the emblematic “Poema – Prólogo”, which opens the *Poemas do povo da Noite* (1979), as a vigorous testimony of the violence against himself and against the other opponents of the dictatorship. With the continuity of his literary production after his release from prison, Tierra frequently points out the role of the word, and the poetic word, in the political struggle, both in terms of what constitutes a weapon in combat (“Fui poeta / como uma arma / para sobreviver / e sobrevivi” – “I was a poet / as a weapon / to survive / and I survived”) and in preserving the memory of those who did not survive (“Venho falar / pela boca de meus mortos. / Sou poeta-testemunha, / poeta da geração de sonho / e sangue / sobre as ruas de meu país” – “I come to speak / through the mouth of my dead. / I am a poet-witness, / poet of the generation of dreams / and blood / about the streets of my country”). This encounter between physical experience and symbolic experience, through words, results in the verification of its insufficiency to fulfill the need to *re-present* what occurred in the cells of that time.

In the couplets that make up “Tomás Carvalhal – 1030”, dedicated to journalist Vladimir Herzog<sup>7</sup>, arrested and murdered by the military, body and word collide in hardness, between the iron of flesh and the fire of word, running together with the “blood of molten metals / in an endless river / of accumulated hatred”. The tortured body seems to transmute into the *honey of storms*, a blunt figure that mixes sweetness and agitation, to symbolically quench the thirst of Herzog's orphans – and, by extension, of all the other children who lost their parents to State violence. What causes satiety/satisfaction in those who have lost the object of love (in this case, paternal love) by the shell of the poet's hands is the poem itself – a product of the impotent breath of humans, like honey of storms, operating, albeit palliatively, a symbolic substitution through the word – and is not this substitution the fundamental core of language?

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<sup>7</sup>The Herzog case had great repercussions in the struggle for human rights in Latin America, but processes continued to unfold in the decades following his death. In 2012, on the initiative of the National Truth Commission, the Court of Justice of São Paulo ordered the issuance of a new death certificate, replacing “hanging due to mechanical asphyxiation” for “injuries and mistreatment suffered during interrogation on the premises of the second DOI-Codi Army” as the official cause of his death. The consequences of this gesture affect not only Herzog's family, but also other similar cases. Still with the aim of investigating and clarifying the circumstances of Herzog's death, the case was taken to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2016, with sentence issued on March 2018, determining that the Brazilian State must restart the investigation into the facts that occurred in October 25, 1975, prosecute and, if necessary, punish those involved in Herzog's torture and death; take measures to recognize that crimes against humanity cannot be subject to statute of limitations; assume, in a public act, responsibility for the facts surrounding Herzog's death, in reparation to his memory; publish the judgment in full and, finally, pay the amount determined by the judgment for material and immaterial damage, in addition to reimbursement of court costs.



From the debate that Judith Butler seeks in Susan Sontag's work on the (in)capacity of photography to mobilize the population to an ethical response and the framing it performs from the perspective of the State; it is worth remembering that the pungent image of Herzog hanged at the DOI-Codi of São Paulo (located at the address that gives title to Tierra's poem) has become a decisive resource to corroborate the suicide as the official version of his death. In the poem, a discreet graphic resource, the quotation marks around the words *hanged and suicidas*<sup>8</sup>, immediately circumvent the framework given to Herzog's life and death, echoing the public reaction to yet another act of violence. Here, photography and narrative were aligned to manipulate the framing by the interests of the State, that is, it is not an image that denounces military violence, but rather one that impels the other interpretation, in favor of the instituted power, for the event.

In Tierra's poem, suffering resulting from death, which is unrepresentable by nature, escapes language. The dry mouth unlearns the form of the song, and the word is crushed, in opposition to Herzog's labor, as a journalist ("You have worked the word / for the world of your children"), and the poet-prisoner ("Possa meu poema acender em cada um / alguma coisa além das fogueiras / que iluminaram a frente da batalha..." – "May my poem to light in each one / something beyond the bonfires / that illuminated the front of the battle..." in "E me interrogo", from *Poemas do povo da Noite*. There is a lack of a representative who is able to deal with *the pain of the other*, and also the pain itself in the affective loss, leaving what the poem can offer as an outline of this unrepresentable nucleus, but which precisely because of its insufficiency is revealed in new access of anguish – the poet's attempts to account for this lack are repeatedly frustrated. In "Conclamação", a poem by Oswald Barroso, arrested three times during the dictatorship (1968, 1975 and 1976) and author of *Poemas do Cárcere e da Liberdade* (1979, author's edition), the poetic-political exercise is presented as a fundamental task:

#### CONCLAMAÇÃO<sup>9</sup>

Poeta  
 a ti cumpre escrever  
 o trágico poema  
 desse tempo submerso.  
 Mesmo que te doa  
 a lembrança  
 resgata o suprimido verso  
 sem omitir nenhum instante.  
 É preciso desvendar  
 o subterrâneo  
 desse circo de horrores  
 para que ele seja  
 cada vez e sempre  
 uma coisa insuportável.

Aquiraz, abril de 1979

(Barroso 1979, 9).

The cry that enunciates the poem attributes to the poet, in the monovocabulary verse that determines a high-sounding address, the elaboration of a *tragic poem* of the depths. The marks of this writing already depart, in principle, from a panorama of obliterated suffering, in the underworld, outside the framing of the surface. Barroso's verses make explicit, from the lexical choice, impressions of suffering, violence and exclusion: *tragic, submerged, suppressed, omit, underground, circus of horrors, unbearable*. The memory hurts, but it is necessary to recover the verse that had been suppressed, even if the *integral* representation is sought, without omissions. In this kind of *negative profession of faith*, directed at himself, as a poet-prisoner, but also at other poets, the call already indicates the fate: an unbearable thing.

<sup>8</sup> The poet resorts to a similar strategy in "Poema – Prólogo": Poema – Prólogo": "[...] Porque sou o poeta / dos mortos assassinados / dos eletrocutados, dos 'suicidas', / dos 'enforcados' e 'atropelados', / dos que 'tentaram fugir', dos enlouquecidos [...] - "[...] Because I am the poet / of the murdered dead / of the electrocuted, of the 'suicides', / of the 'hanged' and 'run over', / of those who ' tried to flee', of the insane [...]" (Tierra 1979, 10).

<sup>9</sup> CONCLAMATION: Poet / you must write / the tragic poem / of this submerged time. / Even if it hurts you the memory / rescue the deleted verse / without omitting any moment. / It is necessary to unravel / the underground / of this circus of horrors / for him to be / every time and always / an unbearable thing. // Aquiraz, April 1979

In the *verse* and *submerge* rhyme, the psychic dimension and the social dimension seem to meet, corresponding to the double path of representation for the subject, as a possible trait in the internal world and in the external world, but, in both cases, starting from a lower layer, little accessible, *forgotten*, so to speak. Freud, in the epigraph of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2019 [1900]), uses verses from the *Aeneid* to inaugurate the discourse and work of psychoanalysis: “Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo” (“If I cannot bend the celestial powers, I will shake Hell”). The poet's task is imperative – it is necessary to unveil/represent/witness Hell, the underworld, what remains excluded from privileged, visible and manipulable registers, which circumscribe a “circus of horrors”, so that something is represented and carries the power necessary to trigger an ethical position *in face of the pain of the other*. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, such an unbearable effect can mark the encounter with the real, with the missing, either with death or with the anguishing excess that results from violence, which triggers radical defense mechanisms in the psychic apparatus. As previously mentioned, the encounter with the real is unrepresentable.

Prisoners during the Brazilian military dictatorship were, at the same time, *ordered to* and *forbidden to* speak. Such conflicts around what one *wants* to say, what can or cannot be said and what one is *obliged* to say is a frequent theme in prison poems, presenting itself as a common suffering among prisoners, as observed in “O contraditório das palavras”, by Gilney Viana, imprisoned from 1970 to 1979, during which period he wrote *131-D Linhares: memorial da prisão política* (1979), which originated, with the addition of scattered writings from the same period, the book *Poemas (quebrados) do cárcere* (2011). For Viana, “there is no poetry capable of translating the cruelty of physical and psychological torture, nor the programmed destruction process of the long years of imprisonment” (2011, 11).

#### O CONTRADITÓRIO DAS PALAVRAS<sup>10</sup>

Falo de coisas imaginárias,  
de presenças sentidas  
de sonhos reais  
e de realidades sonhadas.

Falo do que penso  
como se fosse real  
e falo do real  
como coisa pensada.

As palavras são muitas  
e pouco significativas,  
incapazes de expressar um viver  
expressam o vivido.

As palavras tão poderosas,  
sinto-as em sua fraqueza.  
Ao formar a imagem do real  
com ele se confundem

Impotentes diante do meu sentir  
e tão próximas do meu viver,  
tornam-se necessárias,  
mas não imprescindíveis.

Se as dispensasse,  
ainda me faria entender.  
Ao esperar que nelas acreditem,  
temo que acreditem menos nos fatos.

<sup>10</sup> THE CONTRADICTION OF WORDS: I speak of imaginary things, / of felt presences / of real dreams / and dreamed realities. // I speak what I think / as if it real was / and I speak of the real / as a thought. // Words are many / and not very significant, / incapable of expressing a living / expressing the lived. // The words so powerful, / I feel them in their weakness. / By forming the image of the real / getting confused with them // Powerless before my feeling / and so close to my life, / become necessary, / but not essential. // If you let them go, / would still make me understand. / By waiting for them to believe in them, / I fear they believe less in facts. // What does it matter! / These facts exist. / They can be expressed in words, / that give them meaning. // There are words and gestures. / There is silence. / There are dreams, illusions, / fantasy and recollections. // There is a constellation / of feelings / that words give a pale image, / no concreteness. // This compulsion to speak / it must be a prisoner thing. / In the silence of the cell I ask myself: / why so many words?

Que importa!  
 Esses fatos existem.  
 Podem ser expressos em palavras,  
 que lhes dão sentido.

Há palavras e gestos.  
 Há silêncio.  
 Há sonhos, ilusões,  
 fantasia e memórias.

Há uma constelação  
 de sentimentos  
 que as palavras dão pálida imagem,  
 sem concretude.

Essa compulsão por falar  
 deve ser coisa de preso.  
 No silêncio da cela eu me pergunto:  
 pra que tantas palavras?

(Viana 2011, 54).

From the title of the poem, the problem around language is on the agenda, more specifically taking the word as the signifier par excellence of the representation of reality. The conflicts of the external world and the internal world – in “real dreams” and in “dreamed realities” – are mediated by the appropriation of language in the imaginary plane. The poet, therefore, finds himself hesitating in the face of the specular non-identification between lived experience and linguistic creation. In the second strophe, talking about what is thought as if it were real and talking about the real as a thought, understanding real here as a synonym for reality, shows how the structuring of the imaginary register becomes decisive for the insertion of the subject in the world, since it gives consistency to the fantasy of the I. In this sense, thought is taken as reality and reality is only real through thought – considering here *thought* as a result of psychic operations. The symbolic world, in poetic construction, is already limited *a priori* by what the subject's imaginary appropriates from it. In the “treasure of signifiers” that is the field of the Other, according to Lacan's understanding, words do not have previous meanings, becoming “little significant”. The libidinal investment is always posterior, delayed. The subject itself, for Lacan, is what a signifier represents to another signifier (Lacan 2008, 155).

If language cannot “express living”, as the poet states in the third strophe, they “express the lived”. Living and lived seem to be distinguished at this point in a temporal dimension: present and past, respectively. Language never accounts for the present. Its inscription in the psychic apparatus, as a mnemonic trait, only takes place as a delay. In this sense, returning to the Ricoeur's argument (2007, 442), as soon as an image appears in the present, as an inscription in memory, it is already its own past. It is from the field of lived, and not of living, that language is about.

As the poem advances, the poet highlights another field of contradictions: the power and weakness of words. The signifier, in itself, we know, has no power. The power that the poet deals with is an *object investment*, that is, a high energy charge is attributed to the signifier by the psyche, responding to the body's drives. This is a central understanding in the relationship between language and the unconscious, which concerns the aforementioned *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, psychic representatives of the drive. This means that language can take the place of the object, *representing* to the psychic reality what is actually a drive order. It is for this reason that we invest with greater or lesser intensity in different words, which come to occupy this privileged position in the psychic apparatus. Many of them are culturally determined: Love, Mother, Father, Homeland, God, Family, etc., terms that usually trigger investments of great intensity in the psychic apparatus. At the same time, less invested signifiers can be suddenly overinvested, as in poetry. If the prisoner has the dimension of the power of the word, he notes, at the same time, its weakness: the appropriation of the object is only imaginary, in a psychic satisfaction – the word Love does not carry love in itself. In this sense, they are necessary, since they play a fundamental role in the life of the prisoner, who is deprived of access to external objects by ideological forces in the hands of the State, composing the political-private prison, and, at the same time, they are not essential – they operate only substitutively.

In the conflict between the urgency of saying and the realization of contradictions in the means of saying, the poet determines: “While waiting for them to believe in them, / I fear that they will believe less in the facts”. Here we have a fundamental point in the discussion about the limits of representation.

Beforehand, the poet expects them to believe in what he can transmit from the lived experience – but which, at the same time, may not be believed. If whoever reads it believes in words, believes in fragile, fragmentary matter, which only vaguely accounts for an expression circumscribed to the imaginary dimension of the subject: as we have seen in previous poems, words are insufficient. In that sense, the *truth* would never be accessible. In transit to the interlocutor, something else will be lost as the word is received and appropriated by another imaginary register, with another network of meanings and psychic investments. Thus, if the interlocutor can only *imagine* the prison experience, returning to Didi-Hubermann's elaboration, and if the word guarantees a certain visibility, as Rancière points out, since representation means a certain order of relations between the sayable and the visible (2009, 22), this imagination may distance itself even further from the lived experience. Here is a question that crosses many of the reports of disaster survivors. In the constellation of feelings about which the poet provides news in the prison context, among dreams, illusions, fantasy and recollections, the word reaches a pale image, without concreteness. Although the word offers an object *structure* to drives, ultimately, its *symbolic concreteness* is based on the imaginary register, resulting in a pale, evanescent image, in the face of reality. Even so, in texts, in reports, in interviews, the compulsion to speak, this “prisoner thing”, is frequently mentioned as an *urgency*, as a way of surviving, as a way of “not going crazy”, and as a duty, an ethical task in the underworld, as indicated by Oswald Barroso's verses.

It is to this possible encounter between word and body that Jacques Rancière seems to refer in the debate on the *aesthetic unconscious*, in a double scene of the silent word, both with regard to what is inscribed in bodies (of the drive order), which must be restored to meaning by language, as with regard to the power of language itself, to which it is necessary to give voice and body (2009, 41). The poem, as an *archive*, to be read, consulted, transmitted, takes with it more than the physical body, since “[...] the poetry leaves the prison, if it does, even when the prisoner cannot” (Butler 2009, 9). In the *Poemas para exumar a história viva: um espectro ronda o Brasil* anthology (2021), Alberto Pucheu highlights a central issue in the poetry of political prisoners: “Esses são poemas que não podem ser lidos apenas enquanto papel e tinta, mas no intervalo entre estes, o corpo e o sangue” (“These are poems that cannot be read only while paper and ink, but in the gap between them, body and blood”). If, at the limit of the body and writing, poetic language encounters the anguishing hole of representation, then it becomes necessary for it to burn, perforate, set fire.

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