PRIMO LEVI

Essays in Dialogue with Nicholas Patruno

Edited by
Roberta Ricci and Chiara Benetollo

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Introduction

This volume of essays “in dialogue” with Nicholas Patruno represents the continuation and expansion of a symposium held at Bryn Mawr College on April 22, 2022 — a gathering of scholars, students, and alumnae who honored the legacy of Nicholas Patruno (1941-2020), continuing to investigate one of the main subjects of his research, Primo Levi. “What greater reward can there be for a man than to realize that in saving himself he has also helped to save others?” (Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi*, 1995, 26) — this quote, which featured prominently in our symposium, emblematically illustrates both Patruno and Levi’s urgency to fulfill a historical duty through narration and the sense of responsibility towards society manifested in Patruno as an intellectual and a teacher. **FIG 1** The symposium, organized by the Department of Transnational Italian Studies and cosponsored by the Provost’s Office and the President’s Office, was titled after Patruno’s monograph *Understanding Primo Levi* (2008) to honor Patruno’s decades-long commitment to the field of Italian studies and Holocaust Studies in general and, more specifically, to Primo Levi’s works in their vibrant and variegated nuances. It is also thanks to Patruno’s scholarly investigations that Levi is now considered a well-respected writer with no further qualifications necessary. Starting with presentations from distinguished scholars on Levi’s literary works and through the memories of students and colleagues on Patruno, the symposium aimed to capture the spirit of Patruno’s study and research activity, tracing the common thread that bound his multiple intellectual interests, of which the first essay in this collection will speak in detail (Roberta Ricci). Part of the symposium included Ricci’s students of seminar *ITAL 313: Primo Levi, The Writer* presenting posters as their culminating senior project (Ava Blumer '24, Maia Carvalho '22, Elise DeBiasio '23, Camryn Karis-Sconyers '23, Joseph Lukner '25, Ava Panetto '23, Lake Sanchez '23, Olivia Schaffer '22, Eleanor Taylor '25, and Meenakshi Thirumurti '23). **FIG 2** The event concluded with a roundtable discussion in which colleagues and alumnae shared memories of Patruno as a scholar, teacher, and colleague (Nancy Vickers, Brunilde Ridgway, Nicola Gentili, Tommasina Gabriele, Marissa Golden, Azade Seyhan, David Karen, George Pahomov, Darby Scott, Sofia Bella Vitale '14, Julia Farmer '99, Jessi Harvey '09, Emily Breslin Markos '04, Emilia Otte '18, Sharon Zimmer '70,

Jessica Lee '08, Rachel Lavenda '08, Allison Galea '04, Patricia Rizzo '77, Emily Wiseman '11, Francesca Wiseman '81). **FIG 3**, **FIG 4.**

This volume does not merely represent a record of the proceedings of the essays presented in 2022 by Roberta Ricci, Alessandro Giammei, Julian Bourg, Millicent Marcus, and Gaetana Marrone-Puglia, but a collection of essays that stands on its own. Because of the success of the event, we, the coeditors, decided to move forward with a peer reviewed monographic issue of the *NeMLA Italian Studies*, opening it up to authors whose scholarly expertise on Primo Levi enriched this volume with a variety of thematic and historical cross-references, with the intent to offer a collection on Primo Levi that best represents, with diverse contributions, a line of continuity that leads back to the critical analysis of the twentieth century as a privileged space for the elaboration on post-World War II in Italy. This gaze, always oriented by a literary-historical perspective of those years, guides the depth and range of the essays here published. We have every expectation that they will produce a fruitful conversation that will grow in the years to come, interrogating the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural scholarship of salient and intertwined aspects of Levi's literature.

Primo Levi, a Jewish, Italian chemist from the city of Turin in northern Italy, continues to be widely read. In addition to the complete edition of the works published in 2015 in the United States by Ann Goldstein and that of 2017-2018 in Italy in three prestigious volumes (one of which is exclusively composed of interviews) under the direction of Marco Belpoliti, recently Domenico Scarpa published the *Bibliografia di Primo Levi* (2022) showcasing once again Levi's eclectic work. To such major scholarship, one should add the dozens and dozens of scholarly essays, exhibitions, theatrical adaptations, conferences, bachelor's and doctoral theses, all of which testify the uncontrollable interest in Primo Levi as a great exemplar of Italian literature. Since 2008, the International Center for Primo Levi Studies, in Turin, has been actively promoting Levi's work by providing a reference point for researchers, as well as the Centro Primo Levi in New York City. Levi is known primarily for his contributions to Holocaust testimony and the metaphor of the "gray zone," a conceptual space where the lines between victims and perpetrators are separate and joined. The experience of Auschwitz and Levi's need to recount,

resurrect, and rebirth narratives of the Holocaust was the impulse that drove him to write until his death in 1987, critically engaging with the Western classical canon and civilization that ultimately created Auschwitz. Yet, in addition to publishing three major works related to the concentration camps (*Se questo è un uomo*, *La tregua*, *I sommersi e i salvati*), Levi was also a columnist, literary critic, poet, essayist, translator, and writer of short stories and fantasy tales, many of which border on science fiction, such as *The Periodic Table* — widely considered his magnum opus. In his monograph *Understanding Primo Levi,* Patruno defined Levi as a writer of "encyclopedic vein" and argued that Levi's significance as artist and communicator lied precisely in this fusion of his scientific sensibilities and literary creativity. Thirty-five years after his death, Levi's work continues to be theatrically adapted and performed, keeping his profound impact and legacy alive as one of the most widely read writers, thinkers, and cultural influencers of twentieth-century literature.

The essays included in this volume carry on Patruno's legacy, shedding further light on Primo Levi's work and continuing to investigate its adaptations across media. The first three essays touch upon the fragile relationship between memory and narration, history and literature, within Levi's testimonial writing. Opening the series, "Nicholas Patruno in Dialogue with Primo Levi: So that Memory Never Fades" by Ricci focuses on collective memory and history in twentieth-century Italian literature within the dialogue between Patruno and Primo Levi, considering also translation as a form of antifascist "public intervention" in its "dynamic relationship with the political climate of the post-war period" (p. 19). Ricci reads Patruno's work, especially on Primo Levi, through the lens of *impegno*, arguing that his identity as a migrant and first-generation student informed his understanding of Levi's intersectionality: "Patruno insisted on the intersection and diffraction of Levi's Italianness and his Jewish experience, interrogating both and showing, in the biographical and literary parable which he reconstructed, that these identities constantly evolve in their meaning and are embodied differently by Levi, as a man and as an author" (p. 11). Expanding on the impact of Patruno's legacy for our understanding of Levi, Marcus's article — titled "Nicholas Patruno, Primo Levi, and the Chain of Witness" — describes *Understanding Primo Levi* as an example of the ideal reception that the writer so rarely got, both in Italy and in the United States. Patruno's reading

of Levi becomes for Marcus the starting point to discuss Levi's attitude towards his interlocutors, who are called to be part of a chain of witness that binds him, his readers and scholars, and the artists that have adapted his work in various media: "The denial of his being as a narrator will consign him to a state of non-being, permanent exile from the sphere of human concourse" (p. 29). The crucial importance (and the impossibility) of memory and narration are also central in Benetollo's article, titled "'Free also to make mistakes and masters of one's own destiny:' Primo Levi the (Anti)alpinist." Benetollo reads "Iron" (*The Periodic Table*) and its precursor "Brear Meat" against the backdrop of the tradition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century alpinist literature — a literary and cultural tradition closely intertwined with the Fascist project of conquest and domination of nature. Engaging with this tradition, Benetollo argues, Levi utilized Fascist topoi to construct a new kind of anti-fascist mountaineering hero, centering the generative power of failure, mistakes, and deviations. The following two essays explore new dimensions of Levi's work in his most famous novels on the horrors of Nazi camps. In "Abyssal Foundations: Primo Levi and Giambattista Vico on Terror," Julian Bourg brings together Primo Levi and Gian Battista Vico, exploring how these two writers and intellectuals, more than two centuries apart, engaged with the notion of "terrore." Levi traced the collapse of human beings into terror in the Nazi Lager, whereas Vico posited terror at the origin of human history. Drawing attention to this chiastic structure, Bourg raises difficult questions about the perdurance of primordial fear even in advanced societies: "As with primitive humans' founding cry of terror, so too, with the unearthly abyss of Auschwitz — the pre-humanism of Vico and the posthumanism of Levi are extremes that meet in the sleepless night" (p. 76). For Tommasina Gabriele, Levi's works on Fascist and Nazi persecution become the starting point to investigate the role of Italian studies in research on Colonialism, Fascism, and the Holocaust. In "'Italia fascista, pirata minore': Reflections on Italian Fascist Colonialism, Libya, and the Holocaust," she retraces the connections between Italy's colonial enterprises and Fascist Italy's role in the Holocaust, arguing that efforts to explore both elements have been hampered by the persistent myth of the Italians as "brava gente" and the marginality of Italian studies in research on Colonialism and the Holocaust.

The volume continues with three articles that explore Levi's dialogue with other writers, philosophers, and cinematographers. Focusing on Levi's *Storie naturali,* Antonio Zollino in "Fantastico, tradizione e profezia nelle Storie naturali di Primo Levi (con un inedito accostamento a d'Annunzio)" firstly retraces the editorial history of the volume and Levi's relationship with Calvino, Cerati, and other members of Einaudi's editorial team. Zollino then zooms on to the short story "Quaestio de centauri," which becomes the starting point to explore the underestimated legacy of Gabriele d'Annunzio's role in Levi's writing: "nemmeno Levi sembra sfuggire a quell'«attraversamento» di d'Annunzio, che è quasi una regola, di cui parlava Montale a proposito di Gozzano" (p. 104). Luca Zipoli's "Writing After and About the Holocaust: Primo Levi and Umberto Saba" uncovers and analyzes archival materials documenting an unpublished correspondence between Levi (at the beginning of his literary career) and Saba (already a key figure in the Italian literary landscape). The two writers briefly corresponded in the late 1940s regarding their latest books: *Se questo è un uomo* and *Scorciatoie e raccontini.* Zipoli argues that, "despite its limited duration, this brief private correspondence is crucial as the two letters illuminate previously disregarded connections between Levi's output and Saba's poetics" (p. 117), while helping us to shed light on a key theme in post-war Italy: "writing after and about the Holocaust." While these articles draw attention to Levi's dialogue with other writers and literary traditions, Ilona Klein argues that through dialogue Levi explores himself: in "Alterity as a Mirror of Identity: Primo Levi's Self Representation in *Other People's Trades* (*L'Altrui mestiere*)," the scholar focuses on *L'altrui mestiere*, utilizing the psychoanalytic concept of *(Un)heimlich* to argue that this book constitutes the realization of Levi's self through the observation of otherness and alterity. Paradoxically, Klein suggests, in this book on "other people's trades" one "catches more intimate glimpses of the usually reserved and private writer" (p. 153).

Finally, the last two articles in this collection explore Levi's legacy and his influence on key figures of the 20th-century artistic and philosophical tradition. Jonathan Druker in "Primo Levi's "Shame of the Just": On Post-Holocaust Ethics and Collective Responsibility" mobilizes Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti, and Zygmunt Baumann to investigate the "shame of the just" (p. 170), a concept that Levi outlined in *I sommersi e i salvati*, as the foundation of a post-Holocaust ethics, and a collectively shared

affect that can promote responsibility, solidarity, and resistance to state-sponsored violence: "What Levi's texts imply, and what his interpreters advise, is that we fully embrace our agonizing shame and recall that the space we occupy on the planet, our very existence, obligates us to consider the welfare of our neighbors, in whose place we might be living" (p. 185). Levi's importance for subsequent reflections on the risk of state-sanctioned (fascist) violence returns as a key issue in Gaetana Marrone-Puglia's essay titled "Francesco Rosi's *La tregua*: The Magic Realism of Memory." The author discusses Rosi's cinematographic departures from his literary source, in particular the increased emphasis on the character of the Greek, with his motto "guerra è sempre" and the invented scene at the Munich station. Through his movie, Rosi translates Levi's admonition of the duty to remember, emphasizing that the "greater barbarity" of forgetting. "Survival — Marrone-Puglia concludes — is not all: it could happen again" (p. 199).

Following these peer-reviewed essays, the Appendix includes a series of documents that explore Patruno's legacy and illuminate his portrait from different perspectives. Roberta Ricci offers a glimpse into Patruno's relationship with other key twentieth-century Italian writers, editing and publishing for the first time in full Patruno's "Intervista a Eugenio Montale," which took place on May 6, 1976, in Milan, following the suggestion of Giansiro Ferrata, close friend of Elio Vittorini. Luca Zipoli edits and publishes for the first time in full the correspondence between Primo Levi and Umberto Saba discussed in his article. Bryn Mawr College alumna Jessi Harvey, inspired by the memory of Patruno's teachings, turned to Primo Levi with her original musical composition that interprets *Il sistema periodico*. In "To Compose a Life: The Periodic Table's Musical Translation," Harvey describes and analyzes her musical piece, which premiered at Bryn Mawr College in the spring of 2024. Finally, the essay of the Haverford College alumnus Peter Kurtz testifies how the legacy of Patruno's scholarship and pedagogy on Primo Levi lives on at Bryn Mawr College. Kurz's essay, inspired by the classes on Primo Levi he took at Bryn Mawr College, offers a partial retranslation and analysis of Levi's essay on "François Rabelais" in *L'altrui mestiere*.

Patruno's dedication to teaching Italian literature at Bryn Mawr College from 1969 to 2008 gives prestige to the Transnational Italian Studies Department today. This volume — published four years after his death on May 24th, 2020 — celebrates

not only the impact of his scholarship of Primo Levi, but also the lasting legacy of his pedagogical practices and ability to transform academic teaching into spontaneous complicity. Alongside the profile of a scholar, his dimension of maestro emerges for generations of students, with whom he generously shared ideas and projects, as an intellectual who never stops learning to counter the trivialization of public debate on the ethical impoverishment that makes our democracy so fragile. Like Boccaccio's Brigata in the *Decameron,* during the 2022 symposium we learned, we reconnected with friends, we laughed, and we cried. We were happy and yet we were sad. Our aim with these essays is to share the dynamic nuances of Patruno's intellectual life dedicated to the "understanding" of Primo Levi's work in its entirety. This collection points toward a profusion of pathways into and through Levi's writings, by opening perspectives that are both historical and theoretical, archival and actual. It is our hope that the essays collected here will ignite reenergized scholarly conversations and will constitute a starting point for new academic work, new intellectual debates, and new classroom syllabi, not only to capture the perduring risk of fascism and antisemitism today, but also the power of Levi's creative vein and originality.

Roberta Ricci — BRYN MAWR COLLEGE
Chiara Benetollo — THE PETEY GREENE PROGRAM

July 2024

FIG 1

Understanding Primo Levi

April 22, 2022 · Wyndham Alumnæ House

ground floor · accessible entrance and parking available

10:00 am · Symposium on Primo Levi in Honor of Nicholas Patruno:

Roberta Ricci & Alessandro Giammei
Millicent Marcus · Yale University
Julian Bourg · Boston College
Gaetana Marrone · Princeton University

2:00 pm · Poster Session by Students of ITAL313 "Primo Levi, the Writer":

Ava Blumer, Maia Carvalho, Elise DeBiasio, Camryn Karis-Sconyers, Joseph Lukner, Ava Panetto, Lake Sanchez, Olivia Schaffer, Eleanor Taylor, Meenakshi Thirumurti

3:00 pm · Roundtable: Remembering Nicholas Patruno

Tommasina Gabriele, Nicola Gentili, Marissa Golden, David Karen, George Pahomov, Brunilde Ridgway, Darby Scott, Azade Seyhan, Ute Striker, Nancy Vickers, Julia Farmer '99, Jessi Harvey '09, Allison Galea '04, Rachel Lavenda '08, Jessica Lee '08, Emily Breslin Markos '04, Emilia Otte '18, Patricia Rizzo '77, Elizabeth Schwartz '08, Sofia Bella Vitale '14, Emily Wiseman '11, Francesca Wiseman '81, Sharon Zimmer '70

GIORNATA DI STUDI IN MEMORIA DI

NICHOLAS PATRUNO

Co-Sponsored by the President's Office, the Provost's Office, the Class of 1902 Lecture Fund

BMC

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSNATIONAL ITALIAN STUDIES

FIG 2

Understanding Primo Levi

April 22, 2022 · Wyndham Alumnæ House

9:30 · Breakfast on the Terrace

Offered by the Provost's Office

10:00 · Symposium in the Ely Room

Chair: Chiara Benetollo, Bryn Mawr College

Roberta Ricci & Alessandro Giammei · Bryn Mawr College
Come lavorava Nicholas Patruno: Methods, Practices, Perspectives

Millicent Marcus · Yale University
Nicholas Patruno, Primo Levi, and the Chain of Witness

Julian Bourg · Boston College
Abyssal Foundations: Primo Levi and Giambattista Vico on Terror

Gaetana Marrone · Princeton University
Projections of Memory: Interpreting Primo Levi

1:00 · Lunch

Offered by the President's Office

2:00 · Poster Session by students of ITAL313: "Primo Levi, The Writer" taught by Roberta Ricci

Introduction: Daria Bozzato, Bryn Mawr College

Ava Blumer "The Memory of the Offense: Style and Accuracy in Levi's Se questo è un uomo"/"La memoria dell'offesa: stile e precisione in Se questo è un uomo"

Maia Carvalho "Levi's Journey through Chemical Elements: The Periodic Table (1975)"/ "Il viaggio di Levi attraverso gli elementi chimici: Il sistema periodico (1975)"

Elise DeBlasio "The Humanity of Animals and the Animality of Humans in Primo Levi"/"L'umanità degli animali e l'animalità degli esseri umani in Primo Levi"

Camryn Karls-Sconyers "Tropes and Myths of Primo Levi" / "Tropi e miti di Primo Levi"

Joseph Lukner "A Third Option for Us and Them: the Grey Zone"/ "Una terza opzione per noi e loro: la zona grigia"

Ava Panetto "Writing as an Intergenerational Healing Process"/ "Scrittura come guarigione intergenerazionale"

Lake Sanchez, "La Tregua: A Journey of Body, Mind, and Soul"/ "La tregua: un viaggio del corpo, della mente e dell'anima"

Olivia Schaffer, "Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and Holocaust Education"/ "Quale Olocausto? Primo Levi e l'insegnamento dell'Olocausto"

Eleanor Taylor, "From Babel to Buna: Language and Memory in the Writing of Primo Levi"/ "Da Babele a Buna: linguaggio e memoria nella scrittura di Primo Levi"

Meenakshi Thirumurti, "Primo Levi, the Poet: Poetic Justice and License" /"Primo Levi, il poeta: giustizia e licenza poetica"

FIG 3

FIG 4

Nicholas Patruno in Dialogue with Primo Levi: So that Memory Never Fades [*]

Abstract
Nicholas Patruno believed quite deeply in the political dimension of literary studies. In addition to discussing his models and theoretical interlocutors, this essay places Patruno's pioneering trans-national, trans-disciplinary, and translation-inspired work in dialogue with his most beloved authors, such as Primo Levi. With a passion for an anti-fascist and inclusive approach to the salvific potential of literature, through the lens of *impegno*, Patruno's identity as a migrant and first-generation student informed his understanding of Levi's intersectionality - that hybridism of a scientist with humanistic and philosophical foundations which embodied not only the state of his mind, but also history itself.
Keywords: Twentieth century, intersectionality, *impegno*, fascism, nazism, literature, history, Primo Levi

> Perché la ruota giri, perché la vita viva, ci vogliono le impurezze, e le impurezze delle impurezze…. Ci vuole il dissenso, il diverso, il grano di sale e di senape: il fascismo non li vuole, li vieta, e per questo tu non sei fascista; vuole tutti uguali e tu non sei uguale.
> (Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico*)

> Chi mette muri, chi limita la solidarietà ai suoi, chi mette gli uni contro gli altri per controllare entrambi, chi limita le libertà civili, chi nega il diritto alla migrazione con l'arma della legge e l'alibi della responsabilità, questi sono i fascisti oggi.… Non tutto è fascismo, ma il fascismo ha la fantastica capacità, se non vigiliamo costantemente, di contaminare tutto.
> (Michela Murgia, *Istruzioni per diventare fascisti*)

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[*] The essay expands on the talk presented by Roberta Ricci and Alessandro Giammei at the 2022 Symposium titled *Understanding Primo Levi* at Bryn Mawr College. I acknowledge and thank him for his tremendous help in organizing the Symposium, particularly during his leave, and for his insights on Patruno's monographs (e tanto altro).

“Come lavorava” Nicholas Patruno[1]

Nicholas Patruno embarked on a journey to demystify twentieth-century literature, which occupied a privileged place in the chronological span covered by his studies due to its political shifts and experimental polyphony. Moving from elitism to inclusivity and informed by an extensive reading of Western literatures, he acknowledged Francesco de Sanctis, Carlo Muscetta, Luigi Russo, Giacomo Debenedetti, Glauco Cambon, and Franco Fortini as crucial reference points. His *explication du texte* indicated an ethical system epitomized by language as a means of communicating the intellectual’s responsibility to society: taking a stance on topics through texts that are not solely part of a debate confined within the limits of aesthetics, but rather serve to integrate literary criticism with disciplines that profoundly cross-mark Italian culture in dialogue with Europe. This *passione militante*, whether applied to literary criticism or to his personal life, could never be reduced to simple party-defined politics but instead encompassed democratic ideals with a gusto for life in all its ambiguities and challenges. For Patruno, the intellectual’s mission is neither celebrating solitude as the *exemplum* of poetic spirit (Petrarch, *De vita solitaria*) nor “cullando” “una solitudine mortale” from other human beings (Sandro Penna, *Una strana gioia di vivere* XXIII); rather, it is that act of manipulating words that are integrated, saturated, and drenched in action, in relationship to one another because, in resonance with Giacomo Debenedetti, “dialogare con gli uomini, esplorarne i diversi campi di attività spirituale, che non sono necessariamente limitati alla sfera estetica, implica anche il rifiuto di un determinato costume politico e culturale” (Mutterle 293) [“Dialoguing with humans, exploring together the diverse fields of spiritual activity, which are not necessarily limited to the aesthetic sphere, also implies the refusal of certain political and cultural habits.” All translations are mine].

Over the years, the intersection of private and public, ethics and action, and canon and experimentation remained at the core of Patruno’s academic life — geared on the one hand toward chronological and geographical comparativism and, on the other, toward a methodological and theoretical development that thematized political engagement and pluri-discursivity. This (in)tense commitment to diversity, which peaked for him in *Il romanzo del Novecento* (Giacomo Debenedetti), drawing on disciplines such as cultural studies, cultural history, the sociology of

literature, and intellectual history, helped Patruno to illustrate the relationship between literary fiction and history and to gravitate towards Marxist literary sociology, which remained a crucial key to interpret collective and structural change as they are represented in narrative. In this sense, his thoughts were deeply influenced by the Hungarian literary theorist and philosopher György Lukács, who played a pivotal role in the development of western Marxism, particularly in reference to class consciousness and the concept of "critical realism." In *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), Lukács maintained that "the novel is the necessary epic form of our time" (Lukács 141). Indeed, by embracing cross-national perspectives and interrogating the impact of conflicts plaguing the world, for Patruno anti-fascist culture enmeshed itself with queries posed by contemporaneity, thus exemplifying Ungaretti's consideration on poetry: "La poesia è l'unico mezzo posseduto dall'uomo per lasciare un segno della singolarità di un momento storico in tutti i suoi rapporti" (Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi* 700–701) ["Poetry is the only medium possessed by mankind to leave a sign of the singularity of a historical moment in all of its relationships"].

A. History and Literature, Patruno and Levi

Italy's postwar transition from a fascist dictatorship to a democratic republic was complex, ambivalent, and often contradictory. The colonial tension and racial violence generated by fascism remained unaddressed in national and international public discourse in the decades following the end of the second World War. While society struggled to reinvent itself, decades passed before the country began to address the legacy of authoritarianism; and this dark history continues to be unexplored to a certain extent in the framework of contemporary Italian Studies and politics today (see Gabriele in this volume). The permanence of fundamental aspects of the fascist penal code and family law as well as the reintegration into the postwar administration of fascist bureaucrats, who had not undergone trial, became a recurrent topic of reflection in Patruno's work because of the continuity between the present and the past. The confusion experienced by the dramatic change in Italian politics, with forms of *impegno* and *critica militante* in post-colonial debate, mirrored the chaos contextualized within the polarity of fascism versus democracy. This period of trauma and change in the dominant discursive strategies encapsulated connections to broader Italian society following the 1943 *Armistizio* and emerged often in

literature within the wider discussion on authoritarianism and abolitionism. For instance, in Beppe Fenoglio's *Primavera di bellezza* (1959), this point of departure wrestled with historical legacies, ideological identities, and literary texts, not only marking a transition from the perspective of a soldier's experience amid the civil war and national tragedy, but also pointing out to literary writing amid the dissolution of prior norms: "E poi nemmeno l'ordine hanno saputo darci. Di ordini ne è arrivato un fottio, ma uno diverso dall'altro, o contrario. Resistere ai tedeschi — non sparare sui tedeschi — non lasciarsi disarmare dai tedeschi — uccidere i tedeschi — autodisarmarsi — non cedere le armi" (Fenoglio 109) ["And then, they couldn't even give us the order. To be sure, a hell of a lot of orders did arrive, but one different than the other, or in contradiction with each other. Resist the Germans — don't shoot the Germans — don't allow the Germans to disarm you — kill the Germans — disarm yourselves — don't give up your weapons"].

Echoing these divided sentiments while moving forward towards democracy, the fascist regime started being denied and internalized in the peninsula, and consequently manifestations of fascism have escalated now with impetuosity into our contemporary political debates. In revamping connection with issues such as colonialism and nationalism, writer and activist Michela Murgia emphasized explicit parallels between anti-migrant policies today and antisemitic racism of the past and the conditions that enabled the rise of fascism, reappearing now with violent attacks against inclusion and pluralism. She considered how historical legacies inflect recent conflicts whether in democratic nations or fascist states and warned us about the danger of new, less explicit authoritarianism in our time: "Ma voi vi aspettate che il fascismo vi bussi a casa con il fez e la camicia nera e vi dica: Salve sono il fascismo, questo è l'olio di ricino?" (Murgia) ["Are you really waiting for fascism to knock at your door saying: Hello, I am the Fascism, and this is the *olio di ricino*?"]. As we write this article, for instance, fascist policies and worldviews clearly persist in the unbridled historical revisionism concerning the Resistance, Liberation Day (April 25), the 1980 Bologna train station massacre, the 1944 attack in Via Rasella at the hands of the partisans against the Nazis (Ignazio La Russa, Fratelli d'Italia), as well as the nostalgic fascist proclamation of maternity as the true and only mission of women by Lavinia Mennuni (Fratelli d'Italia), which

was sadly mirrored months later in the United States in a commencement speech delivered by Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker at Benedictine College.[2]

These burning questions on fascist memory led Patruno to steer conversations with colleagues and students on the role of literature in writing history: What is literature? And what is its relationship with life and ethics? What happens when literature writes history and when literature itself becomes activism? Does it mean that its effects, meaning, and causes are constantly up for debate? The idea that literature contains multitudes is not new, and these vexed questions have been debated across the arts globally since Antiquity. As early as Tertullian, *litteratura* referred to any writing formed with *litterae* (by way of example, in Italian universities the field of literature is called "Lettere," "Moderne," or "Antiche"), and classical interest in the overlapping between history (facts that occurred) and fiction (re-elaboration of what did or could occur) is present since Aristotle, who warned not to be misled into supposing that literary characters are distinct persons rather than illustrative types. This theoretical debate on methods of inquiry continued to be linked to history on the one hand and to language on the other, when early modern scholars studied Latin works with a particular focus on both language (*grammatica* and *studium*) and verification (*recensio* and *emendatio*), which elicited new connections between philological renovation and historical faithfulness (with obvious overlap between the two). The controversial views on tradition and transformation depicted in fact the humanist dialogue and shaped decisively this continued attention to — and obsession with — history as a theoretical apparatus and research methodology in modern scholarship. If literature is intrinsically tied to history in the West since its beginning, within the wider development of civic responsibility and activist criticism, then the status of literary studies bought Patruno to books that expressed commitment towards the human consortium from a historical perspective.

This critical affirmation — that literature is irreducibly historical along with the humanistic awareness of the limits of the historical analysis which literary studies may produce — emerged clearly within the realm of oppressive experiences in twentieth-century literature, including survivors' accounts of a terrifying truth. Modern literature bore witness to large-scale suffering, atrocities, and dehumanization that demanded to be conveyed by indisputably

tying historical memory to editorial experience as a bridge between authorship and readership. Patruno's scholarly contributions on Primo Levi are widely known and respected. His large production indicates his admiration for Levi, providing keen insights into Levi's works. While some survivors refused to talk and endured isolation and self-imposed exclusion, others, like Primo Levi, one of the most widely read writers of post-World War II in Italy and abroad, documented and confronted the disturbing experience of the large-scale persecution of the Jews and the extermination camps with three major testimonial works related to his incarceration by the Nazis: *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), *La tregua* (1963), and *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986). As he stated in an interview titled "Primo Levi, il testimone di quelli che non tornarono": "Ormai sono diventato un registratore: se mi si accende, comincio a ricordare gli altri" (3) ["At this point I have become like a tape-recorder: you switch me on and I begin to remember the others"]. This same urgency of testimony led Patruno to pay tribute to the centrality of dialoguing as a sort of ethical light offered in the service of others, as we read in a passage which he often discussed with students of both Dante and Levi. In *Paradiso* XXX, 37–45, Beatrice announces that she and the narrator have left behind the Primum Mobile ("maggior corpo") and have entered the Empyrean ("pura luce"). Here the pilgrim is swathed in a living light that gives him a power beyond his own words, kindling in him the ability not only to see what others do not, but also, and more importantly, to recount to the readers what he sees. This interest in the process of renewal clarifies the enduring purpose of the person of letters — the scholar, the artist. Patruno, a voracious reader of Dante and Levi, tied this idea of scrupulous communication, lucid explanation, *raccontare storie e raccontarsi*, into valuable experiences for others, which bears witness to the long and exhausting journey of human history. While affirming the interconnection between art and reality, Patruno, a literary and cultural historian, made the jump from Dante to the Italian Novecento — no small leap indeed. It is precisely this theme of collective memory that convinced him to read *La tregua* with pungent cross references between past antisemitism and current racism in Italy, while considering *Se questo è un uomo* as a rational testimonial writing through infernal atrocities, purgatorial "respite" (Ferme 54), and final liberation.

With Levi, Patruno reflected on this delicate negotiation between testimony and fiction, imagination and history, and content

and style, in the essay titled "Levi's 'Personaggi ambigeni' and the Navigation of Autobiography and Memory" (in Patruno and Ricci 45–56). The "personaggi ambigeni" are characters from Levi's testimonial writings at the crossroads of plural disciplines (such as Memory Studies and History) and literary genres (such as autobiography and fiction), which exemplify the complex matter of historical actuality. In creating these protagonists, Levi wished to remain truthful to the historical record, "while recognizing his fantasy, seen in the creation of his characters, as an active part of his being" (Patruno, "Levi's 'Personaggi Ambigeni" 54), like any other writer.[3] As Levi himself noted in *L'altrui mestiere*:

> Quanto ai personaggi, il discorso si fa più complesso. Su questo tema, il ménage a tre fra l'autore, il personaggio e il lettore, si sono scritti quintali di libri, ma essendo io oramai un addetto ai lavori, mi permetto di dire la mia, ossia di proiettare le mie diapositive. Anche per i personaggi si prova all'inizio l'impressione di una libertà senza limiti. In astratto, tu hai su loro un potere assoluto, quale nessun tiranno ha mai avuto sulla faccia della terra. Puoi farli nascere nani o giganti, puoi affliggerli, torturarli, ucciderli, resuscitarli: o donare loro la bellezza e giovinezza eterne, la forza, la sapienza che tu non hai, la felicità di ogni minuto (ma questa sarai capace di descriverla senza annoiare il tuo lettore?). (*L'altrui mestiere* 160)
>
> [As for characters, the matter grows increasingly complex. On this theme — the ménage à trois among the author, the character, and the reader — tons of books have been written. However, since at this point I have become an insider in the world of books, I will dare to share my opinion—which is to say, to show my slides. Even for characters, at the beginning, one feels like freedom has no limits. In theory one has absolute power over them, a power that no tyrant has ever had anywhere in the world. You can make them grow microscopic or gigantic, you can afflict them, torture them, resurrect them: or bestow upon them eternal beauty and youth, the force, the erudition you do not have yourself, the happiness of every minute (but will you be capable of describing this without boring your reader?).]

This reflection remained central for Levi, who was interested in breaking down the binary of historical and testimonial writing, in contrast to the demands to which Holocaust writings were asked to adhere by providing historical representation with an unsophisticated and unstylized language. As Michael André Bernstein in fact put it: "Such narratives are habitually regarded as though they were completely unmediated, as though languages, gesture, and imagery could become transparent if the experience being expressed is sufficiently horrific" (339). His numerous letters and conversations are a critical tool to navigate literary and historical matters in the immediate postwar period. The interviews and essays are collected and edited by Marco Belpoliti for Einaudi in 1997 (*Conversazioni e interviste 1963–1987)* as well as edited and translated into English by Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon in 2001 for the New Press (*The Voice of Memory. Interviews 1961-1987*). In these pages, Levi, the "archeologo" (Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 9), engaged with the readers on the complexity of testimonial writings and claimed his identity as a writer of the Lagers. Yet, he also argued that testimony is a literary form with linguistic nuances and, as such, it powerfully discredited the gross simplification of testimonial works on the impact of the Nazi genocide. In 1979 he wrote to Giuseppe Grassano:

> …un ex deportato, un testimone: lo sono, profondamente anche. Però non voglio essere solo questo, che significherebbe in qualche modo un iscatolamento, una clausura. E quindi mi ritengo libero di trattare qualunque tema, senza escludere il ritorno a questo medesimo tema del Lager, come anzi ho in mente. (Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 167)
>
> [A former deportee, a witness: I am that, even profoundly. But I do not want to be only this, which would mean in some ways a boxing in, an enclosure. And therefore I hold myself free to touch whatever theme, without excluding the return to this very theme of the Lager, like in fact I have in mind to do.]

Similarly, in the introduction of *Racconti e saggi*, Levi's final book which included fifteen short stories and twenty essays published by *La Stampa* in 1986, the writer reflected on his testimonial prose on

mass destruction and the experience of dehumanization in the Nazi system, seeking to eradicate once more the contrastive notion that its autobiographical aspect precluded him from making use of imagination. He called attention to the complex nuances of testimonial writing:

> Prego il lettore di non andare in cerca di messaggi. È un termine che detesto perché mi mette in crisi, perché mi pone indosso panni che non sono miei, che anzi appartengono ad un tipo umano di cui diffido: il profeta, il vate, il veggente. Tale non sono; sono un uomo normale di buona memoria che è incappato in un vortice, che ne è uscito più per fortuna che per virtù, e che da allora conserva una certa curiosità per i vortici, grandi e piccoli, metaforici e materiali. (Levi, *Racconti e Saggi* 14)
>
> [I beg to the reader not to look for a message here. It's a term that I detest because it puts me in crisis, because it forces me into a role that is not my own, a role that, in fact, belongs to a type of human whom I distrust: the prophet, the poet, the visionary. That is not what I am, I am a normal man with a good memory who is caught in a vortex, from which I have exited more by luck than virtue's sake. And from that moment on I maintain a certain curiosity for the vortexes, grand and small, metaphoric, and material.]

Levi returned to the topic in an interview published in the appendix he added to the 1976 scholastic edition of *Se questo è un uomo*: a text which Belpoliti definies as "l'autocommento più prezioso sul tema del Lager" (Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 260) ["the most precious self-commentary on the matter of the Lager"]. Here Levi again evoked the urgency of communication and responded at length to eight questions he periodically received from students and adults on humanity, antisemitism, and deportation - "I Tedeschi sapevano?"; "Li ha perdonati?"; "Come mai non avvenivano ribellioni di massa?"; "Come spiega l'odio fanatico dei nazisti contro gli ebrei?"; "Che cosa sarebbe Lei oggi se non fosse stato prigioniero dei Lager?" -, going back to the dynamic relationship between history and memory, collective and private, as a means to explain his narrative as both historical and literary, existing in the real world as well as in the mind.

In addition to philological expertise and historical acumen, a third aspect of "come lavorava" Nicholas Patruno emerges forcefully in *Understanding Primo Levi*, published in 1995, which is at odds with his first monograph devoted to Verga and published almost twenty years earlier. Beginning with the introduction, Patruno reflects with extraordinary sensitivity precisely on Levi's identity, extending the discussion to consider his Jewish identity. This recurring theme in Patruno's analyses "dopo la fine" (to quote a seminal book by Giulio Ferroni, discussed below), speaks to a concept which at the time was absent from nearly all literary discourse: the concept of intersectionality. The impression is that Patruno's own experience as an Italian who left Italy very early in his life, then rediscovered his Italian identity in the United States, and finally defied expectations by embracing that Italianness as a scholar, is the key to understanding how he understood Primo Levi, and how he continues to share his own understanding with us. Patruno's identity as a migrant and first-generation student in the Academy fully informed his reading of this intersectionality in Levi, that hybridism of a scientist with humanistic and philosophical foundations ("Italiano ma ebreo," "chimico ma scrittore," "deportato ma non tanto (non sempre) disposto al lamento e alla querela"; Levi, "Credo che il mio destino"), which embodied not only the state of his mind, but also history itself ("Ma le cose non sono mai semplici, sono sempre complesse"; "Intervista a Primo Levi" 278–79). This intersectionality of an Italian Jew interned in Poland, and later chemist who lent himself to literature, pervaded Patruno's courses dedicated to "Levi and Memory," which problematized the tenuous gap between art and reality, the literary landscape and the Lager experience, insisting on the role of imagination in the creation of literary characters and, consequently, persuading the readers that caution is always in order: "i personaggi ambigeni," *appunto*. Like any genuine and intellectually honest piece of humanistic scholarship, his book on Levi is also a self-portrait, a map of the incredible path that brought him from Puglia to Rutgers University as a first-generation low-income student, and then to Bryn Mawr College as an esteemed professor. In this later work Patruno did not intend to dialogue with specialists, but rather to inform generalist readers and students, like those he encountered and with whom he engaged at Bryn Mawr from 1969 to 2008. Patruno insisted on the intersection and diffraction of Levi's Italianness and his Jewish experience, interrogating both and

showing, in the biographical and literary parable which he reconstructed, that these identities constantly evolve in their meaning and are embodied differently by Levi, as a man and as an author.

While his scholarship on Levi invariably delved into the fields of intertextuality, Archival Studies, Holocaust Studies, and Jewish Studies, his monograph avoids any kind of academic terminology or scholarly argument. It begins with Levi's birth and takes nothing for granted. It is an informative and revealing book which few others could have endeavored to write. Patruno's prodigious command of all the details of Levi's biography and literary production is evident in each page, and yet one does not need a background in Italian literature to understand, as the title promises, the contents of the volume. Much of the information, offered with extreme clarity, is based on Patruno's own first-hand examination of Levi's papers and manuscripts in Torino, the accounts of Levi's acquaintances which Patruno collected in the field, along with information obtained from Giulio Einaudi Press, which published all of Levi's work with the exception of *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), *L'osteria di Brema* (1975), *Ad ora incerta* (1984), and *Racconti e saggi* (1986). In seven chapters, each devoted to one of Levi's best-known books, the volume offers a textual analysis that is strongly informed by its historical context, thus producing two interesting effects. On the one hand, the reader is never required to deal with an abstract conceptualization of the novels and short stories Patruno examines: every book is presented in its own materiality, from its conception to its publication and reception, while Levi's own personal history continually anchors the narration as an easily imaginable human experience. On the other hand, the reader also receives — somewhat surreptitiously — a swift and clear fresco of twentieth-century Italian culture beyond its disciplinary settings. This historical background is so ubiquitous that it becomes a second protagonist of the book, offering a clever introduction to the most studied phases of Europe's political domination and locating the ethical force of Levi's writings within its proper setting.

The above-mentioned celebrated book by Giulio Ferroni, *Dopo la fine*. *Sulla condizione postuma della letteratura* (1996). discusses what he calls "the posthumous condition of literature." Investigating the endings of major works of Italian literature, including some of Levi's novels, he affirms that literature can only

be truly experienced and understood "after the fact": it only begins to exist after it is already over; its nature is to survive its own end. Ferroni's theory, published in 1996, stood in clear opposition to the influential ideas of another great maestro of Italian literary studies, Umberto Eco, who three decades earlier had instead spoken of the endless openness of literature in his famous essay "Opera aperta." In this dispute, Patruno took the side of Umberto Eco, believing that books continually give voice to those who would otherwise be forever silent. Ferroni's *Dopo la fine* includes a discussion of Giovanni Verga, the extraordinary Sicilian realist author whose influence over twentieth-century Italian culture is often forgotten today, but in truth was immense: even Neorealist filmmakers were inspired by his evocative descriptions of the subaltern classes of Italy's south. Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote extensively about him in *Passione e ideologia* (1958) and developed his groundbreaking theory of free indirect discourse in film based on Verga's rhetoric which, in his view, laid the foundations for modern Italian fiction. Patruno's book *Language in Giovanni Verga's Early Modern Novels* (1977) analyzes Verga's figurative and linguistic strategies of narration, based on historical grammar, stylistic and structural evidence, and philology. Once again, the intimate connection between history and language comes into being in different aspects of novelty in literature. This monograph focuses exclusively on the author's least studied works: a series of early novels which had hardly even received a mention in Anglophone criticism. Most other scholars in the field prioritized Verga's two most famous and fully accessible novels: *I Malavoglia* (1881) and *Mastro Don Gesualdo* (1889). Patruno, on the other hand, went to great lengths to bring Verga's lesser-known works into the public eye. One of these novels, *Amore e Patria* (1856) was published only posthumously in fragments, and Patruno had to conduct exhaustive philological work to reassemble the full text. The book offers the most comprehensive analysis of three aspects of Verga's early production: phonology (crucial for framing his work within the tension between dialect and standard Italian); morphosyntax (which reveals textual strategies that, in later novels, would establish a distinct movement in Italian fiction, called Verismo); and lexicon (an essential data-set for understanding the author's approach to reality, including aspects of class, discrimination, misogyny, and peripherality). Such an approach was typical in Italy among Italianists who were trained within the grammatical and philological tradition, but it was rather

anomalous in the US. Patruno refined his linguistic skills well beyond the level of a typical literary critic of his generation, engaging in highly sophisticated historical-linguistic exercises to interpretate modern literature while simultaneously displacing writers and deconstructing their work from the standpoint of a literary historian, whose role is communicating the interdependence between history, literature, and language within the intellectual's responsibility to society.

B. Levi in the classroom

In investigating how writers have reflected on their fluctuating surroundings in the Ottocento (Verga) and Novecento, both in poetry (Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Montale) and in narrative (Morante, Silone, Pratolini, Vittorini, Ortese, Cassola, Levi), Patruno encouraged free and open inquiries on diverse themes in the classroom: the development of new political ideas, fascism and the resurgence of right-wing populism, the role of individuals in history, politics as literature, ideologies and political institutions, the relationship between rulers and those they rule, the place of the church within the state, what makes a revolution, activism. Without suppressing, repressing, or censoring debate, he made space for difficult topics. Despite the immediate sense of discomfort these discussions might cause, Patruno firmly adhered to the principle of academic freedom and freedom of speech, at the core of complex debate in the Academy in Spring 2024 concerning the negotiations between disciplinary actions and civil rights to students' protest on numerous campuses. Pedagogy for him was activism at the intersection of society and literature, past and present, for the dissemination of knowledge at the service of democracy.

His enthusiasm for collaboration led to coediting with the author of this article a Modern Language Association teaching series volume that blends scholarly and critical contributions with didactic tools intended to facilitate university class discussions, because education (at any level, from kindergarten to university) is carried by those who are trained in the academic system. This project provided an excellent opportunity to interrogate what the teaching of literature looks like, thereby inviting broad questions and rigorous pedagogical activities linking the "universo concentrazionario" (Levi, *Il Sistema periodico*) with persecution against plurality across history, as we read in the Introduction to the MLA volume: "His [Levi's] works, characterized by the lean and

dispassionate literature style with which he approaches the experience of incarceration, are classics" (Patruno and Ricci 15). Within seminars on the postwar period, antisemitism, the resistance, and antifascism, Patruno offered readings of feminists, ethicists, Marxists, semioticians, deconstructionists, new historicists, and cultural materialists — all of whom took exception to the canon while not necessarily seeing eye to eye about much else. He had an innate ability to foresee the viability of new areas of inquiry decades before they migrated into the mainstream of the wider field, such as cross-listed courses at the very birth of the era of academic multi-disciplinarity as we know it. Always in favor of renovating academic curricula and pedagogical methods, he advocated for a "remapping" (Swaffer and Arens) of the foreign language curriculum so that, rather than being isolated from content courses, the two tracks would be integrated into a holistic project. Selected works by Primo Levi helped him bridge this gap between language and content with a vibrant engagement and a generous rigor.

Because of the trans-historical dimension of Italian Studies, Translation courses caught Patruno's interest for the lasting impact on Levi's entire testimonial project, "consistently and closely bound up with practices of, the figuration of, and meditation on *translatio*: the carrying over from one spatial, temporal, conceptual, linguistic zone to another" (Insana 89). By exposing the complexity of history and shocking students with an initial sense of unease, translation emerges as a fruitful pedagogical framework for its political role in twentieth-century literary history. The act of trans-lating (from Latin trāns-lātus, perfect passive participle of trānsferō: to make a language comprehensible through a passage) problematizes cultural obstacles and yet encapsulates a trans-national heritage by becoming an "opera di civiltà e di pace" (Levi, *Opere complete* 695). Not coincidently, Patruno's favorite modernist poet, Giuseppe Ungaretti, entered the literary scene as a translator with a production that oscillates between classic paradigms and experimental undertakings, *scartafacci* and variants, dissolution and imitation in favor of intersectionality within the broader context of Western European literatures and artistic traditions: "Sono un frutto / d'innumerevoli contrasti d'innesti" (Ungaretti, *Vita di un uomo*. *Traduzioni poetiche* 95) ["I am a fruit / of innumerable contrasts of implants"].[4]

As a matter of fact, in the decade between 1930 and 1940, Italy experienced a golden age, both for prose and poetic translation, as Mario Luzi polemically remarked years later:

> Era di rito negli anni trenta e quaranta scrivere un saggio *sul tradurre*: poteva essere un trattato o un compitino, ma quella prova di finezza problematica bisognava darla, quell'ossequio un po' da iniziati all'epoca che stava elaborando ab imo una cultura poetica non poteva mancare in chi era veramente o voleva apparire, appunto, "in." (Luzi vii)
>
> [It was a rite of passage in the thirties and forties to write an essay *on translating*: it could be a treatise or a little homework, but one had to perform that exercise of problematic finesse. In order to be (or at least to appear) "in," one could not avoid that somewhat elitist deference in an age that was elaborating, from scratch, a new poetic culture.]

In the 1978 *Intervista a Eugenio Montale* on translation printed for the first time in full in the Appendix of this collection with unpublished variants, Patruno interviewed the poet on the development of literary translations associated with the so-called Italian "Americanism," during which American culture penetrated in Europe in general, and in Italy in particular, through the translations of American novelists of the first decades of the twentieth century. Cesare Pavese, together with Elio Vittorini, Eugenio Montale, Guido Piovene, Alberto Moravia and Giaime Pintor, just to name a few, contributed to the great translation activity that took place in Italy starting from the 1930s within the cultural phenomenon known as *americanismo.* Translation became a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, thanks to which the reader experienced a sense of otherness, contamination, and yet communication.

Primo Levi was also a translator. His reflections on the complexity of translation are prominent in his writings and interviews where he expressed the necessity of rigor and precision, within the scope of representability and translatability. His essay titled "Tradurre ed essere tradotti" (originally published in 1980 and reprinted five years later in the collection in *L'altrui mestiere*)

begins with the multilingual image of the tower of Babel in the Genesis and reflects on the socio-political role of translation as a cultural bridge, noting that linguistic conflicts are fundamentally also racial clashes: "l'attrito linguistico tende a diventare attrito razziale e politico, altra nostra maledizione" (Levi, *Opere complete* 691) ["The linguistic friction tends to become a racial and political friction, another one of our curses"]. Precisely for this reason, translation functions in the classroom as a point of entry into testimonial contexts and discussions on communication "Tradurre è opera difficile perché le barriere fra i linguaggi sono più alte di quanto si pensi comunemente" ["Translating is difficult work because the barriers between languages are higher than is commonly thought"] (ibid. 692). By the same token, in fact, the lack of translation in the concentration camps — and thus of communication — produced a linguistic chaos associated with the degradation of communal bonds, contributing to the horror of dehumanization, with the immediate effect on the prisoners arriving at the camps unable to understand orders imposed on them. Levi was all too familiar with these horrific conditions:

> Nella memoria di tutti noi superstiti, e scarsamente poliglotti, i primi giorni di Lager sono rimasti impressi nella forma di un film sfuocato e frenetico pieno di fracasso e di furia e privo di significato: un tramestio di personaggi senza nome né volto annegati in un continuo assordante rumore di fondo, su cui tuttavia la parola umana non affiorava. Un film in grigio e nero, sonoro ma non parlato. (Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* 72)
>
> [In the memory of all of us survivors, scarcely polyglot as we were, the first days of Lager have remained imprinted in the form of an out of focus and frenetic film, full of fracas and fury and devoid of any meaning: a bustle of nameless and faceless characters drowned in a continuous underlying racket, from which no human voice surfaced. A film in gray and black, with sound but no speech.]

The tension created by incomprehension, sporadically interrupted by improvised translators (paradoxically illustrated in the film *La vita è bella*), not only conveyed humiliation and fear, but also implied a death sentence. Such linguistic polarization offers a

pedagogically rich framework that prompts students to simultaneously recognize the urgency to communicate and yet the limits of the language to express horror and brutality, including compromises in human behavior — what Levi called the *zona grigia,* referring to a certain level of complicity between oppressors and oppressed:

> Noi tutti esseri umani siamo degli animali che preferiscono le cose semplici. Ma le cose non sono semplici, sono sempre complesse.… Per cui questo binomio, vittima e aguzzino, va studiato…. È molto triste. È la tesi di Hannah Arendt, questa della banalità del male. Questa tesi assomiglia a quanto sto dicendo: cioè era molto più importante l'ambiente che non la natura umana interna. Non si parla di mostri. Io di mostri non ne ho visto neanche uno. (Levi, "Intervista a Primo Levi" 278–279)
>
> [All of us human beings are animals who prefer simple things. But things aren't simple, they're always complex…that is why this binary, victim and perpetrator, demands to be studied…It's very sad. It's the thesis of Hannah Arendt, that of the banality of evil. This thesis resembles the substance of what I'm saying: I mean, the environment was much more important than the internal human nature. There is no discussion of monsters. I cannot claim to ever have witnessed even a single monster.]

On one hand, the experience of the extermination camps undoubtedly defies linguistic representations of that universe, and the Shoah becomes

> un film sfuocato e frenetico pieno di fracasso e di furia e privo di significato: un tramestio di personaggi senza nome né volto annegati in un continuo assordate rumore di fondo, su cui tuttavia la parola umana non affiorava. Un film in grigio e nero, sonoro ma non parlato." (Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, 69)
>
> [a blurry and frenetic film full of noise and fury and devoid of meaning: a commotion of nameless and faceless characters drowned in a continuous deafening background

> noise, on which however the human word did not emerge. A black and gray film, with sound but not spoken words].[5]

On the other, despite this linguistic inadequacy to express devastation,

> Comunicare si può e si deve: è un modo utile e facile di contribuire alla pace altrui e alla propria, perché il silenzio, l'assenza di segnali, è a sua volta un segnale, ma ambiguo, e l'ambiguità genera inquietudine e sospetto. Negare che comunicare si può è falso: si può sempre. (Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati,* 65-66)
>
> [One can, and one must, communicate: it is a useful and easy way to contribute to the peace of others and to one's own, because silence, the absence of signals, is itself a signal, but an ambiguous one, and ambiguity generates anxiety and suspicion. Denying that you can communicate is false: you always can].

While later texts by Levi will allow new themes and perspectives to discovery the languages of the Jewish diaspora within identity implications (*Se non ora, quando? Il sistema periodico*), the idea remains that only through engagement in dialogue is indeed possible to challenge racist prospective and subvert black-and-white historical representation. This awareness leads us back to the question of the cultural-translational ability and trans-national agency of literary voices, *dopo la fine*, which Patruno used as a theoretical and ideological framework into Italy's colonial history: "Life is a cycle in which at best we struggle against oppression and at worse we become oppressors" (Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* 109–110). Therefore, in the classroom the dialectical process of translating cultural gaps embodied avenues of communication as a unifying tool to tell stories and read across borders. Ultimately, translation courses ("Dante in translation"; "Il Novecento in translation"; "Levi in translation"; "Vittorini in translation") were, for Patruno, a responsible model to embrace plurilinguism and intertextuality, inclusivity and diversity.

Conclusion

At this point, we might consider modifying the question with which Patruno continually engaged as scholar and educator — "what is the use of literature?" — into "to whom is literature useful?" The response, of course, is that it is useful to us and to him, with his belief that — to cite Matteo Residori in his moving *Ricordo di Francesco Orlando* — "la letteratura fosse una forma di esperienza insostituibile, e che studiarla, insegnarla o semplicemente parlarne fosse un modo non troppo insensato di passare la vita" [that literature was an irreplaceable form of experience, and that studying it, teaching it, or simply talking about it, it became a not too senseless way to spend one's life] (Residori 201).

Nicholas Patruno's *impegno* embraced a comparative methodology far beyond aesthetic criteria and promoted discussions between writers, scholars, and readers on forms of public intervention: that is, a rigorous reflection on modernity in its dynamic relationship with the political climate of the post-war period. This same relationship between memory and history was also central in Levi's voice of witness because of the concern that memories would fade, and that the horror of the concentration camps — with victims stripped of their identities, national roots and language, with families taken from them and their names changed to numbers — might fade as well. The horrific memories of the holocaust were kept alive by survivors, and yet Levi knew that, with the passing of the years with few left to tell the story firsthand, the memories have dimmed. This "duty of memory" [Le Devoir de mémoire] continues to be relevant now more than ever not only as a timeless and universal principle, but also as a political and historical one in terms of antifascist activism that takes the form and meaning of a political commitment.

Raymond Carver, an American short-story writer and poet who revitalized the genre of the English-language short story in the late twentieth century, was one of Patruno's most beloved authors outside of Italian literature. He often read and engaged with Carver's poetry collections such as *At Night the Salmon Move* (1976), *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985), and *Ultramarine* (1986). Let me now end this essay with a quote from "Late Fragment," Carver's final poem (1988). First published one year after his death (1989) within the collection titled *A New Path to the Waterfall*, it is now engraved on Carver's tombstone. Written near the end of his life, in it the poet bears witness to a writer who,

at the peak of his success, must confront increasingly difficult questions concerning ghosts and cadavers, acceptance and eventuality, fear and hope. Farewell is, above all, a soft note of closure to his life and a coda to his work within a dialogic form that celebrates compassion and responsibility:

> And did you get what
> you wanted from this life, even so?
> I did.
> And what did you want?
> To call myself beloved, to feel myself
> beloved on the earth.

In other words: *ricordare*, *testimoniare, comunicare*. So that memory never fades.

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NOTES

[1] With the obvious reference to Gianfranco Contini's famous essay "Come lavorava l'Ariosto" (1939) — the founding act of the criticism of authorial variants.
[2] "How many of you are sitting here now, about to cross the stage, and are thinking about all the promotions and titles you're going to get in your career. Some of you may go on to lead successful careers in the world. But I would venture to guess that the majority of you are most excited about your marriage and the children you will bring into this world." Moreover, Ignazio La Russa, the President of the Italian Senate, stated recently that "Via Rasella è stata una pagina tutt'altro che nobile della Resistenza, quelli uccisi furono una banda musicale di semi pensionati e non nazisti delle SS." In September 2023 another significant episode, which passed completely unnoticed in Italy, constituted a complete refiguration of *Il Duce* in pamphlets handed to clients in a bar in the Veneto region. When questioned, the owner nonchalantly replied: "Sono di destra, non è un mistero." [I am right-wing, it is no mystery]. On January 7, 2024, while the essay is currently under revision, a group of right-wing militants gathered for a memorial celebration in front of the former Movimento Sociale Italiano headquarters where they shouted explicit fascist salutes (*saluto romano)* and screamed "Presente!" in front of Acca Larentia headquarters to memorialize a militant who was killed in 1975.
[3] "The event has occurred, even if the details have become hazy with time. Under this light, students see that what applies to facts may also be extended to how individuals are remembered, seen, or presented. Memory and fantasy, then, even though they are generally distinct expedients, may act in unison in the mind of the writer. I suggest to students that this concept may also apply to Levi's combining

memory and fantasy in his presentation of some of his characters" (Patruno, "Levi's 'Personaggi Ambigeni'" 47–48).
[4] Patruno interviewed Montale and met Ungaretti in Rome, see *Intervista a Eugenio Montale* in the Appendix of this volume; and see Ungaretti's drawing at the end of this article.
[5] Levi reflects at length on these linguistic barriers in the concentration camps, referencing to the impossibility of communication between the victims and the oppressors, which exacerbates the erosion of the individual while reducing single words to mere sounds: "Questo 'non essere parlati a' aveva effetti rapidi e devastanti non ti parla non osi rivolgere la parola…. Inoltre, sul piano dell'immediato, non capisci gli ordini ed i divieti, non decifri le prescrizioni, alcune futili e derisori e, altri fondamentali. Ti trovi insomma nel vuoto, e comprendi a tue spese che la comunicazione genera l'informazione, e che senza informazione non si vive" (Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* 72). [This 'not being spoken to' had rapid and devastating effects, it doesn't speak to you, you don't dare speak to it... Furthermore, on an immediate level, you do not understand the orders and prohibitions, you do not decipher the prescriptions, some of them futile and derisive and others fundamental. In short, you find yourself in a vacuum, and you understand at your own expense that communication generates information, and that without information you cannot live.]

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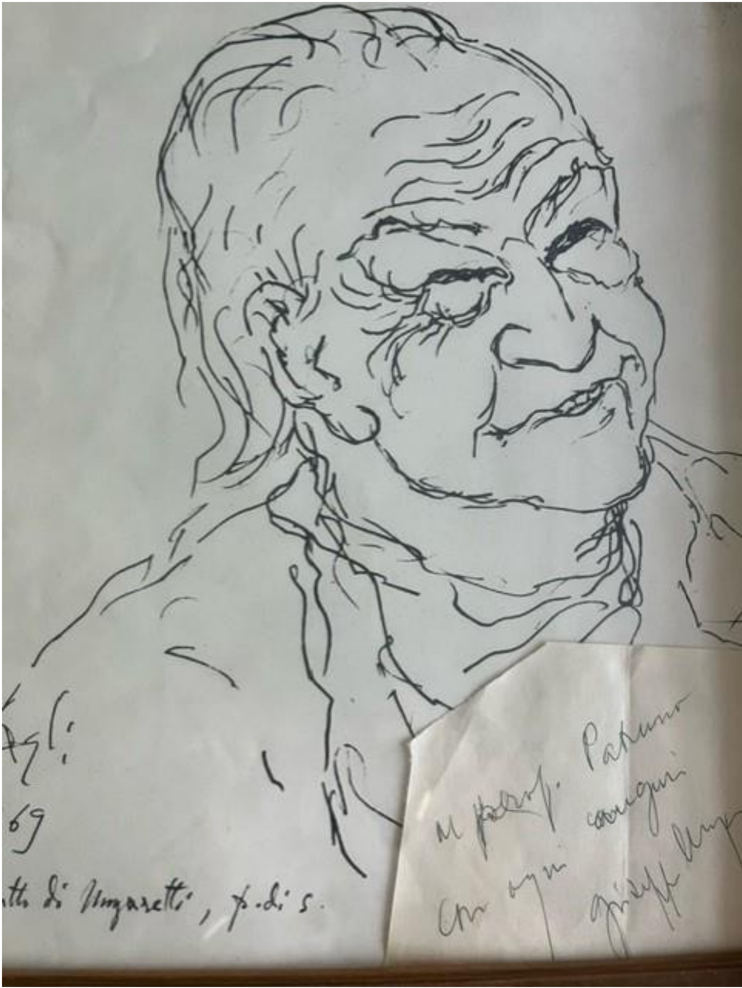

Ungaretti’s drawing for Patruno, 1969.

Nicholas Patruno, Primo Levi, and the Chain of Witness

Abstract
Inspired by a particular incident in Nicholas Patruno's classroom, this essay examines the bond of empathy linking readers (and Holocaust teachers) to Levi's testimony. A detailed interpretation of the passage in *If This Is a Man* concerning Levi's nightmare of the "unlistened-to story" establishes the mechanisms by which this survivor/writer's testimony seeks to recruit readers into the role of the "answerable-other" in psychotherapist Dori Laub's cathartic scenario. An analysis of the "voi" (the second-person plural "you") of the poem "Shema" that serves as the epigraph to *If This is a Man* leads to a consideration of the expanded audience addressed by various artistic adaptations of Levi's testimony, with particular emphasis on Francesco Rosi's film *The Truce*. The essay ends by circling back to Patruno's pedagogy, and the power of the classroom in forging new links for the urgent and on-going chain of Holocaust witness.
Keywords: empathy, testimony, bearing witness, "addressable other," "unlistened-to-story"

This essay was inspired by an intensely personal incident. Because I'm unable to separate the deep current of friendship that bound me to Nick from the incident's literary and ethical import, I hope that the reader will excuse the informal tone of my account. The story dates back to the late 1980s when he and I were colleagues on the Penn-Bryn Mawr summer program in Florence. Nick was teaching a course on Primo Levi, and I was told that at one point he broke down in tears during class. The reason, I learned, was that while looking around the room, it occurred to him that some of these students would not have survived had they been in the wrong place at the wrong time, to wit, in Florence during the Nazi occupation. I was profoundly touched by this story and have gone on to ponder what it said about him as a man, and about his calling as a teacher and scholar of Italy's most renowned Holocaust survivor/witness.

Going back to that day in Florence, what struck me most was the spontaneity of Nick's response, his willingness to expose the humanity residing at the very core of his being. This unguarded show of raw emotion, this shedding of professional composure, was first and foremost a result of empathy — understood as the capacity to emotionally identify with "the other" across zones of difference,

to project oneself into a condition of alterity, with all of the cognitive and ethical burdens that such a process entails. Nick's empathic gift — the basis of the strong connection that he was able to forge with students throughout his career — in this particular case moved him to set aside professorial decorum and give way to tears.

But simple empathy cannot fully explain what happened in the classroom that day. The episode would not have occurred, I believe, had any other Holocaust writer been the subject of the course. It was the depth and urgency of Levi's call for reader engagement which drew Nick inexorably to this particular survivor testimony — an insight that I offered in a back-cover blurb for his 1995 study *Understanding Primo Levi*.[1] The book, I wrote, "exemplifies the kind of ideal reception that [Levi] so desperately sought and despaired of ever finding." Here I was referring to something far deeper than the difficult publication history of *Se questo è un uomo* [*If This is a Man*]: its rejection in 1947 by Jewish writer Natalia Ginzburg, an editor at Einaudi Press, on the grounds that Italy wasn't yet ready for such subject matter; the book's publication by the tiny De Silva publishing house, and its failure to attract a readership; its warehousing in Florence and subsequent loss in the flood of 1966. But this "industrial" difficulty paled next to the deeper anxiety that emerged within the very pages of Levi's memoir — the nightmare of the unlistened-to-story, the fear of never finding the kind of reader willing to bear the full weight of his testimony. Nowhere in Levi's writings is this anxiety more pronounced than in the scenario he conjures up in "Our Nights," the title of Chapter 5 in *If This is a Man* — a scenario of great interpretive complexity characterized by its movement through multiple levels of consciousness. The passage begins with an account of Levi's miserable sleeping conditions in the lager, his slippage into a dream about a locomotive that is about to run him over, his desire *within* the dream to interrupt its narrative progress, his awakening into semi-consciousness by three blasts of a whistle coming from a real-world source near the camp, and then, with no transition at all, his recounting of the next nightmare in which he is telling this very story to listeners who are unwilling to hear it.

> Qui c'è mia sorella, e qualche mio amico non precisato, e molta altra gente. Tutti mi stanno ascoltando, e *io sto raccontando proprio questo*: il fischio su tre note, il letto

> duro, il mio vicino che vorrei spostare. (emphasis mine) (Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* 53)
>
> [Here is my sister, and some other friends, not specified, and many other people. Everyone is listening to me, and I am recalling precisely this: the whistle of three notes, the hard bed, my neighbor whom I would like to displace.][2]

Questions immediately arise at this point, starting with the meaning of "proprio questo" [precisely this]. Is Levi referring here to the events recounted in the previous paragraph — the wretched sleeping conditions, his unbudgeable bunk mate, the whistle that elevated him from the dream of the on-coming locomotive into a state of semi-consciousness? Or is the "proprio questo" referring not to the *concrete referents* of the above words, but to the very act of recounting them in the text that Levi is writing and that we are reading? In the latter case, "questo" would point directly to the memoir in the moment of its composition — a meta-commentary on the writer's authorial task and the readers' receptivity to it.

The passage continues:

> È un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile, essere nella mia casa, fra persone amiche, e avere tante cose da raccontare: ma *non* posso *non* accorgermi che i miei ascoltatori *non* mi seguono. Anzi, essi sono del tutto indifferenti: parlano confusamente d'altro fra di loro, come se io *non* ci fossi. Mia sorella mi guarda, si alza e se ne va senza far parola. (emphases mine) (Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* 54)
>
> [It is an intense enjoyment, physical, unexplainable — to be in my home, among friendly people, and to have so many things to recount: but I can't not be aware that my listeners don't follow me. Rather, they are entirely indifferent: they talk confusedly among themselves, as if I weren't there. My sister looks at me, gets up and leaves without a word.]

The multiple negatives — "non posso non accorgermi, non mi seguono," — lead to the most devastating one of them all: the negation of the speaker's very existence "come se io non ci fossi" Nor can we fail to notice that the paragraph begins with the presence of "mia sorella" — "qui c'è" and ends with her wordless

withdrawal. The other listeners are unspecified. But the fact that his beloved *sorella*, whose presence in the dream had triggered the dream-protagonist's cathartic telling, was the first to exit the scene without even deigning to address him — that is the unkindest cut of all.

What emerges is the absolute necessity of bearing witness, before an audience of receivers, to Levi's *ragione di essere* (emphasis on the word *essere*, in the literal, existential sense of the term). The denial of his being as a narrator will consign him to a state of non-being, permanent exile from the sphere of human concourse (his sister's refusal to address him, as a micro-example.). In a similar vein, Elsa Morante writes of Auschwitz returnees in *La Storia*,

> erano figure spettrali come i numeri negativi, al di sotto di ogni veduta naturale, e impossibili perfino alla comune simpatia. La gente voleva rimuoverli dalle proprie giornate come dalle famiglie normali si rimuove la presenza dei pazzi, o dei morti. (377)
>
> [They were spectral figures, like negative numbers, beneath all-natural sight, inconceivable even for common friendliness. People wanted to censor them from their days as normal families remove the mad or the dead. (*History/A Novel* 321)]

What exempts Levi from the category of Morante's "figure spettrali," is the determination to reclaim his subject position, and most important for our purposes, to do so *through writing.* His use of the term "io" is strategic in this regard. The explicit mention of the subject pronoun, unnecessary given the built-in person and number of inflected verbs in Italian, offered Levi a striking opportunity to anchor his self-hood in this very capacity to *narrate.* "Tutti mi stanno ascoltando, *e* io sto raccontando" he had written. In logical discourse, we would expect the order of these clauses to be reversed: I am recounting, and all are listening to me. But this is not logical discourse; it is dream speech. And the conjunction *e,* joining the two clauses, masks the dream wish of causality, the suppressed *perchè.* Everyone is listening *because* I am narrating. Relegating the protagonist's action to the second clause allows for the emphasis to fall on the *io*. This means that once the listeners cease attending to

his account, "come se io non ci fossi" — his existence, so inextricably linked to his identity as *narrator*, is effectively annulled.

At the meta-level of interpretation, however, a different story emerges. Levi-character may have been expunged from the minds of his audience in the dream, but Levi-author does not disappear from ours. The very recounting of the episode in the pages of the memoir that we are reading redeems the subjectivity of the writer, reclaiming his power to act, to assert his agency in the testimonial process. But the choice to foreground the narrating "io" is highly problematic for Levi, as Maria Anna Mariani eloquently argued in her 2018 study.[3] The possibility of an authoritative account of the Lager goes against Levi's claim in *I sommersi e i salvati* [The Drowned and the Saved] that only those who "reached the bottom," who experienced the extreme logic of the Final Solution, could be considered "i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto significato generale" (Mariani, *Primo Levi e Anna Frank* 34)[4] [the complete witnesses, those whose depositions would have a general meaning]. Survivors, therefore, could only speak as "proxies," as reporters at one remove from those "chi ha visto la Gorgone, [e] non è tornato per raccontare, o è tornato muto" (*I sommersi e i salvati* 64)[5] [saw the Gorgon and didn't return to tell about it, or returned mute]. Central to Mariani's analysis of Levi's rhetoric was his need to subordinate the "io" to the "noi," to speak in a communal voice, to deflect any charges that he was single-handedly appropriating the kind of authority that belonged solely to "i sommersi." According to Mariani, this strategy arose from Levi's urge to expiate his strong sense of guilt at having survived at the expense of others, more worthy than he, and therefore less equipped with the necessary cunning or other skills to stave off extermination. Hence his need to immediately qualify the singularity of his Holocaust experience. In the case of the unlistened-to-story, for example, by stating that this nightmare also belonged to his dear friend Alberto, and "di molti altri, forse di tutti" (*Se questo è un uomo* 55) [to many others, perhaps to everyone). In other words, while it's one thing to tell readers that *all* Holocaust victims dreamt of the unlistened-to-story, it is quite another to usher those readers into the deepest reaches of a *single* dream world, to give words to the troubled workings of *one* man's subconscious, and then to publicly perform that intimate scenario in the pages of a memoir. In doing so, he is treading on dangerous ground, as Mariani argues — courting charges of unjustified

appropriation at the expense of the "drowned." But it is the singularity of Levi's voice that invites empathy, making his testimony "receivable," in contrast to the unlistened-to-story of the nightmare.

To usher his readers into the deepest reaches of his dream world, to give words to the troubled workings of his subconscious, and then to publicly perform that intimate scenario in the pages of a published work — this must have exacted quite a toll on Levi, known for his extreme emotional reserve. Yet this very act of self-exposure is what instilled bonds of empathy in Levi's readers, making his testimony "receivable," and hence transmissible. "To receive the words of witness is to find that one has become a witness, that one's responses are there for others to witness as well" wrote Robert Brinkley and Steven Youra (123). "Once the transmission begins, one cannot stand outside its address" (Brinkley and Youra 123). With this in mind, I have coined the phrase "the chain of witness," where the metaphor of the chain has a double charge. Levi was bound by a compulsion to tell his story, it was his burden, he was enchained by it. But the metaphor also stands for connectivity — the chain as a series of links, originating in Levi's impulse to communicate his testimony to others, and in the process, making them *partecipi* (participants) — not passive, but active receivers, in the ethical sense, willing to become the next links in the chain, accepting their place in the ongoing process of transmission. And this is where Nick comes back into the story, given the intensity of his relationship to Levi's work as revealed in acute form that day in Florence, where the strength of his empathic teaching was on full display. Nick's enactment as *partecipe* in the chain of witness, as transmitter of the emotional and ethical weight of Levi's testimony, could not have found more powerful expression than this.

It is here that the work of Dori Laub, psychoanalyst, child survivor, and cofounder of the Yale Fortunoff Video archive, comes to mind. As a psychoanalyst, Laub was especially interested in the therapeutic effects of testimony — effects that could only be achieved in the presence of an "addressable other," one willing to fully to accept the burden of listening (68).[6] According to Laub, trauma victims are trapped by memories that seem to have no beginning or end — memories which refuse consignment to a past, infiltrating and contaminating the present in a kind of continual feedback loop. To defuse the traumatic memory, the patient must be

able to communicate it in a narrative form which will contain it and thereby delimit its destructive force. In Laub's words, "to undo [the victim's] entrapment, a process of constructing a narrative, or reconstructing a history and essentially of *re-externalizing the event* — must be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit the story*, literally transfer it to another outside oneself, and then take it back again, inside" (Laub 69).

As I am sure it is obvious by now, Levi's "addressable other" (or better, addressable others) are the readers, the enablers of witness in this therapeutic sense. It is no mere coincidence that the very opening word in the searing poem "Shema," which serves as the epigraph of *Se questo è un uomo,* is precisely *Voi* — Levi's appeal to his readers to serve as his community of "addressable others," the next links in the chain of witness. But it is also important to note that the plural "you" of the invocation included not only readers of his writings, but other artists who adapted his work in various media. Levi was an enthusiastic collaborator in producing radio plays, theatrical pieces, and was eager to bring film into the venues for bearing witness. In 1963, Francesco Rosi initiated plans to adapt *La tregua* (The Truce) to the screen.[7] He wanted to shoot the film on-site — in the Soviet Union — but was thwarted by red tape and Cold War prohibitions. Again in 1987, right before Levi's death, Rosi contacted him with the news that he wanted to revive the project. Levi was thrilled, but he didn't live to see the finished film, which premiered in 1997 and was unfortunately upstaged by *La vita è bella*, (*Life Is Beautiful*) which came out the same year.

Though condemned to relative obscurity in the wake of Benigni's blockbuster hit, Rosi's film deserves special recognition for its place in the chain of witness forged by Levi's work. One scene stands out for its explicit rendering of Rosi's role as "translator" of Levi's testimony into the language of film. The scene in question is set in a Polish marketplace, where Primo is being tutored by Mordo Nahum, a Greek Holocaust survivor, on how to sell shirts. As Primo threads his way through the multitudes hawking his wares with little success, a well-meaning bystander offers to help by translating his sales pitch for potential customers. People gather around the two of them, staring at Primo, who asks his translator why he's the object of the crowd's curiosity. "For that" answers the gentleman, pointing to the star-of-David triangle stitched onto Primo's jacket. "Tell them that I was in Auschwitz,

that I am a Jew, and that I need to sell this shirt to eat. Go on, please." But the gentleman's Polish rendering deviates radically from Primo's words, prompting the sudden interruption of the latter to correct what amounts to an egregious act of censorship. "No, no, no, no, no. You said '*polityczny*' prisoner 'political' not '*Zyd*', not Jew. Why? Why didn't you tell them that I am a Jew?" At this point, Primo dispenses with the "help" of the translator by directly and forcefully addressing the crowd in his own terms. "At Auschwitz, not far from here, there was a camp, full of innocent people — men, women, mothers, children, burned, burned in a crematorium, enormous, enormous. Why don't you translate? Go on translate." But by now, his listeners are dispersing — an overhead shot shows them receding from Primo, creating a void around him, as they make their way amid the stalls of baked goods, raw meat, and sacks of grain in a return to the shopping routines of an earlier and better time.

Of the utmost importance to our interpretation of this scene is its radical departure from Levi's literary account of it in *La tregua.* The film's protagonist is far more aggressive and confrontational than his textual counterpart, who is passive and resigned in the face of the well-meaning gentleman's mistranslation. The book's Primo does not shout out his truth to the crowd as it disperses — he does not bludgeon them with the reality of what was happening in the death camp on their doorstep. Instead, Levi writes, "sentii l'onda calda del sentirsi libero, del sentirsi uomo fra uomini, del sentirsi vivo, rifluire lontano da me. Mi trovai a un tratto vecchio, esangue, stanco al di là di ogni misura umana" (61). [I sensed that the warm wave of feeling free, of feeling myself a man among men, of feeling alive, was ebbing far from me. I found myself suddenly old, bloodless, tired beyond all human measure.]

Significantly, Rosi's more robust rendering of Primo's character in the film is accompanied by a series of technical choices which make explicit the filmmaker's medium-specific place in the chain of Holocaust witness. The moment in which Rosi's Primo departs from the textual version and angrily confronts the crowd with the truth of Auschwitz, the camera begins to crane upwards, a movement accompanied by a swelling orchestral score that raises the emotional stakes of the scene. These are techniques that call attention to the fact that this is a spectacle — a staged, highly choreographed reenactment of the book in audio-visual terms, with the interpretive license that literature-into-film adaptation invites.[8] Rosi's

flamboyant crane shot, coinciding with the dramatic entrance of the musical soundtrack, serves to announce his presence as auteur, affixing his personal signature to the work.

It bears remembering that this scene is about an act of failed translation. The gentleman's well-meaning effort to shield Primo from an anti-Semitic reaction on the part of the crowd has the effect of obstructing the protagonist's entire *raison d'être* — his urgent need to bear witness. By so obtrusively announcing his presence as a film artist at this point in the scene, Rosi reveals that *he will take up* the process of translation where the Polish interpreter had failed — that he, Rosi, will translate into the language of cinema the spirit and letter of Levi's Holocaust testimony. In so doing, the filmmaker establishes his own strategic place in the chain of witness by using his mass medium to multiply, exponentially, the number of "addressable others" who will receive Levi's testimony and who will, thanks to the *sui generis* power of cinema to elicit identification and empathy, take that message to heart.

We in academia do not have the spectacular means of Rosi at our disposal to extend the chain of witness beyond the borders of the classroom. But on an understandably reduced scale, we too can amplify Levi's testimonial voice by enacting for our students, in their presence, the empathic appeal of his writings, and its transformative effects on our personal identities as scholars and teachers. In other words, we too are called upon to perform, in the classroom, our own receptivity to Levi's impassioned appeal for engagement as recounted in the episode of the "unlistened-to story" with its challenge to reverse the text's nightmare scenario. In the process, our lessons on Levi's episode will enact a "responsory," to use Maria Anna Mariani's resonant term for interpreting a work which "does not just demand a commentary: it demands a responsory" (*Italian Literature in the Nuclear Age* 101). This she defines as "a way of approaching the text that engages in dialog with it, that reacts actively to its prompts... [and] extends them into the here and now" (Mariani, *Italian Literature in the Nuclear Age*, 101). For us, that "here" is the classroom, and that "now" is of course our new millennium. In this regard, I cannot think of a better model than Nicholas Patruno, practitioner of the responsory *per eccellenza*, "answerable other" of the first order, and creator, in his turn, of new links in the testimonial chain that Levi so urgently sought to forge.

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NOTES

[1] Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi*. Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1995.
[2] All translations in English, unless otherwise noted, are mine.
[3] Anna Maria Mariani, *Primo Levi e Anna Frank: tra testimonianza e letteratura*. For an extended analysis of Mariani's argument, see my review article, "'Due icone della Shoah': Primo Levi, Anne Frank, and the 'peccato della finzione,'" in *Italica*, vol. 96, No. 3, Fall 2019, pp. 515-523.
[4] Quote from Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* cit. in Mariani, *Primo Levi e Anna Frank*, p. 34.
[5] Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati.* Turin, Einaudi, 1991, p. 64.
[6] For the term "addressable other," see Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 68.
[7] For an extended analysis of Rosi's film, see my *After Fellini: Italian Film in the Postmodern Age.* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp. 253-267.
[8] For my theoretical defense of "unfaithful" cinematic adaptations of literary texts, see the Introduction to *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Film and Literary Adaptation,* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

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"Free also to make mistakes and masters of one's own destiny": Primo Levi the (Anti)alpinist

Abstract
The tradition of alpinist literature had a significant, yet still understudied, impact on Primo Levi, who frequently quoted mountaineers such as Edward Whymper and Eugen Lammer. This impact is even more surprising because the canon of alpinist literature was inextricably tied to the Fascist ideals of control over the environment, the territory of the Italian peninsula, and its citizens. Through the analysis of Levi's texts on mountains and mountaineers, in particular "Bear Meat" and "Iron," this article shows how the writer confronted the tradition of alpinist literature and ultimately utilized its topoi to create a new, anti-Fascist mountaineering hero, emphasizing the generative power of failure and mistakes rather than conquest and domination.
Keywords: Primo Levi, Mountaineering, Sandro Delmastro, Edward Whymper, Fascism.

> "When there before us rose a mountain, dark / because of distance, and it seemed to me / the highest mountain I had ever seen" […]. And the mountains when one sees them in the distance…the mountains….oh Pikolo, Pikolo, say something, speak, don't let me think of my mountains, which would appear in the evening dusk as I returned by train from Milan to Turin! (Levi, *If This is a Man* 196)

In one of *If This is a Man*'s most famous passages, Primo Levi recalled that he recited and translated passages of the *Divine Comedy* to his comrade Pikolo. Dante's text was so powerful that Levi for a moment, forgot "who [he was] and where [he was]" (187). He even intuited "the why of our destiny, of the fact that we are here [in the concentration camp] today" (Levi, *If this is a Man* 187). While the philosophical implications of Levi's commentary on Dante have been the object of intense critical debates,[1] it is worth noticing that the most emotional moment of Levi's exegesis comes when he pictures *his* mountains. Dante's description of a dark mountain appearing in front of Ulysses resonated with Levi as an individual and brought him back to his life before and outside the concentration camp. Escaping the temptation to even try expressing

the feelings evoked by the memory of his mountains, Levi concluded, “enough, one has to go on, these are things that one thinks but does not say” (*If This is a Man* 189).[2] Marco Belpoliti, one of the few scholars who commented on the role of mountains in this passage, focused on its literary precedents, arguing that it echoed Manzoni’s “farewell to the mountains,” a key text in the Italian literary canon and a staple of the high school curriculum to this day (Belpoliti 112). While Manzoni’s memory is certainly present in the text, this passage also signals Levi’s deeply personal relationship with the mountains and the practice of mountaineering.

Primo Levi started hiking as a teenager: as he recalled in a 1984 interview published in the magazine *Rivista della montagna*,[3] in his family “there was this tradition of the mountains as something that strengthens you, a bit like the environment that Natalia Ginzburg describes in *What We Used to Say*” (*L’alpinismo?* 28).[4] This quote also suggests that Levi’s experience of the mountains was filtered and mediated by the tradition of those who wrote about them. Indeed, throughout the interview, Levi interspersed the memory of his own adventures in the Alps with the fond memory of the texts that informed and shaped these experiences, outlining an ideal genealogy of alpinist-narrators, from Edward Whymper and Albert Mummery to Eugen Lammer. Building on his familiarity with the mountains and the literary and rhetorical tradition surrounding them, Levi repeatedly tried to write his own epic of mountaineering. His first attempt was a short story centered on the notion of the *valico* (mountain pass), an early text that was never published and does not appear to have survived. Years later, Levi described this story in *Rivista della montagna*:

> I wanted to represent the feeling you have when you climb up, with the line of the mountains closing the horizon in front of you: you climb, you don’t see anything but this line, nothing else, then suddenly you pass it, you find yourself on the other side, and in a few seconds you see a new world, you are in a new world. That’s it, this is what I tried to express: the mountain pass. (Levi, *L’alpinismo?* 31)[5]

Levi’s own (somewhat ironic) commentary of this short story revealed both his ambitious goals and his discomfort with the results, which appeared too steeped in rhetoric: “I never finished, it was not published and such it will remain, because all in all it’s really quite bad. All the epic of the mountains was there, and the

metaphysics of alpinism. Mountains as the key to everything*"* (Levi, *L'alpinismo?* 31).[6]

After the experience of the war and the concentration camp, Levi returned to his project of writing an epic of the mountains with "Bear Meat" (1961), a short story published in the journal *Il mondo* and later reelaborated in "Iron," part of *The Periodic Table* (1975). While Levi's first youthful attempt focused on a feature of the mountain landscape, these two later texts centered on mountaineers. "Bear Meat" was structured as a frame narrative: an autobiographical first-person narrator recalled his encounter with two older alpinists, who each told the story of the ill-advised, naïve climbs of their youth. Both tales thematized the relationship between a young, inexperienced climber and a more experienced one (Luigi in the first tale, Carlo in the second). The second tale explained the title of the short story: the two protagonists, having planned a quick ascent to a nearby mountain, found that the path was much more difficult than they expected and ended up bivouacking in the mountains, with no food or shelter, thus tasting the "bear meat" — the difficult but energizing experience of having to rely only on one's own means in a challenging environment. The same episode constituted the core of "Iron," the fourth chapter of *The Periodic Table.* In "Iron," the author eliminated the frame narrative and emphasized the autobiographical components of the story, explicitly identifying the protagonists as himself and Alessandro (Sandro) Delmastro. A skilled alpinist and a chemistry student, Sandro would go on to become a prominent member of the anti-fascist Resistance and was killed by a 15-year-old fascist fighter in March 1944.

Through these stories, Levi took on the challenge of talking about the significance of the mountains and alpinists without giving into the traditional rhetoric of mountaineering. I suggest that "Bear Meat" and "Iron" are Levi's attempt to create an alternative to the mountaineering heroes of the past alpinist literature, a tradition that — as we will see — profoundly influenced Levi but, at the same time, was inextricably tied to the Fascist project of control over the environment, the territory of the Italian peninsula, and its citizens.

Levi's Genealogy: Alpinist Literature

The control and conquest of the mountain environment were crucial components of the practice and the rhetoric of alpinism well before Fascism. In fact, while one of the most widespread *topoi* of alpinist

literature is the contrast between the urban power struggles and the quiet freedom of the mountains, alpinism was from the beginning a deeply political, nationalistic enterprise. In the nineteenth century, the Alps became a testing ground for the competition between national states, with British, French, German, and later Italian mountaineers struggling to uphold the pride of their countries by being the first to reach new peaks, while modeling a new kind of ideal citizen.[7] Many of the alpinist writers that Levi mentioned in his 1984 interview belonged to this first generation of mountaineers. Whymper and Mummery, in particular, had a key role in shaping the canon of alpinist literature. Their autobiographical writings,[8] combining adventure, self-discovery, and the scientific exploration of uncharted territories, codified the "type" of the alpinist hero. Male, affluent, and cultured, canonical mountaineering heroes viewed the mountains as an opportunity to escape the boring urban life of the plains and to test their limits. They controlled and dominated nature by climbing routes that appeared inaccessible and mapping uncharted territories, while studying and classifying natural elements. Symmetrically, they controlled their own bodies and minds through harsh discipline, exercise, and willpower, overcoming their natural instincts.[9]

For the newly born Italian state, the exploration and mapping of the Alps was part of the process of centralization essential to the construction of the modern national state. It is no coincidence that many of the nineteenth century Italian alpinists were members of the Piedmontese intellectual elites that also filled the ranks of the first governments of the newly formed Italian kingdom. The renowned Ministry of Finance Quintino Sella, for example, was a prominent alpinist and the founder of the Italian Mountain Club. His open letter, *Una salita al Monviso,* published in 1863, is an emblematic example of the role of alpinism in the construction of Italy as a modern, centralized national state. Not only Sella described with pride how his group conquered the peak of Monviso "without the need for foreigners" (Sella, *Una salita al Monviso* 49),[10] but he also pushed for a greater involvement of government and military institutions in mapping and renaming alpine peaks. Sella complained about the confusion resulting from the wide variety of names utilized by the local populations to designate a given site — a great inconvenience for alpinists as well as for government officers who tried to understand and control these territories. To address this challenge, Sella had an easy solution: official government maps should not hesitate to impose new names

on key mountain sites, which would certainly "quickly be adopted by everybody" (Sella, *Una salita al Monviso* 29), eliminating the need to make sense of the local toponymy.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the political implications of mountaineering narratives became clearer and more explicit. Strong, disciplined bodies made for excellent soldiers, as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century mountaineering stories remarked with increasing frequency. The First World War was largely fought in the mountains, and the tradition of alpinist narratives provided the building blocks for the construction of the alpinist soldier hero.[11] After the war, Fascism (as well as Nazism) coopted this tradition. The fascist government took control of existing mountaineering institutions such as the Italian Mountain Club (Club Alpino Italiano, CAI) as part of the institutionalization of sports that sanctioned recreational outlets for the Italian population while instilling the values of comradery, self-sacrifice, discipline, physical, and mental strength. As a 1935 article which appeared in the magazine *Lo scarpone* put it, mountaineering offered a way to escape "alcoholic degeneration and the useless inactivity following the hard work in the fields": with their heavy backpacks and mountain boots, Italian citizens could go "towards the glory of the heights, the physical and spiritual elevation," becoming "soldiers of the mountains."[12] To say that Fascism appropriated the rhetoric of alpinist literature, however, is somewhat reductive, because in many ways, the fascist intrepid yet disciplined heroes were the natural culmination of the tradition of mountaineering heroes from the mid-nineteenth century onwards: they fully embodied the search of danger as the ultimate test of human limits and the desire to dominate the natural environment through the control of one's body that, as we have seen, characterized alpinist heroes from Mummery and Sella onwards. Indeed, this same model of mountaineering heroes outlived Fascism: postwar alpinist literature adopted not only the same rhetoric of control and self-control, but also the same combination of individualism and nationalistic pride. Climbing expeditions only shifted their focus from the European Alps to the Himalayas, making the nationalistic and colonial undertones of alpinism even more evident.

In Search of New Models

This tradition is essential to understand Levi's relationship with the mountains and it is explicitly evoked not only, as we have seen, in his 1984 interview, but also in his short stories. "Bear Meat" is an especially emblematic example of the ways in which Levi inserted himself in the tradition of alpinist writers, while at the same time seeking to revolutionize it to create a new kind of mountaineering hero. This short story started with a celebration of "a little-known human subspecies" that frequented the last real *rifugi* (mountain huts), a group at risk of extinction due to "the advent of chairlifts" (Levi, "Bear Meat" 1139) that opened mountain peaks to mass tourism. The readers familiar with alpinist literature would immediately recognize one of its most widespread topoi: the contrast between the "real" alpinists who ventured outside the bounds of civilization and the tourists who only experienced a filtered, embellished version of the mountains, with safe trails, mountain roads, and the comfort of warm hotels. Already in 1871, Whymper insisted on differentiating himself from the tourists who crowded the lower slopes of the mountains he climbed. Twenty years later, recalling his first ascent to the Matterhorn, Mummery complained about "the vulgarization of Zermatt," the small village at the foot of the mountain, "the cheap trippers and their trumpery fashions," and missed the good old days when the mountain "was still shrouded with a halo of but half banished inaccessibility," before "the ascent had become fashionable" (Mummery 3). His book, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus,* included drawings of "Zermatt Fashions" and "Tourists" leisurely walking on well-marked trails. In the years since, the alpinists' contempt for the tourists and the tools they used to ensure their access to the mountains only grew: if the first alpinists despised ladders and fixed ropes, their twentieth-century imitators complained about roads and chairlifts.

While Levi seemed to embrace this model, the description of the "human subspecies" that interested him clearly marked a departure from the traditional alpinist heroes. In fact, Levi explicitly indicated that his mountaineers "should not be confused with other, vaguely similar types […]: hot shots, extreme climbers, members of famous international expeditions, professionals, etc" (Levi, "Bear Meat" 1139). What set Levi's heroes apart was precisely the fact that they stood outside the narrative tradition of alpinism, refusing to tell their stories and thus avoiding the spotlight. Professional alpinists — Levi claimed — were people who "do speak, and of

whom others speak" (1139). His mountaineers, in contrast, were people "who don't speak much, and of whom others don't speak at all, so there is no mention of them in the literature of most countries" (1139). In other words, what made the difference among the various "subspecies" of alpinists was not their relationship to the mountains but, more crucially, their relationship to language and discourse. Indeed, narration was an intrinsic component of modern alpinism from its origins, so much so that Mummery remarked that "fate decrees that the mountaineer should, sooner or later, fall a victim to the *furor scribendi*" (1) and alpinists, to a fault, wrote reports, open letters, and autobiographies, creating and disseminating their own myth. Almost by definition, telling the story of the kind of mountaineering heroes who refused to talk and were not spoken about required building a different language, departing from the codified topoi of the alpinist literature.

With "Bear Meat," Levi sought to create an epic of mountaineering built on other literary models, explicitly evoked in his text: Dante and Conrad. As Andrea Cortellessa (2013) and Riccardo Capoferro (2014) already noticed, the entire structure of this short story was modelled after *Youth* by Joseph Conrad: the narrator listened to old adventurers telling stories of their youth around a table (in a port in *Youth*, in a mountain hut in "Bear Meat"). Conrad's ghost loomed in the story, evoked first as the "sailor" who wrote that *"*the sea's only gifts are harsh blows and, occasionally, the opportunity to feel strong*"*[13] and then again as the author of "a beloved book," that described the value of being young and free in nature.[14] While existing scholarship focused on the role of Conrad as a model for Levi's short story, the role of Dante's Commedia was equally as important, and perhaps more interesting. If Conrad was Levi's model to describe the epic struggle between humans and nature, the writer turned to Dante to represent people's inner struggles and the generative power of mistakes that make you lose your way. One of "Bear Meat"'s narrators, somewhat unrealistically, quoted six different passages from the Divine Comedy (from *Inferno* I and XXIV and *Purgatorio* XVIII), claiming that while he wasn't a specialist, he was convinced that "Dante couldn't have just invented these founding principles of rock climbing — he must have been here or in a similar place" ("Bear Meat" 1143). In sum, he never doubted that Dante was "del mestiere," a connoisseur with first-hand experience of the mountains. Reading these passages, one cannot help but remember

the powerful impression that the revocation of Ulysses' mountain had on Levi in Auschwitz. In Dante, it seems, Levi found the model of a language that could describe the perils of the mountains with precision and without rhetoric, without wasting too many words.

Reelaborating "Bear Meat" into "Iron," Levi dropped all references to Dante and Conrad. Most notably, Conrad was not mentioned in the list of Sandro's readings, which included instead other adventure writers such as Emilio Salgari, Jack London, and Rudyard Kipling. Capoferro argued that Conrad's expungement strengthened "Iron"'s connection with the autobiographical roots of the story. This choice, I suggest, also helped reinforce the connection with the tradition of alpinist literature, which was itself typically autobiographical. In fact, "Iron" explicitly evoked this tradition by mentioning the Austrian alpinist Eugen Lammer, described as an authority in survival techniques: "we had removed our shoes, as described in the books by Lammer that Sandro liked" (*The Periodic Table* 792). The source of this reference was almost certainly the collection of essays *Jungborn*, published in Italy in 1932 by L'Eroica in Milan, under the title *Fontana di giovinezza*. In one of these essays, Lammer indeed admonished that "in bivouacs, one should remove one's shoes because they conduct heat too easily, and one should put their feet in the emptied-out backpacks" (*Fontana di giovinezza* 464). Judging from this passage, one may think that Lammer was simply an expert in alpine techniques. In addition to a skilled alpinist, however, Lammer was also a narrator and a philosopher. His books alternated technical descriptions of the first ascents he conducted with mystical digressions clearly inspired by Nietzschean philosophy — a combination that is the perfect illustration of the complexity of the tradition of alpinist literature. Alongside discussions on boots and ropes, in Lammer's books one finds emphatic declarations about the need for danger to keep a person alive:

> I consider having experienced mortal danger with lucid consciousness as one of the highest forms of pleasure, one of my most precious treasures, and I wouldn't give up that memory for anything […]. I can easily renounce many joys on this earth, but if you take from me the fear and my generous fight with fear, my existence will become so boring that I would yearn for death. (Lammer, *Fontana di giovinezza* 222)[15]

It is not surprising that Lammer's books, full of mystical undertones and Nietzschean references, became an inspiration for Nazi alpinism.[16] What is surprising is to find him quoted among Sandro's favorite books. One may be tempted to say that Sandro (and Levi) extrapolated Lammer's technical teachings from his mystical celebration of an alpinist Übermensch, but that would be an oversimplification. Levi himself, in his 1984 interview for the *Rivista della montagna,* evoked Lammer's philosophy of mountaineering and listed him, as we have seen, among the authors who instilled in him the idea that one should "always measure oneself with the extreme" (Levi "L'alpinismo?" 29). While Mummery and Whymper were only quoted by name in this interview, Lammer was mentioned alongside his book *Fontana di giovinezza*. In fact, even if Lammer's philosophy was not discussed explicitly in "Iron," its echo can still be perceived in the narrator's words when he claimed, for example, that "nothing, even at a distance, has had the taste of that meat," that is the taste of freedom and the challenge of the mountains (*The Periodic Table* 792). These crucial words bring to mind Lammer's description of the pleasures of the danger and the excitement that comes with stretching ones' limits in the mountains.[17]

An Anti-Fascist Alpinist Hero

As we have seen so far, "Iron"'s explicit and implicit references to Lammer illustrate Levi's complex relationship with the tradition of alpinist literature. In many ways, Sandro was a model alpinist, formed in the same mountaineering culture that imbued the Fascist heroes. Fully extricating Sandro from that rhetorical tradition was not possible. Levi tried to do so in "Bear Meat," but a sailor like Conrad was not the right model for a mountaineering story. Yet, on the other hand, clearly the rhetoric and the language of the tradition of alpinist literature were inadequate to represent the mountaineering hero that Levi was building. This paradox lies at the foundation of "Iron": the analysis of Sandro's character, I argue, reveals how Levi utilized the topoi of the genre of alpinist literature as the building blocks to create a new kind of hero who not only embodied anti-fascist values, but was antithetic to the model alpinists codified since the nineteenth century.

First, Sandro was a man of the land, in contrast to the typical urban alpinists (and to Levi himself). Sandro "spent the summers as a shepherd. Not a shepherd of souls: a shepherd of

sheep, and not out of Arcadian rhetoric or eccentricity but happily, for the love of the land and the grass, and generosity of spirit" (*The Periodic Table* 786). The description of Sandro's shepherding experience reused, with minimal variations, the phrases used to introduce Carlo in "Bear Meat." In "Iron," however, Levi added details about Sandro's father, a mason, thus emphasizing Sandro's rural, working-class background, which set Sandro's character apart from most alpinist heroes, who were by and large wealthy.

From the Swiss and Italian shepherds who served as guides for the first wave of nineteenth-century alpinists to the "sherpas" serving as high-altitude porters in the Himalayas, rural populations are featured prominently in the tradition of alpinist literature. The relationship between the alpinists and their local guides is one of symbiosis and subordination. Despite depending on their guides, alpinists are in a position of power. If guides determine the itinerary, alpinists choose the destination and first set foot on the mountain peaks. They are the ones who get to tell their stories, representing themselves as the bearers of a superior form of knowledge. In these stories, while guides appear to have an in-depth knowledge of the environment, physical strength, and technical expertise, alpinists are portrayed as those who really understand the mountains, as they can classify them, map them, and scientifically study them.

Once more, in "Iron," Levi initially seemed to embrace this traditional paradigm, only to flip it. The character Primo imparted a wealth of theoretical and philosophical knowledge to Sandro, explaining to his friend "that the nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, consisted in making himself a master of matter" and that "chemistry and physics […] were […] the antidotes to fascism […], because they were clear and distinct, at every step verifiable" (*The Periodic Table* 787). However, Levi reversed the power dynamic between the urban scientist-philosopher and the local "guide," insisting that he had a lot to learn from Sandro beyond alpine technique, the traditional real of expertise of the native guides. Indeed, Sandro was represented as an authoritative teacher who could see through Primo's rhetoric and who demonstrated that his education, too, was "lacking":

> Matter might be our master, and maybe even, for lack of a better, our political school, but he had another matter to show me, another educator: not the powders of Qualitative Analysis but that true, authentic timeless Urstoff, the rock and ice of the nearby mountains. (*The Periodic Table* 784)

Levi, for all his theorizing, “did not have the credentials to speak on the matter” (*The Periodic Table* 784). For all his familiarity with the four Empedoclean elements, he ignored their manifestation in nature and did not know how to interact with them: “Did I know how to light a stove? Ford a stream? Did I know a high-altitude blizzard? The germination of seed?” (788). For the young Primo, matter was to be conquered, dominated. Sandro, in contrast, felt a friendly familiarity with matter: “When he saw in a rock a red vein of iron, [he] seemed to have found a friend” (787).

By the same token, Sandro rejected all tools that could interfere with his immediate, natural friendship with the elements and the environment. In Levi’s description, Sandro (as well as his fictional predecessor, Carlo) rejected watches, feeling that their “quiet admonishment” was “an arbitrary intrusion” (*The Periodic Table 790*). Similarly, he didn’t need any maps and only carried the trail guide published by the Italian Mountain Club to mock it and expose its shortcomings. In a particularly funny episode narrated both in “Bear Meat” and in “Iron,” Carlo/Sandro and the narrator hiked through what was described in the guide as “the easy north-western ridge” (*The Periodic Table* 791), only to find that the conditions on the ground made this ridge almost impossible to traverse.

Such an attitude, of course, set Sandro apart from the stereotypical tourists, who depended on watches, books, and maps to make up for their lack of experience in the mountains. However, Sandro’s rejection of these tools was also antithetical to the attitude of professional alpinists, whose reports and autobiographies insisted on the importance of being fully prepared and equipped with all the right tools to conquer the mountains. It is also worth noticing that the Italian Mountain Club was not only the embodiment of institutionalized alpinism but also — since 1929 — an official Fascist institution, and one of the ways in which Fascism expanded access to the mountains as a training ground for the minds and bodies of the Italian citizens (and future soldiers). One may argue that the gap between the guide that described the trail through the “easy north-western ridge” and the experience of the friends who found the same ridge incredibly difficult due to adverse atmospheric conditions represented the gap between the theoretical knowledge of those who believed that they dominated the mountains just because they mapped them, and those — like Sandro — who knew that the

only possible way to understand mountains was by experiencing them. From this vantage point, the role of silence and the rejection of rhetoric that characterized the "human subspecies" that interested Levi. As a prime example of this kind of mountaineers, Sandro "was extremely sparing in recounting his adventures":

> He didn't belong to the race of those who do things so that they can talk about them (like me): he didn't love big words, or, indeed, words. It seemed that, as with climbing, no one had taught him to speak; he spoke the way nobody speaks, saying only the essence of things. (*The Periodic Table* 789)

The parallel between Sandro's unique and instinctive way of talking and his way of climbing is especially interesting because it signals that his contempt for words and rhetoric was symmetrical to his contempt for watches and guidebooks: Sandro rejected of all things that mediated his relationship with the natural environment.

Such an unmediated, instinctive, familiar relationship to the environment manifested itself, first and foremost, in Sandro's choice to embrace mistakes, wrong turns, and deviations. In "Iron," in response to Primo's cautious attempts to find the "correct" official path in the mountains, Sandro emphasized that "it is not worth being twenty if one cannot afford the luxury to make mistakes" (Levi, *The Periodic Table* 793). These words were already used by Carlo in "Bear Meat," with minimal variations. In the same short story, as we have seen, the other narrator similarly discussed how he and his friends took a wrong turn and got lost in the mountains, only to be saved by local mountaineers. As a scientist, Levi was fully aware of the importance of mistakes as necessary steps leading to scientific discoveries. Similarly, traditional alpinist narratives were full of the tales of wrong turns taken on the way to the summit. However, Sandro's philosophy of mistakes was radically different from that of scientists and alpinists, for whom mistakes were means to an end, while the goal remained getting to the top, figuring out the correct hypothesis. For Sandro, mistakes were an integral part of the purpose of climbing: one cannot be late if there are no watches, one cannot take a wrong turn if they were not following a path. While scientists and alpinists aim at conquering and dominating Matter, control and conquest were never a goal for Sandro — freedom was. By making mistakes and suffering their natural consequences, one only acquired the power to

control one's own destiny, as Sandro taught Levi. But that was the only control that counted, because it was the only one that set you free. This was, in Levi's words, the taste of "bear meat": "the taste of being strong and free — free even to make mistakes — and master of one's destiny" (*The Periodic Table* 792). It was this attitude that made Sandro an exemplary anti-Fascist mountaineer. Before joining the Resistance, before sacrificing his life to fight the fascist government, Sandro embodied anti-Fascist values because he instinctively rejected the fascist way of being in the world, rooted in a desire to conquer and dominate the environment.

Language, Dialect, and Toponymy

The significant difference between the two modes of being in the mountains that we have outlined so far is reflected not only in the contrast between language and silence, but also between the standard Italian language and the local dialect: in Levi's short stories, the outsiders, intellectuals and scientists who sought knowledge as a way to control and dominate the environment spoke in Italian, whereas the local mountaineers spoke in dialect.[18] This contrast was especially evident in "Bear Meat"'s first tale, centered on a group of friends who climbed up a mountain, only to find themselves lost and unable to climb down the last cliff that separated them from the mountain hut where they were headed. The friends, all urban and educated youths, not only conversed in Italian, but, as we have seen, recited verses from the Divine Comedy. Stuck on top of the cliff, they were saved by a group of local mountaineers who instead spoke in dialect: "'Who are they?' a voice asked from below. 'A l'è mach tre gagnô brôdôs' was the fierce response. Then, turning to us: 'L'è lon ch'i 'v môstrô a scola?'" (*"Bear Meat"* 1144). As the narrator clarified, *gagnô* was a mocking expression that literally meant "child." The same narrator proudly explained that "Gagnô" became his nickname, making this episode almost literally a baptism into the community of the "real" mountaineers.

This section was not included in "Iron," like the majority of the first tale of "Bear Meat." However, in the Periodic Table, Levi inserted another section on dialects — a long digression on the climbing walls located around Turin. Levi listed and commented on their names, most of which were dialectal, rather than Italian: "the peaks of the Pagliaio with the Wolkmann Tower, the Teeth of the Cumiana, Roca Patanüa (meaning 'bare rock'), the Plô, the Sbarüa, and others, with modest domestic names" (*The Periodic Table* 790).

Toponymy is among the most debated issues in mountaineering. Naming new peaks and new routes, alpinists (and the countries they represent) establish and manifest their control over the peaks they climb. Within a typically colonial dynamic, local names, in local languages, have often been replaced by names created and imposed by foreign alpinists and outsiders. The English names attributed by Western explorers to many Himalayan peaks are obvious and well-known examples of this dynamic, but — as we have seen — as early as 1863 Quintino Sella already advocated to rename local mountains. Indeed, most of the modern names of alpine peaks are almost as recent as the names of the Everest and the K2, and they are the result of a similar imposition of Italian names that replaced the original dialect ones. Reversing, once again, the topoi of alpinist literature, Levi valued the local, dialect names of the boulders and climbing walls he listed. Such a contrast was especially evident in the case of the Sbarüa. This wall was discovered by Sandro himself, or maybe by his brother, and its shape evoked for Levi "il Veglio di Creta" (*The Periodic Table* 790). However, neither the identity of the alpinist who discovered it, nor the mythological associations it evoked were relevant to understand the name of this boulder. With the precision of a linguist, Levi dove into the dialect etymology of the name, explaining that Sbarüa was "deverbative derived from 'sabrüé', which means 'to frighten'" (*The Periodic Table* 790).

Levi was no stranger to etymology, and Linguistics was one of his great passions — a real "third trade" for the writer, as Beccaria characterized it (2020). It is no coincidence that in another essay on etymology, "Fossil Words," Levi returned to the vocabulary of the mountains, recalling that, since he was a kid, he was struck by the resemblance between the Italian word "baita" (mountain hut) and the Hebrew word "bait" (home, shelter). It was as if the Jewish people had, at least in this case, triumphed over the Roman conquerors: politically, of course, the Roman empire had defeated the Jewish people, but at least one word in the Hebrew language resisted, and even supplanted its Latin equivalent.

Later, Levi realized that the real etymology of the word was even more interesting: baita, in fact, predated not only Latin, but also Hebrew as it belonged to a shared "Paleo-European substratum" (*Other People's Trades* 2214). In other words, the young Primo Levi had unknowingly stumbled onto "a confirmation of the theory of areas that is so dear to linguists, and according to which the presence of a given word in outlying areas is evidence of its antiquity" (*Other People's Trades* 2214). In the rest of the essay,

Levi explained that the dialect of the rural areas of Piedmont still included words that were derived directly from Latin, whereas in Italian they had been supplanted by words with a more recent etymology:

> It stands to reason, but at the same time it's surprising and moving, that the weasel [donnola, in Italian] should still be called musteila in Piedmontese (mustela in Latin): in the Italianized city of Turin, weasels have never been seen, and there has been no need to hand down the name from one generation to the next. (*Other People's Trades* 2215)

This linguistic coincidence was moving, for Levi, because it was a testament to the continuity between the contemporary dialect and an ancient language, as well as the trace of a long-lost geopolitical community, which had long been supplanted by the fragmentation of modern languages and national states. Once again, local languages had the nuance and depth that were lacking from the names imposed by the latest cultural and political powers.

Conclusions

While most of the existing scholarship on "Bear Meat" and "Iron" focuses on their literary models, and in particular on their relationship with Conrad's works, I argue that one should read these stories against the background of the tradition of the autobiographies, expedition reports, and essays that, from the nineteenth century onwards, codified the natural environment of the mountains as something that was to be conquered, controlled, and catalogued, Levi utilized *topoi* and images from this tradition as the building blocks for a new kind of mountaineering hero, who rejected all tools used to dominate the natural environment, from maps and watches to language and rhetoric, revealing the anti-Fascist power of digressions, mistakes, and failures.

In building this new model of mountaineering hero, Levi recognized the value of his friend Sandro's instinctive, practical, un-mediated knowledge of the natural environment, even (or because) it was antithetical to his own abstract scientific and philosophical knowledge. But the reverse was also true — Sandro was not insensitive to Levi's knowledge. In fact, Sandro himself, while primarily a man of action who experienced nature as a friend, was also a chemistry student, a scientist.

Finally, "Iron"'s conclusion draws our attention to another facet of such a tension: the paradox of narration itself. As we have seen, Sandro's contempt for language was an essential component of his way of being in the world, a crucial element of Levi's new mountaineering heroes. Sandro, like the other members of the human subspecies described in "Bear Meat," "was not a man to talk about, or to build monuments to, he who laughed at monuments" (*The Periodic Table* 793). Yet, precisely because he was a man of action, who "was all in his actions," now that he is gone there is nothing left of him. "Nothing, except words" (793). Levi was left with the impossible, yet utterly necessary task, to "clothe [him] in words, make him live again on the written page" (793).

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NOTES

[1] This passage is especially problematic because of the parallel that Levi seems to draw between Ulysses (punished by God for his hubris) and the Jewish people. On this issue, see for example Boitani (*L'ombra di Ulisse*), Belpoliti (*Primo Levi*) and Cavaglion (notes to the 1989 edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, which provide a helpful overview of the debate).
[2] Given the context, it is easy to connect this silence to "the usual motif of the impossibility of the word, Dante's unspeakable Good translated and adapted in reference to Evil" (Cavaglion 189). However, Levi's hesitation also brings to mind Francesca's hesitation in *Inferno* V, and her remark that there is no greater pain than to remember happiness while one is in hell.
[3] "L'alpinismo? È la libertà di sbagliare," an interview conducted by Alberto Papuzzi, first appeared in *La rivista della montagna* in March 1984. It is now included in *Conversazioni e interviste,* edited by Marco Belpoliti.
[4] "Ho cominciato ad andare in montagna a 13, 14 anni […]. Nella mia famiglia c'era la tradizione della montagna che fortifica, un po' l'ambiente che Natalia Ginzburg descrive in *Lessico famigliare*. Non l'alpinismo propriamente detto, non le scalate… Si andava in montagna così, per il contatto con la natura… " (My translation. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine).
[5] "Volevo rappresentare la sensazione che si prova quando si sale avendo di fronte la linea della montagna che chiude l'orizzonte: tu sali, non vedi che questa linea, non vedi altro, poi improvvisamente la valichi, ti trovi dall'altra parte, e in pochi secondi vedi un mondo nuovo, sei in un mondo nuovo. Ecco, avevo cercato di esprimere questo: il valico."
[6] "Non l'ho mai finito, è rimasto inedito e tale resterà, perché tutto sommato è proprio molto brutto. C'era tutta l'epica della montagna, e la metafisica dell'alpinismo. La montagna come chiave di tutto."
[7] For a detailed account of one the first episodes of nationalistic competition in the Alps, see the illuminating and well documented *Fall of Heaven,* by the alpinist Reinhold Messner (2017).

[8] See for example Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871) and Mummery's *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* (1895).
[9] In the past decades, a growing number of scholars have investigated European mountaineering narratives. Existing scholarship, however, focuses on Victorian alpinists (see for example Reidy 2015, Hansen 1995, and Van Sittert 2003) and on Germany and Austria (see Keller 2017, which also provides a helpful overview of existing bibliography). Italian mountaineering narratives remain largely unexplored, despite their popularity at the time, with the exception of Pastore (2003) and Cuaz (2005), who have published detailed histories of Italian alpinism and its protagonists.
[10] "We succeeded; and a group of Italians has finally climbed the Monviso! […] In an instant, tiredness, doubts, fears, sufferings, everything was forgotten. We were finally successful! […] We came by ourselves, without the need for foreigners. This is the national pride!" (Sella, *Una salita al Monviso* 49).
[11] On this topic, see for example Sagesser 2018.
[12] Quoted in *Scarpone e moschetto* (Serafin and Serafin 2002, 31). My translation. See also Armiero and Von Hardenberg (2013) for an interesting discussion of Fascist mountaineering in the context of Fascist environmental policies.
[13] As Cortellessa (2013) remarked, the words of Levi's narrator are almost an exact quote from the conclusion of Conrad's *Youth.* Levi included this passage in *The Search for Roots,* his anthology and celebration of the authors who shaped his writing.
[14] On the relationship between Levi and Conrad, see also Mengoni 2017.
[15] My translation from the Italian edition that Levi read and quoted in his interview: "L'avere esperimentato con coscienza lucida il pericolo di morte, io lo considero tra le più alte voluttà, lo tengo tra i miei tesori più preziosi e a nessun prezzo vorrei perderne la memoria […]. A molte gioie della terra voglio facilmente rinunziare, ma toglietemi la paura e la mia lotta generosa con la paura, e l'esistenza diventa noiosa fino a far sospirare la morte" (Lammer, *Fontana di giovinezza* 222).
[16] While there are still very few studies on Lammer, the preface to the most recent edition of his *Fontana di giovinezza* includes a helpful overview of its reception, including its role in inspiring Nazi alpinism (cf. Crivellaro 1998, 21).
[17] In "Bear Meat," the corresponding section was longer and more explicit: "penso, e mi auguro, che ognuno di voi abbia avuto dalla vita quanto ho avuto io: un certo agio, stima, amore, successo. Ebbene, ve lo dico in verità, nulla di tutto questo, neppure alla lontana, ha avuto il sapore della carne dell'orso." Levi's relationship with Lammer should also be interpreted in the context of his relationship with literatures in German (on the topic, see Mengoni 2017). It is difficult to imagine, for example, that in writing about the mountains Levi did not think of his beloved Thomas Mann. However, it is worth remarking that Levi never mentioned *The Magic Mountain* when talking about the mountains. For him, the mountains were a space for adventure, much closer to the oceans and the exotic lands described by Salgari, Conrad, and Kipling than to the introspective, magical, and intellectual atmosphere of Hans Castorp's sanatorium.
[18] On Levi's dialect, see for example Deganutti 2015 and Villata 2013.

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Abyssal Foundations: Primo Levi and Giambattista Vico on Terror

Abstract
Primo Levi and Giambattista Vico, extremely different writers living two centuries apart, both made occasional, conceptually significant uses of the word terrore and its cognates. Levi traced the collapse of human being into terror in the Nazi Lager, whereas Vico posited terror at the origin of human history. Reading them together reveals a chiastic structure — from civilization to terror, from terror to civilization — that raises difficult questions about the perdurance of primordial fear even in advanced societies.
Keywords: Primo Levi, Giambattista Vico, terror, history, Holocaust, Shoah, chiasmus

To speak of terror today is to think automatically of terrorism.[1] In some respects, at least since 2001, such a connection may be historically obligatory insofar as certain figurations of terrorism, notably associations with Islamism, became automatic mainstays of the early twenty-first century. At the same time, terroristic labeling is always mutating. For example, such language has come to refer to American white supremacists and Russian actions in Ukraine. Historical variation thus always attends any historical obligation. Indeed, the contemporary understanding of terrorism as non-state, ideologically inspired political violence is itself contingent. Even if the ahistorical prejudice that "it" has existed in all times and places remains popular, in point of fact, familiar views of non-state terror/terrorism have only predominated since the 1970s. Before then, from the 1930s through the 1960s, terror/terrorism characteristically referred to state or state-sponsored action, especially totalitarian and authoritarian violence, for which the Nazi camps served as the *exemplum horrendum*.

Primo Levi captured this mid-twentieth-century state of affairs. His evocations of terrore in reference to the Shoah revealed, beyond rhetoric, particular conceptual moves which themselves gestured toward human experiences, posthuman happenings, and their social and historical conditions of possibility. While occasionally alluding to terror/terrorism during the 1970s "years of lead," when left- and right-wing violence fractured Italian society, his discussion of Nazi terror contrasts, amplifies, and reframes our own familiar paradigm (*I sommersi e i salvati* 30, 161/*The Drowned*

and the Saved 43, 197).[2] If contemporary terrorism conventionally understood can be considered to pose fundamental questions about security and legitimacy, Nazi terror during the 1930s and 1940s attacked social foundations in qualitatively distinctive ways. Levi used the word terrore and its derivatives to refer to extreme, mortal fear as it related to Nazi rule, the ethos of the camps, and the breakdown of subjectivity. This vocabulary reinforced his famous depiction of the gray zone of the Lager in which language and representation themselves became inoperable. To be sure, terrore was a marginal term in Levi's lexicon, appearing only five times each in *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) and *La tregua* (1963), twice in *Il sistema periodico* (1975), and on three occasions in *Se non ora, quando?* (1982). His most frequent usages, in *I sommersi et i salvati* (1986), amount only to a dozen instances. Yet quantitative paucity does not diminish qualitative import.

While we ought not make too much of Levi's terror talk, we can make something of it. Insofar as terrore gestured to fear as an anti-foundational foundation, Levi also calls to mind another, seemingly radically different figure for whom terror also played a lynchpin role. The early eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinker, Giambattista Vico, writing at a time before the word terrorism existed, imagined terror at the origin of civilization itself, from the time the first peoples walked the trembling earth. It was terror that drove ancient humans to shelter in caves and led them, for instance, to imagine Jove's lightning bolts, giving rise to religion, duty, order; that is, to human culture and development. Levi's and Vico's discussions of terrore were in no way the same. And yet, the chasm between them operates as a chiasmus by which Levi's descent from civilization to terror is mirrored in reverse by Vico's climb from terror to civilization. Involving repetitions and dissymmetries, their treatments echoed one another across the historical expanse that divided them. At stake here is not a standard intellectual history in the sense of tracing lines of filiation whereby Vico influenced or infected [influentia] Levi. Evidence of Levi as a reader of Vico may exist or someday be unearthed, but it is not at hand.[3] Rather than an archeology that organizes difference according to excavated strata or a genealogy through which figures effect or contaminate one another, here is an indirect approach to the history of ideas. Placing Levi and Vico side by side involves, not disjunction or mutation, but a kind of adjacency and contrast, a strategy of staccato or montage-like reading. The point is to expose a literary structure that emerges

from bringing two very different thinkers together transtemporally via the hinge of a single word, terrore.

* * *

Among the incidences of terrore in Levi's corpus, those in *Se questo è un uomo* and *I sommersi e i salvati* — his first and last major works — bear closer examination. Let us begin with a glance at what we will see in greater detail below. Because it was written in the 1980s toward the end of his life, Levi's most thorough reflection on the camps, *I sommersi e i salvati*, provided the fullest thematization of terror at the furthest remove from the war. In it, he foregrounded the word-concept on three levels: the Nazi state, the persecutory logic of the Lagers as such, and "life" in the camps. It was this third element that, with good reason, had prominently appeared four decades earlier in *Se questo è un uomo*, published two years after the war's end. The proximate immediacy of the Shoah had shaped that book's query — *if this is a man* — a desperate, plaintive interrogation that required no question mark. The text acted out the blunted capacity to communicate symptomatic of traumatic horror, and it raised metahistorical doubts about the inheritance of Western humanism. The title of the American translation — *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958) — suggesting perseverance in a place, lost much of the anti- and posthumanist despair intimated by the Italian original. *Se questo è un uomo* considered terror as intensified human fear in extremis; as collapsing the borders between sleeping and waking (and thus between nightmares/lived horror, self/world, etc.); as an alternate "frozen" world; and as an aspect of the camps that outlasted them. While Levi's influence unquestionably derived from his capacity to connect his own experience and memory to larger questions of savagery and breakdown, his meditations on the particular and universal — What indeed is a human? — could sometimes sidestep the distinctive singularity of Nazi Judeocide. As always, one should be careful that considerations of terror, genocide, and humanism/anti-humanism do not indulge the bad faith of trying to offer profane lessons.

Insofar as Levi presented the camps as an unearthly space reached by crossing a threshold, terror shaped both the means of arrival and the terminus. One thinks of the infamous gate at Auschwitz but also of Auguste Rodin's personification of Dante

Alighieri's *Inferno* in his massive sculpture, *The Gates of Hell* (1880–1928), atop which stand three leaning figures — the Shades — who point their fingers downwards, commanding the abandonment of hope (Canto III: 1–11). We might name these figures the human, anti-human, and posthuman. Subjectivity, experience, language, representation, and sociality are to be decimated, and human being is reduced to a terror that disassembles key attributes of humaneness. Those who remain, remainders, grapple with their inexplicable, often random prolongation and continued existence. The language of survival (from the Latin *super-vivere*, in addition to or beyond living) can be compared to that of the remnant [שְׁאָר], those left behind after a community experiences catastrophe and who, according to some traditions, are promised eventual return to the Promised Land. In both *I sommersi e i salvati* and *Se questo è un uomo*, the word terrore evoked the brutal reduction of human being to its constituent elements and impulses and, in a sense below them, to the abyss of inhumanity and post-civilizational torment. Such breakdown into an anti- or post-foundational abyss is a familiar leitmotif of Holocaust literature: the gray zone, a day in which all is night; Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956) and the "black milk" of Paul Celan's poem "Deathfugue" (1948) (Celan, *Selected Poems* 31). Terror all the way down.

In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi named propaganda, censorship, and terror as the three principal "weapons" of the "modern totalitarian state," which exercised "frightful… pressure" over "the individual" (18/29). The language was consistent with anti-totalitarian discourse from the 1930s–1950s but had become somewhat dated by 1986 when the book was published, a year before Levi's death. Furthermore in line with postwar assessments of Nazi violence was Levi's assertion that terror had been an aim and function of the camps as such. "In the early Lagers," he wrote, "work was purely persecutory." Starving bodies pointlessly working earth and stone "served only a terroristic purpose" [scopo terroristico] (97/121). This meaningless labor contributed to an economy of fear. So too, the idea that camps "functioned as centers of political terror" fit with older analyses that situated them within broader systems alongside propaganda, law, police, ideology, and so forth (5/14). From this perspective, Lagers were viewed as unique sites that intensified political terror that coursed through Nazi society as a whole. In the context of mid-twentieth-century interpretations, the absence of anti-Semitism in Levi's specific

account of terror is not necessarily surprising. That these were his views in the 1980s, however, is striking.

Anchoring Levi's two basic observations — terror as a weapon of the totalitarian state and as an aim and function of the camp system in general — was his voice as a survivor/witness. Not all generalizations speak from proximity, and each survivor memory stands out in its distinctiveness. For his part, Levi wrote of different moments in the camps' evolution, distinguishing initial persecutory labor from railroad platform selection "later on." As in other survivor literature, the effort to recall one's own experience of a situation involving the decimation of experience itself occasioned a turn to metaphor: "every new arrival truly felt on the threshold of the darkness and terror of an unearthly space" [alla soglia del buio e del terrore di uno spazio non terrestre] (37/51). More than a mere weapon or strategy, terror was a condition of what might be called the *worldless world* of the camps. The camp was a self-contained world with its own twisted physics, biologism, laws, etc. It lay on the far side of a threshold. Such a world was *worldless* in the sense that it was bereft of sustainable communication, recognition, succor, solidarity, and all the forms of intersubjective meaning that make life bearable and livable. And beyond the collapse of intersubjectivity lay the menace of arbitrary death and protracted dying.

The notion of worldlessness is a figure of post-Heideggerean philosophy (Végső). In a meditation on Jacques Derrida's reading of Paul Celan's line, "The world is far away, I must carry you" (Celan, *Breathturn* 251), Kelly Oliver writes,

> Like and unlike the animals, we are deprived of world. Like and unlike stones, we are worldless. Ultimately, what renders us worldless and deprived is death, but not Heidegger's being towards our own death. Rather what renders us worldless is being towards the death of the other… When the stabilizing apparatuses that hold the world together break down and death renders them inoperative, there are no words, rules, morals, rituals or traditions that can support the weight of death. The survivor must fend for himself. And yet, in this worldless place, the nonplace of facing the death of the other, the survivor must carry that weight

> himself. He is responsible for carrying the other forward in this worldless world. (126–27)

Here, terror *in* (and not only *of*) the camps lays outside or beyond, without in any way intimating transcendence. The image of the worldless world can be extended. David Rousset's 1946 book referred to "the concentration-ary universe" (*L'univers concentrationnaire*, published in English as *A World Apart*). At the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, Ka-Tzentnik 135633, pseudonym of Yehiel De-Nur, described "the Auschwitz planet… The time there is not a concept as it is here on our planet. Every fraction of a second has a different wheel of time. And the inhabitants of that planet had no names… They did not live according to the laws of this world of ours…" (Brackney 124). Both Rousset and Ka-Tzentnik were survivors. Here we have a simultaneous expansion and collapse of the camps: worldless expansion even beyond physical materiality, and worldless collapse in the foreclosure of meaning (no lessons, redemption, or return to the Promised Land). It is for this reason that the ethics of remembrance also outpace any tempting, irreverent gesture toward a transcending sublime or uncanny. In sum, the camps presented a paradoxical space that was simultaneously worldly (in its power, destruction, and death) and worldless (in its lack of human familiarity and the familiarly human, whether subjective or social). Oliver's reference to *stones* calls to mind the senseless "terroristic purpose" of camp labor, and her evocation of *animals* relates to another of Levi's references to terror, to which we now turn.

One of Levi's essential contributions was to have long reflected on the dilemmas of representation opened by the destruction of language in the Shoah: those who knew could no longer speak, while those who could speak could never fully know. Destruction of language and communication was tantamount to dehumanization and, troubling in specific ways, animalization. With cruel irony, the category of animalization evokes both the reduction of the human being to survival in extremis (arbitrary starvation, beatings, death) and also the Nazis' own perverse justificatory rationalization of *Untermenschen* [subhumans]. On terror and animality, Levi reaches once again to metaphor. Describing the incomprehension of non-German prisoners faced with German guards barking menacing commands in an unfamiliar tongue, he wrote, "If anyone hesitated (everyone hesitated because they did not

understand and were terrorized) [terrorizzati], the blows fell … for those people we were no longer human. With us, as with cows or mules, there was no substantial difference between a scream and a punch" (70/91). Terror referred both to a victim's anticipation of violence (incomprehension, paralysis) and perpetrators' pretext for it (hesitation guaranteed the blows). The scream and the punch converged and became indistinguishable. Anything resembling intersubjectivity or even the distinction between life and dying/death collapsed. Such overwhelming breakdowns continue to challenge us today.

Collapse was also the condition of Levi's well-known discussion of the "gray zone." Insofar as terror linked his analysis of the camp system with his attempts to convey the unearthly abyss within wires and walls, the camps were ultimately both continuous with and apart from the Nazi regime. Levi referred, for instance, to "the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness" (43/57). And yet ambiguity also pointed toward one of his most difficult themes with which to contend: complicity and collaboration. Collusion had first of all involved the ways that "Hitlerian terror" had turned Germans into cowards who perpetrated the "crime" of failing "to divulge the truth about the Lagers" (6/15). More contentious, however, were claims that amounted to victim blaming. "German Jews" in the 1930s, he wrote, "were organically incapable of conceiving of a terrorism directed by the state, even when it was already all around them" (134/164). The cruel suggestion that Jews were complicit in their own destruction was inflamed by the perversely ironic invocation of biologistic language: organicamente incapaci. Still, the breakdown of the distinction between perpetrator and victim received its fullest and most troubling treatment in discussions of collaboration *within* the camps. One thinks of Levi's provocative depiction of the figure of the *kapo*. Terror was the primary element in a continuum that included ideology, desire for power, cowardice, and calculation that sometimes led "the oppressed" to participate in their own oppression. The "harsher" the treatment in the camps, he wrote, the "more widespread" was "the willingness" for victims themselves to become perpetrators (30/43). Here, appropriately, terrorization and not any supposed *organic incapacity* was the external cause of horrifying degradation. Generally speaking, Levi broached without fulling engaging key themes that have figured in

wide-ranging debates on the Holocaust: German collusion, Jewish passivity, and oppressed oppressors.

I sommersi e i salvati treated terror as a tactic of the Nazi state, as the persecutory purpose of the camp system in general, and as dehumanization in the Lager's "unearthly space." The last had been the principal concern of Levi's breakthrough text of 1947, *Se questo è un uomo*, where he had evoked terror in several ways. First, it was a comprehensible, even "normal" reaction to extremity. Fright, alarm, dread, and panic are common human experiences. Levi had panic particularly in mind when he noted that "terror is supremely contagious"; it circulated through the coercively assembled crowd and gave rise to the shared impulse to "try to run away" (*Se questo è un uomo* 151/*Survival in Auschwitz* 154). Initially, then, the situation of extreme duress elicited a recognizable response: the impulse of fright-inspired, life-preserving flight. The panicked instinct to flee still embodied the possibility of defense and escape.

Levi went on, though, to contrast the panic of the fleeing crowd to the incalculable effects of prolonged, vigilant fear suffered by those who remained alive in the camps for days, weeks, months, or longer. Experiences in the camps were obviously varied, but at the limit of limit experience lay the decimated responsive capacities of the *Muselmann*. Levi wrote,

> Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (*Se questo è un uomo* 92–93/*Survival in Auschwitz* 90)

They have no fear. The *Muselmann* represented terror so extreme that the capacity to feel emotion, including the most primal self-preserving fear, had disappeared. Terror, as it were, beyond terror. Giorgio Agamben cites the above passage in his own discussion of this "indefinite being" caught between life and death, the human and the nonhuman (*Quel che resta di Auschwitz* 43/*Remnants of*

Auschwitz 48). The camps, he concluded, were "the site of the production of the *Muselmann*, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum. Beyond the *Muselmann* lies only the gas chamber" (79/85). Levi was not alone in weighing this emaciated figure; Agamben also cites Bruno Bettleheim's comparison of the *Muselmann*'s emotional capacity to that of autistic children, and Hermann Langbein on how the *Muselmänner*, incapable of terror themselves, nevertheless became "the great fear [terrore] of the prisoners," since the latter did not know if or when they would meet this "fate" (41/46, 46/51).

This last sense of terror — that of interminable threat — collapsed the distinction between sleep and wakefulness, and led to glacialization, in the sense of a freezing up or immobility of thought and action. Ceaseless organized arbitrariness offered no respite. Sleep, so essential to organic restoration, was impossible. "But for the whole duration of the night," Levi wrote, "the expectancy and terror of the moment of the reveille/waking up keeps watch" (*Se questo è un uomo* 57/*Survival in Auschwitz* 63). Terror was a waking nightmare that made it impossible to lose consciousness and, so to speak, escape the camp within one's own interiority. Such anguish doubled over into paralysis. "One wakes up at every moment," he continued, "frozen with terror" [gelidi di terrore] (56/62). Glacialization was the condition of sleepless time: "when I saw [the SS's] hard faces I froze from terror and hatred" (156/159). The description calls to mind the scene of hesitancy/beatings discussed above — "everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrorized" [terrorizzati] — although the temporality diverged: uncomprehending, panicked uncertainty at arrival differed from immobility that came from a seemingly endless waking nightmare. This temporal logic — by which, for some, the shock of arrival became stretched and prolonged into interminable horror — intersected with the camps' spatial logic that joined together necessity and arbitrariness in ways that seemed paradoxical but were entirely consistent from the perpetrators point of view. What's more, the space and time of the camps exceeded any physical location circa 1933–1945.

We see this last point in the way that, beyond terror as a "normal" reaction to extremity and as glacialization from interminable threat, Levi mentioned the word in relation to the simultaneously closed and endless space of the camps at a very precise moment. As liberation approached, he said, ever "new

terrors" continued to reveal themselves in "this world" (116/119). In a sense, the prospect of foreclosing the interminable, of waking from the nightmare, intensified the agonizing present, the same way that the thought of food increases the pangs of the starving. In other words, the very proximity of liberation absurdly increased distance from liberation, and in that distinctive time and space "new terrors" circulated. Of course, freedom when it came did not end terror, which outlasted the camps' existence, continuing to reverberate across the days and decades that followed. In a preface to *La tregua*, his account of his long journey home from Auschwitz, Levi described the "vortex of postwar Europe, drunk with freedom and at the same time restless in the terror of a new war" (10). Liberation brought a fragile peace, and displaced persons and refugees continued to struggle to survive. When collapse had been the only kind of experience, how could peace seem reliable and trustworthy? *Is it really over?* survivors asked. As Levi and his revolving cast of companions followed their route East and then West, terror came with them — the terror of bugs and of waiting, a pain that had been endured and yet was now contrasted to new emotions, such as the "fragile and tender anguish" of nostalgia. When Levi at last arrived home in Turin, the softness of the bed into which he fell caused him a brief, disorienting "moment of terror" (*La tregua* 122, 137, 175, 254/*The Reawakening* 105, 116, 114, 207). One imagines that in subsequent years he had many sleepless nights.

Altogether, while ultimately playing a small if revealing part in Levi's writings, the language of terror referred to regime, system, intensified fear, dehumanization, nightmarish liminality, and paralysis. As we have just read, terror also outlasted its originary scene. In his decades-long reflections, Levi joined other memorialists of the Shoah in emphasizing breakdowns of subjectivity and sociality. The camps had reduced them to the fundamental and foundational, through and beyond which lay an unworldly abyss. "And when you look long into an abyss," the not unproblematic Friedrich Nietzsche had written in 1886, "the abyss also looks into you" (279). Nazi terror continues to pose questions of subjectivity, society, and, to use a seemingly antiquated word, civilization. In light of Oliver's view that the survivor is "responsible for carrying the other forward," we can recall that in ancient Rome the *corona civica*, a crown of oak leaves, was given to those who preserved the lives of fellow citizens. For even memory is preservation.

* * *

Questions of foundations and what lays beneath or outside them have been religious, philosophical, and theoretical concerns for millennia. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) placed terror at the origin of human civilization. Notwithstanding their overwhelming differences, this eighteenth-century Neapolitan professor of rhetoric provides a suggestive counterpoint to the Torinese survivor of Auschwitz. Known for his influential constructivist view that truth is made [*verum esse ipsum factum*] and his cyclical view of history, positions paradoxically qualified by confidence in providential order and unidirectional civilizational development, Vico had responded to uncritical traditionalism, enthusiastic rationalism, and political contract theory. The final edition of his *New Science* (1744) proposed a philosophical anthropology through which early peoples' fears led to the creation of religion, culture, writing, politics, commerce, etc.; in other words, to history itself. Such fears had been primitive in the literal, etymological sense of *primitivus* — *first of their kind*. This aspect of Vico's vision qualifies his reputation as an optimistic or progressive thinker. For him, terror might be deeper and more intractable than we tend to think, laying at the very origin of civilization and, when seen in light of cyclical history [corsi e recorsi], always threatening to return. Like Levi, Vico did not often refer to terrore and its cognates. Yet here, too, a handful of mentions covered vast conceptual spaces: the terror of the first peoples, of the "giants" and their defeat by Jove, and of the earth itself. Two hundred years before the catastrophe of the 1940s, Vico had traced the inverted chiasmus of Levi's collapse. Just as Levi had demonstrated how terror exceeded the specific time and space of the camps, by the same token, reading these two authors together illustrates the longue durée of attempts to grapple with terror, from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, from ancient times until today.

Rejecting social contract theory that stepped too quickly from nature to politics and bypassed religion, Vico also eschewed positing God as a given source of awe. Instead, he located the origins of religion itself in emotional experience, above all fear. It was this religious anthropology that was later taken to have prefigured thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, who also made the divine a manifestation of social

psychology and religion a pre-political social form. And yet, Vico, who was no secularist, also wanted to have it both ways. In the *New Science*, he distinguished idolatry from true religion based on "divine providence" that, always operating behind the scenes, ultimately pulled the strings of history. Narratively, Vico did not emphasize cyclicality from the get-go, an insight achieved only late in his analysis. Rather, he offered his own version of the initial emergence from the state of nature treated by social contract theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke before him and Jean-Jacques Rousseau afterwards. As we will shortly see, Vico explicitly differentiated his positions from Hobbes'. Early humans, he asserted, had been "shaken and aroused by a terrible fear" [un terribile spavento] (*La Scienza Nuova* 13/*The New Science* 9). Subjected to the lethal hazards of nature, fragile primitive peoples hid themselves, settled in families, and invented gods, religion, marriage, and funeral rites, setting in motion a developmental historical process that, according to Egyptian lore, passed through the three ages of gods, heroes, and humans. In short, civilization was the light against the night that was long and full of terrors.

Concluding an initial discussion of the origins of poetry, idolatry, divination, and sacrifices, Vico wrote that,

> All the things here discussed agree with that golden passage of Eusebius [d. 339] on the origins of idolatry: that the first people, simple and rough, invented the gods "from terror of present power" [*ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*]. Thus it was fear [timore] which created gods in the world; not fear awakened in men by other men, but fear awakened in men by themselves. (150/120)

This last point was explicitly anti-Hobbesian. While it was true that, as Hobbes had said, the feeling of fear set sociality in motion, for Vico, it was not the fear of menacing others in the infamous condition of war of all against all, but the more basic, even primordial psychological interiority that preceded interactions with others. The experience of fear in itself, stirred first by nature, dark nights, and one's own imagination, was foundational. Such fright generated religion, which preceded culture, which in turn preceded politics. Even if in agreement with Hobbes that feeling trumped rationalism, against him, Vico elevated religion over natural war. He

found a tidy formulation of his position in the poet Statius (d. 96): "Fear [*timor*] first created gods in the world" (88/72). Now, to say that fear created gods in the world — and not that God created human fear — was tantamount to idolatry. Vico admitted as much but found a crafty solution in advancing a version of Christian supersessionism: false religion was a developmental stage en route to true religion. Primitive or pagan religion as psychological-projective fear expressed the quality of awe necessary for eventual, proper apprehension of monotheistic divinity. In other words, idolatry served to indirectly fulfill the ultimate purposes of true religion and was thus a propaedeutic to social order and historical civilization. As Vico put it elsewhere, in the face of social chaos, "divine providence" had set about "awakening … a confused idea of divinity" in order to subdue "fierce and violent" people; "through the fear [spavento] of this imagined divinity," he continued, "they began to put themselves in some order" (85/70). In contrast, say, to the Stoic and Epicurean traditions, which turned from anxious fear of wrathful gods toward science and even politics, Vico posited a form of political theology that, rooted in primal fear, generated the dual authority of gods/God and kings. Here, having it both ways meant that the telos at work involved both providential design as well as autochthonous, forward-moving development.

There remains the curious formulation referencing Eusebius cited above: that "the first people, simple and rough, invented the gods 'from terror of present power' [*ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*]. It is unclear in this context who or what is the cause of terror, other than the prevailing influence of the powers of the day themselves. But which powers? Nature makes sense but not proto-social conflict, which Vico immediately takes off the table. This ambiguity is clarified somewhat in an earlier section that reveals him to have likely both misattributed and misquoted the line *ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*. Commentators have long followed intratextual clues to conclude that Vico is invoking on this occasion not Eusebius but Lactantius Firmianus (d. 320), whose *Divine Institutes* he does cite: "Rude men at first called [them, i.e., a king and his family], gods either for their wonderful excellence (wonderful it seemed to men still rude and simple), or, as commonly happens, in admiration of present power…" [*in admirationem praesentis potentiae*] (87/71; Lactantius Firmianus 192). Here, present power is thoroughly terrestrial. Rulers are worthy of admiration, wonder, and awe due to the charism/charisma of their

actual power, so much so that they are considered godlike. We are on the road to the divine rights of kings. So in the first citation not only does Vico apparently exchange Eusebius for Lactantius, but he also transforms "admiration of present power" [*in admirationem praesentis potentiae*] into "terror of present power" [*ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*]." Even if unconscious or accidental, the slippage between admiration and terror reinforces the overall design: the idolatrous invention of the gods as fearful projection coincides with, reflects, and reinforces rulers' awe-striking worldly power. Terror possesses transitive qualities. We are far, it seems, from Levi's conceptualization of terror, which, although involving worldly power and idolatry, did not turn on projection, at least not on the part of its victims.

If the road to the divine rights of kings had been joined, there was far to travel. The early religiosity of false idolatry contained the truth that "divine providence watches over the welfare of all mankind," and it generated or coincided with a form of authority rooted in notions of property (*La Scienza Nuova* 152/*The New Science* 121). Prior to its refinement by rational pagan philosophy, what Vico called poetic wisdom structured the ages of gods and heroes. The authority of Olympus was epitomized by a Latin phrase he cited on several occasions: *terrore defixus*. Both the giant Tityus and the Titan Prometheus had been indefinitely tied to rocks. Birds devoured their livers, which grew back each night. Physical restraint was accompanied by an emotional condition: "being rendered immobile by fear" [resi immobili per lo spavento], he wrote, "was expressed by the Latins in the heroic phrase *terrore defixi*" (153/121–22). *Defixi* from *defigo*, to thrust a weapon, fasten, curse, bewitch, astonish, or stupefy. Terror was what Tityus and Prometheus experienced but also that which constrained and tortured them, embodied by the metaphors of chains and birds. The giant and the Titan were the property of Olympus. A similar fate awaited the princess Andromeda. Repeating the above formulation, Vico described how she was "lashed to the rock and petrified with terror (so Latin kept the phrase *terrore defixus*, rigid with fear) [incantanta alla rupa, per lo spavento divenuta di sasso (come restò a' latini 'terrore defixus,' 'divenuto immobile per lo spavento')]" (305/238). These scenes are reminiscent of Levi's notions of stone's terroristic purpose [scopo terroristico] and of being frozen with fear [gelidi di terrore], violence inflicted in ceaseless cycles that collapsed the difference between day and night. Bound and fixed

with terror meant embodiment on the precipice of annihilation; terror was an emotional state resulting from external causes, whether being chained to a rock or thrown into the gray zone. To Vico's initial image of early humans frightened by nature after sunset can be adjoined the incomparable horror of boots in a hallway taking a family away in the dead of the night.

The evocation of Levi, however, immediately encounters obvious limits. The catastrophe of the camps and Judeocide bears none of Vico's poetic wisdom. Destruction, in other words, is not sacrifice. Tityus, Prometheus, and Andromeda were wrapped up in, even captured by a mythic sacrificial logic, their torment folded into larger narrative significations. Indeed, Heracles ultimately freed Prometheus, and Perseus liberated Andromeda. Such "heroic politics" in which the fixed can sometimes be unfastened foreground an economy of authorities, victims, and intermittent liberators. Andromeda had been sacrificed by her father to mollify Poseidon, who had been wreaking havoc. The sea god's trident "made the lands of men tremble in terror of his raids. Later, already in Homer's day, he was believed to make the physical earth shake" (304/238). The etymological link between terror and earthquakes (here, far tremare le terre) points back to Proto-Indo-European prefixes ters- and trem-: terror and trembling.[4] Still, we can distinguish between earthquakes and the unearthly. To mythologize the Shoah is pure irreverence.

The terror felt by heroes (mythic giants, Titans, and princesses) is inflicted by the gods who, despite heroic stances against them, carry the day. And while Poseidon might make waves, it is Jove's kingdom. It is he who is ultimately responsible for the torment of Tityus and Prometheus. Poetic metaphysics leads to patriarchal, quasi-monotheistic poetic morals. The "poet giants, who had warred against heaven in their atheism" were defeated by "the terror of Jove, whom they feared as the wielder of the thunderbolt." Their bodies and minds were "humbled" by "this frightful (spaventosa) idea of Jove" (217/170). With the figure of the single godhead, we are farther along the still long and winding road of the unfolding of "divine providence," enabling Vico to maintain both his historical anthropology of religious projection and a divine guarantor. With respect to terrore, the narrative is clear: the primal cry of the first peoples hiding away led to imagined "giants" fixed in fear to rocks, and then to the one god whose thunderbolt rules them all. Fear is a foundation, the origin of myth, including the

myth of origins. Vico underscores how notions of "vulgar divinity" enabled the first hermeneutic: *to divine*, to interpret menacing, terror-inspiring natural circumstances. Of the earliest humanoids, he observed that, "In their monstrous savagery and unbridled bestial freedom there was no means to tame the former or bridle the latter but the frightful thought (ch'uno spaventoso pensiero) of some divinity, the fear [timore] of whom is the only powerful means of reducing to duty a liberty gone wild" (123/100). Among the earliest struggles to survive, it was fear of the end of the human that marked the beginning of humanity. Terror made civilization.

It is far from clear, however, how monstrous savagery and unbridled, bestial, and wild freedom that imagined gods in primordial times relates to the monstrous savagery and unbridled, bestial, and wild license that reduced people not to duty but to destruction, the magnitude of which posed the question of whether there could be any God at all.

* * *

Two very different thinkers, centuries, and circumstances. The terror of the Shoah, terror as the imagined origin of human history — these opposite framings form a chiasmus: from civilization to terror and from terror to civilization. The dual movement of a single structure, involving repetition and inversion, points in many directions. To take one example bearing more than an indirect relation to Nazi catastrophe, the title of Charles Darwin's 1871 treatise *The Descent of Man* referred simultaneously to descendance as lineage from an origin but also as degeneration. Simone Ghelli has masterfully shown the ironic proximity of Levi's views to Darwin's on a specific point, writing that,

> the most blatant philosophical trace of Levi's reading of *The Descent of Man* is how he understands and employs the evolutionary notion of "civilization." … Levi rejects the "obvious" — and, for him, naïve — pessimistic anthropology *à la* Hobbes, adopting instead an evolutionary perspective that replaces the strict dualism between human nature and civilization with a gradualist understanding of sociability. (118)

As with Vico, Hobbesian naturalism is rejected in favor of civilizational evolution. Civilization develops over time as a defense against life's tendency toward destruction, cruelty, etc.; it expresses the "corrective actions" (Levi) that, given its constitutive vulnerability, the species needs in order to survive and thrive. Levi's "ethological moralism," says Ghelli, holds two positions simultaneously: on the one hand, "history and life spontaneously tend to inequality, to establish disparities," and on the other hand, civilization is "an indicator of humanity, an egalitarian principle that tends to lessen… extremities" (120, 134). Nazism reflected no simple unchaining of animal instincts or impossible return to a primordial state of nature; rather, it was an inverted civilization, an "uncivilization" (119). The "hyperpolitical situation" of the camps embodied terrifying "unnatural selection" (Levi) that violated the species we have become (118, 120). Many points emerge simultaneously: terror is opposed to civilization, but the camps are not mere unimpeded nature; at the same time, life *does* tend toward destruction, and history, too, inflicts devastation; civilization provides corrective humanization but is also the source of uncivilization, an accelerator of extremes. Such complexity can be seen to derive from and return to a chiasmatic structuring.

Any thought of nature already partakes of culture, and imaginings of immemorial pasts are infused with a given present. At the very moment that Levi was interned in Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer brought together, on the one hand, the vision of a primal scene in which early humans trembling in fright invented gods, with, on the other hand, anti-humanist Judeocide. They wrote of the primitive and primordial "cry of terror" [*Der Ruf des Schreckens*] that had generated ancient civilization, including myth (*Dialektik der Aufklärung* 21/*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 10). Their vision of early humanity was strongly Vicean, and yet they also provided an account of Vico's own era. Insofar as fear-driven myth of the distant past sought to explain, manage, and control reality, it had embodied the earliest form of Enlightenment. Here, too, long-term historical processes had been set in motion, including L'illuminismo in Italia of which Vico had been an exemplar. Yet writing two centuries later in the midst of cataclysmic total war, Adorno and Horkheimer provided a grim assessment of the legacy of Enlightenment rationality: idolization of instrumental reason had pried open the door through which irrational projects of racist genocide were passing. As they famously argued, myth had been

Enlightenment, and Enlightenment had become myth (a story, a mystification, the expression and conduit of unreason). In sum, the terror of the earliest peoples in the face of destructive nature had generated myth, which in affording them a modicum of explanation and control had pointed the way toward Enlightenment. And yet the civilizational project of explaining and controlling nature had culminated in the terrifying mythic destruction of post-Enlightenment humanity, not least in the form of National Socialist "naturalism." This chiastic pattern — the "cry of terror" generating myth and post-Enlightenment modernity engineering cries of terror — Adorno and Horkheimer reinforced with a devastating claim: "One cannot abolish terror and retain civilization" [*Man kann nicht den Schrecken abschaffen und Zivilisation übrigbehalten*]; the two terms were "inseparable [*untrennbar*]" (227/180). Our dilemma may be deeper than we realize. Terror generated civilization, and whether or not imagined as repressed, it nonetheless threatens to return. Within this structure, Vico's pre-humanistic terror and Levi's post-humanistic terror can be heard to echo one another: the unearthly waking nightmare of camp terror perpetrated by sometimes well-educated technicians, the repeated rise and fall of cyclical history (corsi e recorsi). Vico's intimation that terror returns again and again draws our attention to the question of life and civilization after Auschwitz. For Levi, the camps existed until *his* death. It remains an open question the extent to which it can be said that he survived.

Inseparability, inversion, and cyclical history send us deeper into the logic of the chiasmus. In a late essay and notes, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty explicitly meditated on "intertwining — chiasm" [*l'intrelacs — le chiasme*] (*Le visible et l'invisible* 170/*The Visible and the Invisible* 130). Playing on the initial dual meaning of chiasmus as both a literary structure and a biological feature, for instance, the crossing of the optic nerves in the brain, he extrapolated a world of phenomenological relations intimated by the elegant metaphor of "the finger of the glove that is turned inside out" (311/260). Consciousness/body, perception/counter-perception, self/world, sign/signifier, particular/universal — all reality is related, intertwined, and reversible. The breadth of this chiasmatic vision enables us to grasp, as he would say, *the flesh* of the relation/non-relation of both (1) the figures of the "first men" and of the *Muselmann* and survivor, and (2) Levi and Vico themselves. "The past and present are *Ineinander*

[intermingled, into each other],” Merleau-Ponty wrote, “each enveloping-enveloped — and that itself is the flesh” (315/268). Or again, “Like the natural man, we situate ourselves in ourselves and … in the other, at the point where, by a sort of chiasm, we become others and we become world” (210/160). Great distance is the inversion of proximity, and vice versa.

Martina Mengoni is one of the few to have hit upon the essential connection: the “men after Auschwitz” described by Levi, she says, “can be in a certain way compared to the *first men* Vico is describing” (“The Gray Zone” 7n18). She invokes Vico’s distinction between “physical” and “poetic” (or “metaphysical”) truth in order to elucidate Levi’s literary sensibility. To aestheticize a figure is to endow it with a standing and essence whose meaning exceeds any real or concrete veracity. Vico gives the example of Torquato Tasso’s portrayal of Godfrey of Bouillon, an idealized standard against which all other captains of war could be compared and measured (*La Scienza Nuova* 70/*The New Science* 74). In other words, figuration outstrips actual biography. Vico locates this poetic capacity in “the first men” who,

> not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them. (71/74)

Mengoni observes that Levi had treated Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Jewish Council in the Łódź Ghetto, as such an ideal portrait when he described him as a “symbolic and compendiary figure” and as “a metaphor of our civilization” (*Variazioni Rumkowski* 60–61 and n39; “Rumkowski Variations”; citing Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* 49/*The Drowned and the Saved* 68, and “Itinerario d’uno scrittore ebreo” 230/“The Itinerary of a Jewish Writer” 165). She calls Levi a “master” at such fantastic universals through which fiction and non-fiction, the poetic and analytical combine in a distinctive “hybridism” (*I sommersi e i salvati di Primo Levi* 279–80). The implication is that Levi’s poetic capacity itself evokes that of Vico’s first men in the same way that the *Muselmänner* echo the first humans.

To be sure, the Levi/Vico chiasmus possesses dissymmetry in addition to mere repetition. Vico's climb from early humans' emotional capacity for fear to the civilizational accretion of gods, rituals, kings, etc. is not exactly mirrored by Levi's breakdown of sociability and individuality through which the very capacities of experience and intersubjectivity are pulverized. It is one thing to build an escape route from fear, and another to have what seems solid collapse into abyssal freefall. For Vico, terror operated as a kind of generative excess. In spite of their trials, in the end, Prometheus and Andromeda were freed. Thus for Vico, terror ultimately functions; that is, its dysfunction can be foundational or constructive. It leads not only to fleeing or fighting but also to interpretation, explanation, and meaning. Though extreme, it retains something of what might be called normal fear, which always passes, even if it always returns. Again, fear of the end of the human marked the beginning of humanity. Terror made civilization. For Levi, in contrast, terror was functional and dysfunctional in different ways. As an element of the Nazi rule and the camps system, it enforced compliance. And yet, within the camps, across a certain threshold, terror circulated outside any logic of functionality. It served no purpose or meaning. There is no *why* in a worldless world, and both meaning and the capacity to make it break down. Fear does not pass, the impulse to flee freezes, and the *Muselmann* escapes terror only because the capacity to feel has been pulverized. For others, terror persists, outlasting the physical space of the camps and the time when their gates and towers had been guarded. Despite their considerable differences, both Levi and Vico establish the continuity of terror, its physics, its unrelenting and cyclical return. And both their treatments are shadowed by death: for Vico, the healthy fear of death that creates civilization; for Levi, planned arbitrary death. Death may be instantaneous, but dying can be endless. While it is always possible to consider fear of death abstractly — building rituals, rites, and philosophical histories around such apprehension — in contrast, fear of dying is always solitary in its animal, existential physicality. Devastating, paralyzing, animalizing terror is a possible human experience.

We were and are animals. Fear is hard-wired in our brains and bodies. And we are not only animals, not only fear. Civilization is one state of being more than fear, while also being a form and means (techne, rule, regime, system) by which terror can be enforced, visited, and suffered. The camps illustrated how

civilization can decivilize. Beyond the classic opposition between civilization and barbarism lays the negative dialectics of civilized barbarism/barbaric civilization. A possible human experience, then, is being reduced to terror from our ordinary condition of being spared it, to fall from the state of being more than fear into quivering bare life. The human being is a vessel containing the ever-present potentialities of its primordial past. Before and below human being lays an abyss of terror. After and on top of such an abyss is built meaning, belief, reason, culture, and so forth. Such foundations can endure; Enlightenment and civilization did their work. And of course, foundations can tremble, worlds quake, social orders collapse, and abysses open. The terror wrought by the means of civilized-barbarism differs from that of the primordial scene. Wires and tower searchlights are not the sounds of wild animals in a deep forest. Yet what does it mean to construct the foundations of social order again and again on top of terror that haunts them? As with primitive humans' founding cry of terror, so too, with the unearthly abyss of Auschwitz — the pre-humanism of Vico and the posthumanism of Levi are extremes that meet in the sleepless night.[5]

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NOTES

[1] Thanks to the anonymous reviewers, Chiara Benetollo, Eric Grube, Julie Keresztes, Martina Mengoni, Devin Pendas, Roberta Ricci, Eugene Sheppard, and Jonathan Zatlin.

[2] Hereafter, non-English originals and English translations take the following form: "30/43," for instance, refers to "*I sommersi e i salvati*, 30/*The Drowned and the Saved*, 43."

[3] Conni-Kay Jørgensen's study of Vico's twentieth-century reception in Italy considers Carlo but not Primo Levi (Jørgensen 2008). Nor does Vico receive distinctive treatment in a wide-ranging volume on Levi's interlocutors (Cinelli and Gordon 2020).

[4] Vico later points out that "Latin grammarians" had mistakenly believed that "territory" [*territorium*] derived from "the terror of the fasces used by the lictors to disperse crowds." In fact, he says, the word originated in the boundaries of cultivated fields "guarded by Vesta with bloody rites." The Greek counterpart, Cybele or Berecynthia, had worn a "crown of towers [coronata di torri] " that later generated the icon of the *orbis terrarium/orbis mundanus* (351/274).

[5] One is reminded of Stephen Dedalus's often-cited remark in James Joyce's *Ulysses* that "History … is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Less frequently invoked is the specific context in which he makes this comment. Garrett

Deasy, headmaster of the Clifton School, where Stephen is teaching, goes on an anti-Semitic rant: "England is in the hands of the jews. … Old England is dying. … Dying, he said, if not dead by now. … They sinned against the light." "Who has not [sinned]?" Stephen sharply retorts. Deasy asks what he means, and Stephen delivers his line about history being a nightmare. At that moment, the sound of an ongoing soccer game outside drifts into the room. "What if that nightmare," Stephen/the narrator asks himself, "gave you a back kick?" The nightmare of history surpasses any distinction between sleep and wakefulness insofar as the border between dreamscape and embodied object world breaks down. At all hours, history kicks and throws punches that converge with shouts and screams. Deasy weakly invokes salvation history: "All history moves toward one great goal, the manifestation of God." "That is God," Stephen replies, gesturing to the continuing clamor of the unseen soccer match, "A shout in the street …" (Joyce 33–34). Anti-Semitism, dying, history's nightmare and back kick, God as shouts in the street — *Ulysses* appeared twenty-two years and twenty days before Levi arrived in Auschwitz.

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“Italia fascista, pirata minore”: Reflections on Italian Fascist Colonialism, Libya, and the Holocaust

Abstract
This article offers reflections on some connections between the well-analyzed critical trope of *italiani brava gente*, the understudied area of Italian Fascist colonialism, and the Italian Fascist persecution of the Jews. It highlights research on the Italian Fascist concentration camps during the Libyan anti-colonial Resistance and the concentration camps for Jews in Libya after the Italian Racial Laws of 1938. It considers new research on the marginalized role of Italian Studies in wider academic discourses on colonialism, Italian Fascism and the Holocaust, and discusses the importance of Primo Levi’s work to these discourses.
Keywords: Italian Fascism, Italian Colonialism, Anti-colonial resistance in Libya, Italian racial laws, Primo Levi

In honor of Nick Patruno, professor, mentor, friend

At the beginning of the short story, “Ferro,” in *Il sistema periodico* (1975), Primo Levi traces some events preceding World War II that provide a distant and muted political macrocosm for his story, a macrocosm that will eventually penetrate and overturn the lives of the chemistry students in the Istituto Chimico, including his own and that of his dear friend, Sandro, whose strength is represented in the story’s title. After his brief assessments of the actions of Chamberlain, Hitler, and Franco, Levi refers to Fascist Italy as a “pirata minore”: “L’Italia fascista, pirata minore, aveva occupato l’Albania” (*Il sistema periodico* 44). The adjective here, “minore,” invokes many possible interpretations. Among these, that Fascist Italy was a minor player on the stage of these world events, or that it was less successful, less effective, less evil. Such an interpretation calls to mind the widespread characterization of Italians as *brava gente*.

Today, *italiani brava gente* is widely considered a misrepresentative trope that often implies that Italian Fascism has for decades been considered in some sense “a lesser evil,” as Ruth Ben-Ghiat discusses in her article by the same title, “A Lesser Evil?” Italy has been considered “a lesser evil” in public opinion and academic circles, both nationally and internationally, both

inside and outside Italy, and in World War II historiography (Marcus and Sodi, "Introduction" 3). Scholars in recent decades have transformed the congratulatory phrase into a cutting and ironic trope whose productive, critical dismantling has yielded and continues to yield dozens of studies — political, historical, literary, philosophical, comparative, religious — into its inner workings and its ongoing, wide-ranging, and damaging causes and effects. In effect, *italiani brava gente* has come to mean the opposite of what it says. Deconstructive and investigative work on this myth reveals that Italian Fascism was not a lesser evil, but has been and continues to be a lesser-known evil. Marcus and Sodi explore the ways in which this myth in fact inhibited an exploration of the Italian Holocaust in the section of their Introduction entitled, "The Italian Shoah: A Submerged History," in their edited collection of essays (Marcus and Sodi, "Introduction" 2-4). As recently as 2022, Ziolkowski, in her article, "For a Jewish Italian Literary History: from Italo Svevo to Igiaba Scego," which makes a strong case for the study of Jewishness as integral to a better understanding of modern Italian literary history and Italian diversity and identity, writes, "Scholars have contested the 'italiani brava gente' narrative in examinations of Jewish persecution and Italian colonization […] but this myth has been hard to disrupt" (138).

Among those who identify some of the root causes of this myth, as well as some of its damaging effects, vis-à-vis the study of Italian colonialism, are Ben-Ghiat and Fuller. Tied to ignominious political and military defeat, the history of Italian colonialism was "repressed" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, "Introduction" 3) in national discourse:

> Popular and official memory alike has tended to present Italians as "different" among European colonizers in another important manner: with respect to their attitude toward, and aptitude for, violence. The persistence of stereotypes of Italians as more humane and less martial than other European peoples, together with the difficulties in accessing both Italian and African archival collections, have contributed to a grave general underestimation of Italian colonial repression. (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, "Introduction" 4)

Both willful and intentional, as Ben-Ghiat and Fuller point out, "control of the colonial archives was central to this state-sanctioned historical 'revisionism'" in which "suppressing knowledge of Italian atrocities and fostering strains of popular memory […] perpetrated images of colonizers as benign" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, "Introduction" 2). Ben-Ghiat and Fuller offer numerous examples of Italy's "notable primacy in military aggressions," including its position as "the first Western European country in the twentieth century to employ genocidal tactics outside of the context of world war (in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, through a combination of mass population transfers, forced marches, and mass detention in concentration camps" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, "Introduction" 4). In his 1992 study, *L' Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: Miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte*, Del Boca, a scholar of Italian colonialism who has written extensively about Libya and other Italian colonies in Africa, discusses Italians' obstinate refusal to confront their colonial past, which is not just "frutto della massiccia propaganda fascista esercitata durante il ventennio" (x). Del Boca observes, "la rimozione (conscia od inconscia) delle colpe coloniali e il mancato dibattito in Italia sul periodo dell'espansionismo imperialista consentivano la permanenza nel paese di ampie sacche di ignoranza, di disinformazione o di puntigliosa malafede" (*L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: Miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte* xi).[1] Over a decade later, Del Boca's article, "The Obligations of Italy Toward Libya," in Ben-Ghiat and Fuller's collection, begins, "The colonial period is perhaps the least known and most mystified part of Italian national history" (195). In the same collection, Irma Taddia emphasizes the persistence of this historical and cultural amnesia: "By and large, Italian history books pass over the colonial period. As a result, the latest generations of Italians have no knowledge of Italy's colonial past. Strange as it may seem, few students today even know that Italy ever had an Empire" (210).

Among the consequences of the trope is Italy's lack of accountability for its persecution of Jews and for colonial atrocities and destruction, which has been decried both by postcolonial and Holocaust scholars in Italian Studies.[2] On colonialism, Del Boca underlines what's at stake in this ongoing repression of memory: "From Mussolini to Pietro Badoglio, from Rodolfo Graziani to Emilio de Bono, none of those responsible for the African genocides met with punishment. Some have even been honored in postwar

Italy, and have factious biographers to thank for their rehabilitation" ("Obligations" 196). On the Italian Holocaust, Marcus and Sodi similarly note,

> Italy, which had been racked by civil war on one front and world war on another, and was plummeted into exhausting reconstruction at war's end, nonetheless was spared most of the turmoil and wrenching national self-evaluation experienced elsewhere in Europe during the various war crimes trials. Italy, in fact, never put its leaders or their lackeys on trial; it never called to account those who had ordered and carried out the Italian Holocaust. ("Introduction" 3-4)

Over the past few decades, scholars have begun to consider points of contact between Italian Fascism's treatment of colonized peoples and the deportation, persecution, internment, and killing of the Jews, which also occurred in the Italian colonies, especially after the racial laws of 1938. Marcus and Sodi observe that the contemporary waves of migration from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe have induced greater reflection on Italy's "oldest minority, the Italian Jews" ("Introduction" 5), and as scholars of postcolonial literature have noted, contemporary waves of migration have also drawn attention to Italy's colonial past. In fact, Ziolkowski finds that novels by Helena Janeczek, Claudio Magris, and Igiaba Scego "interrogate Italy's role in the persecution of Jews, racial violence, and colonialism. Exploring still uncanonical parts of history, their literature draws on historical documents to show the gaps that exist in dominant discourses, asking readers to reflect on how historical narratives have been constructed and what pasts have been silenced" (140).

While connections between Italy's colonial enterprises and Fascist Italy's role in the Holocaust are now being explored to give a fuller account of Italy's Fascist legacies, this effort has also been hampered or delayed in part because Italy has remained marginal to postcolonial and Holocaust studies. What we mean by this is that Italy has often been sidelined in these discourses which are instead often dominated by a French, German and/or U.S. focus: "Germany's antisemitism, the United States' racism, and France's colonialism," as Ziolkowski observes (143). I would argue that this is another contributing factor to Italian Fascism as a lesser-known

evil: Italian Studies are generally lesser known in a global or transnational context, that is, outside of Italian Studies. Therefore, work on Italian colonies and Italian anti-Semitism is often sidelined in broader, panoramic or comparative studies. Ziolkowski notes,

> In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization,* Michael Rothberg argues for the significant interrelationship between Shoah and decolonial memory: "There is no shortage of cross-referencing between the legacies of the Holocaust and colonialism, but many of those moments of contact occur in marginalized texts or in marginal moments of well-known texts." (2009, 18). (143)

We note with some irony that, immediately following, Ziolkowski adds, "Although Rothberg does not discuss Italy, he shows how apparent marginality — like Italy's — can facilitate experimentation" (143). Ziolkowski's extensive bibliographical references highlight Italy's marginal role in such texts: Wisse's study gives "Italian literature only a minor mention" while Miron's "text does not include Italian examples" (note 12, 148). Ziolkowski also observes that Cheyette's work discusses Primo Levi "but Italian colonialism is not discussed" (Ziolkowski, note 27, 148). In fact, Cheyette discusses Levi in reference to "the detention camps and torture chambers of Algeria" (Cheyette, *Diasporas* 87). In another illustration of Italy's marginal role in postcolonial studies, Jill Jarvis offers a fascinating and dense critique of Agamben's controversial master category of the "muselman" in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz,* which Agamben bases on his reading of Primo Levi's use of the term and which continues to be debated and studied, as Gil Anidjar notes in "Muslims (*Shoah*, *Nakba*)." Jarvis' interpretation of the term, "muselman," and its ironies "challenge a disciplinary *décalage* that continues to separate Holocaust from colonial studies" (708). She criticizes Agamben's interpretation for not taking account of

> a host of other ferocious ironies. The police murder of Algerian demonstrators on the streets of Paris on 17 October 1961 is surely one of the most contested and obscured events in modern French history, although it can be argued that such violence was neither exceptional nor

> without precedent in the history of *la plus grande France.*" (Jarvis 723-724)

While crossing rigid disciplinary boundaries is a necessary and productive dimension of transnational and decolonizing scholarship, it appears that, outside of the field of Italian Studies, Italian Fascism rarely gets a mention in the debates on Agamben's Primo Levi-inspired concepts, such as Primo Levi's description of the "mussulmano" — be these connected to the Holocaust or to colonialism (*Se questo è un uomo* 80). Hom notes that Agamben is frequently criticized for his lack of attention to colonialism and points to David Atkinson's article, "Encountering Bare Life in Italian Libya and Colonial Amnesia in Agamben," which uses Agamben's ideas to illuminate Italian colonialism in Libya while positing why Agamben himself never addresses colonialism, or the concentration camps in the colonies (Hom 82). It is certainly worth asking how Italy can be marginal to any discussion of the Holocaust, Fascism, and colonialism, or at least, to any discussion of their intersection. Can we attribute this to the fact that Italian Studies is marginal in wider dominant Western academic discourses, or to Italian Fascism's putative reputation of being a lesser evil, or a combination of the two? Italian Studies' marginalized position within Anglophone and Francophone discourses, in the U.S. academy, and in the study of colonialism and European Nazism has contributed to the myth of *italiani brava gente* and the ongoing and dangerous critical, historical, and political lacunas of contemporary cultural memory.

Amongst these lacunas, as we have noted, is Italian colonialism, and more specifically, the atrocities against the Libyan people under Italian Fascist colonialism, as well as the condition of Jews in colonial Libya who became subject to Italy's anti-Semitic laws, internment, and deportation to concentration camps. The work of Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, published in the U.S. and thus available to an English-reading audience, redresses some of these lacunas through its decolonizing research on the anti-colonial resistance against the Italian Fascist occupation in Libya. Ahmida offers important context and cultural insights. Ahmida's most recent work, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, A Hidden Colonial History* (2021), undertakes a transnational and decolonizing analysis of Italian Fascist atrocities in Libya. His work is built on decades of study, extensive archival research, and fieldwork, which includes oral

interviews of the survivors of the 1929-1934 resistance and the transmission of cultural memory through an oral tradition that includes poetry. A historian and political scientist who also uses sociological and literary frameworks for his analysis, Ahmida offers a moving account of the humiliation and destruction of almost 100,000 semi-nomadic people of Cyrenaica. Ahmida gives an account of some of their suffering in part through the voices of survivors and their kin, while explaining his own personal investment in his studies. While acknowledging and building on the work of scholars such as Del Boca, Labanca, Ben-Ghiat, Rochat, Baldinetti, Atkinson, and others, his perspective of this period in Libyan history is not from the position of an Italianist; instead he seeks to offer the perspective of the colonized people and resistance fighters, among whom are his own family members. His own grandparents experienced the colonial period, which dates back to 1911; his grandfather participated in the resistance as a teenager and his grandmother died in exile in Chad (Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices* 53). Ahmida writes, "When I came to the United States as a graduate student, I brought with me my family's anguish at their displacement and struggle for survival and love for oral history and poetry … In the United States as a teacher and political scientist/historian, I have worked to tell the individual stories of my family and the forgotten human history of the Libyan people, as illustrated by Libyan folk poetry in the camps" (*Forgotten Voices* 53). In contrast to the willful amnesia in Italy, Ahmida writes that generations of Libyans have transmitted the memory of this colonial and genocidal history through an oral tradition and through poems, such as "Our Homeland Ruined Twice" by Fatima 'Uthamm and "I have no illness but this place of Agaila [one of the worse concentration camps, for resistance fighters]" by Rajab Buhwaish, which are reproduced in Ahmida's *Genocide in Libya* (Appendices A 6 and A 7, 179-186). In fact, this topic recurs consistently in Ahmida's books, from *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830-1932* to *Forgotten Voices* to his most recent book, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, A Hidden Colonial History*, which most extensively explores the forced relocation of the "rural population of Cyrenaica" (*Forgotten Voices* 43), including the 657 mile march across the desert which resulted in the death of many children and elderly and sick people; the wrenching death of livestock central to the people's lives and survival; the ensuing illness and starvation; the devastating effects

of internment on a semi-nomadic people; the violence, humiliation and rapes; the public whipping, killing, hangings, and more.[3] In this text, Ahmida explains his research process, his unearthing of newspapers in various countries, and his investigative challenges especially in the face of the inaccessibility and silence of important Italian archives. He describes the survivors' stories through their oral testimonies and offers a transnational deconstruction of the myth of *italiani brava gente* and Italian Fascism as a lesser evil. (In the book's glossary, *Shar* is defined as "evil, starvation, death, depression in Italian colonial concentration camps" [*Genocide* xviii]).

Suggesting a connection between Italian Fascist colonialism and the Holocaust, Ahmida notes that the German Nazi state "looked at the Italian Fascist genocidal policies in Libya as a model for success" and that Heinrich Himmler visited Libya during the Italian Fascist occupation (*Genocide* 10). Ahmida is referring here to the work of Patrick Bernhard who explores at length the Nazi leaders' fascination with the success of the Italian colonies and settlement. Bernhard discusses Himmler's visit to Libya in 1937 and his agreement with Italo Balbo, then Governor of Libya, to send 150 SS soldiers to the Italian colonialism school near Rome (79). Bernhard notes Hitler's praise for Italy's colonial achievements just a few months after Hitler's famous visit to Rome in May, 1938. Urging new studies on the close collaboration of the two regimes, Bernhard asserts: "The still dominant image of Mussolini's regime as an insignificant appendage to the superior Nazi state is inaccurate. Rather, modern social engineering of Italian Fascism acted as an 'inspirational' force on Nazi Germany, catalysing the evolution of Hitler's dictatorship" (61).

Challenging the misguided notion of *italiani brava gente*, Ahmida writes, "In some fundamental aspects, I seek to shift the paradigm of thinking about the African and European genocides by challenging both colonial and area studies" (*Genocide* 11). In recovering and highlighting the voices of survivors and witnesses for an English reading audience, Ahmida's vision is illuminating, an admonition of the risks that come with the repression of cultural memory of Fascist atrocities in Italy and in the colonies: "We must never forget the evil deeds of the fascists both in Europe and in Libya. The notion of a reformed fascism — coinciding with the reemergence of Italy's neo-Fascist Party — is a dangerous new myth that no one should tolerate" (*Forgotten Voices* 54).

Hom's recent study, *Empire's Mobius strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention* (2019), builds further on the work of Ahmida, Del Boca, and Italian postcolonial scholars to explore the threads of continuity between Italy's past colonizing activities, especially in Libya, to which she devotes considerable space, and today's migrant condition in Italy. Regarding the sixteen Libyan concentration camps built between 1929-1933, she writes, "Altogether it was a protracted genocide that, again, remains little known outside Libya today" (89).[4] She too elaborates a critique of "the myth of *italiani brava gente* [which] helped repress deeds so painful … that it created a long-standing blind spot in both the Italian cultural imagination and Italian historiography, which, in turn, ensured Italian empire's elision from a broader set of imperial histories" (15). In her book, Hom also devotes a brief space to the Jadu (Giado) concentration camp where Libyan Jews were interned as part of the 1942 Italian Fascist "campaign of *sfollamento*, or 'clearing out' all the Jews from Libya" (109). Hom directs readers to Eric Salerno's observations on Jadu (110). Salerno's 2008 study traces the effects of the racial laws in Libya and describes the concentration camps in Libya and Italy. Salerno draws parallels between the colonial camps and the camps for Jews in Libya, while carefully qualifying his remarks to acknowledge the historical specificities of different internment experiences: "Il campo di Giado e almeno altri due, Sidi Azaz e Bukbuk, sono stati, per alcuni versi, il perfezionamento dei campi di Soluch ed El Agheila. Scopi diversi, certo. Risultati diversi, assolutamente" (112).[5]

At the same time, examining the boundaries of knowing and the transmission of knowledge, Salerno reveals that the Libyan historian who accompanies him in his travels and is an expert on the concentration camps that Italians built to fight the Libyan resistance to Italian occupation had never heard about the internment and forced labor camps for Jews in Libya, built 10 years later (97). Salerno later adds that Yacov Haggiag-Liluf, historian of the center for Libyan Jews in Or Yehuda, near Tel Aviv in Israel, says that when he talks about the Jadu concentration camp or other internment and forced labor camps in Libya, "Gli altri ebrei, sefarditi e askenaziti, mi guardano sorpresi o increduli' (167). Yet Salerno rightly points out that Primo Levi offers a brief mention of Libyan Jews at the beginning of *Se questo è un uomo*, his canonical work first published in 1947 (131). In *Se questo è un uomo,* Italian

Fascist colonialism, anti-Semitic policy, and the Holocaust cross paths in the camp at Fossoli in Emilia Romagna, as Levi describes an extended family of Jews from Tripoli in Libya that he encounters before he is deported to Auschwitz. Levi describes the Libyan family's preparations for the subsequent day's deportation to the death camps:

> Nella baracca 6 A abitava il Vecchio Gattegno, con la moglie e i molti figli e i nipoti e i generi e le nuore operose. Tutti gli uomini erano falegnami: venivano da Tripoli, attraverso molti e lunghi viaggi, e sempre avevano portati con sé gli strumenti del mestiere, e la batteria di cucina, e le fisarmoniche e il violino per suonare e ballare dopo la giornata di lavoro, perché erano gente lieta e pia. Le loro donne furono le prime fra tutte a sbrigare i preparativi per il lutto; e quando tutto fu pronto, le focacce cotte, i fagotti legati, allora si scalzarono, si sciolsero i capelli, e disposero al suolo le candele funebri, e le accesero secondo il costume dei padri, e sedettero a terra a cerchio per la lamentazione, e tutta notte pregarono e piansero. Noi sostammo numerosi davanti alla loro porta, e ci discese nell'anima, nuovo per noi, il dolore antico del popolo che non ha terra, il dolore senza speranza dell'esodo ogni secolo rinnovato. (13)

Here, the poignant description of exile and diaspora has both a concrete and symbolic valence, as the women follow an ancient ritual of mourning, grieving before time for their own and their family's anticipated death. The description is both poetical and historical, as it offers an early fleeting but powerful hint at the peregrinations of the Jews from the Libyan colony during World War II.[6] Nicholas Patruno points out in his 1995 book on Primo Levi that *Se questo è un uomo* has been in continuous print and has been translated extensively since Einaudi's publication of it in 1958 (8). It leaves us to wonder how the research, understanding, and transmission of historical and political connections between Italian Fascist colonialism, Fascist Italy's anti-Semitic laws, and the Holocaust would be if "un dibattito in Italia sul fenomeno del colonialismo" had actually taken place in the '50s and '60s — "un dibattito," as Del Boca insists, "che avrebbe dovuto svolgersi già negli anni '50 e '60 e che avrebbe dovuto coinvolgere tutti gli italiani" (*Africa* xii).[7]

As we can see, studies of Italian Fascist colonization, racism and discrimination, anti-Semitism and oppression, and its consequences past and present, unmask the consolatory myth of *italiani brava gente* as a travesty. Far from being a lesser evil, Fascist Italy is rather a *lesser-known* evil, for the many reasons explored by scholars such as Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, Marcus and Sodi, Ahmida, Del Boca, Hom and many others — reasons as diverse as the ex-colonial functionaries' control of state archives immediately after World War II, missing archival documents, Italy's own status as a Nazi-occupied territory after the fall and reinstatement of Mussolini's regime in 1943, Italy's refusal to put perpetrators of WWII atrocities on trial, the marginal status of Italian Studies in wider academic and postcolonial discourse, or the deeply rooted desire — conscious or unconscious — not to know.[8] Perhaps even the long fetishistic history of Italy as tourist destination with its *la dolce vita* mystique and, today, its contemporary Made-in-Italy commercial power make us cling to the notion of Italy as more harmless than Nazism or other colonial powers.

Knowing and not knowing. Information, misinformation, and disinformation. Primo Levi writes extensively about these thorny problems, for example, as regards the challenges of bearing witness to Auschwitz in *Se questo è un uomo* but also as regards the linguistic barriers and haphazard geographical and cultural navigations of his journey home in *La tregua* (1963). We end with the following few lines, from which we have drawn our title. In these lines, Levi merges the not-knowing that results from state censorship with its haunting and numbing effects. As we have seen, in *Il sistema periodico,* Primo Levi starts the short story, "Ferro," which pays tribute to his inscrutable and heroic friend, Sandro, the first fallen partisan of the Comando Militare Piemontese del Partito d'Azione, by referring to the wall that separates his academic environment from the politics of the times: "Fuori delle mura dell'Istituto Chimico era notte, la notte dell'Europa" (44). Appearing to hint at the myth of Fascist Italy as a lesser evil, he writes, "L'Italia fascista, pirata minore, aveva occupato l'Albania" (*Il sistema periodico* 44). Yet the second paragraph of "Ferro" appears to undermine the very idea of Italy as a minor pirate as it acknowledges the weakening and isolating effects of widespread lack of information: "Ma dentro quelle spesse mura la notte non penetrava: la stessa censura fascista, capolavoro del regime, ci

teneva separati dal mondo, in un bianco limbo di anestesia" (*Il sistema periodico* 44).

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NOTES

[1] Labanca deems Del Boca, "il primo grande studioso del colonialismo italiano del tempo della nostra Repubblica" (199). Del Boca identifies the myth of *italiani brava gente* as "uno strumento autoconsolatorio" in his *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (2005).
[2] Both Del Boca and Muhammed T. Jerary, in their essays in Ben-Ghiat and Fuller's collection, discuss Italy's 1999 admission of guilt and the scope of reparations.
[3] See Essay 2 in Hom's book on the "Italian state's naming and containment of *grande nomadismo*" (p. 100).
[4] In a recent *New York Times* article by John Eligon about Germany's inadequate reckoning with its colonial past and that colonial past's connection to Germany's Nazi history, there is again no mention of Italy, although racist thinking was central to Italian Fascism and although the current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, is from a post-Fascist party. Other, though not all, colonial powers are mentioned: "'The French, the English and the Germans were all together in their racist thinking,' said Christian Kopp, a historian with Berlin Postcolonial, an activist organization. 'In that sense, the history of National Socialism needs a global explanation.'"
[5] See Salerno's work for more information about his characterization of the camps.
[6] For more on Fossoli and the deportations of Jews from Libya, see, for example, Salerno pp. 65-70, and his chapter on Ferramonti.
[7] Studies of Primo Levi's relevance to postcolonial theory have begun to emerge, as in Hom (68) and in Derek Duncan's "The Postcolonial Afterlife of Primo Levi," which carefully advances the potential for reading Primo Levi in a postcolonial context that may be illuminating to critiques of Italy's current migrant policies and practices.
[8] Ahmida reports that Rochat and Del Boca told him "that, after decades of research, they had found that the Italian state archive files in the camps had been manipulated and some crucial files on the camps had been 'misplaced,' or taken out by what they described as the 'colonial lobby,' which referred to ex-colonial and fascist officials who dominated the administration of the Italian National Archives after the fall of the fascist regime in 1945" (*Genocide* 26). Ben-Ghiat and Fuller write, "Control of the colonial archives was central to this state-sanctioned historical 'revisionism,' and only a handful of individuals — most of them ex-colonial functionaries — were allowed to consult state-held archival materials on Italian colonialism for much of the postwar period" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2).

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Fantastico, tradizione e profezia nelle *Storie naturali* di Primo Levi (con un inedito accostamento a d'Annunzio)

Abstract
L'articolo si propone di evidenziare la grande originalità e pregnanza delle *Storie naturali* (1966) di Primo Levi, un libro apparso fra le polemiche riguardo all'apparente mutato impegno narrativo dell'autore, ora non più focalizzato sugli orrori del lager bensì dispiegato ad illustrare le distopie di un mondo senza regole, dominato dalla scienza e dalla tecnica. Come dimostrano recenti studi, il fantastico coesiste da sempre con gli argomenti storico-testimoniali di Levi e la valenza profetica della sua opera si fonda anche su solide basi tradizionali, avvalendosi persino del magistero di un autore che sembrerebbe lontanissimo dai propri orizzonti ideologici e creativi come Gabriele d'Annunzio.
Keywords: Levi, Fantastico, Profezia, Tradizione, Classicità, d'Annunzio, Polemiche letterarie

Le Storie naturali di Primo Levi sono state pubblicate per la prima volta in volume il 6 settembre 1966, nella collana "I coralli" di Einaudi — di cui costituisce il duecento trentaquattresimo numero — sotto lo pseudonimo di Damiano Malabaila.[1] La singolare scelta onomastica sembra convergere verso il patronimico di una storica famiglia nobiliare di Asti[2] ma in effetti il cognome fu ispirato a Levi da un'insegna d'elettrauto, dopo che la casa editrice Einaudi, nella persona del direttore commerciale Roberto Cerati, gli aveva richiesto di non apporre il proprio nome su racconti così differenti per natura e sostanza dal carattere testimoniale dei primi romanzi: ritegno editoriale, dunque, e non dell'autore, che difatti aveva già pubblicato da tempo tali racconti fantastici con il suo vero nome e cognome senza avvertire alcuna preoccupazione o particolare scrupolo.[3] Ricostruisce la vicenda con dovizia di particolari e avvalendosi di accurate indagini psicologiche e circostanziali il bel libro di Carlo Zanda, *Quando Primo Levi diventò il signor Malabaila*; della questione tratta fra gli altri anche Francesco Cassata nel volume *Fantascienza?* e veramente si può aggiungere poco rispetto a quanto sinora stabilito da tali approfondite indagini, se non focalizzare ulteriormente un fatto di politica culturale che oltrepassa i confini delle strategie editoriali riconoscendosi, più in generale, in quello che Giancarlo Marmori, testimone tanto avvertito quanto poco ascoltato del secondo Novecento, definiva

sinteticamente come il "nefasto illuminismo torinese" (Marmori 49), una pratica di canonizzazione estetica e ideologica della cultura italiana che portò, fra le altre conseguenze e solo per produrre qualche esempio, al rifiuto di pubblicare un indiscusso capolavoro come il *Gattopardo* di Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa e alla demonizzazione di d'Annunzio (cui per inciso — e per rendere giustizia alla città di Torino — seppe reagire un grande critico e intellettuale torinese di estrazione cattolica come Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti).[4] Tornando a Levi, l'operazione potrebbe denotare nel caso specifico soltanto una straordinaria miopia, oltretutto ispirata da poco nobili precauzioni mercantili, se non fosse che, come poi dimostrato nei fatti, le preoccupazioni di Cerati non erano per nulla infondate: a provarlo, oltre alle numerose missive di lettori indignati ricevute da Levi (Zanda 195), la durissima e insulsa stroncatura ricevuta dai "Quaderni piacentini" (Zanda 254-5) e infine il caso tanto penoso quanto istruttivo del romanzo *Devozione* (1990) di Giorgio Chiesura, in cui compare uno autore che dopo aver scritto un libro di successo sul lager ne pubblica un altro del tutto differente, una raccolta appunto di racconti fantastici: da qui la forte irritazione e il senso di tradimento del protagonista del romanzo, reduce anch'egli dal lager, così vicino al tenore di quelle lettere che Levi aveva ricevuto da parte di lettori delusi e specie da ex compagni di prigionia (Zanda 194 e sgg). Se un siffatto senso di tradimento può risultare umanamente comprensibile, non mi sembra per questo altrettanto giustificabile, alimentato in sostanza dal sordo rancore di chi anzitutto appare infastidito dall'idea che uno scrittore internato dai nazisti possa, o debba, un certo punto della propria esistenza decidere di 'uscire' dal lager per dedicarsi alla scrittura nella sua dimensione apparentemente solo fantastica. Una simile posizione strumentale mette da parte più o meno di proposito la portata simbolica della letteratura e la sua capacità di esprimere, nel nostro caso in forma lieve ma sapientemente misurata, le ansie contemporanee, costringendo così un autore di prima grandezza come Levi in un ruolo preciso e quasi imbalsamandolo nel passato affinché scarichi ed esaurisca le proprie forze e capacità di critica in quell'ambito e non sul presente e sul futuro: come se presente e futuro fossero, a differenza del passato, del tutto rassicuranti. Sappiamo bene, però, che così non è, e oltretutto in questo modo si sottrae alla letteratura uno dei suoi compiti più importanti e una delle sue prerogative più affascinanti: quello di azionare un campanello d'allarme sui pericoli del presente e di prevedere, e

almeno potenzialmente di prevenire, le distopie in agguato in un futuro più o meno imminente. A molti anni di distanza, ormai, dalle profetiche immaginazioni di un tecnico e scrittore come Levi, sono sotto gli occhi di tutti, per quanto generalmente sottaciute per squallide ragioni mercantili e di potere, le minacce che si accampano all'orizzonte di un mondo dominato dalla religione dogmatica della scienza e dalla tecnica, in cui già ora miliardi di esseri umani risultano ormai pressoché incapaci di vivere, relazionarsi e spostarsi senza l'ausilio di apparati tecnologici, con vantaggi innegabili che tuttavia, in diversi casi, non superano i rischi connessi all'uso selvaggio e indiscriminato di tali strumenti; per non parlare della cosiddetta intelligenza artificiale prontamente impiegata prima ancora che in ambito civile nel comparto militare e dunque a fini nefasti e meramente distruttivi. Ed ecco che ben prima che tutto ciò si verificasse, lo scrittore e scienziato Levi, in *Versamina*, indubbiamente uno dei racconti più profetici e interessanti delle *Storie naturali*, così ammoniva, mettendoci in guardia con toni e temi quantomai attuali: "questi credono di liberare l'umanità dal dolore, quelli di regalarle l'energia gratis, e non sanno che niente è gratis, mai: tutto si paga" (Levi, *Storie naturali* 82).

In effetti la dimensione profetica è uno dei tratti salienti e delle finalità delle *Storie naturali*, dimensione che si dispiega agevolmente, come s'è detto, attraverso l'adozione del registro fantastico che consente la proiezione nel futuro e che oltretutto, lo vedremo fra breve, non è alcunché di posticcio o di aggiunto nella scrittura di Levi, ma anzi un elemento di profondamente connaturato alla sua stessa vicenda umana ed autoriale. A questo proposito, mi pare opportuno segnalare una coincidenza cronologica piuttosto interessante, potendosi attagliare alla tanto discussa irruzione del fantastico nell'opera di Levi: nel 1966, pochi mesi prima dell'uscita in volume delle *Storie naturali*, Roger Callois pubblica una personale *Anthologie du Fantastique*, nella cui prefazione *De la féerie à la science-fiction* si trova una capitale distinzione, appunto, fra fiabesco e fantastico:

> Le féerique est un univers merveilleux qui s'ajoute au monde réel sans lui porter atteinte ni en détruire la cohérence. Le fantastique, au contraire, manifeste un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite, presque insupportable dans le monde réel. (Caillois 8)[5]

Lo "scandale," la "déchirure," emergenze rese visibili dal fantastico, sembrano dunque ben vicine e addirittura sinonimi di quel "vizio di forma" consustanziale appunto alla modalità fantastica della scrittura di Levi,[6] che già prima della pubblicazione in volume delle *Storie naturali* le fa discendere dalla "percezione di una smagliatura nel mondo in cui viviamo, di una falla piccola o grossa […] che vanifica uno o l'altro aspetto della nostra civiltà o del nostro universo morale." Ma conviene citare più estesamente il pensiero di Levi, contenuto in un articolo di Maria Grazia Leopizzi apparso su "Avanti!" del 6 luglio 1965:

> Ho scritto una ventina di racconti e non so se ne scriverò altri. Li ho scritti per lo più di getto, cercando di dare forma narrativa ad una intuizione puntiforme, cercando di raccontare in altri termini (se sono simbolici lo sono inconsapevolmente) una intuizione oggi non rara: la percezione di una smagliatura nel modo in cui viviamo, di una falla piccola o grossa, di un 'vizio di forma' che vanifica uno od un altro aspetto della nostra civiltà o del nostro universo morale. Non so se siano belli o brutti: piacciono a molti alcuni che dispiacciono a me, molti ne rifiutano alcuni di cui io mi sento fiero. Certo, nell'atto in cui li scrivo provo un vago senso di colpevolezza, come di chi commette consapevolmente una piccola trasgressione.
> Quale trasgressione? Vediamo. Forse è questa: chi ha coscienza di un 'vizio', di qualcosa che non va, dovrebbe approfondirne l'esame e lo studio, dedicarcisi, magari con sofferenza e con errori, e non liberarsene scrivendo un racconto. O forse ancora: io sono entrato (inopinatamente) nel mondo dello scrivere con due libri sui campi di concentramento; non sta a me giudicarne il valore, ma erano senza dubbio libri seri, dedicati a un pubblico serio. Proporre a questo pubblico un volume di racconti-scherzo, di trappole morali, magari divertenti ma distaccate, fredde: non è questa frode in commercio, come chi vendesse vino nelle bottiglie dell'olio? Sono domande che mi sono posto, all'atto dello scrivere e del pubblicare queste 'storie naturali'. Ebbene, non le pubblicherei se non mi fossi accorto (non subito, per verità) che fra il Lager e queste

> invenzioni una continuità, un ponte esiste: il Lager, per me, è stato il più grosso dei 'vizi', degli stravolgimenti di cui dicevo prima, il più minaccioso dei mostri generati dal sonno della ragione. **(**Leopizzi 3)

Si tratta, come si vede, di una dichiarazione non priva di interesse, in quanto attesta fra l'altro gli scrupoli di coscienza che Levi avvertiva riguardo alla propria produzione fantascientifica, scrupoli che — è lecito supporre — di lì a poco entreranno in gioco nell'accettare la soluzione dello pseudonimo proposta dall'editore delle *Storie naturali*. Ma la dichiarazione è anche netta nello stabilire, al di là delle apparenze, una "continuità, un ponte" fra la maniera testimoniale e quella fantastica, dando libero sfogo ad un'irrevocabile istanza per cui l'orrore non si può confinare nel passato come se il presente ne fosse immune: ed è ormai un dato acclarato che i racconti fantastici sono stati scritti negli stessi contorni cronologici delle prose più celebri di Levi. Francesco Cassata ha indicato chiaramente la contemporaneità e quindi la sinergica consequenzialità dei racconti rispetto al lavoro di chimico e alle relazioni tecniche che tale mestiere comporta: in altri termini, se dall'atroce esperienza del lager sono derivati *Se questo è un uomo* e *La tregua*, è pure un fatto che negli stessi anni l'esperienza del Levi chimico ha prodotto i racconti che nel 1966 confluiranno nelle *Storie naturali.* Il rapporto fra le due maniere o "miniere," dunque, sussiste anche se non va enfatizzato o, peggio, assolutizzato; è infatti errato ricondurre troppo drasticamente l'esperienza dei racconti fantastici a quella del lager, come tiene a precisare Levi stesso:

> Si è accesa una vera e propria battaglia tra critici sul rapporto tra i miei libri di memorie e gli altri. Si sono chiesti se *Storie naturali* e *Vizio di forma* siano una prosecuzione del discorso del Lager; se si tratti di allegorie, di racconti simbolici dove in diversa chiave si rappresenta la sopraffazione dell'uomo sull'uomo. Devo confessare che questa controversia m'interessa veramente poco. Chi scrive attinge alla materia che conosce. Le mie miniere sono più d'una, e diverse. Davanti a quelle domande io dico sinceramente: non so rispondere con precisione. Posso solo dire questo:

> certo, Auschwitz in certi racconti riaffiora, ma come eredità del profondo, non come deliberato proposito.[7]

Tali precisazioni potrebbero anche sembrare in contraddizione con la precedente presa di posizione leviana che ho citato, ma è qui evidente, allora, che il fantastico in Levi non è solo connesso al "riaffiora*re* [...] come eredità dal profondo" della tremenda esperienza del lager, ma si pone come vettore di un messaggio ulteriore, quasi un avvertimento a non voler considerare la violenza umana come episodica e persino isolata, ovvero passibile d'essere limitata alla mostruosa manifestazione storica patita dall'autore. Occorre anzi sottolineare che la scrittura dei primi romanzi (poi ripresa e splendidamente riformulata nella conclusiva prosa de *I sommersi e i salvati*), così attenta nel descrivere le atrocità, le terribili privazioni, i tipi umani e i loro giochi di potere, ha in qualche modo postulato essa stessa, con lo scorrere degli anni,[8] l'esigenza di preoccuparsi del presente e del futuro prossimo e quindi di porre nuovi e non meno inquietanti interrogativi al lettore contemporaneo: appunto, come dicevo, non relegando dunque quegli orrori nel passato, ma cogliendone anzi i segni di una pericolosa sopravvivenza, sotto tutt'altra e ingannevole specie, nel mondo odierno.

Assai coraggiosa per quanto spontanea, proprio per l'acclarata contingenza con il lavoro di chimico, la scelta del registro fantastico per dare voce a simili istanze, un registro che in Italia suscitava e suscita ancora non poche diffidenze nella ricezione critica dei testi impostati in tal senso. Ciò, s'intende, ad un diffuso livello di sensibilità comune a molta critica corrente: fra coloro che invece non hanno patito particolari turbamenti nell'accettare pacificamente anche questa essenziale maniera di Levi si annovera Italo Calvino, consulente di lettura per l'editore Einaudi, che ben prima della pubblicazione in volume delle *Storie naturali* invia, in proposito, "una lettera amichevole e incoraggiante"[9] datata 22 novembre 1961:

> Caro Levi,
> ho letto finalmente i tuoi racconti. Quelli fantascientifici o meglio: fantabiologici, mi attirano sempre. Il tuo meccanismo fantastico che scatta da un dato di partenza scientifico-biologico ha un potere di suggestione intellettuale e anche poetica, come lo

> hanno per me le divagazioni genetiche e morfologiche di Jean Rostand. Il *tuo umorismo* e il *tuo* garbo ti salva molto bene dal pericolo di cadere in un livello di sottoletteratura, pericolo in cui incorre di solito chi si serve di stampi letterari per esperimenti intellettuali di questo tipo. *Certe tue trovate* sono di prim'ordine, come quella dell'assiriologo che decifra il mosaico delle tenie, e l'evocazione dell'origine dei centauri ha una sua forza poetica, una plausibilità che s'impone (e, accidenti, scrivere di centauri si direbbe impossibile, oggi, e tu hai evitato il *pastiche* anatole-france-walt-disneyano).
> Naturalmente, ti manca ancora la sicurezza di mano dello scrittore che ha una sua personalità stilistica compiuta; come Borges… Tu ti muovi in una dimensione di intelligente divagazione ai margini d'un panorama culturale-etico-scientifico che dovrebb'essere quello dell'Europa in cui viviamo. Forse i tuoi racconti mi piacciono soprattutto perché presuppongono una civiltà comune che è sensibilmente diversa da quella presupposta da tanta letteratura italiana.

La lettera di Calvino, così franca, puntuale e ricca di suggestioni, risulta utilissima per puntualizzare diverse questioni e, in primo luogo, partendo dall'ultima considerazione, notare come Calvino faccia riferimento a "una civiltà comune […] sensibilmente diversa da quella presupposta da tanta letteratura italiana," con non celato piacere e direi quasi con sollievo, per avere trovato in Levi visioni più aperte e stimolanti rispetto a quelle, appunto, di "tanta letteratura italiana," orientandosi, invece, verso una "civiltà comune" europea dove, possiamo presumere, le riserve solitamente destinate in patria al fantastico non trovano terreno fertile per attecchire. Ci sarebbe molto da dire, ovviamente, su tale italica resistenza al fantastico, una resistenza che malgrado il monumentale precedente etico-filosofico delle *Operette morali* di Leopardi, ha messo fuori campo, per produrre solo qualche esempio, alcune fra le migliori prove narrative di Bontempelli e gli splendidi racconti di Papini non per nulla ripubblicati da Borges,[10] oppure si potrebbe pensare alla stessa pressoché generale incomprensione di Buzzati, apprezzatissimo invece in terra d'oltralpe, ma non è compito di questa indagine

occuparsi di un problema storico-culturale così ampio e articolato: basti qui acquisire, pertanto, il dato di fatto e registrare, a ennesima riprova di tale avversione, come il registro fantastico risulti giudicato implicitamente quale modalità letteraria inferiore nella lettera che Cerati scrive a Levi per convincerlo ad adottare uno pseudonimo. Il quale Cerati, proprio mentre si sforza di rassicurare Levi che "lungi dal relegare una qualsiasi parte del suo ingegno ad una scala di valori minori" con l'infelice esempio di Contini gastronomo, preoccupandosi unicamente delle vendite del libro, non fa altro che rappresentare involontariamente una simile minorità: "Se Gianfranco Contini desse alle stampe uno squisito libro di ricette, avrebbe tutta l'attenzione che i critici dedicano all'illustre filologo, ed il pubblico dell'uno e dell'altro versante" (Zanda 69). Ma è del tutto evidente, come ancora rilevato nell'ottimo volume di Zanda, che "*Storie naturali* era l'esatto contrario di un ricettario, non certo un libro popolare come erano allora per lo più i libri di cucina di allora, quando cucinare non era ancora una moda" (70). Senza contare che Primo Levi, per parte sua, era tutt'altro che alieno dalla dimensione fantastica, vuoi per vocazione personale vuoi per continuità con una specifica quanto ampia tradizione ebraica,[11] come attesta ad esempio l'argomento chassidico del Golem dispiegato ne *Il servo* di *Vizio di forma*, sia pur felicemente contaminato, come nota Federico Pianzola, con le teorie sull'anima di Platone[12] (Pianzola 221-22). Nell'ambito del fantastico, Calvino suggerisce a Levi un modello abbastanza scontato per quanto ancora da raggiungere interamente: manca infatti, all'amico torinese "la sicurezza di mano dello scrittore che ha una sua personalità stilistica compiuta; come Borges." Intanto però è facile osservare che proprio la lezione borgesiana è stata favorevolmente sondata ed accolta nella stesura di queste prove fantastiche di Levi, come dimostrano i non rari riferimenti a studi e saggi del tutto inventati che ricordano l'analogo uso così caratteristico nell'autore delle *Ficciones.* Ma, tornando sulla lettera di Calvino e riflettendo attentamente sulle osservazioni in essa contenute, vale la pena di soffermarsi, credo, sul fatto che i racconti elogiati in quanto "trovate di prim'ordine, come quella dell'assiriologo che decifra il mosaico delle tenie, e l'evocazione dell'origine dei centauri" siano anche quelli dotati di più ampio sottofondo letterario e parodico, come appunto *L'amico dell'uomo* (che presenta evidenti richiami fra l'altro, a Ungaretti e Baudelaire)[13]e la *Quaestio de Centauris*: testo, quest'ultimo, per cui l'apprezzamento di Calvino appare anche più argomentato:

"l'evocazione dell'origine dei centauri ha una sua forza poetica, una plausibilità che s'impone (e, accidenti, scrivere di centauri si direbbe impossibile, oggi, e tu hai evitato il pastiche anatole-france-walt-disneyano)." Che nel 1961 la rimodulazione di un simile mito, specie in un contesto di racconti imperniati sul futuribile, destasse sorpresa è più che logico, ma si consideri che nel primo Novecento la ripresa del mito centaureo non era poi così infrequente e ad esempio attestata in Marinetti,[14] nel Savinio di *Derby reale* (1926),[15] ma soprattutto in d'Annunzio, nella cui vasta produzione la figura bimembre torna più volte[16] e specialmente in alcune notevoli occasioni, quali *La morte del cervo* di *Alcione,* alcuni capitoli del *Secondo amante di Lucrezia Buti* e la 'favilla' *La resurrezione del Centauro*: testo, quest'ultimo, che sembra fornire, come vedremo, diversi dettagli alla *Quaestio* di Levi. Prima, tuttavia, occorre segnalare che le evocazioni di d'Annunzio nell'opera di Levi non sono invero moltissime e risultano, come ci si può attendere, connotate in modo piuttosto negativo. Così, nella *Tregua*:

> Il fellone dei felloni, spia italiana a Vienna, era una stramba chimera, mezzo D'Annunzio e mezzo Vittorio Emanuele: di statura assurdamente piccola, tanto che era costretto a guardare tutti dal basso in alto, portava il monocolo e la cravatta a farfalla, e si muoveva su e giù per lo schermo con arroganti scatti da galletto. (Levi, *Opere* 377)[17]

Si tratta qui del personaggio di un vecchio film propagandistico austriaco, "in sé mediocre" (Levi, *Opere* 376), sulla Prima guerra mondiale, dove gli italiani vengono rappresentati come "volgari gaglioffi, tutti segnati da vistosi e risibili difetti corporei" (Levi, *Opere* 377). Ne *I sommersi e i salvati*, invece, il riferimento a d'Annunzio occorre nel capitolo *La zona grigia*, laddove si nota come Rumkowski, capo del ghetto di Lodz e collaborazionista, imiti la tecnica oratoria di Hitler e Mussolini:

> Forse questa sua imitazione era deliberata; forse era invece una identificazione inconscia col modello dell'"eroe necessario" che allora dominava l'Europa ed era stato cantato da D'Annunzio (Levi, *Opere* 689).

Ciononostante, nemmeno Levi sembra sfuggire a quell'"attraversamento" di d'Annunzio, che è quasi una regola, di cui parlava Montale a proposito di Gozzano:

> Gozzano, naturalmente dannunziano, ancor più naturalmente disgustato dal dannunzianesimo, fu il primo dei poeti del Novecento che riuscisse (com'era necessario e come probabilmente lo fu anche dopo di lui) ad 'attraversare D'Annunzio' per approdare a un territorio suo. (Montale, "Saggio introduttivo" 14)

Concetto che peraltro era già stato espresso e storicamente contestualizzato dallo stesso Montale nella prefazione (del 1956) ai *Canti barocchi* di Lucio Piccolo:

> D'Annunzio nella recente tradizione italiana *è* un poco come Hugo nella sua posterità francese da Baudelaire in giù: è presente in tutti perché ha sperimentato o sfiorato tutte le possibilità stilistiche e prosodiche del nostro tempo. In questo senso non aver appreso nulla da lui sarebbe un pessimo segno. (Montale, "Prefazione a Lucio Piccolo" 9-10)

Fra le innumerevoli sperimentazioni e invenzioni dannunziane quella del centauro pare avere in effetti tutte le carte in regola per imprimersi nella memoria di Levi, considerata la particolare preferenza per tale mito esplicitata nella famosissima dichiarazione dello scrittore torinese che riguarda, appunto, i propri esiti fantascientifici:

> Io sono un anfibio, un centauro — ho anche scritto dei racconti sui centauri — e mi pare che l'ambiguità della fantascienza rispecchi il mio destino attuale. Io sono diviso in due metà. Una è quella della fabbrica: sono un tecnico, un chimico. Un'altra invece è totalmente distaccata dalla prima, ed è quella nella quale scrivo, rispondo alle interviste, lavoro sulle mie esperienze passate e presenti. Sono proprio due mezzi cervelli. È una spaccatura paranoica (come quella, credo, di un Gadda, di un Sinisgalli, di un Solmi).[18]

A margine di tale celebre e commentatissima dichiarazione, che io sappia, non è mai stato osservato che Levi non è il primo nel secolo a immaginare se stesso come centauro: già d'Annunzio, infatti, nel *Secondo amante di Lucrezia Buti*, e precisamente nel capitolo intitolato *L'Ommorto e il centauro*, annotava:

> Mi sellai da me il cavallo; da me gli imboccai il filetto, m'imbavai le dita; gli respirai contro le froge, mi lasciai respirare in faccia, comunicai con l'animo equestre la mia natura umana; balzato in sella, aderito al mantel sauro, sùbito mi sentii mezzo uomo e mezzo cavallo, sùbito si sentì egli mezzo cavallo e mezzo uomo. (d'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca* 1219)

Abbastanza singolare, credo, che tale riflessione preceda di pochissime pagine il paragrafo intitolato *Il demone mimetico* (come non pensare, per inciso, al tuttavia ben differente racconto leviano *Alcune applicazioni del Mimete*) in cui d'Annunzio rievoca l'esperienza del proprio imbestiamento da cui prese forma l'alcionia *Morte del cervo,* altro notissimo testo dannunziano ove campeggia la figura di un centauro. Rammentando poi come l'immagine del centauro sia assunta da Levi non solo riguardo a se stesso, ma estesa a cifra della "condizione umana" — "l'uomo è centauro, groviglio di carne e di mente, di alito divino e di polvere" scriverà nel *Sistema periodico* (Levi 1987 135) vale la pena di soffermarci su un'altra favilla, intitolata *La resurrezione del centauro*, in cui d'Annunzio evoca ancora una volta il mito, anche stavolta come simbolo d'un ideale implemento della vita umana e in netto contrasto con l'uomo moderno invece rappresentato quale "un centauro storpio e mutilato":

> Fraterna tra tutte le creature generate dal suolo mitico! Nessuna ci tocca, anche oggi, più a dentro; nessuna ci sembra meglio rappresentare la più recente delle aspirazioni umane, meglio significare il nuovo aspetto della vita terrestre, poiché l'uomo moderno non è se non un centauro storpio e mutilato il quale ricostituisce il mito primitivo riconnettendo indissolubilmente il suo genio all'energia atroce della Natura.
> Non nasce la nostra coscienza dal più maschio ardire proteso verso l'estrema idealità, come la prole biforme

> dall'impeto dell'eroe temerario verso la nuvola sublime in cui egli crede fecondare la compagna stessa del massimo dio? Imaginate le corse precipitose dell'Issionide su la faccia dell'orbe appena emersa dalle acque, ancor vergine e fumida nei mattini remoti. Una insaziabile fame di conoscenza lo incita a misurare tutti gli spazii, a trascendere ogni confine, a respingere sempre verso gli orizzonti i limiti dei suoi dominii che il desiderio supera sempre in grandezza. (d'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca* 1576-77)

Confrontando questo brano con la leviana *Quaestio de Centauris,* si possono individuare alcuni passi non troppo distanti da quanto d'Annunzio invita a immaginare: in primo luogo "le corse precipitose dell'Issionide su la faccia dell'orbe appena emersa dalle acque, ancor vergine e fumida nei mattini remoti" che trovano un discreto riscontro nelle condizioni che favorirono, secondo Levi, l'apparizione dei centauri sulla terra:

> Quando le acque si ritirarono, la terra rimase coperta di uno strato profondo di fango caldo. Ora questo fango, che albergava nella sua putredine tutti i fermenti di quanto nel diluvio era perito, era straordinariamente fertile: non appena il sole lo toccò, si copri di germogli, da cui scaturirono erbe e piante di ogni genere; ed ancora, ospitò nel suo seno cedevole ed umido le nozze di tutte le specie salvate nell'arca. Fu un tempo mai più ripetuto, di fecondità delirante, furibonda, in cui l'universo intero sentì amore, tanto che per poco non ritornò in caos. (Levi, *Storie naturali* 120)

Levi aggiunge qui, rispetto all'enunciato dannunziano, l'elemento erotico conformemente ai caratteri tradizionali del mito: come specifica lo stesso Levi nella *Quaestio*, l'origine dei centauri avviene nell'ambito di una "festa delle origini," di una "panspermia" (Levi, *Storie naturali* 122) e non è difficile osservare come tale tema trovi risonanza in altri testi letterari fra i più vicini nel tempo, dai "paradisi di fecondazione" dell'*Anguilla* di Montale (v. 19; nel volume *La bufera e altro* dal 1956) alla localizzazione transteverina di "un'aura spermatica" attiva in *Quer pasticicciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (in volume dal 1957) di Gadda, per cui

> dal Tevere in giù, là, là, dietro i diroccati castelli e dopo le bionde vigne, c'era, sui colli e sui monti e nelle brevi piane d'Italia, come un grande ventre fecondo, due salpingi grasse, zigrinate d'una dovizia di granuli, il granuloso e untuoso il felice caviale della gente. Di quando in quando dal grande Ovario follicoli maturati si aprivano, come ciche d'una melagrana: e rossi chicchi, pazzi d'un'amorosa certezza, ne discendevano ad urbe, ad incontrare l'afflato maschile, l'impulso vitalizzante, quell'aura spermatica di cui favoleggiavano gli ovaristi del Settecento. (Gadda 24)

Del resto, uno studioso sempre attento e puntuale come Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo ha osservato a proposito della *Quaestio de Centauris* che si tratta della "realizzazione più spinta, e artisticamente più cospicua, di un uso dell'aulicità devoluto a quel gusto del *pastiche"* ritenuto dal critico uno dei capisaldi del trattamento della lingua da parte di Levi (Mengaldo xxxi). In tale direzione credo sia opportuno segnalare anche il caso dell'esplicita citazione, con tanto di virgolette, delle "fiere snelle" (Levi, *Storie naturali* 122) di *Inferno* XII, v. 76: e magari proprio per indirizzare l'attenzione del lettore su quello specifico episodio dantesco e sul fatto che ivi il Sommo Poeta venga portato dal centauro, su richiesta di Virgilio, "in su la groppa" (v. 95) così come avviene parodicamente per il personaggio che narra la storia di Trachi nella *Quaestio de Centauris.* Il nome stesso di Trachi, poi, strizza l'occhio ad un modello classico come *Le Trachinie* di Sofocle — come osserva Federico Pianzola (Pianzola 324 n.10) — appunto ambientate nella città greca di Trachis, in cui il centauro Nesso, invaghitosi di Deianira, moglie di Ercole, viene da questi ucciso ma trova il modo (postumo) per vendicarsi atrocemente dell'eroe provocandone a sua volta la morte. Anche da qui (ma non solo: si pensi all'episodio della rissa scatenata appunto dalla libidine dei centauri nel dodicesimo libro delle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio) si riverbera l'elemento erotico della *Quaestio* di Levi, un elemento curiosamente assente nel passo dannunziano sopra esposto, che tuttavia offre un altro punto di contatto con le vicende di Trachi: il quale, una volta innamoratosi, comprende

> che tutta la sua metà umana era gremita di sogni, di fantasie nobili, gentili e vane; avrebbe voluto compiere imprese temerarie, facendo giustizia con la forza del suo braccio; sfondare col suo impeto le foreste più fitte, giungere in corsa ai confini del mondo, scoprire e conquistare nuove terre, ed instaurarvi opere di civiltà feconda (Levi, *Storie naturali* 127);

ma già agiva, nel centauro dannunziano, come s'è visto, una "insaziabile fame di conoscenza" che "lo incita a misurare tutti gli spazii, a trascendere ogni confine, a respingere sempre verso gli orizzonti i limiti dei suoi dominii che il desiderio supera sempre in grandezza."

L'accostamento fra Levi e d'Annunzio potrà anche destare sorpresa, trattandosi di un rapporto che, a quanto ne so, non è mai stato preso in considerazione dalla critica— un accenno assai circoscritto, di carattere linguistico, è in Mengaldo xxxvii, n. 24[19] — e tuttavia, restando in tale ambito, è possibile rinvenire altre possibili convergenze testuali nell'ordito delle *Storie naturali*: come ad esempio fra le ultime righe de *I mnemagoghi*, allorché del giovane protagonista allontanatosi dal dottor Montesanto che ha racchiuso i ricordi della propria vita in boccette odorose, si dice: "Poi si sdraiò sull'erba, cogli occhi chiusi, a contemplare il bagliore rosso del sole attraverso le palpebre" (12). Si tratta di un'immagine che trova riscontro, rimodulata, in diversi passi dannunziani: così ne *Il libro delle vergini*, *Ad altare Dei*:

> Io vedevo, a traverso le palpebre, un bagliore roseo, una gran selva rosea fiorire, a traverso il tessuto vivente delle mie palpebre (d'Annunzio, *Tutte le novelle* 479);

in *Maia, Laus vitae*, vv. 171-73:

> Vidi per le trame
> delle mie palpebre il fulgore
> del mio sangue;

in *Alcyone*, *Il vulture del sole*, vv. 13-14:

> e *pel rossore* de' miei chiusi *cigli*
> veggo del sangue mio splendere il mondo;

e nel *Notturno*:

> Chiudo le palpebre. Il coro è rosso nella mia visione coperta (d'Annunzio, *Notturno* 411);

osservando, peraltro, che l'immagine in Levi si trova appunto a conclusione di un racconto imperniato sugli odori come tracce mnestiche, motivo tutt'altro che secondario in d'Annunzio, e ciò ben prima che venisse reso celebre dalle *madeleines* proustiane, come nota Pietro Gibellini nell'articolo "Il 'naso voluttuoso' di Gabriele d'Annunzio" (211).[20]

Anche nel caso del *Versificatore*, a ben vedere, si trovano tracce del plausibile "attraversamento" leviano di d'Annunzio, ma vi giungerò per gradi, poiché il Pescarese non è certo l'unico autore "convocat*o* sotto penna"[21] nel racconto di Levi. Ecco come il Poeta protagonista del racconto effettua le prove della macchina deputata a confezionare versi:

> POETA *(in fretta e furia)* Sicuro, che provo. Ecco: LYR, PHIL *(due scatti);* terza rima, endecasillabi *(scatto);* secolo XVII. (Levi, *Storie naturali* 29)

A tali indicazioni, cui va aggiunto l'ironico titolo assegnato dal Poeta, "Limiti dell'ingegno umano," che contrassegna la pretesa di produrre con un mezzo meccanico la poesia, la macchina elabora un simile testo:

> Cerèbro folle, a che pur l'arco tendi?
> A che pur, nel travaglio onde se' macro
> Consumi l'ore, e dì e notte intendi?
> Mentì, mentì chi ti descrisse sacro
> Il disio di seguire conoscenza,
> E miele delicato il suo succo acro (30),

intessuto, come si vede, di lemmi e lessemi di svariata provenienza e certo non limitabili all'ambito del prescritto "secolo XVII," come invece ritengono Pietro Boitani ed Emilia Di Rocco, secondo cui

> occorre avere una qualche dimestichezza con la poesia del Seicento per apprezzare la composizione e la sottile parodia che Levi ne sta facendo (Boitani-Di Rocco 76),

con ciò fidandosi fin troppo delle indicazioni fornite dal parodico poeta leviano: la rima "sacro : acro" è in effetti nel principio del canto XXXI del *Purgatorio* dantesco (vv. 1 : 3), smentendo così l'infastidita segretaria del Poeta che, pur titolare di una "laurea in lettere" (33), afferma con decisione: "Acro. Mai sentito: non è mica italiano, questo. Acre, si dice" (31), sentendosi dunque depositaria di una lingua anzitutto comunicativa e per nulla letteraria o poetica ma così denunciando al tempo stesso la propria ignoranza e inadeguatezza professionale. Quanto al "travaglio onde se' macro" non pare peregrino avvertire in proposito l'eco della memorabile terzina posta in principio di *Paradiso* XXV:

> Se mai continga che il poema sacro
> al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra
> sì che m'han fatto per più anni macro

dove è pure presente la rima "sacro : macro" fatta propria dal Versificatore leviano. La traccia dantesca si fa però del tutto riconoscibile nel penultimo verso fornito dalla macchina, in quel "disio di seguire conoscenza" che richiama il famosissimo (anche in questo caso) passo dantesco "ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza" (*Inferno*, XXVI, v. 120). E pure Petrarca, se vogliamo, è velatamente evocato attraverso il *senhal* della rima "Avvampi : Stampi"[22] prescelta dal mediocre poeta tratteggiato da Levi, rima che fa risalire la memoria, anche in questo caso, alle radici della tradizione italiana, attestato com'è nei primi versi (1 e 4) del celeberrimo sonetto *Solo e pensoso i più deserti campi.* E quindi, d'Annunzio? Il poeta pescarese, che in effetti ambì a fare della propria opera una *summa* di tutta la tradizione italiana, mette in campo la rima "avvampa: stampa" in *Perugia* (4 -5), una delle *Città del silenzio* di *Elettra*, ma a stretto contatto di questa rima si trova pure il termine "acro" stigmatizzato dalla segretaria leviana:

> tutto il mio sangue acro e vermiglio
> delle immortali tue vendette avvampa.
>
> Certo segnato fui della tua stampa (vv. 3-5).

Da notare che "acro" si trova pure (oltre che nel *Ditirambo* II, v. 18: "nella sua carne d'*acro* sangue irrigua") nel componimento alcionio *La morte del cervo*, riferito proprio al centauro protagonista del testo, "*acro* e bimembre, uomo fin quasi al pube" (v. 23). Nel componimento che in *Alcione* precede *La morte del cervo*, ovvero *Versilia*, si trova poi una combinazione di termini occorrenti come "suco" (v. 42) "miele" (v. 44) e "acre" (v. 45)[23] assai vicina alla conformazione dell'*explicit* della poesia (a questo punto, con tutta evidenza, falso-seicentesca) del Versificatore: "E miele delicato il suo succo acro."

Osservo, per concludere, come da una simile tradizione, rivista, rimodulata e parodizzata, ovvero da una tradizione che parte dalle origini per approdare fino al ventesimo secolo, scaturisca il fantastico di Primo Levi, che dunque poggia su solide fondamenta letterarie e non ha nulla del *divertissement* divagante e fine a se stesso. Anche la stessa coesistenza del registro realistico-testimoniale (mai dismesso: *I sommersi e i salvati* escono nel 1986) con quello fantastico-profetico non deve destare eccessiva sorpresa una volta constatato che nel caso specifico l'attenzione e le preoccupazioni dell'autore semplicemente si sono spostate dal recente passato ad un prossimo futuro. E in effetti, più trascorrono gli anni dalla data di pubblicazione delle *Storie naturali* e più si avverte con nettezza di particolari, in questi racconti, la straordinaria capacità mimetica, ovvero profetica, del futuro che sta diventando, oggi, il nostro presente. Ha ben ragione allora Nick Patruno nell'osservare che "none of the plots is distant from possible reality" (Patruno 145), specie se badiamo alla serie impressionante di profetiche intuizioni che nel frattempo si sono avverate, come l'uso del computer preconizzato ne *Il Versificatore,* la stampante 3d nel Mimete de *L'ordine a buon mercato* e *Alcune applicazioni del Mimete*, la realtà virtuale e il metaverso in *Trattamento di quiescenza,* l'aspirazione di alcuni a farsi ibernare ne *La bella addormentata nel frigo*, l'uso smodato di droghe anestetiche in *Versamina* e infine, più generalmente, il consenso o persino la compagnia (si pensi al famigerato *tamagotchi,* ma anche a *Second Life* e a certi usi compulsivi dello smartphone) che a volte ricerchiamo in apparecchi appositamente studiati per accontentare il nostro narcisismo, poiché, secondo le parole di Levi ne *La misura della bellezza*: "a tutti piace sentirsi lodare e sentirsi dare ragione,

anche se soltanto da uno specchio o da un circuito stampato" (Levi, *Storie naturali* 117-18).

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NOTE

[1] Su tale opera di Levi esiste ormai un'ampissima bibliografia: nei riferimenti bibliografici posti a conclusione del presente articolo sono compresi solo alcuni dei lavori critici pubblicati negli ultimi decenni.
[2] Il palazzo Malabaila costituisce il più prestigioso edificio rinascimentale di Asti. Per la storia della famiglia cfr. Grassi 230-31.
[3] Per gli estremi bibliografici delle pubblicazioni su periodici dei singoli racconti si veda la nota 1 in Zangrandi, "*Storie naturali* e il futuro futuribile di Primo Levi."
[4] In ambito dannunziano, sono notevoli anche i risultati di altri e più giovani critici torinesi come Monica Bardi e Luciano Curreri.
[5] Traduco liberamente: "Il fiabesco è un universo meraviglioso che si sovrappone al mondo reale senza incrinarlo o distruggerne la coerenza. Il fantastico, al contrario, rende visibile uno scandalo, una lacerazione, un'irruzione insolita quasi insopportabile nel mondo reale."
[6] Lazzarin, 2008: 56: "il fantastico come vizio di forma, sfida lanciata alla razionalità, faglia che si apre nel quadro rassicurante della vita quotidiana."
[7] Così in una "conferenza tenuta a Zurigo," come risulta da Poli - Calcagno 1992, in cui compare altresì il brano qui riportato (54-5).
[8] Si veda, in proposito Patruno (5): "his memories of his agonizing experience were always the ink in his creative pen. Through them his perceptions, productivity, and self-awareness were sharpened and clarified, and his ability to communicate was heightened to new levels of eloquence."
[9] Cito da Cassata (29); dallo stesso volume riproduco la lettera di Calvino che segue (29-31).
[10] Papini; una prima edizione di tale bellissima antologia era apparsa nella borgesiana "Biblioteca di Babele," 1975. Sui racconti fantastici di Papini mi permetto di rimandare a Zollino 2004.
[11] La menzione dell'*Ecclesiaste* occorre nel finale dell'ultimo racconto di *Storie naturali*, *Trattamento di quiescenza* 183.
[12] Fra le innumerevoli rese letterarie della leggenda del Golem ricordo almeno, nel Novecento, il romanzo di Gustav Meyrink *Der Golem* (1915) e i versi di *El Golem* (1958) di Jorge Luis Borges. Quanto al rapporto fra Levi e la cultura ebraica si possono vedere Nezri-Dufour e Cicioni.
[13] Si veda per ciò Zangrandi, "Storie naturali e il futuro futuribile di Primo Levi."
[14] Sulla figura del centauro in Levi e nel contesto letterario novecentesco si vedano Ottieri e Gendrat-Claudel.
[15] Cfr. Savinio, rammentando che proprio Savinio aveva progettato il seguito di *Tragedia dell'infanzia* - mai portato a termine - intitolandolo *Sul dorso del*

centauro. Qualche anno dopo la pubblicazione in volume della *Quaestio* di Levi, nel 1972, il mito troverà invece cittadinanza nel racconto *Il centauro* in Juan Rodolfo Wilcock.

[16] Oltre alle occorrenze di cui si discuterà poco più avanti si vedano *Alcione*, *La tregua*, v. 9: "ei conosca la gioia del *Centauro»* e del *Libro segreto*: "Se quello è il Serchio, dov'è il Centauro nato dal mio forzamento della nuvola?"; cito, per quest'ultimo, da d'Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca* 1710.

[17] Cito per *La tregua* e *I sommersi e i salvati* da Levi 1987.

[18] Così nell'intervista rilasciata a Edoardo Fadini*, Primo Levi si sente scrittore "dimezzato",* "l'Unità," 4 gennaio 1966; cito da Poli - Calcagno 35.

[19] Relativamente a Trattamento di quiescenza: «per una scandalosa modella-cortigiana, è inventato il nome prezioso, allitterante e dannunzianeggiante, di Corrada Colli».

[20] Si veda ora anche Polito.

[21] L'espressione è in Gadda, *Come lavoro,* 436.

[22] Così nelle *Storie naturali*, 23: "POETA Già: le trovano tutte. "Cialampi"... no, è dialettale. "Avvampi." *(Liricamente)* "O popolo di Francia, avampi, avampi!"... Ma no, che cosa sto dicendo! "Stampi." *(Meditabondo)*».

[23] Questo il contesto di *Versilia*: "Io so come si morda il pomo / senza perdere stilla di suco. / Poi co' miei labbri umidi induco / il miele nel cuore dell'uomo" (vv. 41-4).

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Writing After and About the Holocaust: Primo Levi and Umberto Saba

Abstract:
This article examines the brief and intense relationship that Primo Levi established at the beginning of his literary career with another author of twentieth-century Italian literature: the poet Umberto Saba. The article analyzes two little-known and two hitherto unpublished letters that the writers exchanged in 1948-1949 concerning their most recent books: Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1947) and Saba's *Shortcuts and Short Stories* (1946). The article argues that, in spite of its limited duration, this brief private correspondence illuminates previously disregarded connections between Levi's output and Saba's poetics, as well as highlights one of the first meaningful receptions of Levi's work. In addition, the correspondence sheds a new light on one of the major literary issues of post-war Italy: writing after and about the Holocaust.
Keywords: Primo Levi, Umberto Saba, Theodor Adorno, Holocaust, Majdanek, Shortcuts, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud

Throughout his forty-year-long literary career, Primo Levi established connections, relationships, and exchanges — directly as well as indirectly — with a broad range of writers, scholars, and intellectuals from both Italian and international backgrounds. In the past few years, interpreters of Primo Levi have conducted extensive research into the diverse exchanges that the author of *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) had with twentieth-century transnational writers and intellectuals.[1] This innovative approach has not only enriched our knowledge of Levi's biography and intellectual development, but has also advanced Levi studies more generally, enabling scholars to better understand his output as well as to highlight previously overlooked aspects of his writing. As a matter of fact, certain features that are invisible, while focus lies solely on his works, emerge more clearly once Levi is placed in dialogue with other writers and intellectuals.

One of Levi's cultural relationships that has yet to be fully acknowledged is that with Umberto Saba, whose poetry is distinctive in twentieth-century Italian literature.[2] In my article, I will trace the relationship between the two authors by drawing on

four private letters that the writers exchanged in 1948-1949 (for the texts, see "Letters" in the Appendix of the volume, pp. 215-224). Two of the letters were found by Castellani and Fiori in the 1980s in the "Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi" in Turin and in the "Centro Manoscritti" in Pavia, and were later published in three occasions.[3] The other two I found in the "Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi" in Turin and have never been published until now.[4] By building on a close reading of those four important documents, I will provide insight into the main literary aspects and themes that in my opinion connect Levi to Saba, and show crucial commonalities — alongside nuanced differences — in the poetics of these two writers. Through my analysis, I will argue that the dialogue between the two authors is an asset in shedding a new light on fundamental features in both their output, such as the problems of writing "after the Holocaust," the stance on writing driven by authentic first-hand experiences, and the need for clarity.

Primo Levi and Umberto Saba were quite remote from each other in many ways: they belonged to different generations (Saba was born in 1883, and Levi in 1919); they received distinctive training (Levi graduated in Chemistry, whereas Saba became a book-seller); and they had distant geographical backgrounds (Saba was born in Trieste, a port city under the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time, and Levi was born in Turin, the first capital city of the reunified Italy). In addition, by the time of this epistolary exchange in 1948-1949, they were at very different stages of their literary careers. Saba was an established writer who had just published an extended edition of his *Canzoniere* (*The Songbook*) with Einaudi (1945) and had just won the Viareggio Book Prize for poetry (1946); Levi had just returned to Turin from the nine-month-long extenuating journey from his traumatic experience at Auschwitz that he later recounted in his 1963 book *La tregua* (*The Truce*). However, some relevant biographical experiences connected the two authors. Primarily, both Levi and Saba belonged to Jewish families and underwent persecution after the Fascist racial laws — passed by Benito Mussolini from 1938 to 1944 in order to enforce racial discrimination and segregation in Italy — as well as during the Second World War because of their Jewish and antifascist identities. More particularly, they were both non-practicing secular Jews, and thought of their Judaism as a part of their multilayered cultural identities and not the predominant one. It is noteworthy that in two

separate pieces of writing, they recalled how they discovered their ethnicity only with the start of the Nazi-Fascist persecution:

> non mi era mai importato molto di essere ebreo: dentro di me, e nei contatti coi miei amici cristiani, avevo sempre considerato la mia origine come un fatto pressoché trascurabile ma curioso, una piccola anomalia allegra come chi abbia il naso storto o le lentiggini; un ebreo è uno che a Natale non fa l'albero, che non dovrebbe mangiare il salame ma lo mangia lo stesso, che ha imparato un po' di ebraico a tredici anni e poi lo ha dimenticato. (Levi, *Opere complete I* 886)

> [being Jewish hadn't much mattered to me: privately, and with my Christian friends, I had always considered my origin as a nearly negligible but curious fact, a small, a cheerful anomaly, like having a crooked nose or freckles; a Jew is someone who doesn't have a Christmas tree, who shouldn't eat salami but eats it anyway, who learned a little Hebrew at the age of thirteen and then forgot it. (Levi, *The Complete Works* 782)]

> non mi sono mai sentito che un italiano fra italiani [*sic*]. Il resto [i.e. l'ebraismo], prima che la pazzia e la disperazione degli uomini ne facessero una tragedia, era per me — lo ripeto volentieri — poco più che una "nota di colore." (Saba, *Tutte le prose* 365-66)

> [I never felt myself anything but an Italian among Italians. The rest [i.e. Judaism], before human madness and desperation made a tragedy of it, was to me — I repeat with pleasure — nothing but a "splash of color." (Saba, *The Stories and Recollections* 11)]

Already 60 years old by the time of the Nazi occupation, Saba did not actively join the resistance movement, and he did not experience deportation and internment in the Nazi *Lagers*, unlike Levi, who was imprisoned on December 13, 1943 and then sent to Auschwitz because of his activities as a partisan. Nevertheless, Saba, being a Jew, suffered a great deal during the war because of the fear of racial persecution and was forced to hide in order to

escape deportation by the Nazis.[5] The great distress endured during the Second World War resulted for him — as for Levi — in the development of a lifelong trauma fueled by the terror of persecution and by the complex of being an undeserving survivor. The trauma of racial discrimination and Nazi occupation had a major impact on Saba's mental condition — which had been precarious since he was 20 — and in those post-war years he experienced the most difficult depression of his entire life.[6]

Because of his worsening clinical condition, in his later period Saba lost his trust in the therapeutic possibilities of writing. Poetry ceases to be a form of daily treatment against illness for him; instead, he describes it as "a miracle," a surprise that can only be generated when medication attenuates the symptoms of depression. As a result, he reduced his poetic writing, although he did not stop writing completely. As Sergio Parussa noted, in this period Saba started an extensive production in prose, made up of letters, accounts, and short stories, which for the most part remained private and unintended for publication (57-58). It is my contention that the later Saba located the therapeutic functions he no longer found in poetry in his prose writing. For example, in the same years in which Primo Levi was composing *If This Is a Man*, Saba was designing his *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (*Shortcuts and Short Stories*), an experimental volume through which he significantly renovated his literary output. Although largely different in structure and content, the two books appear as two pivotal books of post-war Italy and were defined by the critic Domenico Scarpa as "due libri che sono altrettanti chiodi conficcati nel Novecento" ["two books who are two nails driven into the Italian twentieth century"] ("Presentazione").

The four letters that the writers wrote to each other in 1948-1949 revolve around an exchange of opinions on these two volumes, which eventually turns into an insightful process of exegesis and self-assessments of their respective writing. Primo Levi first published *If This Is a Man* in October, 1947 through the local publisher De Silva,[7] whereas Saba published his first edition of *Shortcuts and Short Stories* in January, 1946 with Mondadori.[8] In a way, both the authors were dealing with a debut, since *If This Is a Man* represented the first publication for Levi, whereas *Shortcuts* was the first book in prose for Saba. At this time, especially Levi was launching his career as a writer; for that reason, he was still consolidating his own literary apprenticeship — which had begun

in childhood also thanks to his bibliophile father — and seeking significant points of reference.[9] Primo Levi's initial reception was not fortunate and straightforward, and the writer struggled to find a publisher eager to print *If This Is a Man*.[10] The manuscript was surprisingly and notoriously refused by the Einaudi publishing house, since both Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg agreed that "non è il momento di pubblicare un libro come questo. Ne sono usciti troppi sull'argomento" ["is not the time to publish a book like this. Too many have come out on the subject"] (Anonymous) and feared that the book "sarebbe andato disperso fra i tanti libri di testimonianze sui lager che uscivano in quel tempo" ["would have been lost among the many testimonial books on the camps that were coming out at that time"] (Orengo). As a result, Levi was forced to come out with De Silva and in a limited run of only 2,500 copies, many of which remained unsold.[11]

Amidst this general indifference, it was Umberto Saba in 1948 who realized that Levi had the makings of a writer and that his book was a remarkable literary work. We do not know how Saba discovered *If This Is a Man.* Andrea Rondini states that it was Primo Levi himself who sent Saba the book ("Da Umberto Saba a Primo Levi" 45), but there is in fact no evidence of that exchange. Also, this hypothesis contradicts Saba's own statement in his letter that he had discovered Levi's book rather by accident ("il suo libro l'ho avuto per caso") ["it was even by accident that I got your book"] (LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 215-216). In my opinion, the most plausible hypothesis is that, being a bookshop owner in Trieste, Saba found *If This Is a Man* himself, and decided to read it because of his own interest in Judaism and the Holocaust.

On October 26, 1948, after finishing the book, Saba sent a letter to the publisher Giulio Einaudi, with whom he had published an extended version of his *Canzoniere* in 1945. In a post-scriptum at the end of this letter,[12] Saba writes,

> Forse tu, o qualche tuo impiegato, saprà l'indirizzo di PRIMO LEVI,[13] che abita a Torino, dove fa il chimico. Egli ha scritto un bellissimo libro (Se questo è un uomo) che avrei voluto vedere fra le tue edizioni. Ma, come me, anche tu non puoi avere tutto. In una parola, vorrei scrivergli a proposito di quel suo libro, e, se puoi farmene[14] avere il recapito, mi farai cosa grata.

> [Perhaps you, or some of your employees, know the address of PRIMO LEVI, who lives in Turin, where he is a chemist. He has written a beautiful book (If This is a Man) that I would have liked to see among your publications. But, like me, you cannot have everything. In short, I would like to write to him about his book: I will be grateful if you can get me the contact information.]

Saba's letter to Einaudi constitutes one of the first reviews of Levi's book and one of the few positive ones. Among the other encouraging feedback on *If This Is a Man* in those years was the very first review by Arrigo Cajumi, who 11 months before Saba, on November 26, 1947, had stated that Levi's novel "s'impernia, spontaneamente, sul problema capitale: quello dell'uomo che vive ad arbitrio d'uomo, nel mondo moderno" ["spontaneously hinges on the crucial problem: that of a man living at the will of other men, in the modern world"].[15] Only six months before Saba, on 6 May 1948, Italo Calvino had also praised Levi's book, calling *If This Is a Man*,

> un magnifico libro […] che non è solo una testimonianza efficacissima, ma ha delle pagine di autentica potenza narrativa, che rimarranno nella nostra memoria tra le più belle della letteratura sulla Seconda guerra mondiale. ("Un libro sui campi della morte")[16]

> [a magnificent book […] which is not only an extremely effective piece of testimony, but has passages of real narrative power, which will be remembered as some of the most beautiful of the literature on the Second World War.]

In July 1949 Calvino would expand this interpretation by this saying that, among the books on Resistance,

> il più bello di tutti [è]: *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino, De Silva, 1948 [*sic*, ma: 1947]) di Primo Levi: un libro che per sobrietà di linguaggio, potenza d'immagini e acutezza psicologica è davvero insuperabile.[17]

> [the most beautiful of all [is]: *If This is a Man* (Torino, De Silva, 1948 [*sic*, in fact: 1947]) by Primo Levi: a book that,

for sobriety of language, power of images, and psychological acuity, is truly unsurpassed.]

The fact that both Saba and Calvino use the adjective "beautiful" to describe Levi's work shows that — unlike the Einaudi publishing house —, they were approaching it as literature, not as a testimony but as a form of testimonial-narrative literature. As a result, Saba and Calvino may be regarded as the first ones who recognized in Levi not only a survivor and an invaluable first-hand witness of the Shoah, but also a literary writer — and a remarkable one.[18]

In his letter to Giulio Einaudi, Saba not only lamented the fact that *If This Is a Man* had not been welcomed within one of the publisher's prestigious book series, but also asked him for Primo Levi's address to be able to write to him directly. Giulio Einaudi replied to Saba four days later, giving him Levi's address in Turin (Barberis 754). Subsequently, four days later, on November 3, 1948[19] Umberto Saba wrote a letter to Primo Levi, which is the first important document that ties the two authors together (see LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 215-216).

Saba's words constitute one of the first reflections on the crucial issue of writing after and about the Holocaust. In 1948, awareness of the historical truth of the genocide and of its actual occurrence was not so present amongst the European intellectual classes. The experience of the Shoah, at that time, was mostly shared by voices linked to Jewish culture, and had not yet been absorbed and acknowledged by Italian society. As a result, Saba's letter can be considered as a small but important step on the way towards the acknowledgement in Italy of the Nazi genocide.[20]

Beyond Saba's awareness of the historical importance and sociological impact of Levi's work, there are further relevant features in this letter. As Rondini ("Da Umberto Saba a Primo Levi" 45) noted, the usage of the adjective "fatale" in relation to Levi's book is remarkable, as it is a central term in Saba's own writings. In his vocabulary, the expression means a work written out of inescapable necessity. For example, his *Canzoniere* in verse published in 1945 is also "fatale" (Ponti), as is *Shortcuts*, the short prose book that had appeared almost three years before this letter:

> le SCORCIATOIE rappresentavano nella mia vita *una fatalità*.[21] Prima o dopo, era "necessario" che dicessi le cose che in esse ho dette. (*Tutte le prose* 872)
>
> [the SHORTCUTS represented *an inevitability* in my life. Sooner or later, it was "necessary" for me to say the things I said in them.]

One week later, on November 10, 1948, Levi replied to Saba with a letter of thanks and of deep appreciation for his complimentary words, and he announced his eagerness to meet with Saba in person (see LETTER 2 in the Appendix pp. 216-219). In his response, Levi agrees with the definition "fatale" used by Saba for *If This is a Man*, and adds that in his view the book appears self-written and naturally stemmed from "l'indignazione, l'offesa e la vergogna" ["indignation, outrage, and shame"]. Levi also confesses the limited success that his book has found ("il libro non è andato molto bene") ["the book has not gone well"], and frankly conveys to Saba his frustration for such an ungenerous reception. He specifies that this disappointment combines for him with "un momento di stanchezza e di disgusto" ["a moment of weariness and disgust"], in which he is not convinced to have "il vigore di scrivere ancora cose buone ed utili a me ed agli altri" ["the vigour for writing things which are good and useful for myself and others"]. Nevertheless, he confirms his interest to follow the literary career inaugurated by *If This is a Man* ("avrei quindi ancora molte cose da raccontare," ["So I still have many things to tell"] and informs Saba that he has already started a sequel of the book. In a brief overview of the new book, Levi reveals that this second volume narrates the perilous voyage across Europe that followed his liberation from Auschwitz, a blurb that coincides with what he later recounted in *La tregua* (*The Truce*), published in 1963. This passage proves that Levi conceived a sequel to his first book already in 1948, although he had to quit the project for his mental distress and because of his professional and parental duties. The letter also confirms that the publication of *If This Is a Man* was not a one-time endeavor for Levi and that in those years, he was considering himself primarily as a writer, alongside his work as chemist. In addition, this confirms the hypothesis that although he had been writing throughout his life, his decision to become a writer was driven by the post-war urgency to communicate his experience in the *Lager*. For this reason, Levi

describes Saba's letter as at the same time "gradita ed amara" ["welcome and bitter"] and his own feeling as "un piacere non privo di amarezza" ["a pleasure not without bitterness"], since he feels encouraged by his senior colleague to pursue his own urgency to write at a moment in which his writing is challenged by personal issues.

Saba wrote back to Levi again and with similar thoughtfulness on November 20, 1948 (see LETTER 3 in the Appendix, pp. 219-220). As Barberis (755) mentioned, in this letter Saba becomes even more cordial, as he confesses to "caro Primo" ["dear Primo"] that he has given his letter to another admirer of his book who was also a collector of autographs. He also replies that he would gladly visit him in Turin if he were not too "vecchio e stanco" ["old and tired"] to leave Trieste (as a matter of fact, the two authors never met). Then he reveals that he has written to Giulio Einaudi to get Levi's address and that he had shared with him his regret that *If This Is a Man* had come out with a different publisher. In addition, Saba suggests to Levi not to be concerned about the difficulties in writing the sequel, and to focus on it only once he feels the same sense of "necessity" that originated his first book. It is presumable that Saba's advice persuaded Levi, and that this authoritative opinion played a role in convincing him to publish *La tregua* (*The Truce*) only 15 years after his first book. Finally, along with his complimentary remarks, Saba sent Primo Levi a copy of his "libretto" ["little book"] *Shortcuts and Short Stories*. In establishing a clear connection between the two books, Saba — unlike other Italian intellectuals — was again identifying Levi as a fully accomplished writer, and was implicitly connecting the poetics of *If This Is a Man* with his own. Saba urged Levi to tell what he thought of *Shortcuts and Short Stories*, a book Saba cared about but that had not been as well received as *The Songbook*.

Primo Levi read Umberto Saba's book and two months later, on January 10, 1949, respectfully replied to the poet (see LETTER 4 in the Appendix, pp. 220-222). In his letter, Levi showed a great appreciation for Saba's book and envisioned a keen literary affinity between Saba's work and his own production ("vi ho ritrovato molto del mio mondo") ["I found very much of my own world in it"]. In particular, Levi confessed to have resonated mostly with the first section of the book, entitled *Shortcuts*, than with the second one, *Short Stories*, a collection of short stories about the life of the Jewish community in Trieste before the war. As a matter of

fact, Levi argued that the latter left him less impressed ("tutto questo mi ha toccato meno") ["all this touched me less"], whereas in his opinion the former truly manifests the author's innovative poetics ("quel Suo coraggio, di quella Sua avidità vigile […] di nulla lasciare inesplorato, di tutto sollevare dal buio del sottosuolo alla luce della consapevolezza") ["your courage, your alert longing […] to leave nothing unexplored to bring up everything from the darkness of the underground to the light of awareness"].

Why did these two quite different authors perceive such a profound rapport between their two works? What is the deep bond that connects Levi's *If This Is a Man* to Saba's *Shortcut*s?

Umberto Saba's *Shortcuts* is not a memorial of the Lager, since the author never experienced deportation and internment. *Shortcuts* is a hybrid experimental volume made up of 165 aphoristic and essential sentences on a diverse range of topics, from Italian history to European philosophy. Although it does not deal directly with the Holocaust, the book opens with a text (shortcut 5) which specifically recalls the name of a German prison and extermination camp — Majdanek (or "Maidaneck" in Saba's spelling):

> 5
> Dopo Napoleone ogni uomo è un po' di più, per il solo fatto che Napoleone è esistito. Dopo Maidaneck [*sic*]... (*Tutte le prose* 8)
>
> [5
> After Napoleon every man is a little more just because Napoleon existed. After Majdanek...]

Majdanek was a small Nazi Lager located in Lublin, in southern Poland. It was established in October, 1941, and it was the first camp to be discovered by the Allies, on July 22,1944.[22] In his shortcut, Saba establishes a comparison between the world before and "after" Majdanek, which in his terms stands for: humankind before and after the discovery of the horror of the concentration and extermination camps. Saba implies that, while after Napoleon every human being, regardless of their time and place, is "more" because they now have a supposedly superior model from which to take inspiration, after the discovery of mass extermination, everyone is "less": their humanity has been diminished. Furthermore, with his

reference to "every man," Saba is already moving in the direction of overcoming the uniqueness of the Shoah, which later became of one of the main issues in Holocaust studies.[23]

It is noteworthy that the same syntagma "dopo Maidaneck" ["after Majdanek"] also appears in shortcut 18, which closes the first section of the book:

> 18
> "Voi triestini" —mi diceva ieri Giacomo Debenedetti — "siete veramente *figli del vento*.[24] È per questo che amate tanto moralità e apologhi, favole e favolette. È perché sei nato nella città della bora che scrivi SCORCIATOIE."
> Quanto piacere mi avrebbe dato un giorno questa sua favoletta! Che buon augurio ne avrei tratto per il mio amico e per me! Ma oggi... Ma dopo Maidaneck [*sic*]... (*Tutte le prose* 18)
>
> [18
> "You from Trieste" — Giacomo Debenedetti said to me yesterday — "are truly *sons of the wind*.[25] That is why you love morality and fables so much, stories and fairy tales. You write SHORTCUTS because you were born in the city of the 'bora' wind."
> How much pleasure his tale would once have given me. What a good omen would I have taken from it for my friend and myself! But today… But after Majdanek...]

Through the recurrence of the same expression "dopo Maidaneck" ["after Majdanek"] in this shortcut, Saba again establishes a parallel between the world before and after the discovery of mass extermination; he implies that the change between the two conditions is definite and irreversible, not only in his personal biography but in the lives of everyone. However, by quoting Debenedetti's "tale," Saba switches his reflection also to another crucial theme in the world after Majdanek: the role of literature in this completely changed anthropological environment. Saba is implicitly and problematically asking: How can humankind still believe in "fables […] stories and fairy tales" after the undeniable abyss of the concentration camps?

A testament to the importance of this theme for Saba is that the name of the same Lager recurs for the third time as the closing

word also of the second series of shortcuts. In this context, the author addresses the readers and personifies his whole work as a "survivor of Majdanek":

> 49
> Lettore mio, non t'inganni l'apparenza, a volte paradossale, a volte perfino scherzosa (?) di (alcune) SCORCIATOIE. Nascono tutte da dieci e più esperienze di vita, d'arte e di dolore.
> Sono, oltre il resto, reduci, in qualche modo, da Maidaneck.
> (*Tutte le prose* 26-27)
>
> [49
> My reader, do not be fooled by the appearance, at times paradoxical, at times even playful (?) of (some) SHORTCUTS. They all stem from ten or more experiences of life, art, and pain.
> They are, apart from the rest, survivors of Majdanek in some way.]

An ever more problematic angle regarding the possibility and mode of discourse can be found in shortcut 87. This text is dedicated to the meeting between Saba and the writer Mario Spinella and hosts the fourth occurrence of the name of the Lager:[26]

> 87
> Aveva da dirmi che né lui, né i suoi compagni (giovani comunisti) sapevano che farsene di SCORCIATOIE. Sono — mi spiegò — piccole cose felici, nate dalla felicità. (Forse voleva dire dalla liberazione). CAMPO DI EBREI di Giacomo Debenedetti, quello sì che gli piaceva; in quello sì che si sentivano veramente *lacrime e sangue*.[27]
> Forse aveva ragione Spinella. Maidanek è inespiabile.
> (*Tutte le prose* 43)
>
> [87
> He told me that neither he nor his companions (young communists) knew what to do with my SHORTCUTS. They are — he explained to me — happy little things, born of happiness (perhaps he wanted to say from liberation).

> CAMPO DI EBREI by Giacomo Debenedetti, that he liked; in that you could really feel *tears and blood*.[28]
> Perhaps Spinella was right. Majdanek is unatonable.]

In Saba's volume, the first shortcuts bear the information "Rome, February 1945,"[29] only seven months after the first discovery of that Nazi Lager. Philological evidence shows that Saba was designing his literary project of *Shortcuts* — already sketched far back in 1936 — in Rome in January 1945, during the last months of the war.[30] The volume was indeed a "survivor of Majdanek," and was conceived by Saba — like *If This Is a Man* was deemed by Levi — as a response to the horror of the concentration camps. Therefore, in those years both the writers were experimenting with a new form of writing to face the discovery of this previously unknown reality.

Based on what I have shown so far, my argument is that Primo Levi and Umberto Saba were intimately connected by the same problematic necessity of writing after and about the Nazi genocide, which as persecuted Jews they had both experienced firsthand, though in very different ways. As a result, Saba and Levi were among the first intellectuals to ask what place is left to culture and literature in the aftermath of the Holocaust,[31] thus anticipating Theodor Adorno's celebrated statement on the role of writing after Auschwitz, which appeared in 1949:

> To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (34)

Levi and Saba asked one year before Adorno the same question that the philosopher would pose about the role of literature and poetry after the Shoah. Do Levi and Saba come to the same conclusion of Adorno's that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"? Do they believe that the condition of literature and culture "after Majdanek" is silence?

It seems to me that the two authors do not choose to give up the literary word, although they do perceive the dramatic change that has been imposed on language and literature by the overarching tragedy of the Final Solution. Through their own identities as persecuted Jewish intellectuals, Levi and Saba are the first writers — one year before Adorno's philosophical inquiry — to come to the conclusion that it is no longer possible, *after* Auschwitz, to write poetry as it had been written before. The sub-human atrocity of the concentration camps confronted humanity with an experience so new and terrible that it was impossible to conceptualize and express using already-existing cognitive tools and frameworks.[32] To cite Levi's words in his letter, humans are not the same *after* the Holocaust, since "ne siamo usciti *mutati*, estremamente *differenziati*, spesso nemici del mondo e di noi stessi, altre volte *disgregati*, o in aperta ribellione o evasione" ["we came out of it *changed*, extremely *separated*, often enemies of the world and of ourselves, at other times *broken apart*, or in open rebellion, or flight"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221). The genocide broke apart the unity of the subject, which was forced to experience another part of itself as deported and fugitive, thus transforming the matter of poetic creation itself. The Shoah thereby changed the meaning of words, revolutionized the relationship between language and experience, and compelled writers to forge new tools with which to rethink the modern world in light of the catastrophe that had disfigured it forever.

With the form of his *Shortcuts*, Saba aimed to address this new state of language; the author of *The Songbook* abandoned his earlier poetry and experimented with a new form of literature. Since canonical tools could no longer express the inescapable rupture brought about by the Lagers, Saba chose to pioneer a new literary genre (shortcuts) to literally find new pathways for literature. As he explains in his meta-poetic shortcut 2:

> SCORCIATOIE *Sono* […] *vie più brevi per andare da un luogo ad un altro*.[33] Sono, a volte, difficili; […] Possono dare la nostalgia delle strade lunghe, piane, diritte, provinciali. (*Tutte le prose* 7)
>
> [SHORTCUTS *are* […] *shorter ways to get from one place to another*.[34] They are, at times, difficult [...] they can make you nostalgic for long, flat, straight, provincial roads.]

In this sense, the new genre of the shortcut is a response to Majdanek for Saba, since it opens up a new literary mode in order, simultaneously, to continue to create literature and to acknowledge the enormous cultural change brought about by the horrific awareness of the Holocaust. In my opinion, as a symbol of this change, he no doubt chose Majdanek and not more famous Lagers (like Auschwitz) because the discovery of that particular camp was the first time when humanity directly faced what had only been heard about the Nazi persecutions; it was the first time a new reality needed to be expressed. As Sergio Parussa noted, Saba's transition from poetry to prose and his choice of such a hybrid form of literary communication "can be interpreted as stylistic attempts to bridge the gap opened up by the war in personal and collective history" (58). For Saba personally, it was an "attempt to bridge his existential gap in order to reach a desirable, as well as impossible, integrity of the subject" (Parussa 58).

In reply to the same compelling question — how can one write after Auschwitz? — Levi too reacted to the enormity of this historical event by crafting an innovative and experimental form of literature. With his *Shortcuts*, Saba inaugurated a genre at the intersection of poetry and prose, which privileged memory over imagination and meditation over expression. Meanwhile, with *If This Is a Man,* Levi pioneered a new form of literature that was neither novel nor autobiography, neither testimony nor memoir, but rather a hybrid form of testimonial-narrative literature which was radically distinct from any other previous accounts narrated in the first person. In five later interviews, dated 1971, 1984, 1985, and two in October, 1986, Levi actually responded to Adorno's assertion by saying,

> Sì, forse si tratta proprio dell'affermazione di Adorno, che "dopo" Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia o almeno non lo può chi ci è stato; mentre era possibile fare poesia "su" Auschwitz, una poesia pesante e densa, come metallo fuso, che scorre via e ti lascia svuotato.[35] (*Opere complete III* 36)
>
> [Yes, maybe it is a question of that assertion by Adorno, that "after" Auschwitz there can be no more poetry, at least for those who were there; whilst it was still possible to write poetry "on" Auschwitz — a heavy, dense poetry, like

molten metal, that runs away and leaves you gutted. (*The Voice of Memory* 88)]

G. N. *Eppure Adorno aveva detto che "dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia."*
P. L. La mia esperienza è stata opposta. Allora mi sembrò che la poesia fosse più idonea della prosa per esprimere quello che mi pesava dentro […]. In quegli anni, semmai, avrei riformulato le parole di Adorno: dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia se non su Auschwitz.[36] (*Opere complete III* 469)

[G. N. *Yet Adorno had said that "after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry."*
P. L. My experience was the opposite. It seemed to me that poetry was more suitable than prose to express what weighed on me inside [...]. In fact, regarding those years, I would rephrase Adorno's words: after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry except about Auschwitz.]

L. B. *Eppure Adorno aveva scritto che dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia.*
P. L. Ecco, io correggerei questo enunciato di Adorno. Direi che dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia se non su Auschwitz, o per lo meno tenendo conto di Auschwitz. Qualcosa con Auschwitz, qualcosa d'irreversibile è successo nel mondo.[37] (*Opere complete III* 532)

[L. B. *Yet Adorno had written that after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry.*
P. L. Look, I would correct this statement by Adorno. I would say that after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry except about Auschwitz, or at least with Auschwitz in mind. Something with Auschwitz, something irreversible has happened in the world.]

R. M., B. S. *Che risposta darebbe alla domanda di Adorno (il filosofo della scuola di Francoforte): "è ancora possibile fare poesia dopo Auschwitz"?*
P. L. […] Direi che la frase di Adorno è molto severa ed anche motivata… però è inesatta. Io credo che si possa fare

> poesia dopo Auschwitz, ma non si possa fare poesia dimenticando Auschwitz.[38] (*Opere complete III* 622)
>
> [R. M., B. S. *What answer would you give to Adorno's (the Frankfurt School philosopher) question, "is it still possible to make poetry after Auschwitz"?*
> P. L. [...] I would say that Adorno's statement is very strict and also motivated... however, it is inaccurate. I believe that one can make poetry after Auschwitz, but one cannot make poetry by forgetting Auschwitz.]
>
> la famosa affermazione di Adorno che scrivere poesia dopo Auschwitz è un atto barbarico. Lo [*sic*] cambierei con: dopo Auschwitz è barbarico scrivere poesia se non su Auschwitz.[39] (*Opere complete III* 630)
>
> [Adorno's famous statement that after Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric. I would change it to: after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry except about Auschwitz. (*The Voice of Memory* 28)]

In my opinion, the complex dynamic of "writing after" is thus one of the most profound bonds between Saba and Levi, and the one which made both envision an intense similarity between their two works — as Levi writes to Saba ("mi sento più vicino a Lei di prima") ["I feel closer to you than before"].

In addition to the difficulties of finding a new literary voice in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the two writers also experienced the pain and solitude as Shoah survivors of not being trusted and understood by their contemporaries. Nonetheless, they never ceased to write and to feel the necessity of writing, and in their post-war outputs they tried to respond to the dilemma of remaining writers both *in spite of* and *because of* the Shoah. For example, in the post-war years, Saba experienced a terrible feeling of detachment and loneliness to which his writings and his letters bear witness.[40] As I have demonstrated elsewhere ("'A lei scrivo volentieri'. Lettere" 96), in these years Saba considered the process of writing as a painful activity ("scrivere mi affatica o, meglio, mi angoscia") ["writing causes me fatigue or, rather, distress"][41] but at the same time a cathartic one, which can lead both the author and his readers to the liberation from their inhibitions and psychic turmoil. The

importance for Saba of having his voice heard even at the risk of being criticized and not understood is demonstrated in a letter to his friend Bruno Pincherle dated June 30, 1953:

> Oh Dio, se invece di quel discorsetto avessi potuto leggere Ernesto (chiudendo d'autorità gli ascoltatori nell'Aula Magna; in modo che avessero potuto dire a sé stessi e agli altri che ascoltavano solo perché obbligati dai cordoni della Celere) credo che sarebbero impazziti di gioia, compreso il Magnifico Rettore e Funaioli, che deve essere sugli ottanta. La gente, Bruno mio, ha un bisogno, un bisogno urgente di "mettersi in libertà," di essere insieme liberata dalle sue inibizioni. Questo sarebbe il mestiere della mia vecchiaia: disgraziatamente, se lo esercitassi, la Celere sarebbe contro di me e non contro il pubblico… (Coen 241)
>
> [Oh God, if instead of that little speech I had been able to read Ernesto (authoritatively locking the listeners in the Great Hall; so that they could have told themselves and others that they were listening only because they were obliged by the cordons of the Celere Units) I think they would have gone crazy with joy, including the Magnificent Rector and Funaioli, who must be in his eighties. People, my Bruno, have a need, an urgent need to "set themselves free," to be together freed from their inhibitions. This would be the profession of my old age: unfortunately, if I exercised it, the Celere Units would be against me and not against the public…]

Saba fantasizes about a forced public reading of his novel *Ernesto* since he argues that his work would liberate his listeners from their inhibitions and neuroses, although he knows that society would not allow such a scandalous recitation. Seemingly, the same horror of not being listened to and of not being taken seriously recurs throughout Levi's production, interconnecting with a literary tradition that includes Homer, Dante, Coleridge (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), and Eduardo de Filippo (*Napoli milionaria*). For instance, Levi's last book *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), published in the Spring of 1986 only one year before his death, was originated profoundly by his fear of not being heard or believed, at a time when revisionist theories on the Lagers and

Holocaust denial were growing stronger. In his conclusion to this book, the author states how passing their testimonies to the newer generation is a moral duty as well as a risk for Shoah survivors:

> Per noi, parlare con i giovani è sempre più difficile. Lo percepiamo come un dovere, ed insieme come un rischio: il rischio di apparire anacronistici, di non essere ascoltati. Dobbiamo essere ascoltati: al di sopra delle nostre esperienze individuali, siamo stati collettivamente testimoni di un evento fondamentale ed inaspettato, fondamentale appunto perché inaspettato, non previsto da nessuno. […] È avvenuto, quindi può accadere di nuovo: questo è il nocciolo di quanto abbiamo da dire. (*Opere complete II* 1273-1274)
>
> [For us it is becoming harder and harder to speak with young people. We see it as both a duty and a risk: the risk of appearing outdated, of not being listened to. We have to be listened to: apart from our individual experiences, we were collective witnesses to a fundamental and unexpected event, fundamental precisely because it was unexpected, unforeseen by anyone. […] It happened once and it can happen again. This is the heart of what we have to say. (*The Complete Works III* 2564)]

However, some nuances can be perceived in the ways in which Saba and Levi address the difficulty of writing after and about the Holocaust. Despite the great distress of his later years, Saba never ceased to believe in poetry and in its therapeutic potential. By contrast, the relationship between the painful need to write and its outcomes appears more problematic in Levi. The chemist and author often expressed the utopian ideal of literature as a rational tool which could bring scientific logic where there seemed to be none. In Levi's output, it is through the painful reliving in writing of the subjugation and the violence he suffered that the narrator could strive to understand universal grief. This is what he states also in his letter to Saba, where he refers to "i problemi nuovi che attendono soluzione: e li attendono da noi, *noi che ci siamo passati attraverso, corpo ed anima*, chi in un modo e chi in un altro" ["the new problems which need solving: and those problems are awaiting solutions from us, *who went through it, body and soul*,

some in one way and some in another"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221). Nevertheless, along with this assumption, in Levi there is also a painful awareness of the innate insufficiency of words to describe fully the trauma of the Lager. Literature is then for him a mix of effort and relief, and language a form of liberation and perpetual imprisonment. In his later years, this complex dilemma led him to develop an anguished concern regarding the very possibility of speech, as manifested in his powerful short story *La ragazza del libro* (*The Girl in the Book*), from *Lilith e altri racconti* (*Lilith and Other Stories*, 1980), and in his last masterpiece, *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986).

In my opinion, the four letters also show some further points in common between the poetics of the two authors, which appear to be the motivation for the thoughtful comments upon their respective books. First of all, in his letter Saba praises Levi for writing "dall'interno" ["from the inside"] of the concentration camp, thus providing an invaluable point of view of that experience ("adesso è come se avessi fatto personalmente l'esperienza di Auschwitz") ["I feel as if I personally have experienced Auschwitz"] (LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 215-216). This resonates profoundly with Saba's own idea of literature, since he also aimed to write "from the inside" of the self and often stated that the main objective of his poetry was to convey his own experience of psychological grief and mental sorrow. In shortcut 113, he reveals that one of his favorite verses is the hendecasyllable from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Ernani* "Udite tutti del mio cor gli affanni" ["Hear, you all, the afflictions of my heart"], which demands a sharing of personal anguish (*Tutte le prose* 52). In the same vein, the title of the 1912 edition of what became later known as *Il Canzoniere* was *Coi miei occhi* (*With My Eyes*), a title which emphasized the personal and subjective position of the poet's unique gaze on the world.

Writing "from the inside" is also a fundamental aspect of Levi's *oeuvre*, and this is revealed in his letter by the expression "passare attraverso" ["to go through"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221). In Levi's words, only those who have gone through and experienced the Holocaust "corpo ed anima, chi in un modo e chi in un altro" ["body and soul, in one way or another"] have both the right and the duty to express their experiences, since they are the ones who are most capable of facing "i problemi nuovi che attendono soluzione" ["the new problems which need a solution"].

As a matter fact — like Saba — a key point of Levi's poetics was to carefully anchor his texts in individual, real experiences, according to an aesthetic based on fidelity to the truth that he had inherited from Manzoni and Dante, as well as from his training in chemistry. As Rondini ("Bello e falso" 58-71) has recalled, building on his poetics in 1979 Levi famously described Liliana Cavani's 1974 movie *Il portiere di notte* (*The Night Porter*) as "un film falso" ["a false movie,"] (*Opere complete III* 136)[42] and inspired by "un cumulo di bugie" ["a heap of lies,"] (*Conversazioni e interviste* 229).[43] He disliked the Shoah being recounted through a fictional portrayal rather than a faithful testimony and for this reason he found himself in disagreement with Cavani's intentions, including her among a group of "esteti" (*Opere complete III* 440)[44] ["aesthetes"] (*The Voice of Memory* 252) negatively opposed to the actual eyewitnesses of the Lager.

However — and unlike Saba — Levi's claim for writing "from the inside" was perceived by himself as a problematic position rather than an undisputed one. His being a writer not *in spite* but *because of* his experience in the concentration camp was not simply a pacific state for him. It was also responsible for some almost irresolvable knots in his writing, such as the dichotomy between the need for a truthful account and the use of an undeniable fiction that is by its very nature "false."[45] For Levi "la memoria umana è uno strumento meraviglioso ma fallace" (*Opere complete II* 1155) — ["human memory is a wonderful but fallible instrument"] (*The Complete Works III* 2420) — and the process of transferring personal memories into creative texts appears at the same necessary and highly problematic, since it inevitably simplifies and distorts the original experiences:

> un ricordo troppo spesso evocato, ed espresso in forma di racconto, tende a fissarsi in uno stereotipo, in una forma collaudata dall'esperienza, cristallizzata, perfezionata, adorna, che si installa al posto del ricordo greggio e cresce a sue spese. (*Opere complete II* 1155)

> [a memory that is recollected too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to harden into a stereotype, a tried-and-true formula, crystallized, perfected, adorned, that installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense. (*The Complete Works III* 2420-2421)]

In the chapter “Stereotipi” [“Stereotypes”] from *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*) Levi argued that an ineludible gap exists between the true account of the Holocaust and the fictionalized versions which had been provided by the many creative works based on it,

> […] spaccatura che esiste, e che si va allargando di anno in anno, fra le cose com’erano «laggiù» e le cose quali vengono rappresentate dalla immaginazione corrente, alimentata da libri, film e miti approssimativi. Essa, fatalmente, slitta verso la semplificazione e lo stereotipo; vorrei porre qui un argine contro questa deriva. (*Opere complete II* 1246-1247)

> [[…] a gap, growing wider as the years pass, between the way things were “down there” and the way they are represented in today’s imagination, fueled by inaccurate books, films, and myths. It drifts fatally toward simplification and stereotypes. Here I would like to build an embankment against this drifting. (*The Complete Works III* 2527-2528)]

Therefore, more than Saba, Levi is aware of the tension existing between the actual truth to convey and the risks of creative writing. He challenges this gap by offering his own first-hand testimony as survivor and developing a literary style “from the inside,” while remaining confident that “non c’è libro senza invenzione” [“there is no book without invention”] (Poli and Calcagno 264).

Among the other commonalities between Saba and Levi, it is possible to note that for both the need to proclaim the distinctiveness of one’s own sorrowful experience is not conceived simplistically as a form of narcissistic egotism or self-voyeuristic impulse. By contrast, the retelling of their private deeds is conceived by both as a way to interpret the universal distress of all humankind. For instance, in his poetic collection *Mediterranee* Saba confesses that his poetic motto is “Pianse e *capì* per tutti” [“He wept and *understood* for everyone”] (*Tutte le prose* 532), a verse reshaped from Gabriele D’Annunzio’s poem *Per la morte di Giuseppe Verdi*, in the collection *Elettra*.[46] This confession bears

witness to Saba's belief that his sorrows could be paradigmatic of those of the whole of humankind.[47] Levi seems to think along the same lines. In his letter he says, "vi ho ritrovato molto del mio mondo. Non del Lager, voglio dire; meglio *non solo del Lager*" ["I found much of my own world in it. Not of the Lager, I mean: or rather, *not only of the Lager*"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221). His experience of grief in the camp provided him with an overarching knowledge that makes him more conscious of many other problems of his times. As Massimo Bucciantini has argued, for Levi Auschwitz was not only a unique terrible experience, but — scientifically speaking — "una gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale" ["a gigantic biological and social experiment"] (Bucciantini 6-7), a useful litmus test that enabled him to understand and conceptualize other issues of society and humankind. It is interesting to note that the syntagma "non solo del Lager" ["not only of the Lager"] used in the letter was repurposed by Levi in two passages from *I sommersi e i salvati*, published more than thirty-seven years after the letter:

> Il discorso sul privilegio (*non solo in Lager!*) è delicato (*Opere complete II* 1151)
>
> [Privilege is a delicate subject (and *not only in the Lager*) (*The Complete Works III* 2416)]
>
> Gli scopi di vita sono la difesa ottima contro la morte: *non solo in Lager*. (*Opere complete II* 1240)
>
> [The business of living is the best defense against death, and *not only in the camps*. (*The Complete Works III* 2520)]

Another crucial point in common between the two writers is the need for clarity. This aspiration for clarity is recorded by Saba himself in his self-commentary *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (*History and Chronicle of the Songbook*):

> Parve […] troppo, per i suoi lettori, "oscura." Forse *era troppo chiara*. "*Chiarezza*" infatti avrebbe potuto essere il titolo del *Canzoniere*. (*Tutte le prose* 324)

> [[The poem] seemed […] too "obscure" for its readers. Perhaps *it was actually too clear*. "*Clarity*" could actually have been the title of the *Songbook*.]

> la sua complessità è stata ottenuta mediante un lavoro di *chiarezza intellettuale*. (*Tutte le prose* 328)

> [the complexity [of Saba's poetry] was attained through the workings of *intellectual clarity*.]

The need for clear and scientific writing is exactly what Levi meant in the powerful passage of his letter where he praised Saba's courageous longing "di nulla lasciare inesplorato, di tutto sollevare *dal buio del sottosuolo alla luce della consapevolezza*" ["to leave nothing unexplored, to bring up everything *from the darkness of the underground to the light of awareness*"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221). In fact, Levi's argument seems to reference shortcut 116, where Saba says,

> 116
> Ma se tu, se io, potessimo portare quelli [*sic*] inconsci conflitti *alla luce della coscienza*, ne proveremmo un grande, un indicibile sollievo (*Tutte le prose* 52)

> [116
> But if you, if I, could bring these unconscious conflicts *to the light of awareness*, we would feel a great, an inexpressible relief]

This dialectic between the light and the underground also recalls another self-exegetic passage that can be found in Levi's 1983 essay on translating Kafka:

> Nel mio scrivere, nel bene o nel male, sapendolo o no, ho sempre teso a *un trapasso dall'oscuro al chiaro*, come […] potrebbe fare una pompa-filtro, che aspira acqua torbida e la espelle decantata: magari sterile. (*Opere complete II* 1096)

> [In my writing, for better or for worse, knowingly or not, I have always tended toward *a transition from obscurity to clarity*, rather like a filter pump, sucking in turbid water and

> turning it our purified, even sterile […]. (*The Complete Works III* 2348)]

As Saba had famously stated in 1911, "ai poeti resta da fare *la poesia onesta*" ["it remains to poets to write *honest poetry*"] (*Tutte le prose* 674), that is to say, the only way to write poetry in modern times is through poetry that is authentic in its content, clear in its style, and comprehensible to anyone. In his writing, Levi seems to go in the same direction, trying to act as a scientific writer who strives to rationalize even that which seems to escape human reason. The solitude of this difficult but inescapable rationalizing process seems to be confirmed by a passage from *I sommersi e i salvati*, where Levi says,

> la distinzione […] buona fede / mala fede […] presuppone una *chiarezza mentale* che è di pochi (*Opere complete II* 1157)
>
> [the distinction […] between good and bad faith […] presumes a *clarity* that few have (*The Complete Works III* 2423)]

In the midst of many similarities or nuanced affinities, at least one major difference can be established between the two authors. In his letter, Levi remembers the last shortcut by Saba and offers his interpretation of "la genealogia che Lei si è scelta nell'ultima scorciatoia" ["the genealogy that you chose in the last shortcut"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221). In that text, Saba's traces the lineage of his work back to two thinkers of the early twentieth century, Nietzsche and Freud,[48] whereas Levi manifests in many occasions his disagreement with the theories of these two figures.

With regards to Nietzsche, Levi titles the eighth chapter of *If This Is a Man* "Al di qua del bene e del male," suggesting an implicit counterpoint to *Al di là del bene e del male*, the Italian translation of Nietzsche's 1886 book *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (*Beyond Good and Evil*). In this chapter the Lager prisoner is presented in his nullity and in stark contrast to the Nietzschean *Übermensch*; Levi aims to show the reader the other side of the "will to power" described by Nietzsche in his book, which portrays domination, appropriation and injury to the weak as not universally

objectionable. In the chapter “Violenza inutile” [“Useless Violence”], written more than three decades after *If This Is a Man* and included in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and The Saved*), Levi confirms his distance from Nietzsche’s work:

> Né Nietzsche né Hitler né Rosenberg erano pazzi quando ubriacavano se stessi e i loro seguaci con la loro predicazione del mito del superuomo, a cui tutto è concesso a riconoscimento della sua dogmatica e congenita superiorità; ma è degno di meditazione il fatto che tutti, il maestro e gli allievi, siano usciti progressivamente dalla realtà a mano a mano che la loro morale si andava scollando da quella morale, comune a tutti i tempi ed a tutte le civiltà, che è parte della nostra eredità umana, ed a cui da ultimo bisogna pur dare riconoscimento. La razionalità cessa, e i discepoli hanno ampiamente superato (e tradito!) il maestro, proprio nella pratica della crudeltà inutile. Il verbo di Nietzsche mi ripugna profondamente; stento a trovarvi un’affermazione che non coincida con il contrario di quanto mi piace pensare; mi infastidisce il suo tono oracolare; ma mi pare che non vi compaia mai il desiderio della sofferenza altrui. L’indifferenza sì, quasi in ogni pagina, ma mai la *Schadenfreude*, la gioia per il danno del prossimo, né tanto meno la gioia del far deliberatamente soffrire. Il dolore del volgo, degli *Ungestalten*, degli informi, dei non-nati-nobili, è un prezzo da pagare per l’avvento del regno degli eletti; è un male minore, comunque sempre un male; non è desiderabile in sé. Ben diversi erano il verbo e la prassi hitleriani (*Opere complete II* 1212)
>
> [Neither Nietzsche nor Hitler nor Rosenberg was mad when he intoxicated himself and his followers by preaching the myth of the superman, to whom all is conceded in recognition of his dogmatic congenital superiority. But it is worth considering the fact that all of them, master and pupils, gradually took leave of reality at the same pace as their morals became detached from the morals common to every time and every civilization, morals that belong to our heritage as human beings and must ultimately be recognized. Rationality ended and the disciples surpassed (and betrayed) their master by a broad measure in the

> practice of useless cruelty. Nietzsche's language repels me deeply; I struggle to find a statement that does not coincide with the opposite of my own preferred way of thinking. His oracular tone annoys me, but I do not think it ever expresses a desire for the suffering of others: indifference there is, on almost every page, but never s*chadenfreude*, joy in the hardships of his fellow man, or joy in deliberately causing pain. The suffering of the common people, the *Ungestalten*, the unformed, the not nobly born, is the price to pay for the coming of the kingdom of the elect. It is a lesser evil but evil nonetheless; it is not desirable in itself. Hitler's language and practices were another matter entirely. (*The Complete Works III* 2487-2488)]

While Saba found the roots of his *Shortcuts* in Nietzsche's work,[49] Levi opposed the philosopher both in his style and in his theories. In particular, he did not appreciate his "tono oracolare" ["oracular tone"], and considered him the master of Hitler's ideas. According to Levi, Nazism shaped his violent ideology by taking inspiration from Nietzsche's myth of the *Übermensch* detached from common morality, although the Nazis added a further sadistic desire for the suffering of others.

As for Freud, there seems to be a similar distancing between Levi and the psychoanalytic thinking; Levi refused this school of thought in the name of his rationalism, his "avidità vigile […] di nulla lasciare inesplorato" ["alert desire […] to leave nothing unexplored] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 221) that could not fully contemplate the possibility of unconscious impulses. In the chapter "La zona grigia" ["The Gray Zone"] from *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and The Saved*), Levi at the same time echoes and distances himself from Freudian terminology on the unconscious:

> Non mi intendo di inconscio e di profondo, ma so che pochi se ne intendono, e che questi pochi sono più cauti; non so, e mi interessa poco sapere, se nel mio profondo si annidi un assassino, ma so che vittima incolpevole sono stato ed assassino no (*Opere complete II* 1172)

> [I am no expert on the unconscious or the inner depths, but I do know that there are few experts, and that those few are more cautious. I do not know, nor am I particularly

> interested in knowing, whether a murderer is lurking deep within me, but I do know that I was an innocent victim and not a murderer (*The Complete Works III* 2439)]

Unlike Saba, Levi clearly states that he is more interested in true human actions than in the irrational drive that influences them. Again, in the chapter "La memoria dell'offesa" ["The memory of the offense"] he criticizes psychoanalytic interpretations of the social dynamics in the Lager by calling them "freudismi spiccioli" (*Opere complete II* 1156) — ["armchair psychoanalysis"] (*The Complete Works III* 2421). As Alberto Cavaglion noted, "l'assenza di Freud lascia incompiuto lo stesso dialogo di Levi con Saba" ["the absence of Freud leaves Levi's own dialogue with Saba incomplete"] (*Notizie su Argon*, 104). Saba implicitly acknowledges the importance of psychoanalysis also in his letter to Levi; his parenthetical sentence "se gli uomini possono essere responsabili di qualcosa" ["if men can be responsible for anything"] (LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 215-216) seems to echo Freud's famous statement that the ego "is not even master in its own house" (Freud 16, 285) and that human unconscious inputs "seem to be more powerful than those which are at the ego's command" (Freud 17, 141-142). In addition, Saba refers to Freud as "il solo che ha ancora ragione" ["the only one who is still right"] (Zipoli, "'A lei scrivo volentieri'. Lettere" 64),[50] again in September 1950 — almost two years after his letter to Levi — arguing that he is the only thinker who enables to understand not only personal problems but also societal ones. By contrast — as Cevenini noted — Levi was never an enthusiast of Freud's theory and always viewed with skepticism any ideas of irrational impulses, never renouncing his rational thinking and his scientific approach.

In conclusion, the correspondence between Levi and Saba, although very limited in time, seems to be crucial in highlighting the similarities and differences in the poetics of these two authors. The epistolary exchange reveals that, in spite of their distance in age, geography, background, and experiences, the two authors are far more connected and far closer in their literary intentions than critics have reckoned thus far. As a matter of fact, their poetics share some peculiar features, such as writing "from the inside," writing built on one's own experience, the attempt to rationalize sorrow, and the need for clarity. Finally, the four letters also bear witness to the fact that, as Jewish writers and survivors of the Shoah, in their *oeuvres*

Saba and Levi anticipated the same literary issue of "writing after" and about the Holocaust which later became the object of philosophical speculation and historical debate.

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NOTES

* I wish to thank Lisa Levi and Prof. Renzo Levi — Primo Levi's children and heirs — as well as Dr. Luisa Gentile from the State Archive in Turin and Prof. Walter Barberis from the Einaudi publishing house for allowing me to consult and publish hitherto unpublished archival materials. I express my gratitude also to Prof. Mattia Acetoso — Umberto Saba's heir — for authorizing me to access and cite these documents. All translations in the article are mine unless it is stated that they are taken from an existing publication in English.

[1] For the contacts between Primo Levi and Italo Calvino, see Beer. On Primo Levi and Claude Lévi-Strauss, see Mengoni, "Epifania di un mestiere." On Primo Levi and the correspondence with his German readers, see the bilingual book by Mengoni, *Primo Levi e i tedeschi*. For the exchanges between Primo Levi and Philip Roth see Samarini. On the impact of the essays and book reviews written by anthropologists in the journal *Scientific American*, see Maiolani.

[2] An article which pioneered the work in this field was Rondini, "Da Umberto Saba a Primo Levi." Other works which touch briefly on this specific theme are: Janulardo; Cavaglion, *Notizie su Argon* 104; Cavaglion, *Dal buio del sottosuolo* 9; Bucciantini 56-59; Barberis.

[3] LETTER 1 is preserved within the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Umberto Saba a Primo Levi, 3 ottobre 1948. The letter was published for the first time — and partially — in Castellani 7, and then quoted in part in Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1386. It can also be read now, both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski, in Bucciantini 158-159. LETTER 4 is preserved within the "Umberto Saba" archival collection at the Centro Manoscritti of the University of Pavia; see Centro Manoscritti dell'Università di Pavia, *Fondo Umberto Saba*, shelf mark SAB-07-0040. The draft of this letter, written with a pencil, is preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Primo Levi a Umberto Saba, 10 gennaio 1949. The letter was published for the first time in Fiori 8. It can also be read, both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski, in Bucciantini 160-161.

[4] LETTER 2 and 3 are preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999). The content of those two letters was summarized and only partially cited by Barberis 755, so it remains for the most part unpublished. I wish to thank Primo Levi's children and heirs — Renzo and Lisa Levi — for making these documents available to me and allowing me to publish them. I also thank Ruth Chester for providing the translations into English.

[5] Saba's dramatic mental condition in the postwar period is recorded in his letters to his friends and physicians. On this point, see Zipoli, "'A lei scrivo volentieri'. Lettere" and Zipoli, "Amos Chiabov e la poesia."
[6] On the porous boundaries between sanity and mental issues, and the consequences that this had on Saba's later years, see Zipoli, "'Strinsi col dolore un patto'."
[7] Levi's masterpiece was republished by Einaudi in 1958, and interestingly not in a narrative collection but within the book series "I Saggi" (The Essays).
[8] For an analysis of the publishing process of Saba's *Shortcuts*, see Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1191-1197.
[9] For example, it was in this period that Levi read *Uomini e no* (*Men or Not Men*) by Elio Vittorini, published in 1945.
[10] On the difficulties encountered by Levi in publishing his first volume, see Marco Belpoliti's "Note ai testi" in Levi, *Opere I* 1375-1413 and in *Opere complete I* 1449-1486. On the reception of Levi in those first years, see Ferrero 1997.
[11] On the controversial refusal of Primo Levi by Einaudi see Belpoliti 25-27, and Scarpa, *Storie avventurose* 165-202; 425-34.
[12] The original of this letter is preserved in the "Achivio Einaudi" at the State Archive in Turin; see Segreteria Editoriale, Corrispondenza (1931-1996), n. 3475, box 184, folder 2679, page 83 r.: *Saba Umberto; Carteggio in ordine alla pubblicazione del "Canzoniere" (1948)*. The letter was briefly discussed but not transcribed in Barberis 754. I wish to thank Dr. Luisa Gentile from the State Archive in Turin and Prof. Walter Barberis from the Einaudi publishing house for allowing me to consult and cite this hitherto unpublished document.
[13] Saba capitalizes Primo Levi's name in the original document, and I keep the same format both in my Italian quotation and within my self-translated English version. From this point onwards, all the capitalizations in the quotations are to be considered as present in the original text written by Saba.
[14] In the original, Saba writes "framene" instead of "farmene," and I correct the typo in my edition of the letter.
[15] Cajumi, Arrigo. "Immagini indimenticabili." On the early reception of Primo Levi in Italy, also see Ferrero 2005.
[16] This review can also be found in Ferrero 1997 306-307. More recently, the review was published both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski in Bucciantini 154-157.
[17] Calvino, Italo. "La letteratura italiana sulla Resistenza." (1949). *Saggi,* vol. 2, 1492-1500: 1499.
[18] On this, see Gordon, "Primo Levi and Holocaust Memory" and Gordon, "Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-war Italy."
[19] The date written on the letter ("October 3, 1948") is probably an error made by Saba because of the proximity of the date with the end of the previous month.
[20] It was not until the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s that this acknowledgement occurred in Italy, with regards both to the genocide and to the appreciation of Jewish culture in its relation to the Catholic tradition.
[21] The emphasis is mine. From this point onwards, all the emphases in the quotations are to be considered as mine, unless an endnote reports otherwise.
[22] Historical data show that around 300,000 deportees passed through Majdanek, 40 percent of them Jews of various nationalities. It was a site of death by many means, through gas chambers, shootings, and hangings, and about 80,000 people died there. The first Russian patrols arrived there on July 22, 1944 and found only a few

thousand survivors. At that time, Mauthausen, Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz were still unknown.
[23] An overview of this complex debate is provided by Stone.
[24] The italics are in the original text.
[25] The italics are in the original text.
[26] Mario Spinella was a writer and journalist who had joined the Italian Resistance movement in Tuscany after his experience on the Russian Front. He gave Umberto Saba refuge and protection in his house in via Della Robbia in Florence during the period of the Nazi occupation.
[27] The italics are in the original text.
[28] The italics are in the original text.
[29] Saba, *Tutte le prose* 18.
[30] The complete series of 'shortcuts' first appeared in six episodes in the printed journal *Nuova Europa* between March and July 1945. For information on the genetic process of this book, see Stara's essay entitled "Storia del testo, pubblicazioni precedenti alla stampa." in Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1191-1194.
[31] On the importance of Majdanek for Umberto Saba, also see Baldasso.
[32] On the reactions of European writers to the Holocaust, see Traverso; Marshall.
[33] The italics are in the original text.
[34] The italics are in the original text.
[35] Levi's interview with Luca Lamberti first appeared in *L'Adige* on May 11th, 1984. The quotation can also be read in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 111.
[36] Levi's interview with Giulio Nascimbeni was published in *Corriere della Sera* on October 28, 1984. This quotation can also be read in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 137.
[37] Levi's interview with Lúcia Borgia was broadcast in Rai television on February 3, 1985.
[38] Levi's interview with Raffaella Manzini and Brunetto Salvarani first appeared in *Qol* on Sept.-Oct. 1986.
[39] Levi's interview with Anthony Rudolf was first published in English in *London Magazine* vol. 26, no. 7, Oct. 1986, pp. 28-37. The cited translation into Italian is by Diana Osti.
[40] On Saba's later production, see Galavotti and Zipoli, "'Strinsi col dolore un patto'" 9-13.
[41] The quotation is from a letter that Umberto Saba wrote to Amos Chiabov on September 19, 1950.
[42] Levi's interview with Silvia Giacomoni appeared on *Repubblica* on January 24, 1979. The quotation can be read also in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 121.
[43] Levi's interview with Rita Sodi is dated June 19, 1986 and appeared posthumously in English in *Partisan Review* 54:3, 1987. The cited translation into Italian is by Erminio Corti. The interview was later republished by Marco Belpoliti using the interviewer's original materials in Italian, and this passage can be read in a slightly different version in Levi, *Opere complete III* 701.
[44] Levi's interview with Marco Vigevani was first published in *Bollettino della Comunità Israelitica di Milano* 40:5, 1984. The quotation can be read also in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 216.
[45] On the role of fiction in Levi's production see Mariani 69-80.
[46] On the strong bonds between Saba and D'Annunzio see Đurić 2008.

[47] As a testimony to the significance of this phrase for Umberto Saba, his daughter Linuccia wanted it to be engraved on the poet's tombstone in the Sant'Anna cemetery in Trieste.
[48] For this shortcut, see Saba, *Tutte le prose* 79.
[49] On the major impacts of Nietzsche's thinking in Saba see at least Palumbo; and Milanini.
[50] The quotation is from a letter that Umberto Saba wrote to Amos Chiabov on September 4. 1950.

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Alterity as a Mirror of Identity: Primo Levi's Self Representation in *Other People's Trades*

Abstract
Primo Levi reveals much about himself in the fifty-one short essays of *L'altrui mestiere* (*Other People's Trades*). This study analyzes *L'altrui mestiere* as the awareness of the "self" through the observation of "otherness" — other people, but also other living beings which are not human (mammalian animals and insects), others as minerals, and others as hypotheses, theories, writings, microcosmic or macrocosmic conceptions that Levi uses to weave a discourse of "alterity" as a mirror of "identity." *L'altrui mestiere*'s narrative pattern revolves around contrasts and comparisons between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the canny and the uncanny, the Heimlich against the Unheimlich. Ultimately, *Other People's Trades* sends a powerful, positive, universal message of respect and compassion about the human condition and enforces the natural curiosity about getting to know better who and what surrounds us.
Keywords: Primo Levi, *L'altrui mestiere*, *Other People's Trades*, self-identity, Heimlich, Unheimlich

L'altrui mestiere (*Other People's Trades*) is packed with delightful surprises for readers interested in learning more about its author, Primo Levi.[1] The Italian volume contains a collection of fifty-one short essays by Levi, spanning topics which include the natural sciences, zoology, astronomy, culture, modern and ancient classics, linguistics, philosophy, and literature.[2] All essays had been previously published in various Italian journals and newspapers, mostly by *La Stampa*, between 1964 and 1984.[3] The book sold approximately 14,000 copies (the least of all of Levi's books) and won the Premio Aquileia in 1985. The collected essays in *L'altrui mestiere* do not appear in the same chronological order in which they were originally separately published (Belpoliti 480-482). The English translation further shuffles the order of the essays, without an editorial note of explanation. Carol Angier notes that the illustration on the front cover of the first Italian edition, representing three stylized owls in shades of blue and grey, was created by Levi himself on his home computer (642).[4]

Primo Levi's writings are those of a philosopher in the age of the Cold War, of a humanist in the era of many scientific

discoveries, of a survivor of the Shoah during a decade of historical revisionism. Paradoxically, and notwithstanding the title *Other People's Trades*, Primo Levi reveals much about himself in between the lines of the short essays which compose the book. This study analyzes the volume as the realization of the "self" through the observation of "otherness," of personal individuality emerging from the scrutiny of the differences and diversity in "others." It is a discourse of "alterity" as a mirror of "identity": the essays collected in *Other People's Trades* help reveal Primo Levi's own self-representation. Here the reader catches more intimate glimpses of the usually reserved and private writer: his passions, his observations on everyday life, and his ethical convictions.

The complex discourse about *Identity/Alterity* and *Individuality/Otherness* embraces many academic disciplines: from linguistics to psychology, to literature, sociology, and anthropological studies. As Terry Veling paraphrasing Levinas, writes, "*I* am not an *I* unto myself, but an *I* standing before the other" (36, emphasis in the original). And Ralph Grillo states that "...the construction of alterity is varied and flexible across cultures, societies, and epochs, [and] ...different constructions can be found simultaneously within the same society" (262). In similar fashion, critic Marianna Papastephanou points out that "the constitution of the I and the Other is itself a mutable and unpredictable process ... where... identity and alterity within humankind need not be separated by impermeable boundaries, political or onto-anthropological." (14) In other words, defining the "self," reconstructing one's own individuality, emerging whole again after an existential crisis are the results of a subjective psychological process which is fluid, fragile, and amorphous.

L'altrui mestiere literally translates as "the job of the other," or "the trade that the 'other' is involved in," or "the 'work' or the 'specialization' of others." It implies an interest in the peculiar occupation(s) of others. For Levi, the term "others" is meant in its widest scope: other people, but also other living beings which are not human (mammalian animals and insects), others as minerals, and others as hypotheses, theories, writings, microcosmic or macrocosmic conceptions. "Others," then, defined simply as the "non-I": "others" as the "alterity." The Italian title, *L'altrui mestiere*, grammatically points to a singular noun, *mestiere*, rather than the plural form of "mestieri" ["trades"] which appears in its English translation. Perhaps this title modification in the Summit

Books edition seeks to reflect a plurality, a wider and more comprehensive horizon than what is implied by the original Italian title. Perhaps it represents a fair enough choice of wording by the translator Raymond Rosenthal, as the essays ultimately do cover a wide variety of different trades performed by different people, and treat multiple surroundings and issues beyond the "I."

The brief introduction which Levi wrote for *Other People's Trades* sheds light on his vast humanistic culture. Clarifying his intellectual interests, Levi writes,

> sovente ho messo piede sui ponti che uniscono (o dovrebbero unire) la cultura scientifica con quella letteraria scavalcando un crepaccio che mi è sempre sembrato assurdo [...] È una schisi innaturale, non necessaria, nociva […] fra le 'due culture' non c'è incompatibilità. (VI)
>
> [I have often set foot on the bridges which unite (or should unite) the scientific and the literary cultures, stepping over a crevasse which has always seemed to me absurd [...] This is an unnatural schism, unnecessary, harmful [...] between the 'two cultures' there is no incompatibility. (10)]

Levi states that life is part destiny, and part choice. When combined, they form the bridge that leads to the platform of life upon which each individual stands. And while societally, over the millennia, humankind formed many cultural clusters and anthropological tribes, at the same time individuals have been able to maintain their own identity within their communal groups.

The volume begins with an essay strikingly titled, "La mia casa" ("My House," as Rosenthal puts it; the title, however, could just as well have been a more reflective and intimate "My Home"). Why would a book on "others" begin with a narrative about "my" home? A possible clue might be found in a study by Adi Hastings and Paul Manning on "alterity" and its socio-linguistic components: "...voice is precisely an area where anthropological linguistics has shown clearly that a category seemingly transparently related to expressive identity is instead shot through with alterity" (300). In other words, that the construction of one's identity is not at all unrelated to otherness, and that linguistically the "I" is able to emerge as a separate entity from the "you" only after an *Auseinandersetzung*, a "confrontation" of sorts, takes place

generating the subjective. “Alterity,” then, understood as a mirror of “identity.”

The first essay of the volume clearly sets the tone for a self-portrait of this chemist-turned-writer. As the reader focuses on the few clues that Levi gives of himself here, the stage is set for Levi’s journey of self-discovery through the rest of the book. Here, Levi shares his longing for travel, but the reader hears echoes of his earlier deportation in 1944 to Poland, to the hell of Auschwitz, a journey that branded him both physically and psychologically; and likewise of his dramatic circuitous route back home to Turin after the Russian liberation of Auschwitz, a journey that lasted 10 months, from January to October 1945, and whose details were recounted in his autobiographical *The Truce*.[5] Leaving and returning to Turin require different interpretations depending on the chronology, because in Levi’s work, Turin, his native town, is squarely set at the intersection of intents between identity and alterity, between reality and desire: pre-war Turin stands in conflict and in contrast with Levi’s post-war and post-concentrationary Turin.

When referring to alterities, doubles, mirrors, otherness, and *Doppelgängers*, Sigmund Freud’s theories on the “uncanny” inevitably frame the basis of such discourse. However, in her seminal work *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva, clearly distinguishes between the connection to aesthetic problems in Freud’s “Das Unheimliche” and his investigation into the dynamics of the unconscious. She writes that “Freud took pains to separate the uncanniness provoked by esthetic experience from that which is sustained in reality” (Kristeva 187). Insightfully, Kristeva differentiates the literary from Freud’s theory of the return of the repressed. She shows the relational tension between the strangeness of the uncanny and its literary function as an aesthetic tool. In this study, the use of Freud’s “uncanny” terminology functions as an aesthetic and literary tool (a metaphorical form of cognition), rather than as a strict psychoanalytical premise for an investigation into the dynamics of the unconscious.

Freud’s 1919 essay “Das Unheimliche” [“The ‘Uncanny’”] sets the psychoanalytical premises for how individuals perceive part of their surrounding world. He seeks to answer the questions, what is meant by “fearful,” “dreadful,” and what is cause for horror? Freud defines as “uncanny” [*unheimlich*] that “class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very

familiar" (1-2). While apparently this assertion might seem a contradiction in terms, by the end of his study, Freud shows that it is not. Importantly, his essay begins with a thorough linguistic exploration of the word *unheimlich* as it appears in German and in various translations (Latin, Greek, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese) taken from etymological dictionaries, focusing on the historical development of their literal meaning. In its etymological German meaning, *heimlich* refers to the home (*Heim*), and by extension to something domestic and familiar, comfortable, to soothing memories. When the word appears with its prefix *un-*, the meaning turns to its opposite, to something unfamiliar and concealed, uneasy, eerie, whose meaning also could imply gruesome. Italian scholars use the Italian term *inquietante* (*disquieting*) to best translate the German *unheimlich*. Freud, of course, points out that not everything that is unfamiliar (or not belonging to the home) is frightening.

In German, notably, the word *heimlich* carries also a second meaning, that which is secret, secretive, concealed, withheld. Both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, then, may carry the same meaning, as is evident in all the possible nuances revealed in a dictionary. Freud clarifies that *heimlich* "is not unambiguous but belongs to two sets of ideas ... on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight" (4), and he makes human memory a contingent and necessary element for the existence of the "uncanny" (Süner 201). Freud points to some everyday examples when one encounters an object that is at the same time both canny and uncanny: for instance, children playing with dolls. In the child's mind, the doll (a humanoid that is not human) is a playmate rather than the obvious inanimate object that it is. The uncanny element of playing with an inanimate object becomes the child's desire and wish that the doll were, in fact, a living companion with whom to share fun times. Here, the uncanny transforms into a wish, a positive component, shooing away the uneasy connotations of the word, and the natural fear of the uncanny. By further extending the doll's example of the uncanny and the idea of a "double," one easily lands on the concept of a *Doppelgänger*, as Freud shows in his essay.

Freud's literary sources for his *Doppelgänger* theory first stem from Ernst Jentsch's writings, and later are followed specifically by his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman's short story "Der Sandmann," in *Nachtstücke*.[6] Also, Freud dips into the work of his

psychoanalyst colleague Otto Rank's *Der Doppelgänger*.[7] Perceptively, Freud writes that Rank's concept of the "'immortal soul' was the first 'double' of the body" to be understood as "preservation against extinction" (9). From this angle, religion is also understood as a double, the double of mortality, in that religion provides hope for some form of life after death. When viewed within this frame, Freud asks, is death then indeed actually uncanny and final? "The uncanny," Freud argues, "is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it" (15). Kristeva states, further developing this point, that "the builder of the *other* and, in the final analysis, of the *strange* is indeed repression itself, and its perviousness" (184). Freud points to the example of a haunted house, where the deceased might appear as spirits and ghosts (uncanny), but likewise also as benevolent spirits still connected to our lives, who can gently continue to guide loved ones still alive. In this case, spirits and ghosts are familiar and welcomed, while at the same time secretive and concealed.

The borderline between the concepts of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* can indeed be quite tricky. In literature, and specifically since the era of historical comedies, the character of the "double" has long been utilized as a technique used to bring to light contradictions and quirks of life to which one might otherwise be blind. Whether these doubles be human, or animal, or sometimes otherworldly, they help highlight and recognize different traits of oneself by mirroring human characteristics.

Rank writes extensively about the shadow (as cast from the human body), interpreted as the immortal part of a mortal person. Both shadow and the soul are viewed as human dualities, as the immortal expressions of human mortality. The shadow has long been understood as a dark mirror image of what casts it, a taboo of sorts, but also, and at the same time, as one's veritable *Doppelgänger*, a simple projection of reality, manifesting itself in a different form where *unheimlich* and *heimlich* coexist in the same moment. The *Doppelgänger* is often manifest in folklore and in myths: it can be something as obvious as dichotomous characterizations of young *vs.* old; mental health *vs.* mental health issues; peace *vs.* anxiety; reality *vs.* illusion and confusion. A "double" can be a past episode or experiences that still cling to a person *vs.* someone who lives exclusively in the present. Rank underscores that new ideas emanate from the double and these in turn stimulate its counterpart: the *Unheimlich* that helps shape and

refine the *Heimlich*. Oliver Simons sums up the apparent dichotomy well: "[a]fter all, it is all about the prefix '-un', the idea of a word that contains its antonym, not as a contradiction, but as an integral part of itself, two sets of ideas that are not mutually contradictory, yet very different from each other" (87).

Levi defines himself as a hybrid, stating that his intellectual life was forged in part by his professional choices as a chemist and in part simply by the vicissitudes that life threw at him over the years. He recognizes the need to reconcile the *Heimlich* with the *Unheimlich* coexisting within him. He claims to be teetering between science and the humanities, an expert in neither field, but to have gained a rich, rewarding and multifaceted look at the world, "annusando qua e là, e costruendomi una cultura disordinata, lacunosa … a rivisitare le cose della tecnica con l'occhio del letterato, le lettere con l'occhio del tecnico" (v) ["sniffing here and there, forming for myself a haphazard culture full of gaps ... examining matters of technique with the eye of a literary man, and literature with the eye of a technician" (9)].

In his writings, Levi compares himself to a centaur, the hybrid Greek mythical creature who is human in its upper body, and equine from the waist down; the centaur who physically carries his own *Doppelgänger* along (the reader will recall Levi's short story "Quaestio De Centauris," featuring Trachi, the protagonist, half horse and half-human male).[8] Levi's perceived own hybridity stems from both being simultaneously a writer and a chemist, as well as his real struggle — like Trachi's — between animalism and rationality which all humans feel. As Kristeva writes, "Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container…" (187).

In his study, Massimo Giuliani focuses on Levi's hybrid nature as a writer, emphasizing his "mythological metaphor of the centaur" (27). The human duality, Giuliani stresses, emerges when Levi writes as a witness to historical events, while keeping his scientific, objective approach to his narrative. Levi's prose is disciplined, rigorous and patient.[9] Literature mirrors life, "so that human intelligence can read and open space between life and its re-presentation, its reproduction and reduction in words" (Giuliani 27).

Throughout the short stories in Levi's *Altrui mestiere*, the dichotomies are numerous: from the need for one's privacy and comfort within the walls of one's own home — the *Heimlich* — to

the opposite desire to travel and discover the *Unheimlich* — the unknown, the unfamiliar, the uncanny. Starting already in Levi's first essay of the book, the pattern of the narrative begins to take shape: a pattern of contrasts and comparisons, of familiar and unfamiliar, of canny and uncanny, of the *Heimlich* against the *Unheimlich* in both thematic and linguistic terms. Kristeva, who writes that what is presently uncanny stems from that which in the past used to be familiar, remarks that "[w]ith the Freudian notion of the unconscious the involution of the strange in the psyche loses its pathological aspect and integrates […] an *otherness* that […] becomes an integral part of the *same*" (181, emphasis in the original).

Of the original fifty-one essays that compose the Italian version of *L'altrui mestiere*, eight, regrettably, have not been translated for the English edition of *Other People's Trades*.[10] Among these are a few which I deem to be seminal essays, in that they offer a better understanding of Levi's conception of individuality (*Heimlich*) as a contrast to alterity (*Unheimlich*). For instance, Levi, the professional, methodical, analytical chemist, specifically praises the liberating enthusiasm of the *amateurs*, people whose passions inspire them to reach beyond their everyday *Heimlich*, and who do so with the curiosity and the eagerness that he admires in the "others."[11] Levi's own duality leads him to value both serendipity (the uncanny, the unfamiliar) as well as his established, systematic, scientific approach to inquiry within his own field of knowledge.

Several essays in *L'altrui mestiere* explore the subject of "alterity" as revealed in language, linguistics, psycholinguistics, writing (method and scope), and the properties of others' languages. Levi looks at how language colors "other" lives in particular, at how — in De Saussurian terms — the objective *langue* differs from the subjective *parole*, at how communication is shaped also by colorful, local dialectal forms of expression. Humans are inextricably connected by the common threads of exchanged narratives. Words weave together stories and integrate them — together with the stories of others — into varied cultural landscapes. In doing so, the boundaries between the "I" and the "other" become more permeable and flexible, allowing for post-modern ideological conflicts to exist, not as a premise to war, but as capable of generating new kinds of inter-human relationships, possibly creating constructive horizons which enable reconciliatory perspectives. Marianna Papastephanou

argues that while the dipole "I" — "Other" cannot be substituted with the dipole "We' and "They," they share "a spatial and temporal proximity, one which becomes simultaneously a bridge and border, fluctuates, and is never at rest, [...] divided and distributed but also experienced in common" (16). She further suggests that "a story can be heard and told in infinitely many ways and the claims to 'plural reading' and 'recounting differently' are not only legitimate, but also compelling" (20). Such strategy is fundamental in understanding the "other," in narrowing the gap between self-representation and alterity, and emphasizing the need for human coexistence and survival. Without exception, Levi's essays in *Other People's Trades* stress that the stories of "others" are as compelling as our own, because by listening to others' memories, their own sufferings mitigate the divide between "them" and the "I."

It is, in fact, Levi's unique ability as a storyteller to view life from multiple points of view, through what he calls "incursions into other people's trades" (9), his never-ending curiosity for explorations into different horizons that bring him and his readers to understand better the world in all its manifestations. Such intersecting interests and intents sharpen the focus on the importance of both friendly and inimical encounters.

One of the ways in which Levi explores his surroundings is through etymologies and nuances in the use of language, because language brings to the fore the unstable bipolar pull of identity/alterity (*langue*/*parole*), which in turn creates the ability to identify one's own linguistic patterns and the variances of others'. Through words, others' languages and their differences (*unheimlich*) become relevant when compared and contrasted with one's own idiom (*heimlich*). As Hastings points out,

> Clearly everyone *knows* that identity is always constructed in relation to alterity. After all, it takes two to differ. It has long been an anthropological truism that the construction of (ethnolinguistic) identity cannot be studied except at its boundaries, beginning with alterity and otherness. [...] So we all know that it is impossible to talk about identities except by explicit reference to alterity. (293, emphasis in the original)

Hastings focuses on the relevance of differences in linguistic patterns, both in grammatical form and in a socio-linguistic context. A different linguistic use defines "alterity" socio-politically.

Within this setting, *L'altrui mestiere* draws attention to the language of science and to its polyphony of voices and intellects. Specifically, Levi points to how chemistry's elemental properties flow into words and how words create metaphors that describe the properties of chemistry, itself a non-verbal phenomenon.[12] Having turned to full-time writing after retirement, Levi states, "Ma adesso il mio mestiere è un altro, è un mestiere di parole, scelte, pesate, commesse a incastro con pazienza e cautela; così, per me anche gli elementi tendono a diventare parole, invece della cosa mi interessa acutamente il suo nome e il perché del suo nome" (127). ["But now my trade is a different one, it is the trade of words, chosen, weighted, fitted into a pattern with patience and caution: thus, for me also the elements tend to become words, and instead of the thing, its name and the why of its name interest me acutely" (117).]

De Saussure's principles of *langue* vs. *parole* are seminal to the concept of "otherness" in languages, not only in the case of a foreign idiom, but also within the variables of the domain of any single language, for *langue* and *parole* represent respectively a general semantic field *vs*. the specific, subjective choices of words by any individual. Thus, the issue of linguistic identity and linguistic alterity is relevant both when translating from one language into another, as well as within one single language. Goetschel points out that, "Identities...are by definition fragile, precarious, strategic, and often dynamic" (26). The nuances between subjective *vs*. objective use of language play a fundamental role in trans-cultural exchanges. In *Other People's Trades*, Levi probes the use of language as an identifier of alterity and of its variations when dealing with translations and translated texts, where the *Heimlich* meets the *Unheimlich*.[13] He writes that a well-executed translation is equivalent to a work of peace and reconciliation, as it bridges two languages, or two cultures, or two worlds which otherwise would have had difficulty in intersecting meaningfully. In her work on Freud's essay on the (Un)Heimlich, Kristeva points to the importance of reconciliation, stating that the unconscious becomes "nature and symbol" which host the foreignness living within each psyche, and lead to the appeasement of the "I" and the "Other" (182). When a text is translated, the "identity" meets its linguistic "alterity," building a bridge with a stranger. Two languages meet,

two cultures come together (the *Heimlich* and the *Unheimlich*), and one text becomes intelligible to two culturally different readerships through the careful work of a mediator, the translator. Herein lays the reorientation in the human landscape. The translator and the act of translating mediate between the "I" and the "other." No one better than Levi could understand the intricacies, the responsibility, the skills entailed in translating, as he himself was both a translator and a translated author. Levi understands that the translator is the only person who truly and completely reads a text, who navigates the transition between the canny (familiar) and the uncanny (unfamiliar), and who does it "apprezzando ogni parola e ogni immagine" (113) ["appreciating every word and every image," my translation] of its original meaning.[14]

The critic Papastephanou also highlights the cultural, social, linguistic and political implications embedded in a translation, as her ethno-linguistic analysis on alterity examines the implications and compromises forged in translations: "In the difference of the I and the Other there lies similarity and vice versa ... For, if my life history (*Lebensgeschichte*) can be conveyed in many ways and if, in its uniqueness, it is interwoven with that of others and can be recounted from their perspective, then my own narration of it cannot be immutable" (20). Hence, a translator's job ("trade") is to render intelligible to the "other" a subjective, mutable, fluid (*heimlich*) narrative which defines the "identity" of both the original author and its text in a way that can be read in a familiar and understandable (*heimlich*) way by those for whom it previously was not fully recognizable (*unheimlich*). Of course, no matter how skilled a translator may be, something is always lost in a translation. Insightfully, Levi notes that "l'attrito linguistico tende a diventare attrito razziale e politico" (109) ["linguistic attrition tends to become political attrition," my translation"].[15] He emphasizes that the act of translating is not merely just a linguistic skill, rather that much more is involved in a transaction, for it implies also a deep understanding of the socio-political linguistic frames and of their cultural norms and use. Such intricacies are part of the fabric of a translation, from the original "identity" into the target of "otherness." This amalgamation of approaches requires communicating the invisible linguistic envelope that wraps a text.

When moving the *Heimlich* into the *Unheimlich*, specifically in the case of a translation, Levi observes an inevitable loss in the exchange. He compares this to the fee charged by banks

when exchanging foreign currencies, a non-negotiable fact about which the customer already knows in advance and takes for granted in these kinds of financial transactions because when creating textual "alterity" from an original "identity," the translator negotiates and localizes between two separate worlds of grammatical signifiers, cultural idioms, and morphological systems; perfect translations are impossible.

Levi is adamant about the authorial obligation to write as understandably as possible for the readers.[16] Gabriel Motola notes that "what in fact almost makes Primo Levi's blood boil is the deliberately equivocal artist" and Levi's "scorn for the writer who obfuscates" (144-145). Here, Levi explores the theme of the *Doppelgänger* who hides within every author. Of the many iterations of alterity and otherness, a *Doppelgänger* is borne, Levi writes, of the forced relationship that anyone has with their past, with their 'paths not taken,' with their regrets about life and professional choices that did not come to fruition, "[...] perciò siamo condannati a trascinarci dietro, dalla culla alla tomba, un Doppelgänger, un fratello muto e senza volto, che pure è corresponsabile delle nostre azioni, quindi anche delle nostre pagine" (50). [... therefore we are condemned to carry from crib to grave a doppleganger, a mute and faceless brother who nevertheless is co-responsible for our actions, and so for all of our pages" (170)].

Some of these ghostly look-alikes are part of Levi's past, they are the Jewish inmates of Auschwitz, the "sommersi" (submerged) as well as the "salvati" (saved) among his friends and fellow prisoners, those who spoke Italian, those who spoke Yiddish, the agnostic prisoners, the zealously religious, the women, the children, the ghosts of the murdered in the camps, those who, in his memories, permeate, and often hound, his prose works and, especially, his poetry.[17]

The unavoidable disconnect that a *Doppelgänger* creates with the "I" also becomes, though, the best route to the understanding of the "other," because alterity, as it turns out, is not all that different from the "I," once the stories are told, the differing points of view explained. Kristeva writes that we welcome the uncanny, because "Freud teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves" (191). The *Unheimlich* becomes *Heimlich*. As Papastephanou argues, the validation of one's own memories, identities, and sufferings leads to forging an integration between the purported dichotomies, so that the "other" ceases to be a contrasting

stranger, and morphs instead into relative and less radical forms of alterity: "What separates us as distinctive entities is also what brings us together" (22). Thus, the exchange of memories, of language, of perspectives constitutes the first building blocks for the transformation of rigid dipoles into a more flexible multiplicity of manifestations. Levi discusses to what end an author writes, for whom, and why. The distance between a reader (the "other") and a writer (the "I") is proportional to the clarity and the scope of the author's words: the more intelligible, the stronger the bond that connects them.

To what extent do writers share their authorial language with their *Doppelgänger* and their readers? Language intended for the "other" cannot be cryptic, Levi writes, and must be as linear and as explicit as possible because, "la scrittura serve a comunicare, a trasmettere informazioni [...] e chi non viene capito da nessuno non trasmette nulla, grida nel deserto" (51) ["Writing serves to communicate, transmit information [...] and he who is not understood by anyone does not transmit anything, he cried in the desert" (171)].[18] The author should seek to create a trusting path of understanding, transparency and intelligibility. Such effort to build a bridge with the "other," the reader, also brings long-term rewards to the writer, because "tanto più a lungo verremo ricordati, quanto migliore sarà la qualità della nostra comunicazione" (54) ["the better the quality of our communication [...] the longer we will be remembered (174)].

In recognizing the merits of Primo Levi's works, there is no need to choose between chemistry and literature. For him, they are inter-connected subjects, and they support one another. Levi has proven that literary structures (to include, of course, poetry) and mathematics each follow their own patterns that reveal internal rhythms and models. The former uses syllables, words, sentences and paragraphs to build intelligibility, to form a harmonious discourse. The latter relies on the energy of material, whose patterns point to our place on this planet and within the universe. Within the cosmic balance of energy and matter in which we dwell, language expresses human existence and our surroundings. The one could not exist without the other.

Levi teaches that better communication between the "I" and the "alterity" leads to common ground, while at the same time allowing for the necessary space to respect differences. Papastephanou writes that when not inflated, "[d]issent and conflict

may generate fresh outlooks [...] appreciation of otherness" (14). Interhuman relations are served and improved by intersubjective exchanges between alterities. The enforcement of reciprocal recognition between the "I" and the "alterity" creates respect for divergences. Eventually, the emerging similarities between the narratives of the "identities" and those of the "alterities" will lead to the discovery of some fundamental commonalities, and to exchanges and reversibility of the perceived frictions, where the *Unheimlich* can freely morph into the *Heimlich*. The stories in *L'altrui mestiere* highlight that "others" are always most worthy of our own investigation and study, and that by seeking to understand the strategies of the "other," we better understand and hone our own.[19] As Kristeva points out, "[T]he strange appears as a defense put up by a distraught self" (183).

In developing his own self portrait in between the lines of *L'altrui mestiere*, Primo Levi leaves a clear message: a person's self representation is closely related to, and dependent upon, the "other." "Alterity" is merely a reflection of the understanding of one's own "identity." *Other People's Trades* has as much to do with "others" as it has to do with Primo Levi himself and to his own reader. Ultimately, *Other People's Trades* sends a powerful, positive, universal message of reconciliation that blossoms simply through the natural curiosity of getting to know better who and what surrounds us.

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NOTES

[1] I dedicate this study to the memory of Nick Patruno, whose academic commitment and contributions to Primo Levi helped bring to light so many new facets of Levi's works. Patruno's shining personality, his personal ethics, and dedication to the profession are truly missed — he was gregarious, and he always so sincerely welcomed the stories of the "others." *L'altrui mestiere* (Einaudi, 1985) was translated into English by Raymond Rosenthal and published in 1989 by Summit Books. The short stories published in English are presented in a different order from the original Italian volume. I wish to thank Chris Kleinhenz, Professor Emeritus of Italian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his thoughtful critique of an earlier version of this study, Ugo Rubeo, Professor Emeritus of Anglo-American Literature at the Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza for

his suggestions on the "uncanny," and the anonymous readers for their helpful comments.

[2] Of the original fifty-one essays in the original Italian edition (1985), only forty-three (plus Levi's introduction) were included in the translated English edition, *Other People's Trade* (1989). While I use both titles interchangeably, my comments, references and quotes pertain to the Italian edition (*L'altrui mestiere*), unless otherwise cited in English. Some quotes are my translations, as noted, because they refer to stories from *L'altrui mestiere* that have not yet been translated.

[3] This information is printed on the back cover of the first Italian paperback edition.

[4] Both Carol Angier and Pietro Scarnera highlight Levi's fascination with owls, and the personal connection that he felt with strigiforms. Pietro Scarnera, too, reports that the front-cover illustration was created by Levi on one of his early Apple Macintosh computers.

[5] *La tregua*, 1963; titled *The Reawakening* in the US English translation (1965).

[6] *The Night Pieces*, 1817

[7] Rank's study was first published in 1914.

[8] "Quaestio de Centauris" appeared in *Storie naturali* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966), Levi's third published book, which he wrote under the pseudonym of Damiano Malabaila. The short story was translated into English only many years later, in 2015, by Jenny McPhee in *The New Yorker* (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/08/quaestio-de-centauris).

[9] Levi's poetry is altogether different in nature, thematically and stylistically.

[10] The American publisher, Summit Books, a division of Simon and Schuster in New York, offers no explanation for this editorial choice in the English volume.

[11] "Le parole fossili" ("Fossil words," or "Fossilized words," one of the essays not appearing in the English edition).

[12] "La lingua dei chimici I" and "La lingua dei chimici II" [The Language of Chemists (I)" and "The Language of Chemists (II)"].

[13] "Tradurre ed essere tradotti" (this essay is not included in the English translation of *Other People's Trades* — "To translate and to be translated," my translation).

[14] Levi masterfully translated into Italian, among others, a body of German poems by Heinrich Heine, Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*, an anonymous Scottish ballad, a poem by Rudyard Kipling, a treatise by Mary Douglas, and two works by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Levi's first traumatic encounter with foreign-language linguistic alienation occurred as a prisoner in Auschwitz, where a chaos of languages was spoken in the camp, but where orders were barked solely in German, and where Jewish prisoners deported from all of Europe spoke a cacophonic variety of different idioms, most often without being able to even understand one another. In Auschwitz, the skill of being able to translate and of being translated could sometimes mean the difference between death, or a few more days of life. In Auschwitz, the linguistic *Unheimlich* brought terror and death.

[15] "Tradurre ed essere tradotti."

[16] As a self-proclaimed amateur literary critic, Levi's essay "Dello scrivere oscuro" ("On Obscure Writing") is arguably one of his most significant texts, because he

explores the theme of the authorial *Doppelgänger*. "Dello scrivere oscuro" appeared first in *La Stampa* on December 11, 1976, p. 3. https://www.scribd.com/doc/223308837/Primo-Levi-Dello-Scrivere-Oscuro#

[17] See, specifically, the poem "Il superstite," "The Survivor" written on February 4, 1984. https://poesiainrete.com/2022/09/02/il-superstite-primo-levi/

[18] In criticizing authors whose language is convoluted, Levi states that their readers likely feel frustrated and demotivated as they try to negotiate an unintelligible text. As examples of obscure writers, Levi points to Ezra Pound, George Trakl, and Paul Celan. "Dello scrivere oscuro" ("On Obscure Writing").

[19] "Gli scacchisti irritabili" ("The Irritable Chess Players")

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Primo Levi's "Shame of the Just": On Post-Holocaust Ethics and Collective Responsibility

Abstract
The "shame of the just," a concept Levi developed in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*) and other texts, is the experience of shame acutely felt by blameless people of conscience at the sight of crimes against humanity. It compels us to feel morally and politically responsible for offences committed by others. Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti and Zygmunt Baumann use Levi's "shame of the just" concept to theorize post-Holocaust ethics. While shame can be paralyzing, especially abject shame, the "shame of the just" is a collectively shared affect that can promote responsibility, solidarity and resistance to state-sponsored violence.
Keywords: Shame, post-Holocaust ethics, Primo Levi, Zygmunt Baumann, Rosi Braidotti, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka

> It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled,
> But the world that is wholly foul (77-78).
> (T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral)*

Over the course of four decades Primo Levi wrote powerfully about shame, one of the Holocaust's saddest and most significant legacies. His several testimonies thoroughly address the abject shame of dehumanization in Auschwitz, which he personally experienced and observed. However, I am particularly interested here in what Levi had to say about the kinds of shame that arise from the "subject" position, that is, for those who had or have the potential to act altruistically. Not the shame of what was done to me, but what I fear I did to the Other or failed to do for the Other that makes me feel ashamed. Consequently, the shame experienced from a position of agency is not only about subjectivity but also about intersubjectivity, that is, the subject's ethical relation to the Other.

Levi stated multiple times that the Nazi genocide shamed not only the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders — those who witnessed the atrocities at some remove — but also debased the whole world, depositing a toxic residue that still shames every one of us, even those born after the events. The only ones apparently unaffected by this shame, at the time of the Holocaust but also

afterwards, were some Germans and their collaborators, including the Italian Fascists, who were guilty of either perpetrating or silently consenting to the atrocities. In contrast, the feeling of shame experienced by "the just" does not depend on actual culpability, but on a visceral abhorrence to crimes against humanity. It does not arise from a rational decision but from an affective response to the sight of unnecessary, unwarranted suffering. In such cases, people of conscience who have done no wrong judge their inability to stop oppression, or to redress a crime against humanity after the fact, as a kind of unwilled complicity. As members of the human race, they feel implicated in the shame of the Holocaust and, therefore, responsible.[1]

Several of Levi's key texts demonstrate the following principle which dates back to his earliest writings: to sincerely engage with testimony bearing witness to the Other's suffering at the hands of criminal perpetrators — an act that shames the world — is to embrace responsibility, which is the first and necessary antecedent to ethics and action. To mention a well-known example, "Shemà," the moving epigraphic poem to *Se questo è un uomo* (1958), and one of Levi's first post-Holocaust texts, commands the reader to acknowledge that abject victims robbed of their intrinsic individual qualities are human beings, no matter how fully dehumanized, for whom the reader is responsible (*Se questo* 3; *If This* 7).

In this article, I argue that what makes Levi so significant to the formulation of post-Holocaust ethics and, in turn, to collective resistance to genocidal violence, is his account of the "shame of the just" (also known as the "shame of being human" or the "shame of the world"). By this, I mean the experience of shame felt acutely by blameless people of conscience at the sight of crimes against humanity. While shame can be paralyzing, especially abject shame, the "shame of the just" is a collectively shared affect that can promote responsibility, solidarity, and action.[2]

The first two-thirds of this article describes how Levi's "shame of the just" is represented in his Holocaust testimonies and also considers the daunting challenges entailed in testifying to shame.[3] The last third gives a concise account of what three post-Holocaust thinkers — Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti and Zygmunt Baumann — take away from Levi's account of shame. In a nutshell, it is that "la vergogna…che il giusto prova davanti alla colpa commessa da altrui" (*Tregua* 206) ["the shame which the just

person experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another" (*Truce* 216)] is a basis for ethics and action. As we will see, all three thinkers extend and revise Levi's "shame of the just" paradigm to theorize post-Holocaust ethics as a response to new crimes against humanity, and to enable political resistance to state-sponsored racism. At the end of the article, I critique Giorgio Agamben's reading of Levi, in which he fails to acknowledge the ethical, intersubjective force of shame, Levi's "shame of the just," and its crucial role in post-Holocaust ethics.

The Gaze of the Just

I begin my discussion of shame in Levi's writings with the first pages of *La tregua* (1963), his second book, which focuses on his nine months as a "displaced person" who waits and wanders through Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, finally returning home to Italy in October 1945. The powerful opening passage, which recounts his liberation from Auschwitz by an advanced patrol of Red Army soldiers on January 27, 1945, recognizes the Nazi genocide as an irrevocable, world-shaming event.

> Quando [i soldati] giunsero ai reticolati, sostarono a guardare, scambiandosi parole brevi e timide, e volgendo sguardi legati da uno strano imbarazzo sui cadaveri scomposti, sulle baracche sconquassate, e su noi pochi vivi. … Non salutavano, non sorridevano; apparivano oppressi, oltre che da pietà, da un confuso ritegno, che sigillava le loro bocche, e avvinceva i loro occhi allo scenario funereo. Era la stessa vergogna a noi ben nota, quella che ci sommergeva dopo le selezioni, ed ogni volta che ci toccava assistere o sottostare a un oltraggio: la vergogna che i tedeschi non conobbero, quella che il giusto prova davanti alla colpa commessa da altrui, e gli rimorde che esista, che sia stata introdotta irrevocabilmente nel mondo delle cose che esistono, e che la sua volontà buona sia stata nulla o scarsa, e non abbia valso a difesa. (*Tregua* 206)
>
> [When (the soldiers) reached the fences, they paused to look, and, with a brief, timid exchange of words, turned their gazes, checked by a strange embarrassment, to the jumbled piles of corpses, to the ruined barracks, and to us few living beings. … They didn't greet us, they didn't

> smile; they appeared oppressed, not only by pity but by a confused restraint, which sealed their mouths, and riveted their eyes to the mournful scene. It was a shame well-known to us, the shame that inundated us after the selections and every time we had to witness or submit to an outrage: the shame that the Germans didn't know, and which the just man feels before a sin committed by another. It troubles him that it exists, that it has been irrevocably introduced into the world of things that exist, and that his goodwill availed nothing, or little, and was powerless to defend against it. (*Truce* 216)]

Of the many ideas and feelings evoked by this passage, I am struck immediately by Levi's careful attention to the visual, the sense of perception most typical in the production of shame. On the first exposure to the terrors of Auschwitz, the soldiers look, and then, with greater engagement, gaze in embarrassment at the defiled corpses. Most significantly, in the face of such inhumanity, the soldiers do not spare themselves by looking away. Instead, Levi writes, "un confuso ritegno…avvinceva i loro occhi allo scenario funereo" ["a confused restraint…riveted their eyes to the mournful scene"]. Rather than treat the soldiers' fixed stare as a voyeuristic lack of respect for the dead, Levi links it with a righteous sense of shame, that is, with a fundamental human affect that is an essential condition for responsibility and solidarity.

Levi, looking at the soldiers who look at Auschwitz from the outside, recognizes in their faces a sense of shame that he and his fellow prisoners know all too well, the shame of having witnessed senseless suffering and dehumanization on a vast scale, without being able to stop it. It is the shame that the just person, "il giusto," experiences when witnessing the crimes committed by others. Like other forms of psychological trauma, deeply shameful events are burned into our memories, and are forever after a part of "[il] mondo delle cose che esistono" ["the world of things that exist"]. It is burdensome knowledge that can only be avoided through denial, by means of the constantly averted gaze. It is an emotion that, to our enduring shock, "i tedeschi non conobbero" ["the Germans didn't know"]. While Levi always insists on the humanity of his oppressors, he is equally certain that some perpetrators and bystanders shamelessly look away so as to remain

untouched by the undeniable feelings of complicity and responsibility experienced by "the just."[4]

Levi begins *La tregua* by dramatizing precisely how his text is intended to work. The soldiers, outsiders encountering the strange, terrible world of Auschwitz, are also stand-ins for us, Levi's readers. As we read, he counts on the same restraint referred to in the passage above to keep our gazes fixed on the page, focused on the unjust and intolerable suffering of the victims. This restraint prevents us from looking away, as much as we would like to escape the shame of being human in the face of such inhumanity.

It is because of the temptation to avert our gaze that testimonies bearing witness to deeply shameful events — as Levi's do — run the risk of meeting with the public's mute indifference, or with a willful amnesia designed to let the troubling past slip quietly away. This is precisely what happened in Italy in the first decade after Auschwitz. In 1955, Levi explained this troubling silence as a failure to register and accept the pervasive shame of the Holocaust that afflicts all people of conscience. He was not surprised that the citizens of Germany and the Italian Fascists were silent, but what about the rest?

> Ma che dire del silenzio del mondo civile, del silenzio del mondo della cultura, del nostro stesso silenzio, davanti ai nostri figli…? Non è dovuto solo alla stanchezza…[o] alla viltà…È vergogna. Siamo uomini, apparteniamo alla stessa famiglia umana a cui appartennero i nostri carnefici. Davanti all'enormità della loro colpa, ci sentiamo anche noi cittadini di Sodoma e Gomorra; non riusciamo a sentirci estranei all'accusa che un giudice extraterreno, sulla scorta della nostra stessa testimonianza, eleverebbe contro l'umanità intera. ("Deportati. Anniversario" 1114)
>
> [But what to say about the silence of the civilized world, the silence of our culture, our own silence, before our children…? It is not due to weariness alone (or)… to cowardice. It is shame. We are men, we belong to same human family that our executioners belong to. Before the enormity of their crime, we feel that we, too, are citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and cannot be exempted from the charge that an otherworldly judge, on the basis of our

> testimony, would bring against all humanity. ("The Deported. Anniversary" 1129)]

To put it simply, shame is the subject of Levi's writing but also, potentially, the impediment to its reception since the Holocaust not only shamed the victims but also every person. Levi's "shame of the just" can point toward ethical choices, but any survivor testimony, or any ethical or political resistance to future genocides, must also overcome the shame of speaking about our shameful pasts.[5]

His Brother's Cain

Although *La tregua* was first published in 1963, Levi actually wrote his account of the Russian soldiers and the shame they experienced in 1947, in conjunction with the concluding paragraphs of *Se questo è un uomo*. Levi, so perceptive, seems to have grasped immediately that shame would be one of the Holocaust's important legacies, not merely the abject shame experienced by the victims, but also our collective human shame in the face of events that have forever stained the world. When almost forty years later Levi returns to the topic of shame in "La vergogna," an essay included in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), he begins by citing the passage from *La tregua* that we have just analyzed. Those earlier observations have stood the test of time, Levi states, but are worthy of a more detailed analysis supported by additional testimony.

In the essay that follows, Levi discusses several distinct but intertwined types of shame that stem from Auschwitz. Informed by personal experience, he writes searchingly about the shame survivors feel when reflecting on their abject humiliation and passivity, on being forced to live like filthy, fearful animals. We cannot hope to understand the process of dehumanization without considering what it feels like to be thoroughly objectified and deprived of all dignity, emotions that Levi's texts convey with power and pathos. However, as I said, I am particularly interested in what Levi thinks about the kinds of shame that arise from the "subject" position, for those who have the potential to act ethically toward the Other.

By way of example, Levi discusses in detail the shame experienced by survivors when they recall their failure to help fellow prisoners in need of assistance and care. This lack of "solidarietà umana" ("Vergogna" 1051) ["human solidarity" ("Shame" 2463)], stemming from a justifiable concern for one's

own survival, is a typical example of another important concept Levi developed, the "zona grigia" — the "gray zone" — which describes how the Auschwitz prisoners were coerced into degrees of complicity with their murderous oppressors, yet another shameful legacy for the survivors.[6]

The survivor's sharpest sense of shame, according to Levi, stems from the inevitable and painful supposition that he or she survived the camp at the cost of another prisoner's life. What makes this observation so significant is the way that Levi universalizes the condition of the "survivor," which suggests that all of us who live privileged lives do so at the expense of forgotten others. In the following passage Levi ostensibly adopts the second-person singular to address himself, but we quickly understand that this "you" refers to all people of conscience.

> Hai vergogna perché sei vivo al posto di un altro…più degno di vivere di te? Non lo puoi escludere…non trovi trasgressioni palesi, non hai soppiantato nessuno…non hai rubato il pane di nessuno; tuttavia non lo puoi escludere. È solo una supposizione, anzi, l'ombra di un sospetto: che ognuno sia il Caino di suo fratello, che ognuno di noi (ma questa volta dico "noi" in un senso molto ampio, anzi universale) abbia soppiantato il suo prossimo, e viva in vece sua. È una supposizione, ma rode; si è annidata profonda, come un tarlo. ("Vergogna" 1054)

> [Do you feel shame because you are alive in the place of someone else…more worthy of living than you?... You cannot exclude the possibility…You find no obvious transgressions. You did not take anyone's place…you did not steal anyone's bread. Yet you cannot exclude the possibility. It is just a supposition, or, rather, the shadow of a doubt: that each is a Cain to his brother, that each of us (here I say "us" in a very broad — indeed, universal — sense) has betrayed his neighbor and is living in his place. It is a supposition, but it gnaws at you; it's nesting deep inside, like a worm. ("Shame" 2466)]

This is one of many occasions where Levi finds links between the extreme world of Auschwitz and our everyday lives. In this way of thinking, extremity does not simply make the Holocaust unique;

instead, it produces an intense glare revealing uncomfortable, perennial truths about our human condition that otherwise remain in the shadows. Like Cain, we are all our brothers' keepers, a lesson that Nazi genocide teaches us by negative example. Consequently, the space we occupy on the planet, our very existence, obligates us to consider the welfare of our neighbors, in whose place we might just be living.[7] This fundamental principle, the obligation to the suffering Other, arises from the "shame of just," an affect which compels us to think and act altruistically.

At the conclusion his essay, Levi develops more explicitly the link between the experience of Holocaust survival and the most devastating and far-reaching kind of shame that touches us all, what he calls "la vergogna del mondo" — "the shame of the world" ("Vergogna" 1057; "Shame" 2469). Notice, again, the prominence of the visual in Levi's formulation, and, again, the command that we not avert our gaze from the intolerable suffering that results from such criminal acts, unlike the majority of Germans during the war (and some smaller number after the war).

> Eppure c'è chi davanti alla colpa altrui, o alla propria, volge le spalle, così da non vederla e non sentirsi toccato: così hanno fatto la maggior parte dei tedeschi nei dodici anni hitleriani, nell'illusione che il non vedere fosse un non sapere, e che il non sapere li alleviasse dalla loro quota di complicità o di connivenza. Ma a noi [sopravvissuti] lo schermo dell'ignoranza voluta, il "partial shelter" di T.S. Eliot, è stato negato: non abbiamo potuto non vedere…I giusti fra noi, non più né meno numerosi che in qualsiasi altro gruppo umano, hanno provato rimorso, vergogna, dolore insomma, per la colpa che altri e non loro avevano commessa, ed in cui si sono sentiti coinvolti, perché sentivano che questo era avvenuto intorno a loro, ed in loro presenza, e in loro, era irrevocabile. Non avrebbe potuto essere lavato mai più; avrebbe dimostrato che l'uomo, il genere umano, noi insomma, eravamo potenzialmente capaci di costruire una mole infinita di dolore…Basta non vedere, non ascoltare, non fare. ("Vergogna" 1057-1058)

> [Yet there are those who turn their backs on their own transgressions and those of others, to avoid seeing or being touched by them. This is how most Germans behaved in the

> twelve years of Hitler, in the illusion that not seeing was not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity or connivance. But we (survivors) were denied the shield of willful ignorance, T.S. Eliot's "partial shelter": we could not not see…The righteous among us, whose number was neither higher nor lower than in any other human group, felt remorse, shame, and sorrow for the wrongs committed by others, not by them, but in which they felt implicated, because they felt that what had happened around them, in their presence, and in them was irrevocable. It could never be washed away. It would prove that man, the human race — we, in other words — was capable of building an infinite mass of suffering…All it takes is a refusal to see, to hear, and to act. ("Shame" 2469-2470)]

Like the survivors, the just among us cannot *not* see such transgressions — people's egregious inhumanity to other people — that are the shame of the world. The just cannot *not* feel implicated in them. Many of Levi's sentences here echo those he wrote four decades earlier in *La tregua*, especially regarding the irrevocable nature of the crime. What is new, and what makes the "shame of the just" more than an abstract moral stance is Levi's implicit plea that we keep our gaze fixed on the victims, that we attend to the witnesses, and that we actively respond to crimes against humanity committed by others, or, better yet, prevent them from occurring. Our charge is to look, listen, and act.

Levi included passages from T.S. Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, in *La ricerca delle radici* (published before "La vergogna"), his personal anthology of thirty texts that he cherished or held to be significant in his development as a writer. Among these are Levi's own translations into Italian of two speeches by the women's chorus (1510-1512). The first time they speak, before the murder of archbishop Thomas Beckett (later known as Saint Thomas of Canterbury), the women indicate that they hide from the brutality of the world by averting their gaze, by constructing the "partial shelter," to which Levi refers in the "shame of the world" passage cited above. In their second speech, after the impious murder of Saint Thomas, these same women now bear witness to a crime that does not merely defile the cathedral and the city, but the whole world, as stated in the verses that serve as an epigraph to this present article: it is "the world that is wholly foul," which Levi

translates as “il mondo intero è infesto.” To try to repurify the world in the face of such shame, even if it is irrevocable, the women command the audience to “Wash the stone, wash the bone, wash the brain, wash the soul, wash them wash them!” (78), words Levi renders as “Lavate la pietra, lavate l’osso, lavate il cervello, lavate l’anima lavate lavate!” (1512). In sum, the “shame of the just” can and should motivate us to act.

The Shame of Being a Man

Having discussed Levi’s key pages on the Holocaust and its legacy of shame, I offer a succinct review of three thinkers — the most significant among them, Gilles Deleuze — who adopt Levi’s “shame of the just,” and extend it, either explicitly or implicitly, to theorize post-Holocaust ethics and resistance to crimes against humanity. A shared belief among these thinkers is that shame can have a positive, even liberating, value, and that it might be the necessary condition for the possibility of ethics and community after state-sponsored violence.

Consider first sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who completed his canonical study *Modernity and the Holocaust* in 1989, perhaps too soon after the publication of Levi’s “La vergogna” to incorporate its ideas explicitly into his final chapter, titled “Afterthought: On Rationality and Shame.” Like Levi, Bauman identifies the shame experienced by a person of conscience at the sight of crimes against humanity as a cleansing force. He asserts that “the moral person’s feeling of shame…[is] an indispensable condition of victory over the slow-acting poison, the pernicious legacy of the Holocaust” (204). Where Levi conceives of the “shame of the just” as a restraint that prevents us from averting our gaze, Bauman understands this type of shame as absolutely enabling, when he writes, “only the *liberating feeling of shame* may help to recover the moral significance of the awesome historical experience and thus help us exorcise the spectre of the Holocaust, which, to this day, haunts human conscience and makes us neglect vigilance in the present, for the sake of living in peace with the past” (Bauman’s emphasis, 205).

For Bauman, embracing our shame when confronted by the brutal facts of genocide is a necessary step toward working through traumatic histories, which will otherwise continue to haunt our communities, nations, and the world. In theory, this same consciousness will make us alert to the signs of impending mass

violence or attempted genocides. He further affirms his belief in the cleansing power of the "shame of the just" by imagining a hypothetical situation in which he chooses to turn away someone in danger so as to protect his whole family, a justifiable and "an entirely rational decision" for which he would nevertheless feel ashamed. "And yet," Bauman states, "I am sure, as well, that were it not for this feeling of shame, my decision to turn away the stranger would go on corrupting me till the end of my days" (205).

In search of a workable post-Holocaust ethics, contemporary feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti draws on Levi and Bauman (whom she also critiques), and especially on the late work of Deleuze, who, in her view, constructs an "an ethics of affirmation" out of the negativity of shame, a shame that Europeans experienced when the Nazi genocide revealed the failure of Enlightenment humanism.

> Deleuze speaks openly of the "shame" of being human, in relation to Primo Levi and the issue of the Holocaust which marks the fundamental moral bankruptcy of European civilization. In this respect, Deleuze can be compared to Bauman in that he takes the Holocaust as a point of no return and is committed to elaborating an ethics that faces up to the complexities engendered by Europe's genocide. Like Bauman, Deleuze connects this ethical failure of European culture to the historical decline of an Enlightenment-inspired faith in humanism. It is in response to this failure that he formulates an alternative ethics. (Braidotti 200)

While shame can foster "negatives passions (guilt, envy, resentment, anger)," Braidotti shares Deleuze's view that shame can just as well foster "affirmation, desire, sympathy, connection" (201), that it can be

> an empowering passion, in that it motivates us to repair the failings or limitations our human endeavours. Primo Levi's evaluation of the ethical bankruptcy of Europeans over the Nazi death camps sums up both [negative and positive] senses of the global shame about being human. Deleuze places full emphasis on the active force of shame as a step

> towards an ethics of affirmation, which is for him the transcendence of negativity. (200)

Braidotti endorses Deleuze's Levi-inspired ethical pragmatism, which employs "the active force of shame" to help us think ethically about the effects of our actions on the Other. She is certainly right to say that Levi maps out a spectrum of shame (that is, from abjection to the "shame of just"), although he might not have been quite so optimistic as to describe shame as "an empowering passion" that "motivates us to repair" society. Nevertheless, that influential thinkers like Deleuze and Braidotti extend his notion of shame and embrace its revolutionary possibilities attests to the power of the concept.[8]

For Deleuze, shame motivates philosophical thought. It "is one of the most powerful incentives toward philosophy, and it's what makes all philosophy political," he stated in a 1990 conversation with Toni Negri on philosophy and political action (*Negotiations* 172). In the same interview, Deleuze credits Levi, in the recently published *I sommersi e i salvati*, for recognizing Auschwitz as a contaminating phenomenon that people of conscience experience as "a shame at being human."

> I am very struck by all the passages in Primo Levi where he explains that the Nazi camps have given us "a shame at being human." Not, he says, that we're all responsible for Nazism, as some would have us believe, but that we've all been tainted by it: even the survivors of the camps had to make compromises with it, if only to survive. There's the shame of there being men who became Nazis; the shame of being unable, not seeing how, to stop it; the shame of having compromised with it; there's the whole of what Primo Levi calls this "gray area." (*Negotiations* 172)

As described by Deleuze, the Holocaust's legacy of shame, complicity, and compromise not only evokes the morally and psychologically corrupting qualities of the "gray zone," but also recalls Levi's "shame of the world," which exhorts people of conscience to overcome the negativity of our human shame by keeping our gazes fixed on the victims, and our ears attuned to their voices.

Writing in 1991 with Félix Guattari, in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze expands his "shame of being human" concept in the direction of positive action, despite our tendency to avoid painful confrontations with Holocaust memory. Thus, even after the hard lessons of Auschwitz, "we do not feel ourselves outside of our time but continue to undergo shameful compromises with it. This feeling of shame is one of philosophy's most powerful motifs. We are not responsible for the victims but responsible before them" (*What is* 108).[9] "Responsible for the victims" seems to mean acting paternalistically and depriving them of agency. Whereas "responsible *before* the victims" — *devant*, in the original French — opens an ethical relation with the Other, a reciprocal social bond arising from our collective shame that can foster ethics and egalitarian politics.[10]

Levi's "shame of the just" also plays an important role in Deleuze's thinking on the functions of art and literature. In *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, a fascinating seven-hour video-interview conducted by Claire Parnet, Deleuze discusses his belief that art can offer a productive form of resistance to the oppressive forces of the present, while disrupting the forgetfulness that silences our shameful, traumatic past. In the section titled "R is for Resistance," Deleuze asserts, in terms similar to his previous utterances, that an important motif in philosophy and art is the "shame of being a man," and that Levi articulated this affect better than anyone else.[11] "The result of this feeling," writes Deleuze scholar Charles Stivale, "is that art consists of liberating the life that humans have imprisoned, as Deleuze insists, since men never cease imprisoning life, killing life — hence the shame of being a man" (56).

This same sense of shame is also a generative force that creates literature, Deleuze claimed in the essay titled "Literature and Life." "The shame of being a man," he mused, "is there any better reason to write?" (25). It seems to me that this rhetorical question offers a succinct one-sentence interpretation of Primo Levi's entire oeuvre, from *Se questo è un uomo* to *I sommersi e i salvati*: "The shame of being a man — is there any better reason to write?"[12]

Abel's Shame, Not Cain's

Having examined three thinkers who understand Levi's "shame of the just" in a similarly redemptive manner, it will be useful for the sake of contrast to consider Giorgio Agamben's tendentious reading

of "La vergogna." In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2002), in the chapter titled "Shame, or On the Subject," Agamben cites in full the opening passage of *La tregua*, which describes the arrival of the Russian soldiers at Auschwitz, as we have previously discussed. While noting that the liberation of Auschwitz was not joyful, but marked by shame, Agamben does not attend to Levi's key point: that both the survivors and the soldiers experience an ethical, intersubjective "shame of the just" — or "the shame of being human" — at the sight of crimes against humanity committed by others, atrocities that have irrevocably stained the world.

Instead, over many pages, Agamben focuses almost exclusively on the abject shame experienced by the Holocaust victims. He asserts that this humiliating shame is constitutive of the subject, or the state of "being," but also causes the subject's undoing, resulting in what Agamben called "bare life" (*Homo Sacer* 83) a biopolitical category describing a dehumanized individual without rights and without community. "In shame," Agamben asserts, "the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame" (*Remnants* 106). It is certainly true that the capacity to feel shame is a defining characteristic of the human, but Levi and the other thinkers discussed so far identify both negative and positive shame. As Lisa Gunther demonstrates, Agamben fails to appreciate the ethical, intersubjective force of shame, the "shame of the just": "his ontological approach to shame effaces a crucial distinction between shame as a feeling of collective ethical responsibility and humiliation as an instrument of political domination" (60).[13]

Gunther's critique is confirmed by how Agamben reads the passage in "La vergogna" where Levi universalizes the condition of the Holocaust survivor, such that each of us is our brother's Cain, that each of us, when we think about it, fears that we live in the place of another more deserving of life. Agamben dismisses the gravity of this generalized accusation (91), preferring to abandon Levi's focus on the ethical "shame of being a man" in the aftermath of genocidal violence to concentrate on the abject shame of the victim, who must "die in the place of another…without reason or meaning" (104). Uninterested in the shame experienced by the survivor, or from a position of agency, Agamben defines our post-Holocaust human condition as one of potential victimhood, as if to

say: each of us is our brother's Abel. It is difficult to see how a workable post-Holocaust ethics can be founded solely on vulnerability and passivity.

For Agamben, the humiliating shame experienced when we "die in the place of another," brings to mind the concluding sentence of *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, the author who correctly predicted a world in which the state executes citizens "without reason or meaning." Unceremoniously murdered, Kafka's character Josef K. feels as though "the shame of it should outlive him" (Kafka 165).[14] While Agamben attributes this shame to the abject Holocaust victim, Levi, who translated *The Trial* into Italian, also links Josef's shame to "the shame of the world," or "the shame of being a man," that arises in the aftermath of human-induced human suffering.[15]

> Josef K., alla fine del suo angoscioso itinerario, prova vergogna perché esiste questo tribunale occulto e corrotto, che pervade tutto quanto lo circonda…È finalmente un tribunale umano, non divino: è fatto di uomini e dagli uomini, e Josef, col coltello già piantato nel cuore, prova vergogna di essere un uomo. ("Tradurre Kafka" 941)
>
> [Josef K., at the end of his anguished journey, feels ashamed that this secret, corrupt tribunal exists, pervading everything around it...In the end it is a human, not a divine, tribunal: it is made of men and by men, and Josef, with the knife already planted in his heart, is ashamed of being a man. ("Translating Kafka" 2350)]

While it may be true that Levi overlooks the extent to which Kafka anticipates the Holocaust by imagining a world where some people (that is, the Jews) have no legal rights and earn no human sympathy, Levi is consistent in his belief that injustice and unnecessary suffering anywhere in the world shames all of humanity. We may be blameless yet are still complicit in our inaction.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the place of shame in Levi's testimonies and essays and finds in his concepts the fundamental bases for intersubjective ethics and a politics of resistance. Genocides, ethnic cleansings, and so many other crimes against humanity, as well as human-caused environmental disasters, have happened, and

continue to happen. We did not prevent them from occurring, and they have now stained the world with irrevocable shame. What Levi's texts imply, and what his interpreters advise, is that we fully embrace our agonizing shame and recall that the space we occupy on the planet, our very existence, obligates us to consider the welfare of our neighbors, in whose place we might be living. As Levi said so memorably, each of us is a potential Cain to his brother or sister. In recognition of this fact, Levi's "shame of the just" demands that we not avert our gaze when it lands on morally intolerable human suffering. However, too many of us have ignored Levi's warning, have lived "nell'illusione che il non vedere fosse un non sapere, e che il non sapere [ci] alleviasse dalla [nostra] quota di complicità" ("Vergogna" 1057) ["in the illusion that not seeing was not knowing, and that not knowing relieved (us) of (our) share of complicity" ("Shame" 2469)].

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NOTES

From the author: Over my many years as a Levi scholar, I often had the pleasure of sharing conference panels with Nick Patruno, who was always a lively and generous interlocuter. I am glad to have known him and to have benefited from his books and articles which did much to advance Levi studies in North America. An earlier version of this essay was presented in May 2018 at "Primo Levi for the Public," a symposium sponsored by the Leve Center for Jewish Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

[1] Levi felt no need to maintain the conventional distinction between shame (that is, an affect associated with passivity) and guilt (that is, an affect associated with agency), the latter a term he rarely used. For example, at the beginning of "La vergogna" he conflates guilt with shame when he writes: "Che molti (ed io stesso) abbiano provato 'vergogna,' cioè senso di colpa, durante la prigionia e dopo, è un fatto accertato e confermato da numerose testimonianze" (1047) ["Many people (and I myself) felt "shame" — that is, a sense of guilt — both during and after imprisonment, as numerous witnesses have verified and confirmed" (2459)]. On those few occasions when Levi refers to guilt, he locates it on the side of agency within his broad conceptualization of shame, which includes both agency and passivity.

[2] In *The Question of German Guilt*, first published in 1947, German philosopher Karl Jaspers makes categorical distinctions among "criminal guilt," "political guilt," "moral guilt," and "metaphysical guilt." Closely resembling the "shame of the just" and possibly a source for Levi's later expansions of his concept, Jasper's "metaphysical guilt" originates from "a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world,

especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty" (26).

[3] Many other scholars have addressed shame in Levi's works, but not with an emphasis on the "shame of the just" and its broader implications. For other emphases (such as the inexorable shame experienced by survivors), or for brief references to Levi's "shame of the just," see Bellin (139-153), Belpoliti (549-562), Harrowitz (108-137), Insana (88-89), Mengoni (272), Miglianti (1-4), Neppi, Parussa (91-103), and Patruno (119-122), among others.

[4] Tont Judt argued that in the immediate postwar period, American-led denazification programs in Germany largely failed. When the Allies forced Germans to watch documentary films about the Holocaust, many in the audience literally turned their faces away, trying to remain unashamed of the crimes against humanity committed on their behalf by the Nazi regime (57).

[5] Or as Ferdinando Camon puts it, "How is it that, on first impact, Levi so often turns out to be unacceptable?… There was Auschwitz, and humanity was ashamed of itself. All of humanity, including those who had no part in it, and knew nothing about it. Levi arouses shame and this is the obstacle to his wide acceptance" (74-75).

[6] For a discussion of the "gray zone," and specifically its legacy of shame, see Druker (489).

[7] Michael Rothberg makes a similar argument. He coined the term "implicated subjects" to describe those who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles" (1). To fully develop this useful concept, Rothberg employs Levi's "gray zone" but not his representations of the shame.

[8] In a similar vein, many readers have understood the "gray zone" as portable far beyond Auschwitz and the ghettos, despite Levi's occasional equivocations on this question. By using the "gray zone" "as a tool to analyze the effects of power and coercion during extreme events, and even in everyday life…scholars in many disciplines have discovered numerous applications for this concept" (Druker 497).

[9] This formulation calls to mind Sartre's phenomenological analysis of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, where he writes: "I am ashamed of myself before the Other" (364).

[10] Or as Aislinn O'Donnell puts it, "The concept of shame is important for Deleuze's ethics and politics… In this respect, shame, in particular 'the shame of the world,' has the potential to be a proto-political and proto-ethical affect because it suspends and precludes the ready invocation of clichés and explanations that buttress us against reality. This disruption in turn opens a space for creativity and resistance" (1).

[11] See minutes 2:40-5:00 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voRRg3HBQnE.

[12] It is clear that Levi, like most of his contemporaries, understood the word "man" as a universal term. He was not alert to the possibility that this usage might disempower women. Deleuze, too, used the word "man" as a universal, but was certainly aware of its patriarchal implications.

[13] Gunther adds: "But precisely because these systems of domination are structural

rather than individual, the struggle against them presupposes some capacity…to feel implicated in crimes that one did not personally commit. When Primo Levi locates 'the same shame' in the soldiers who liberated Auschwitz and the prisoners who both witnessed and suffered outrageous violence in the camp, he attests to this capacity to feel responsible for crimes committed by others" (71). Furthermore, Gunther seems to have absorbed Deleuze's lesson on shame and resistance, when she states: "The capacity for shame attests to a remnant, however small, of interhuman relationality — an interest, however diminished or degraded, in others. This is why shame can function as a site of resistance, a feeling for justice even in the midst of radical injustice: because it confirms the root of responsibility in our relations with others" (64).

[14] I cite Wyllie's translation of *The Trial* rather than Agamben's erroneous version, in which the shame is specifically attributed to Josef — "it was as if *his* shame were to survive him" (104) — rather than to the world of humanity, in general.

[15] Instead of dwelling on the shame experienced by the slain victim, as Agamben does, Stefano Bellin, in his reading of Levi's "Translating Kafka," and other texts, focuses on the hidden affinity between Josef K. and the innocent Holocaust victim who nevertheless feels ashamed. "Shame is a self-reflexive emotion and involves passing judgment on one's own condition or actions. Like Josef K., Levi, unable to come to terms with the mysterious crime of which he is charged, becomes at once the defendant, the accuser, and the judge of himself. By putting himself on trial, he discovers a feeling [of shame] that will survive both him and the court that hunted him down" (153). I find this analysis persuasive even though Levi insists on reading the conclusion of *The Trial* as universal rather than individual. Levi's main interest is in reaffirming that every person of conscience ought to feel ashamed by injustice.

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Francesco Rosi's *La tregua*: The Magic Realism of Memory

Abstract
This essay compares Levi's *La tregua* to Francesco Rosi's 1997 adaptation, drawing primarily on the director's archival materials. It focuses on two departures from the literary source: the character known as Il greco [The Greek] and his memorable words "guerra è sempre" (a theme that is forever present in the long gestation of Rosi's cinematic project) and the re-invented scene at the Munich train station, when a German officer kneels under the spell of Primo's severe gaze. Rosi transcribes Levi's picaresque odyssey as an aching story that hints at a springtime of freedom and translates the moral indignation of the narrator into the admonition that the greater barbarity is forgetting.
Keywords: Francesco Rosi, *The Truce*, Primo Levi, The Greek, Holocaust survivor, John Turturro, magic realism

With his adaptation of Primo Levi's memoir *La tregua* (*The Reawakening*) published by Einaudi in 1963, Francesco Rosi descends into the reflective world of a survivor's journey home from Auschwitz to recreate an authentic vision of historical awareness.[1] Throughout his career, Rosi revisited the history of postwar Italy, noting its erosion of values but also suggesting hope for the future. This is indeed the case when in 1996 he filmed *La tregua* in Ukraine, and he chose the inevitability of war, as his central motif, a motif defined by one of the most important lines of Levi's book: the Greek's memorable "guerra è sempre" ["there is always war"] (Levi, *La tregua* 57). With the striking combination of despair and laughter, *La tregua* (*The Truce*, 1997) shows that the truest history lies not only in official documents but also in the testimony of those who bear witness to what they lived through. In Rosi's words, Levi's trek homeward "è un viaggio di ritorno ed è assieme un viaggio di speranza. Ed è un viaggio di ripresa delle ragioni per cui si può continuare ad avere speranza" ["It is a journey back home and at the same time a journey of hope. It is a journey to recapture the reasons why one can continue to hope"].[2]

Levi's idea of a return to life has special resonance for Rosi. The Holocaust survivor overcomes the despair and degradation of the concentration camps and spirituality triumphs over the dehumanizing experience of Auschwitz. Rosi focuses on the contemporary relevance of his film. In *La tregua*, Levi defines the

"truce" as a state of suspension between rational ordinary life and the illogical existence in the camps; and yet, it is "una parentesi di illimitata disponibilità, un dono provvidenziale ma irrepetibile del destino" ["a parenthesis of boundless availability, a providential but unrepeatable gift of destiny"] (253). Levi's nine-month-long labyrinthine journey back to Turin represents an odyssey of a Europe suspended between war and peace.[3] Here is the true meaning of the text.

Rosi's initial idea to adapt Levi's book dates back to the early 1960s, when the memoir was published. He was impressed by the figure of a shy, fragile young man who, having escaped by sheer luck from extermination at Auschwitz, roams with a group of heterogeneous companions through a world adrift and yet he looks on the chaos with keen curiosity.[4] Levi chose to depict the trials of liberation rather than the horrors of internment. Indeed, as Levi writes, "di fronte alla libertà ci sentivamo smarriti, svuotati, atrofizzati, disadatti alla nostra parte" ["face to face with freedom we felt lost, emptied, atrophied, unfit for our part"] (*La tregua* 13). Rosi creates a moving journey of survival, at times familiar and real, at others primeval and haunting. He recounted the long saga of the film's production in an interview with Lorenzo Codelli:

> In April 1987, I called Primo Levi... I asked him for his book to be made into a film. He answered with enthusiasm. He said: "you bring me a ray of light in a very dark moment of my life." At the time I did not understand what he was talking about. I understood it a week later, when he died in the tragic manner we all know. During our telephone conversation, he was cheerful and showed interest. He laughed when we spoke of the picaresque and grotesque aspect of his book… My telephone conversation with Levi was a kind of a silent word exchanged between the two of us of a reciprocal engagement. (9)

A week later, on April 11, Levi died, believed by most to be suicide. Traumatized by this event, Rosi postponed the production but the project persisted in his mind. Prior to the film's release in February 1997, he explained that he chose to film *La tregua*, instead of *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man* 1947), because he was not interested in showing the atrocities of the concentration camps (Jacobbi 108). For the screenplay, he did not limit himself to one

book, but selected passages drawn from Levi's other writings, as well as interviews. The film premiered at Turin's Teatro Regio on February 10 and generated considerable attention from the international press and the Jewish community. Some critics did not fail to notice that Rosi departed from the original text and mostly focused on the characterization of The Greek as well as a reinvented scene at the Munich train station.[5]

Rosi's adaptation of what Levi regarded as a fateful "adventure in the awful mess of a Europe swept by war" (Roth 41) captures the fleeting moments when civilization triumphs only through its wavering glimpses of hope and comic relief. Rosi inscribes Levi's colorful railroad odyssey within the realm of ordinary experience. He relies on impressions, details, and encounters. He intercuts the comic episodes with flashbacks to the camps (in black and white) which appear during moments of reflection. As Gary Crowdus points out, the film is "most successful in smaller scenes which imaginatively render those moments when Levi and fellow Holocaust survivors reawaken to the nearly forgotten beauties of nature and music, and such essential human needs as humor, compassion, and love" (60). The film narrative enhances the intense emotions that animate Primo's story, which are essentially curiosity and the desire to establish human relationships.[6] Through the recollection of his extraordinary adventures, Levi conveyed the exuberance of the reawakening of hope by highlighting the significant and trivial events of everyday life. Attracted to adventure, he is fully committed to remembrance. Above all, Rosi notes, "ho voluto far diventare un occhio Primo Levi, cioè un osservatore e un narratore, un personaggio al quale far vivere in prima persona gli episodi che emergono dai suoi racconti… Ho trovato in Turturro l'interprete ideale" ["I wanted to turn Primo Levi into an eye, that is an observer and a narrator, a character who experiences in first person the episodes which emerge from his storytelling… I found in Turturro the ideal interpreter"].[7] Rosi concentrates around the actor, an introspective John Turturro, the temporal relationships of history.

The film's story unfolds in an atmosphere that oscillates between "la fiaba e la crudezza della cronaca" ["Fable and the rawness of the news headlines"].[8] This dichotomy between the historical reality and Primo's point of view distinguishes Rosi's method from that of traditional cinematic adaptation. In the book, a specular relationship is created between Levi, the author, and the protagonist, while in the film the leading character is introduced in

accordance with the canons of narrative objectivity. For example, in the opening scenes of *La tregua*, after we witness the Germans hastily executing prisoners and burning evidence, the tragic images of the camp are seen through a veil of falling snow, as if it were memory. The camp is framed from the point of view of the four young Russian cavalrymen as they appear above the horizon: the binoculars of one of the soldiers represent the camera lens as it establishes the main characters and then rests on a shot of Levi/Turturro who stands at the gate, a witness to the historical moment. It is January 27, 1945. While drafting his script, Rosi wrote down:

> Gli internati sono dei punti neri che, usciti dalle baracche del Lager, vanno a macchiare la neve bianca. E poi gli occhi… I quattro soldati sono pieni di sgomento e di pietà: girano i cavalli e se ne vanno. Gli internati si avvicinano alle porte aperte e non hanno il coraggio di uscire… ricordare l'immagine straziante degli iracheni che baciano le mani ai soldati americani nella guerra del Golfo… il crollo del muro, la Polonia, Auschwitz rivisitata oggi.[9]
>
> [The prisoners are like black spots and, as they leave the barracks of the Lager, they stain the white snow. And then their eyes… The four soldiers are overcome by shock and compassion: they turn their horses and leave. The prisoners move toward the open gates but they dare not to go out… remember the heartbreaking image of the Iraqis kissing the hands of the American soldiers during the Gulf War… the fall of the [Berlin] wall, Poland, Auschwitz revisited today.]

As Tullio Kezich remarks, Rosi refers to the illusions of postwar years in a magic neorealism of memory (35). Rosi takes on the reality of the Holocaust, reminding us that sorrow is waiting in ambush and even in the sweetest moments, when you least expect it, life is a truce between a war and another.

Munich's Insolvent Debtors

As we have seen, from the very start, the camera focuses on Primo's gaze to reveal all the debasement at the hands of man. Rosi limits Turturro's dialogue to a minimum. And it is in silence that one of the film's most talked about, and reinvented, scenes unfolds: the

German officer kneeling down before Levi at the Munich train station, after he sees the Star of David shining out of Levi's striped jacket. If Levi describes his encounter with that "folla anonima di visi sigillati… di chi non poteva non sapere, non ricordare, non rispondere" ["anomalous crowd of sealed faces… of those who could not but know, remember, reply"] (*La tregua* 251) withholding a judgment, for Rosi this symbolic gesture falls within the contemporary approach that underlies his film. We read in the treatment:

> I tedeschi si sollevano dal lavoro e guardano quel treno, raccogliendo negli sguardi i resti di una superbia e di un orgoglio mai domati. Ma tra loro, un uomo anziano, che indossa i brandelli scoloriti delle orgogliose uniforme della Wermacht, lentamente si piega in ginocchio.[10]
>
> [The Germans look up from their work and at the train, gathering in their expressions the remains of a never-tamed arrogance and pride. But among them an old man, who is wearing the discolored rags of the proud uniforms of the Wehrmacht, slowly goes down on his knees.]

At this exemplary act, one of Levi's companions, the Moor from Verona, helps the man to rise. For Rosi, the old German officer kneels under the spell of the Holocaust survivor's severe gaze: his gesture formalizes a confession and an admission of guilt. As Jean Gili has observed, the message of the film is epitomized here — in the figure of a man who takes upon himself the tragedy of an entire people guilty, before History, of crimes against humanity (7). In the memoir, Levi wanders around the streets of Munich, among the Germans, whom he calls "debitori insolventi" ["insolvent debtors"] (251). In this departure from the book, Rosi chose instead a penitential gesture. He was inspired by a photograph of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt falling to his knees in silence, on December 7, 1970, in front of a memorial dedicated to the victims of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

Originally Rosi wanted to superimpose a photograph of the Warsaw ghetto at the end of this scene and then cut to Primo's return home to Turin. These two scenes were bridged with the insertion of a clip from Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*.[11] The scene at the Munich train station, we read in *Le Monde*, "will be

optically imprinted in our eyes. Too bad for those who sneer at repentance, and who would like to turn the page" (Poirot-Delpech 18).

The Greek from Salonika and the Inescapability of War

In the mid-1990s, while still trying to realize his film, Rosi referred to the Bosnian genocide in a notebook entry and states that he is reminded of the Greek's "guerra è sempre."[12] This theme is forever present, and in the long gestation of his cinematic project, we find traces of the director's concerns that the greater barbarity is forgetting. The film features a number of unforgettable companions Levi wrote about, who remind us that sheer physical survival is not enough — what defines a human being is the desire to pursue higher goals. In the book, the picaresque Cesare is given center stage because of his gift for daring, humor, and mimicry. He represents warm comradeship, the relaxed moments when the refugees re-experience the beauty of nature and brotherhood. But Rosi's *La tregua*, while including such scenes rich with emotions and a powerful comic force, highlights a political allegory of the future, particularly in the figure of Mordo Nahum, known as *Il greco*, who looms large in the film. In a 1986 interview with Anthony Rudolf, Levi revealed that his Greek in *La tregua* was based on a real-life person, Leon Levi, whom he had met after Liberation and later had made many, unsuccessful attempts to trace him (23-24). Mordo, then, can be identified as an ambigenous character: he is the author's opposite and could be heartless but Levi could not help respecting him (Patruno and Ricci 51). To reflect contemporary associations, Rosi chose Rade Šerbedžija, a well-known Serbo-Croatian actor, for the role.

With the rapacious appearance of a nighthawk surprised by light or a shark outside his natural element, Mordo Nahum embodies the director's kind of postwar cynicism. As a Greek Jew, his view of life is essentially realistic, an unwavering belief in practicality. He enjoys the reputation of having a superior ability as an astute barterer in commercial negotiations and confronts Levi's questions with "valuable, albeit disconcerting lessons in survival," as Nicholas Patruno points out, and "he accepts unconditionally the Hobbesian concept that man is a wolf-like predator who turns even against his own" (*Understanding Primo Levi* 37). Having learned that life means incessant struggle, Mordo's formula for survival is work, food to eat, shelter and shoes. He becomes Primo's mentor

during the unforgettable week of vagabondage they spend together in Kraków and then in Katowice. Levi carries on a lengthy conversation with this "grande greco" ["great Greek"] (*La tregua* 45) whose practical wisdom reveals to him how fragile the intellectual is and how difficult it is to translate feelings into words and gesture. While Mordo is able to return to Greece because it is one of the founding countries of the United Nations, Levi must remain behind: Italy only joined in 1955. This clear allusion to the UN signals a shift from the existential rebirth of the freed camp inmates to a global concern for the future.

In his earliest script notes, Rosi devotes pages to profiling this privileged character. The words of Il Greco "*La guerre n'est pas finie*" (*La tregua* 61) set the pace of the survivors on the road and also ascribe the historical situation to a suspended moment of "truce." These very words are repeated to Primo by the Polish Lawyer, the spokesman of the civilized world. In the film's treatment, Rosi conjures up photographic inserts of contemporary historical-political reality which are intended to dispel the impression that the Holocaust and the threat of war are a thing of the past. Stock images of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and of our own times confirm that, everywhere in the world, racial hatred is still exploding.[13]

Millicent Marcus has argued that it took the end of the Cold War to make possible a new Italian historiography that would recognize the Shoah, and that Rosi's film stands at the cusp of this transformation (80). When Mordo and Primo eventually part ways, Patruno writes, the Greek's mythical stature has reawakened sentiments of an unusual kind of friendship, contempt, respect, and curiosity (*Understanding Primo Levi* 38).

To Understand Is Almost to Justify

In the film's final scene Rosi eliminates historical footage and focuses on the image of Primo Levi tearing off a piece of bread at the kitchen table, a nurturing act that asserts a reintegration into the comfort of his family once back in Turin.[14] In the first draft for the screenplay, however, the director struggled to finalize the closing of his film. He evoked the memory of World War II with an ending close to the political and biographical sphere:

> …un bambino tra le macerie di Berlino gioca con la sua ombra… fino a quando si suicida. Dopo la "speranza"

> costituita dal muro di Berlino, l'Europa continua a essere dilaniata e prostrata da divisioni, guerre, ecc. Lui torna a casa… Lui a letto. Caffè-latte, pane, madre (la scena del sogno). Bussano… Lui sul pianerottolo… controcampo: Primo Levi anziano… Tromba delle scale.[15]
>
> […a child is playing with his shadow among the ruins of Berlin… until he kills himself. After the "hope" built up by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Europe continues to be torn and ravaged by divisions, wars, etc. He returns home… He is in bed. Caffelatte, bread, his mother (the dream scene). A knock at the door. He stands on the landing… reverse shot: an old Primo Levi… He falls down the well of the elevator.]

After Auschwitz, Levi, traumatized by the agony of Auschwitz, had proclaimed God is dead. "Eppure, raccontare dobbiamo," he felt necessary to declare in 1975: "è un dovere verso i compagni che non sono tornati, ed è un compito che conferisce un senso alla nostra sopravvivenza" ["But tell we must: it is a duty towards our fellow inmates who did not come back; and it is a mission that gives a meaning to our survival"] (*Cosí fu Auschwitz* 114).[16] Testimony, then, has an undeniable bearing on his message; it becomes a symbol of survival, an experience of fundamental importance in order to learn some things about Man. In his writing, Levi did not "tell" about the monstrous suffering of the internment camp prisoners, he focused instead on what it means to be human. Toni Morrison called Levi's defiant humanism, "the triumph of human identity and worth over the pathology of human destruction […] For this articulate survivor, individual identity is supreme; efforts to drown identity are futile. He refuses to place cruel and witless slaughter on a pedestal of fascination or to locate in it any serious meaning. His primary focus is ethics" (15). To the end of his life, Levi believed that Auschwitz had been a learning experience never cultivated hatred within himself as a desire for revenge, even less as collectively addressed at an ethnic group. Yet one could not, what is more one must not, understand what happened, "because to understand is almost to justify" (Levi "Afterword" 227).

Significantly, Rosi endorses Levi's own refusal to write about human destruction and the monotonous horror at the Buna-Monowitz concentration camp: "Io non ho mai creduto che si possa riscostruire efficacemente quell'immagine di distruzione fisica che

viene fuori da quello che abbiamo visto attraverso i documenti dei campi di sterminio. L'ho evitato accuratamente" ["I never believed that one can accurately reproduce the physical destruction that we have seen in the documents of the extermination camps. I purposely avoided it"].[17] Rosi's *La tregua* affirms the importance of individual identity and collective memory for building the future based on a traumatic event, a collective act that aspires to ward off an absolute evil. In Levi's final chapter, there is a sense of personal freedom achieved, but there is also a complex state of the soul: the terrible, recurring dream of the *Lager* (the brutal Kapo command at dawn), forever present in him. In Rosi's film, the last shots of Primo/Turturro looking directly into the camera lens translate the absolute evil of Auschwitz into vigilance. It is an emotional moment, summing up the complex strains of Primo's theme. With a calm voice Levi recites the powerful lines inscribed to *Se questo è un uomo*:

> Voi che vivete sicuri
> Nelle vostre tiepide case,
> Voi che trovate tornando a sera
> Il cibo caldo e visi amici:
> Considerate se questo è un uomo. (7)
>
> [You who live safe
> in your warm homes,
> you who returning home at night
> find hot food and friendly faces:
> consider if this is a man.]

Rosi transcribes Primo's picaresque odyssey as an aching story that hints at a springtime of freedom; he translates the moral indignation of the narrator into the admonition that the greater tragedy is when civilized values collapse. Survival is not all: it could happen again.

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NOTES

[1] All references to *La tregua* are to the 1971 Einaudi reprint.

[2] Personal interview with the director, Rome, December 11, 1999. Unless otherwise cited, all translations are mine.
In January 1996, Rosi signed the contract for *La tregua*, which was entirely shot on location. Principal photography began in Ukraine in April and ended in July 1996. Coproduced by Leo Pescarolo and Guido De Laurentiis, it is Rosi's most expensive film. For fourteen weeks, with a multinational crew, Rosi reconstructed both snowy and hot seasons, and used period trains. The Ukrainian army provided men and military equipment. The difficult shooting conditions were so challenging that Pasqualino De Santis, Rosi's long time cinematographer, suffered a fatal heart attack on June 23. The film was completed by his camera operator Marco Pontecorvo. For production details, see Rosi's interview with Gili (7-8) and Marrone (200-217).
[3] See Rosi: "La vita come una tregua tra una guerra e un'altra" ("Life as a truce between a war and another one") ("*La tregua*. Adattamento originale," n. pag., Archival Collection). Further references to the director's archival sources are noted as AC. In 2008, Rosi's personal archives were transferred to the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin.
[4] See the director's interview with Furio Colombo (39). As Levi admits, "I had an intense wish to understand, I was constantly pervaded by a curiosity that somebody afterwards did, in fact, deem nothing less than cynical, the curiosity of the naturalist who finds himself transplanted into an environment that is monstrous, but new, monstrously new" (Roth 41).
[5] The film provoked heated cultural debates primarily addressing the differences between Levi's book and Rosi's adaptation. Some critics praised the film's realistic depiction of Levi's return home but others were perplexed about the comic vignettes and claimed that it did not translate the life style of the Turinese Jewish antifascists in the 1940s. See, among others, Segre (31), Fofi (106), Péron (4).
[6] See Rosi: "Curiosità, spenseratezza, voglia di attaccare discorsi, di intavolare rapporti umani, di fare pompa e spreco della smisurata libertà" ("Curiosity, serenity, poise, the desire to communicate and establish human relationships, to display and enjoy the unlimited freedom"). (*La tregua*. Originale adattamento" (second treatment) 10 (AC)).
[7] "Argomenti per interviste," December 1995, n. pag. (AC). Thanks to the intervention of Martin Scorsese, Rosi secured the participation of John Turturro in the leading role. Turturro lost not only some thirty pounds to play Levi, but he also documented himself thoroughly to understand the life of the Holocaust survivor. He revealed that he found the key for his interpretation after reading *Se questo è un uomo*, and after discussing at length with Rosi his visual approach to certain scenes. Filming in Ukraine was also a physical and psychological challenge. The actor lived the part so intensively that he had difficulty in readjusting to American life: "It was like a shock and it took me months to really find myself once again" (Ciment 16). Some critics noted, however, that the casting of a well-known actor influenced the director's interpretation of Levi's character, now rather a protagonist than a witness. See, for example, Cortellazzo and Tomasi (77).
[8] Rosi, "*La tregua*. Adattamento originale" (first treatment), n. pag. (AC).
[9] "*La tregua*. Scalettone e appunti di base per adattamento" 1 (AC). Indeed, initially Rosi intended to begin his film with "un rapido montaggio di immagini di repertorio di fotografie e di fiction… documentata a lampi la situazione della seconda guerra mondiale in Europa, a partire dall'aggressione della Polonia nel

settembre del 1939" ["A rapid montage of images, consisting of photographs and reconstructed scenes… documenting in flashes the time capsule of the Second World War, beginning with the invasion of Poland in September 1939"]. "*La tregua*. Soggetto cinematografico di Francesco Rosi" 2 (AC).
[10] "*La tregua*. Soggetto cinematografico di Francesco Rosi" 15 (AC).
[11] "I felt it was an inspired idea… one not to lose, but, to my chagrin, very few of my collaborators thought the same-and frankly, when reviewing the final edit, I too was persuaded." From an undated letter, written in English to producer Leo Pescarolo during postproduction, 3 (AC). Vincent Remy deemed this moment to be "an absurd pardon" of the historical Holocaust reality, a betrayal of Levi's text and tragic death (96), while Irene Bignardi (43) and Tullio Masoni (73), among others, singled out this scene as the most powerful and truthful of the film.
[12] "Personal notes," dated 1995, n. pg. (AC). Rosi points to what happened in Srebrenica: some eight thousand Bosnian Muslim males were slaughtered, and more than thirty thousand civilians deported. The massacre was committed by the Serb military forces in July 1995.
[13] Rosi notes: "Lo sconcerto, la condanna, la paura: ovunque nel mondo, dall'America alla Russia, dalla Bosnia alla Croazia, alla Serbia, dalla Germania ai Balcani, dall'India al Medio Oriente, esplode ancora l'odio razzista" ("Bewilderment, condemnation, fear: wherever in the world, from America to Russia, from Bosnia to Croatia and to Serbia, from Germany to the Balkans, from India to the Middle East, there still explodes racist hatred.") "*La tregua*. Soggetto cinematografico di Francesco Rosi" 17 (AC).
[14] While drafting the screenplay, the director conceived the ending scene quite differently: Primo "immerge il pane nel latte. Al momento in cui porta il pane alla bocca, si odono improvvisi e fortissimi alcuni colpi alla porta e comandi militari urlati in lingue diverse" ("he soaks a piece of the bread in the milk. As he is about to bite into it, he hears sudden laud knocks at the door, followed by a series of military orders shouted in various languages"). "*La tregua*. Soggetto cinematografico di Francesco Rosi" 16 (AC).
[15] "*La tregua*. Scalettone e appunti di base per adattamento" 14 (AC).
[16] Originally, Levi's article "Così fu Auschwitz" was published on the front page of *La Stampa*, February 9, 1975.
[17] Personal interview with the director, Rome, December 11, 1999.

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APPENDIX

Intervista a Eugenio Montale [sulla traduzione]

A cura di Roberta Ricci

Primo Levi da sempre è stato al centro della produzione scientifica e dell'impegno didattico di Patruno, ma non certo l'unico autore oggetto di lettura e ricerca. L'archivio del Fondo Patruno a Bryn Mawr College, in via di allestimento, conserva numerosi manoscritti dagli anni '70 in poi, in larga parte inediti o parzialmente pubblicati, che rendono l'idea della vastità degli interessi accademici di Patruno relativi al '900 italiano e soprattutto della sua vena critica nell'abitudine di appuntare, e poi rielaborare anche a distanza di anni e corsi accademici, pensieri e interpretazioni in succinti saggi. Tra tali documenti spicca un'intervista a Eugenio Montale sulla traduzione che riproduco qui in versione completa e con varianti inedite, in parte-pubblicata in *Gradiva* nel 1978. Piuttosto che sulla produzione poetica di Montale, già Premio Nobel, la conversazione fra i due verte interamente su Elio Vittorini: il suo "americanismo" e le metodologie di traduzione della letteratura angloamericana che in quegli anni stavano diventando in Italia, e non solo, un modello per gli scrittori più giovani. L'interesse dell'intervista a Montale risiede proprio in questo insolito contenuto proposto da Patruno.

Cesare Pavese, insieme a Elio Vittorini, Eugenio Montale, Guido Piovene, Alberto Moravia, Fernanda Pivano e Giaime Pintor, per citarne alcuni, contribuiscono alla ricca attività di traduzione che si svolge in Italia a partire dagli anni Trenta, dando avvìo alla conseguente penetrazione della cultura angloamericana in Europa, in generale, e in Italia, in particolare. Nell'Antologia *Americana - Raccolta di narratori dalle origini ai nostri giorni a cura di Elio Vittorini e con Introduzione di Emilio Cecchi* (1942) Montale traduce i lavori di ben otto scrittori, molti dei quali tra i più famosi e conosciuti della narrativa americana: di Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Wakefield*, *Il velo nero del pastore* e *Il grande volto di pietra*; di Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*; di Mark Twain, *L'uomo che corruppe Hadleyburg*; di Francis Bret Harte, *La fortuna di Roaring Camp* e, tra gli scrittori a lui contemporanei, di Evelyn Scott, *Pagine di diario*; di F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Il giovin signore*; di Kay Boyle, *Cura di riposo* e, di William Faulkner, *Il sole della sera*. In seguito alle traduzioni per *Americana*, Montale continua poi a tradurre opere teatrali e poesie, tra cui Shakespeare.

Il rapporto fra politica, Americanismo e letteratura interessa Patruno proprio perché l'atto del tradurre abolisce la distanza

storico-geografica fra le culture, facendo emergere problematiche antropologiche con cui anche gli scrittori italiani possono facilmente identificarsi, al di là dell'interpretazione miticizzante di quella realtà d'oltreoceano. A questo proposito Cesare Pavese in un articolo intitolato *Ieri e oggi* apparso in "L'Unità" il 3 agosto 1947 (poi in *La letteratura americana e altri saggi*. Torino, Einaudi, 1959, 193-196) sottolinea la specularità fra America e Italia da un punto di vista sociologico e riduce pertanto anche linguisticamente quell'apparente distanza culturale. Patruno condivide le affinità elettive fra i due paesi così articolate da Pavese: "Ci si accorse, durante quegli anni di studio, che l'America non era un altro paese, un nuovo inizio della storia, ma soltanto il gigantesco teatro dove con maggiore franchezza che altrove veniva recitato il dramma di tutti. E se per un momento c'era apparso che valesse la pena di rinnegare noi stessi e il nostro passato per affidarci corpo e anima a quel libero mondo, ciò era stato per l'assurda e tragicomica situazione di morte civile in cui la storia ci aveva per il momento cacciati. La cultura americana ci permise in quegli anni di vedere svolgersi come su uno schermo gigante il nostro stesso dramma. Ci mostrò una lotta accanita, consapevole, incessante, per dare un senso un nome un ordine alle nuove realtà e ai nuovi istinti della vita individuale e associata, per adeguare ad un mondo vertiginosamente trasformato gli antichi sensi e le antiche parole dell'uomo. Com'era naturale in tempi di ristagno politico, noi tutti ci limitammo allora a studiare come quegli intellettuali d'oltremare avessero espresso questo dramma, come fossero giunti a parlare questo linguaggio, a narrare, a cantare questa favola." Se da un lato, dunque, l'America rappresenta l'altrove, il luogo del mito e del sogno, della speranza e della libertà, insomma "un'allegoria sociale" (Claudio Pavese, *L'avventura di Americana: Elio Vittorini e la storia travagliata di una mitica antologia*. Milano: Uniclopi, 2018, XIII), dall'altro in quegli stessi testi americani emergono temi e forme di scrittura elaborati anche dalla letteratura italiana: il viaggio, l'infanzia, la ricerca simbolica, lo stile dialogico.

Così il 6 maggio 1976, dietro suggerimento di Giansiro Ferrata, amico di Elio Vittorini, Patruno comunica telefonicamente con Montale presentandosi come italianista, novecentista e americano, e chiede un appuntamento per discutere delle modalità della traduzione italiana di opere letterarie americane. Il giorno stesso, anzi "nel giro di un'ora", Montale lo invita a casa sua: "Nel trovarmi, solo, davanti a una tale personalità letteraria mi lascio

facilmente sopraffare dalla timidezza e riesco appena a felicitarmi con lui per il Premio Nobel ricevuto alcuni mesi prima. La sua sensibilità gli fa subito intuire di trovarsi davanti a sé uno che si sente a disagio. Con la massima gentilezza, fra una sigaretta e l'altra, egli procede a tranquillizzarmi con delle domande chiaramente designate a facilitare il mio compito e mi fa presto capire, col suo volere elaborare, che è disposto a portare avanti il discorso su Vittorini e su altro", dagli appunti del Fondo Patruno presso il Bryn Mawr College. E proprio questo contributo di Montale su *Americana* suscita smisurato interesse in Patruno che elegge così Montale tra i fautori della diffusione della letteratura anglofona e americana in Italia.

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Milano, 6 maggio 1976

Patruno: Signor Montale, mi interessano le traduzioni che ha fatto durante quegli anni. Le confesso che il materiale riguardante gli aspetti tecnici della traduzione è quasi inesistente. Volevo sapere se Lei avesse mai parlato con Vittorini sugli aspetti tecnici della traduzione o se si fossero formulate delle teorie

Montale: No, abbiamo fatto le traduzioni ma senza stare a teorizzarci sopra. Poi Vittorini conosceva abbastanza male l'inglese. Questo ha provocato degli inconvenienti ma anche dei vantaggi. Per esempio, *Il Piccolo Campo* di Caldwell è migliore, secondo me, nella traduzione italiana di Vittorini.[1] Quando io poi ho affrontato il testo di Caldwell sono rimasto profondamente deluso perché Vittorini ha tagliato, ha spostato, ha accomodato e non dico che questo sia il sistema lodevole in sé, ma, come eccezione, fatto da un uomo intelligente come Vittorini, siamo costretti ad ammetterlo. Del resto, ci sono molti episodi di traduzioni inesatte. Mi ricordo la traduzione fatta da Ugo Foscolo di Sterne che è piena di errori [2]

Patruno: Bella però

Montale: Bellissima, bellissima. Il criterio della correttezza è uno dei tanti criteri per giudicare le traduzioni ma non può essere l'unico. Senza contare poi le versioni poetiche del poeta che fabbrica un'altra poesia su una poesia preesistente di altra lingua. E lì dov'è la fedeltà? C'è l'errore? Se c'è o non c'è errore, se c'è o non

c'è voluta infedeltà, può permettersi qualsiasi cosa il traduttore poetico. Meno siamo abituati a concedere al traduttore prosastico

Patruno: Sì

Montale: Da lui ci si attende più fedeltà

Patruno: Una delle cose che ho notato nelle traduzioni di Vittorini è che oltre a permettersi certe libertà di interpretazione, a scegliere alcuni equivalenti invece di altri, è il fatto di tagliare molti passi

Montale: Dove non capisce, taglia. Forse, a volte, questo accade

Patruno: Questo può essere vero. Ma ho notato che per quanto riguarda la sua traduzione di Faulkner, *Luce d'Agosto*, Vittorini è molto più cauto.[3] Di tagli, infatti, ce ne sono molto pochi. Ha mai avuto Lei occasione di parlare a Vittorini di Faulkner?

Montale: No, no. Magari ne avremo parlato ma non ho memoria che abbia detto cose. So che Faulkner è uno dei suoi autori, ma non credo ne abbiamo parlato molto. Non credo. Anch'io ho conosciuto Faulkner, ma lui era talmente silenzioso e taciturno che non sono riuscito a cavargli di bocca neanche una parola. Poi era totalmente chiuso a qualsiasi altro tipo di cultura che non fosse la sua. Va bene, gli Stati Uniti, ma una parte degli Stati Uniti, mica tutto

Patruno: Però dicono, e questo me lo ha fatto notare anche [Claudio] Gorlier, se non mi sbaglio, che Faulkner, benché non avesse parlato mai di scrittori stranieri che si siano interessati delle sue opere, nella sua biblioteca personale avesse la traduzione fatta da Vittorini. Comunque anche Lei ha tradotto molto

Montale: Ma meno di Vittorini. Molto meno, credo. Almeno credo, non so

Patruno: Lei ha tradotto per condividere quel vivo entusiasmo che hanno avuto, ad esempio, Vittorini e Pavese per la letteratura americana durante quegli anni oppure ci sono state altre ragioni?

Montale: Io ho tradotto perché mi è stato richiesto, per guadagnare qualche lira.[4] Con questo non dico che non abbia avuto interesse.

Poi l'inglese era l'unica lingua da cui potevo tradurre. Nessuno mi chiedeva di tradurre dal francese perché c'era un sufficiente pubblico che leggeva francese direttamente. Io non conosco quasi niente di tedesco. Conosco lo spagnolo ma quasi nessuno mi ha mai parlato di tradurre le cose spagnole. Quindi restava l'Inghilterra e la lingua inglese. Mi hanno proposto. Sono quasi tutte traduzioni fatte per incarico dell'editore, in questo caso Vittorini. Chiamiamo editore nel senso di "editor" perché lui non era affatto editore nel senso italiano. Ma quello che ho fatto con passione è stato il *Billy Budd*[5]

Patruno: E mi fa piacere che sia stato ripubblicato[6]

Montale: Poi sempre per la commissione, ho tradotto quattro tragedie di Shakespeare per la collezione di Mario Praz. Ma vedrà, sono traduzioni… Praz non esigeva genialità. Voleva traduzioni letterali. E, fuori di questi confini letterali, poi ho tradotto invece con maggior libertà e con risultati migliori naturalmente, l'*Amleto*, che è stato pubblicato e ripubblicato per Longanesi nell'edizione di lusso. Lì ho fatto dei tagli. I tagli che di solito fanno gli attori. Anziché farli fare agli attori, che spesso tagliano interi personaggi, io ho lasciato tutte le scene, tutti i personaggi. Solo qua e là qualche riga scompare ma sostanzialmente credo che se vivesse Shakespeare approverebbe. Lui farebbe ancora altri tagli da solo. E poi c'è anche, mai pubblicato credo. Il *Giulio Cesare*. Ma è stato rappresentato qui a Roma, a Milano, in vari teatri. Anche quello in traduzione in prosa. Qua e là con qualche pezzetto in versi. Poi ho fatto la parte verseggiata soltanto di *Sogno di una notte d'estate*, che è stato presentato al Giardino Boboli di Firenze molti anni fa. Ma la traduttrice è Paola Ojetti. Io non figuro nemmeno. Ma nelle parti ci sono alcune poesie, anche in mezzo, che sono mie. E anche la parte dei rustici, dei comici, dei buffoni, secondo me, non erano nemmeno scritte da Shakespeare

Patruno: Lo crede Lei?

Montale: Dato l'aria del tempo, e la grande libertà, il teatro non credo che…

Patruno: Che sia stata una persona a scrivere tutto?

Montale: No. I buffoni non sono soltanto di Shakespeare. Sono un altro Shakespeare del tempo. Secondo me erano dei comici professionisti che inventavano loro

Patruno: Una specie, allora, di commedia dell'arte

Montale: Sì, ma soltanto le parti riservate a loro insomma

Patruno: Improvvisavano?

Montale: Sì, la tradizione è continuata, continuata fino a pochi anni fa quando esisteva l'Operetta. L'Operetta fu un colpo geniale nell'Ottocento specialmente francese e poi austriaco. E molto, pure, inglese. Lì c'erano proprio i buffi. I buffi inventavano le loro parti. Con riferimenti alla situazione politica attuale: o il sindaco della città, o le guardie, o la politica cittadina, i fatti del giorno. E mettevano dei commenti così, delle frecciate a destra e a sinistra, che il pubblico della città capiva al volo

Patruno: Certe battute…

Montale: Io credo che i buffoni shakesperiani siano stati gli antenati di questi gruppi che si estinguono però alla fine dell'Ottocento. Infatti, non esistono almeno in Italia. L'Operetta è morta e poi non è mai stato un frutto italiano. Le grandi operette venivano dalla Francia. Molte dall'Austria e dalla Germania. Lì c'è il grosso modello di Offenbach. Probabilmente Offenbach scriveva veramente i suoi testi senza bisogno d'aiutanti, ma ci sono tanti che non hanno questa facilità

Patruno: Lei quando è venuto a Milano?

Montale: Sono venuto a Milano nel '48

Patruno: Vittorini era già qui quando è venuto?

Montale: Vittorini era già qui da parecchi anni

Patruno: Mi potrebbe dire qualcosa di Vittorini uomo?
Montale: Mah! Era un uomo estremamente simpatico, aperto, cordiale, generoso, non saprei. Dico, non era il tipo dello scholar,

ecco. Parlava un po' a caso, a vanvera. Però con genialità di intuizione

Patruno: Anche se con ritardo, ho avuto il piacere di aver letto l'*Americana*. Le sue introduzioni (ai vari periodi letterari), le sue scelte, lasciano pensare che veramente è un libro che ha destato interesse

Montale: Bisogna pensare al tempo in cui è uscito. Non badare, magari, ad eventuali inesattezze o errori

Patruno: No. Ma lo spirito con il quale è stato compilato. Lì quasi quasi si sente Vittorini, mosso, in un certo senso, da "astratti furori" che va alla ricerca di qualcosa. Era difficile, a quei tempi, ottenere copie di libri americani?

Montale: Mah, per me no perché dirigevo la biblioteca Vieusseux di Firenze che era appunto una biblioteca di libri stranieri.[7] Quindi lì Vittorini avrà pescato quello che avrà voluto. Poi, non è vero che il Fascismo proibisse di leggere, di comperare, o perfino di recensire libri americani.[8] Se avesse fatto questo sarebbe stato una cosa, a modo suo, una cosa seria, diciamo, perché non poteva fare queste cose. Mussolini no, lasciava una notevole libertà agli editori perché non gli interessavano. Non sapeva neanche che esistessero. Non per generosità. Però neanche per crudeltà. Li perseguitava, sì. Alcuni sono stati perseguitati, ma non per i loro interessi letterari, ma per altre ragioni. Perché sapeva che erano anti-fascisti o altro, per manifestazioni pubbliche o altro, ma non per il fatto che hanno pubblicato qualche libro americano

Patruno: Oggi si parla di Saroyan. Non si sapeva se Vittorini avesse tradotto Saroyan direttamente dall'inglese oppure avesse avuto nelle mani un'edizione francese

Montale: Questo non lo so ma poteva benissimo avere il testo inglese perché a parte il Vieusseux c'era anche l'Istituto Britannico che prestava libri

Patruno: Avrebbe, perciò, potuto ottenerli
Montale: Sì, sì, secondo me li ha avuti senz'altro

Patruno: Lei quando ritorna in America?

Montale: Mah! Io non so. Ci sono stato otto giorni nel '48[9]

Patruno: Vorrebbe tornare? So che farebbe piacere a molta gente

Montale: Per me è troppo tardi. Cosa farei? Una conferenza a un college? Parlando un cattivo inglese

Patruno: Ma so che farebbe piacere

Montale: Avevo pensato di visitare l'America quando lasciai, mi cacciarono dal Vieusseux. Ma allora avevo quarant'anni, ora ne ho ottanta. Poi cosa avrei fatto? Molti miei amici si sono americanizzati, restando né carne né pesce. Non parlo di Lei perché non la conosco. Poi succedono cose strane.

Edited by Roberta Ricci BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

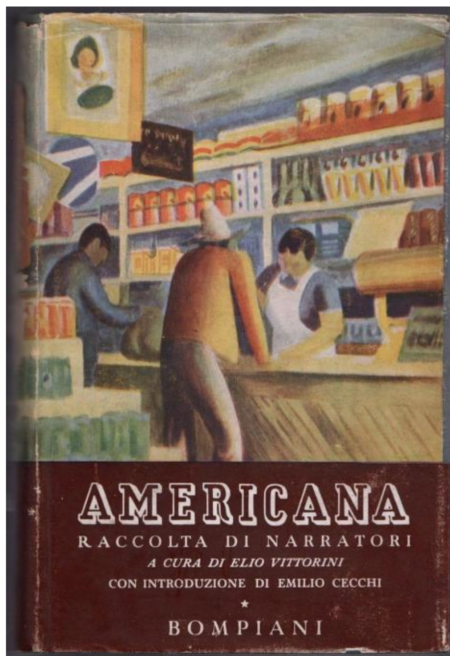
NOTES

[1] Erskine Caldwell, *Il Piccolo Campo*, introduzione e traduzione di Elio Vittorini. Milano: Bompiani, 1940. Titolo originale, *God's Little Acre*, 1933.
[2] Vittorini, come americanista, si pronunciò frequentemente sui metodi di traduzione optando per l'adattamento e la contestualizzazione piuttosto che per la trasposizione fedele e letterale. Al di là di tale principio teorico volto a restituire l'intento e le suggestioni di un testo, egli del resto, come tutta quella generazione di traduttori, aveva una conoscenza approssimativa della lingua anglo-americana: "It bears remembering that, unlike Pavese who studied English and wrote his thesis on Walt Whitman, Vittorini was virtually self-taught in English. In his famous letter to Togliatti (Doppio fronte della cultura – Rivoluzione e "cultura al potere" - Suonare il piffero per la rivoluzione? – Uno sforzo che eviti l'arcadia), Vittorini speaks of the relationship between translation and politics and admits that 'le lingue straniere …le so come un sordomuto: posso leggere o scrivere in esse, tradurre da esse, ma non posso parlarle né capire chi parla'", inedito dal Fondo Patruno, Bryn Mawr College. Patruno nelle medesime annotazioni esprime il suo distinguo da Montale, il quale in diverse occasioni aveva criticato l'abolizione e la sostituzione da parte di Vittorini di ciò che non comprendeva. Per Patruno si tratta invece di una consapevole strategia stilistica: "Vittorini approached these translations with a certain degree of flexibility and a great deal of freedom, which are due in part to his limited knowledge of the English language and in part to his creative spirit and to his notion of freedom of expression that he saw in American literature. In other words, his translations have in them the observations he made about some of the American writers he admired", inedito dal Fondo Patruno, Bryn Mawr College.

Cfr. anche Patruno, *Montale e Americana,* In *Paesaggio ligure e paesaggio interiore nella poesia di Montale. Atti del Convegno internazionale "Credo che non esista nulla di simile al mondo",* a cura di Paola Polito e Antonio Zollino*,* Firenze, Olschki 2011, 111-116.
[3] William Faulkner, *Luce d'Agosto*, traduzione di Elio Vittorini. Milano: Mondadori, 1939. Titolo originale, *Light in August*, 1932.
[4] "[F]urono [le traduzioni] tra il 1938 e il 1943 i soli pot boiler a me concessi", cfr. E. Montale, *Quaderno di traduzioni*. Milano: Edizioni della Meridiana, 1948, 9. Il 15 maggio 1941 Montale scrive a Vittorini preoccupato per il presumibile danno economico causato dalla perdita delle sue illustrazioni fuori testo con didascalie che aveva disegnato per *Americana*: "Ti prego rassicurarmi d'urgenza perché non ne ho copia e non vorrei che mi sfumassero così 3000 lire. Sono stato sciocco a non assicurarlo!! Rassicurami d'urgenza". In E. Esposito, *Quando Montale traduceva (per vivere)*, in "Tradurre - Pratiche, teorie, strumenti*"* https://rivistatradurre.it, 18, 2020, 5. Le illustrazioni, concepite per la prima edizione come apparato critico nell'equilibrio fra testo e immagine, furono subito censurate dal fascismo. Ed ancora con Vittorini il 27 settembre del 1941 Montale condivide la sua necessità di tradurre per ragioni economiche: "Vedi un po' come stanno le mie finanze presso Bompiani. Io debbo avere 1200 lire (mi pare) per la spagnola e 1500 per il saldo Parker, avendo consegnato da tempo le ultime bozze. Ho l'impressione di aver ricevuto per l'Americana L. 944 più del giusto. M'ha dato in due volte L. 4700 (prima [L]. 2000 e poi L. 2700) e il dovuto era di L. 3756; salvo che il primo versamento non fosse di 1000 e allora mancherebbero 56 lire al saldo dell'Americana. Se invece le cose stanno come dico io, io dovrei avere 1200 + 1500 – 944 = 1756 che ti prego farmi mandare. Ma forse non c'è errore; o se c'è passa inosservato ed io posso intascare L. 944 in più per l'americana, ciò che non ripugnerebbe punto alla mia coscienza dato che Billy Budd meritava più di 12 lire alla pagina. Insomma risolvi tu il caso, magari senza parlarne a Raguzzi, ché quello se trova un errore sviene certo." In *Quando Montale traduceva (per vivere)*, 11.
[5] Herman Melville, *La storia di Billy Budd*, traduzione di Eugenio Montale. Milano: Bompiani 1942, titolo originale *Billy Budd*, 1924.
[6] Ristampa dell'edizione tradotta da Montale *Billy Budd: gabbiere di parrocchetto* nel 1975 presso Mondadori. Dal secondo dopoguerra in poi la pubblicazione delle opere melvilliane in prosa è cresciuta ininterrottamente con edizioni che hanno riproposto, rivisitato e ritoccato traduzioni esistenti o ne hanno presentate di nuove a seconda delle finalità fruitive, continuando a proliferare senza sosta anche successivamente all'edizione esaustiva di *Tutte le opere narrative di Herman Melville*, a cura di Ruggero Bianchi. Milano: Mursia, 1986-1992. Per una bibliografia estesa delle traduzioni italiane dal 1931, cfr. Herman Melville, *Lettere a Hawthorne*, a cura di Giuseppe Nori. Macerata, Liberilibri Editrice, 1994.
[7] Direttore del Gabinetto Vieusseux a Firenze dal 1929 al 1938. E poi nel 1948, a Milano, capo critico letterario per il *Corriere della Sera.* "Sotto il profilo della maturazione culturale, i venti anni che ho passato a Firenze sono stati i più importanti della mia vita. Lì ho scoperto che non c'era soltanto il mare, ma anche la terraferma: la terraferma della cultura, delle idee, della tradizione, dell'umanesimo. Vi ho trovato una natura diversa, compenetrata nel lavoro e nel pensiero dell'uomo. Vi ho compreso che cosa è stata, che cosa può essere una civiltà". Cfr. Silvia Betocchi, "Italica", *Gli anni di Montale al Gabinetto Vieusseux di Firenze*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (1994): 311-324, 322.

[8] La prima versione di *Americana - Raccolta di narratori dalle origini ai nostri giorni* (1940) - bloccata, già in stampa, dalla censura fascista che impose all'editore Bompiani l'eliminazione delle note di Vittorini per sostituirle con una presentazione critica di Emilio Cecchi, docente di letteratura inglese, già collaboratore di Bompiani e ben visto dal regime anche per il giudizio negativo sulla cultura americana: "un paese che, traviato da un falso ideale di benessere, brancola cercando la propria unicità etnica ed etica". Dopo lenti scambi politici e tagli testuali, finalmente Cecchi approvò la nuova versione dell'antologia con trentatré prosatori americani, ultimata nell'ottobre del 1942 col titolo *Americana - Raccolta di narratori dalle origini ai nostri giorni a cura di Elio Vittorini e con Introduzione di Emilio Cecchi* (seconda edizione nel gennaio 1943, terza nel 1944, ristampa tipografica nel 1947, nuova proposta editoriale da parte di Bompiani mai realizzatasi nel 1960, ristampa anastatica nel 1968, e riedizioni con illustrazioni dal 1971 al 2002).

[9] In realtà Montale viaggiò a New York nell'ambito dell'inaugurazione del volo Roma-New York-Roma nel 1950 e non nel 1948, come si legge in questa intervista. Ne parla nel capitolo V di *Fuori di casa* (Mondadori, 1969) ed in due pezzi giornalistici *Andati e tornati in novanta ore* ("Corriere della sera", 13 luglio 1950) e *Dove le donne sono importanti* ("Corriere d'informazione", 24-25 luglio1950), che confluisce poi con *Andati e tornati in novanta ore* nel dittico americano che costituisce la sezione V di *Fuori di casa*. Ringrazio Antonio Zollino per queste segnalazioni.



Writing After and About the Holocaust: Primo Levi and Umberto Saba

LETTER 1

Umberto Saba to Primo Levi
October 3, 1948
Turin, Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Umberto Saba a Primo Levi, 3 ottobre 1948[1]
Typewritten, final draft of the text

Trieste, 3 ottobre 1948[2]
Caro Signor Primo[3] Levi,
non so se le farà piacere sentirsi dire da me che il suo libro *Se questo è un uomo* è più che un bel libro, è un libro fatale. Qualcuno doveva ben scriverlo; il destino ha voluto che questo qualcuno fosse lei.

È fatale come lo furono,[4] nel secolo scorso,[5] *Le mie prigioni* di Silvio Pellico. Ha avuto successo, non l'ha avuto? Io non ne so nulla. L'orrore e, più ancora il disgusto, di quello[6] che sta accadendo, mi isolano sempre di più da tutto quanto oggi si scrive o si dice. Ed anche il suo libro l'ho avuto per caso; difficilmente l'avrei acquistato. Ma, appena ho cominciato a leggerlo, non ho potuto più smettere. Adesso è come se avessi fatto personalmente l'esperienza di Auschwitz. Fosse[7] nelle mie possibilità, lo imporrei come testo scolastico. Ma i responsabili (se gli uomini possono essere responsabili di qualcosa) dei campi di annientamento, se ne guarderanno bene dal farlo. Purtroppo l'immensa crisi di cattiveria e di stupidità che ha avuto inizio nel 1914 ha bisogno, per esaurirsi, di alcuni secoli. Ho l'impressione che il suo libro possa vivere anche al di là della crisi. Perché molti altri hanno descritto quelli [*sic*] orrori, ma tutti lo hanno fatto dall'esterno; nessuno — almeno che io sappia — li ha risentiti, e resi, dall'interno.

Suo, con gratitudine ed affetto
Saba

[Trieste, October 3, 1948
Dear Mr. Primo Levi,
I do not know if you will be pleased to hear from me that your book *If This is a Man* is more than a good book, it is an

inevitable book. Someone really had to write it: destiny willed that this someone was you.

It is as inevitable as Silvio Pellico's *My Prisons* was in the last century. Was it successful? Did it not succeed? I know nothing about it. Horror and, more so, disgust at what is happening, isolate me more and more from everything that is being written and said today. And it was even by accident that I got your book; it is unlikely I would have bought it. But as soon as I started reading it, I could not stop. Now it is as if I had personally experienced Auschwitz. If it were up to me, I would set it as required reading in schools. But those responsible (if men can be responsible for anything) for the death camps will be careful not to let that happen. Sadly, the immense crisis of wickedness and stupidity that started in 1914 needs some centuries to exhaust itself. I have the impression that your book can live beyond the crisis. Because many have described those horrors, but they have done so from the outside; no one, whom I know of, has done so from the inside.

Yours truly, with gratitude and warmest wishes,
Saba[8]]

LETTER 2

Primo Levi to Umberto Saba
November 10, 1948
Turin, Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Primo Levi a Umberto Saba, 10 novembre 1948
Handwritten, first draft of the text[9]

Umberto Saba – Libreria Antiquaria
November 10, 1948[10]
Via S. Nicolò 30 Trieste

Caro Saba,

come potrebbe non farmi piacere sentirmi dire di queste cose, e ~~sopratutto~~ soprattutto da Lei, e senza avere sollecitato il suo giudizio? ~~Ma debbo confessarle che~~ Ma è un piacere non privo di amarezza: infatti[11] la sua lettera ~~mi è giunta~~ giunge anche per me in un momento di stanchezza e di ~~nausea~~ disgusto, in un momento in cui mi pare che non avrò mai più il vigore di scrivere ancora cose buone ed utili a me ed agli altri.

Il libro non è andato molto bene. Pochi lo leggono, e sono in genere[12] quelli che non ne avrebbero bisogno; altri conchiudono "poveretto!" oppure "quei vigliacchi!", e per loro è acqua passata. I più, come è noto, per varie ragioni preferiscono non leggere.

Ora, forse lei non sa che la mia storia non è finita con l'arrivo dei russi in Auschwitz; ancora per nove mesi ho girato per l'Europa, da Cracovia a Ketowice, e poi in Ucraina, in Russia Bianca, ~~indi~~ e di nuovo in Ucraina e poi in Romania, ~~in cerca della via buona per ritornare in Italia;~~ come un travicello alla deriva,[13] e questo con una sola camicia, senza un soldo, ma in discreta salute e con gli occhi bene aperti, e soprat[t]utto generic. [*sic*] felice per la mia restituzione al mondo.[14] ~~Ho vissuto per 4 mesi fra le paludi del Pripet, e per 35 giorni consecutivi nella tradotta che da Starie Doroghi[15] un oscuro-pae-villaggio sovietico mi ha portato a Torino~~. Avrei quindi[16] ancora molte cose da raccontare: ~~sui polacchi e sui russi visti da vicino, sul loro sterminato paese, sul loro nuovo ed antico modo di vivere, sul loro incredibile esercito~~.

~~Avevo~~ Mesi fa avevo anche incominciato a scrivere di queste cose: ora credo che vi rinuncerò, almeno per qualche anno. Altre cose premono. Ho un mestiere, sono impiegato, debbo osservare in [*sic*]orario, portare a casa una certa somma al mese. ~~Sono~~ Da 10 giorni (per questo il ritardo nel risponderle!) sono anche padre:[17] e questa è una cosa fondamentale e impareggiabile, ma anche un giro di vite.

Per tutte queste ragioni, appena ~~mi trovo al~~ assaggiato il piatto, mi trovo al punto di rinunciare a scrivere. E per questo, o anche per questo, ~~conser~~ la Sua lettera mi è giunta ~~dolce~~ gradita[18] ed amara, e la conserverò come il ricordo ed il documento di un mio passato modo di essere.

Mi pare che anche Lei abbia intuito questo, quando mi dice che il [mio] è un libro fatale; così credo anch'io infatti, quando lo rileggo: mi pare che si sia scritto da sé, che l'abbiano fatto l'indignazione, l'offesa e la vergogna. Non io, o almeno non l'io di oggi. Quello che dovevo dire, l'ho detto.

Mi perdoni questa mia confessione, potrà sembrarle un abuso della Sua confidenza. Le sono sinceram. [*sic*] grato del suo giudizio e spero di poterla un giorno conoscere di persona.

[Dear Saba,

How could it not please me to hear these things spoken of, and especially by you, and without having sought your opinion? ~~But~~

~~I must confess to you that~~ But it is a pleasure not without bitterness: in fact your letter ~~has come to me~~ comes in a moment of weariness and ~~nausea~~ disgust for me as well, in a moment when it seems to me that I will never again have the vigor for writing things which are good and useful for myself and others.

The book has not gone well. Few read it and in general they are those who have no need of it; others conclude "poor thing!" or "those cowards!", and for them it's water under the bridge. Most, as is well known, for various reasons prefer not to read.

Now, perhaps you do not know that my story did not end with the Russians' arrival at Auschwitz; for nine months more I wandered around Europe, from Kraków to Katowice, then to Ukraine, to Belarus, ~~from there~~ and then again to Ukraine and then Romania ~~in search of a good way to get back to Italy~~; like a joist adrift, and this with a single shirt, without a penny, but in decent health and with my eyes wide open, and above all generally happy for my return to the world. ~~For four months I lived in the swamps of Pripet, and for 35 consecutive days in a troop train which, from Starie Doroghi, an obscure soviet village, carried me to Turin.~~ So I still have many things to tell: ~~about the Poles and the Russians seen up close, about their endless country, about their new and old way of life, about their incredible army.~~

~~I had~~ Months ago I had even started to write about these things: now I think I will give it up, at least for some years. Other things are more pressing. I have a job, I am employed, I must keep to timetable, bring home a certain amount each month. ~~I am~~ For ten days (this is the reason for the delay in replying) I have also been a father; and this is a fundamental and unparalleled thing, but also a turn of the screw.

For all these reasons, just ~~I find myself at the~~ having tasted the dish, I find myself on the point of giving up writing. And because of this, or also because of this ~~I cher~~, your letter has come to me ~~sweet~~ welcome and bitter, and I will cherish it as the memory and document of a past way of being of mine.

It seems to me that you have understood this as well when you say that mine is an inevitable book; I also believe that when I reread it: it seems to me like it wrote itself, that indignation, outrage, and shame created it. Not I, or at least not the I of today. What I had to say, I have said.

Forgive me my confession, it may seem an abuse of your confidence. I am sincerely grateful for your opinion and I hope one day to be able to meet you in person.]

LETTER 3

Umberto Saba to Primo Levi
November 20, 1948
Turin, Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Umberto Saba a Primo Levi, 20 novembre 1948
Typewritten, final draft of the text[19]

20 Novembre 1948
Caro Primo,
la ringrazio per la sua lettera che… non ho più. Me l'ha portata via un ammiratore del suo libro, e che colleziona un pò autografi. (Non vorrei però credesse — data la mia qualità di libraio antiquario — che l'abbia… venduta).

Ho avuto il suo indirizzo dall'editore Einaudi. Nella stessa lettera, gli dicevo che mi dispiace non sia stato lui a pubblicare il libro.

Non si dia fretta a scrivere il seguito. I seguiti sono sempre pericolosi… Verrà il giorno nel quale sentirà la necessità di ~~farlo~~[20] fare, come l'ha sentita per il primo libro. Allora nè la paternità, nè la chimica potranno esserle un impedimento serio.

Non so se lei conosce un mio libretto che s'intitola *Scorciatoie e raccontini* e che — all'opposto del *Canzoniere* — non è stato — si può dire — venduto. Se non lo ha e desidera leggerlo, posso mandargliene una copia. È un'operetta alla quale tengo molto, anche (soprattutto) dal punto di vista stilistico. Ma il "contenuto" (che ha urtato a tutte le resistenze conscie ed inconscie) ha impedito agli italiani [*sic*] di capirlo. E questo in modo assoluto.

Verrei volentieri a Torino. Ma, vecchio e stanco, mi muovo il meno possibile.

Auguri, caro Primo, e affettuosi saluti dal suo
Saba[21]

[November 20, 1948
Dear Primo,
Thank you for your letter which… I no longer have. It was taken away by an admirer of your book who collects autographs.

(However, I do not want you to think — given my nature as antiquarian bookseller — that I have… sold it).

I got your address from the publisher Einaudi. In the same letter, I told him I was sorry that it was not he who had published the book.

Do not be in a hurry to write the sequel. Sequels are always dangerous… The day will come when you feel the need to ~~create it~~ create, as you felt for the first book. Then neither parenthood nor chemistry will be a serious impediment to you.

I do not know if you are familiar with a little book of mine called *Shortcuts and Short Stories* and which – unlike the *Songbook* — has not been — one could say — sold. If you do not have it and would like to read it, I can send you a copy. It is a little work I hold very dear, also (above all) from a stylistic point of view. But the "content" (which has come up against all conscious and unconscious resistances) has prevented the Italians from understanding it. And this in an absolute way.

I would willingly come to Turin. But, old and tired, I move around as little as possible.

Good wishes, dear Primo, and affectionate greetings from your

Saba]

LETTER 4

Primo Levi to Umberto Saba
January 10, 1949
Centro Manoscritti dell'Università di Pavia, *Fondo Umberto Saba*, shelf mark SAB-07-0040
Handwritten, final draft of the text

Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Primo Levi a Umberto Saba, 10 gennaio 1949
Handwritten, first draft of the text[22]

Torino, 10 gennaio 1949

Caro Saba,

non creda che mi sia occorso tutto un mese per leggere *Scorciatoie*;[23] l'ho letto invece con grande rapidità, mi è parso[24] subito finito, e vi ho ritrovato molto del mio mondo.

Non del Lager, voglio dire; meglio, non solo del Lager. Mi pare che si tratti press'a poco di questo, vi ho trovato ~~definiti~~[25] tutti o quasi i temi nuovi che attendono svolgimento, e i problemi nuovi che attendono soluzione; e che li [*sic*] attendono da noi, noi[26] che ci siamo passati attraverso, corpo ed anima, chi in un modo e chi in altro [*sic*], e che ne siamo usciti mutati, estremamente differenziati, spesso nemici del mondo e di noi stessi, altre volte disgregati, o in aperta ribellione o evasione.

C'è[27] anche molto altro, lo so: il mestiere (nel senso buono!) che Le invidio; e ricordi pacati del mondo di prima; e isole serene nel tumulto d'oggi. Ma tutto questo mi ha toccato meno[28] di quel Suo[29] coraggio, di quella Sua[30] avidità vigile (in questo senso preferisco intendere la genealogia che Lei si è scelta nell'ultima scorciatoia[31]) di nulla lasciare inesplorato, di tutto sollevare dal buio del sottosuolo alla luce della consapevolezza.[32]

Non mi resta che ringraziarLa. Mi sento più vicino a Lei di prima, e più desideroso di conoscerLa.

Mi creda Suo[33]

Primo Levi

[Turin, January 10, 1949

Dear Saba,

do not think that it has taken me a whole month to read *Shortcuts*; I read it very quickly and it seemed over too soon to me, and I found very much of my own world in it.

Not the Lager, I should say; or better, not only the Lager. It seems to me that it is more or less about this: I found in it all or almost all the new issues which need further development, and the new issues that are waiting for solutions; and they are waiting for us to offer them, we who went through it, body and soul, some in one way and some in another, and came out of it changed, extremely separated, often enemies of the world and of ourselves, at other times broken apart, or in open rebellion, or flight.

There is much more, I know: the craft (in a good sense) that I envy in it; and serene memories from the world before; and tranquil islands in the chaos of today. But all this touched me less than your courage, your alert longing to leave nothing unexplored (I prefer to understand the genealogy that you chose in the last shortcut in this sense), to bring up everything from the darkness of the underground to the light of awareness.

I can only thank you. I feel closer to you than before and even more eager to meet you.

Yours truly and sincerely,
Primo Levi[34]]

Luca Zipoli BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

NOTES

* In my edition of the Italian texts, I preserve the many "anomalous" forms that appear in Saba and Levi's writing and diverge from the current usage (*nè* for *né*, *pò* for *po'*, *conscie* for *consce*, *inconscie* for *inconsce*, *ed* for *e* in front of any vowels). All these forms reflect the authors' styles and languages, and I believe they should remain in the text with no modern amendments. In my transcription, I report in italics all the capitalizations used by Saba in the original typewritten documents. I correct *E'* for *È* and other mere typos, by fixing them through the usage of signs of removal (‹a›) and integration ([a]). With respect to self-corrections, in my edition I report all the edits and variants inserted immediately by the authors while writing and typing, and I maintain also the crossed-out parts, if readable. As for the manuscript additions, which are pertinent to a later phase, I include them in the text and mark them with an endnote comment.

[1] The original typewritten testimony of this letter is preserved within the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Umberto Saba a Primo Levi, 3 ottobre 1948. The letter was published for the first time — and partially — in Castellani 7, and then quoted in part in Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1386. It can also be read now, both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski, in Bucciantini 158-159. Unlike those previous editions, which intervened in the transcription, in mine I preferred to philologically report Saba's original punctuation, and to mention in my notes which parts were later additions and self-corrections.

[2] The date written on the letter ("October 3, 1948") is probably an error made by Saba because of the proximity of the date with the end of the previous month. The letter was most probably written on November 3, 1948, since Saba later mentions that he has received the address from Luigi Einaudi (through the letter of October 26, 1948).

[3] Saba writes "Primo" with a blue pen above a previous "Pino."

[4] Saba adds "lo furono" with a blue pen in the interlinear space.

[5] Saba adds the comma after "scorso" with a blue pen in the interlinear space.

[6] Saba adds "quello che" with a blue pen in the interlinear space.

[7] Saba corrects a previous final "i" with an "e" with a blue pen in the interlinear space.

[8] In this version, I follow predominantly Simborowski's translation in Bucciantini 158 with various edits.

[9] The original handwritten testimony of this letter is preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Primo Levi a Umberto

Saba, 10 novembre 1948. The content of this letter was summarized and only partially cited by Barberis 755, so it remains for the most part unpublished. I wish to thank Primo Levi's children and heirs — Renzo and Lisa Levi — for making this document available to me and allowing me to publish it. The translation is by Ruth Chester, whom I warmly thank for providing the first English version ever of this text.
[10] The date is written with a pencil at a later stage (probably by the curators and not by Levi).
[11] The sentence from "Ma" to "infatti" is written by Levi in the interlinear space above the crossed-out sentence.
[12] Levi adds "in genere" in the interlinear space.
[13] Levi adds "come un travicello alla deriva" in the interlinear space, above the crossed-out sentence.
[14] Levi adds the sentence from "e" to "mondo" in a later footnote.
[15] Levi writes "Starie Doroghi" in the interlinear space above the crossed-out sentence.
[16] Levi adds "quindi" in the interlinear space.
[17] Levi refers here to the birth of his daughter Lisa Lorenza Levi, born in Turin on October 31, 1948.
[18] Levi writes "gradita" in the interlinear space above the crossed-out "dolce."
[19] The original typewritten testimony of this letter is preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Umberto Saba a Primo Levi, 20 novembre 1948. The content of this letter was summarized and only partially cited by Barberis 755, so it remains for the most part unpublished. I wish to thank Primo Levi's children and heirs — Renzo and Lisa Levi — for making this document available to me and allowing me to publish it. The English translation is by Ruth Chester, whom I warmly thank for providing the first English version ever of this text.
[20] Saba writes "fare" in the interlinear space with a pencil and above a crossed-out "fare."
[21] The signature is autograph and written with a pencil.
[22] The original handwritten testimony of this letter is preserved within the "Umberto Saba" archival collection at the Centro Manoscritti of the University of Pavia; see Centro Manoscritti dell'Università di Pavia, *Fondo Umberto Saba*, shelf mark SAB-07-0040. The draft of this letter, written with a pencil, is preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Primo Levi a Umberto Saba, 10 gennaio 1949. The letter was published for the first time in Fiori 8. It can also be read, both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski, in Bucciantini 160-161. Unlike those previous editions, in mine I preferred to philologically report Levi's self-corrections and to mention in my notes the variants between the draft and the final letter.
[23] In the draft, Levi writes "S. e R." instead of "Scorciatoie."
[24] In the draft, Levi first writes "l'ho trovato" and then he crosses it out and substitutes it with "mi è parso."
[25] In the draft, Levi first writes "abbondanti e ben definiti" and then crosses it out.
[26] In the draft, Levi writes "noi giovani" but then in the final letter only reports "noi."

[27] In the draft, Levi writes "So" then crosses it out and substitutes it with "So che" which he crosses out likewise and substitutes with "C'è."
[28] In the draft, Levi writes "molto meno" but then in the final letter only reports "meno."
[29] In the draft, Levi does not capitalize "suo."
[30] In the draft, Levi does not capitalize "sua."
[31] In the draft, Levi capitalizes "scorciatoia."
[32] In the draft, Levi writes "coscienza" but then in the final letter changes it with "consapevolezza."
[33] In the draft, Levi does not capitalize "suo."
[34] In this version, I follow predominantly Simborowski's translation in Bucciantini 160 with various edits.

To Compose a Life: The Periodic Table's Musical Translation

Two classes at Bryn Mawr College marked my first encounters with Primo Levi and Nicholas Patruno: the Emily Balch College Seminar titled "The Periodic Table" (Fall 2005), reading Levi's book of the same title, and "Primo Levi, Holocaust, and Aftermath" (Spring 2006), studying the writings of Levi in relationship to the Holocaust. Both Levi and Patruno had an impact. Patruno, the professor for both classes, was a speaker of truth who saw to the heart of people's actions past their words, and a continuer of the chain of remembrance. He was someone who, despite his knowledge of the depths of humanity's darkness, held onto joy. The classes pushed my ability to think, analyze, and recognize the patterns and threads of connection, skills that later formed the foundation of my methods of composition. In 2020, I learned of Patruno's passing. His death, combined with the events of the presidential election and the echoes of Brown Shirt tactics of the 1920s, brought me back to Primo Levi. With the blessing of Edwina Patruno and Roberta Ricci, Professor and Chair on the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Chair in the Humanities, I commenced composing *The Periodic Table*: a composition for solo piano bringing to life Primo Levi's book and guided by Patruno's analysis of the work in *Understanding Primo Levi*.

The world premiere was performed by Charles Abramovic at Bryn Mawr College on April 11, 2024. Roberta Ricci gave an introduction on the concept of "intersectionality" concerning Patruno's scholarship on twentieth-century literature, especially on Levi, and on his own life as a first-generation immigrant and low-income student. Afterwards, a group of her students (Emily Short, Zeyu Xie, Lillian Belzer, Lake Sanchez) in the seminar ITAL 320 *Novel, History, and the Making of Modern Italy: Alessandro Manzoni and the Romantic Movement*, dedicated to the modern novel and nationalism that swept over Europe during the nineteenth century, read excerpts of *The Periodic Table* as well as of Levi's poem, *If this is a Man*. I conceived the event not to just have my new piece performed in my alma mater, but to share the words and stories of both men — Levi and Patruno. The following day, Friday April 12th, I was invited as a guest in Ricci's class ITAL 201 *Problematiche di oggi: conversare insieme* to engage in a meaningful discussion about the relevance of Levi in patriarchal,

contemporary Italy, touching upon issues of identity and gender, historical memory and politics, and marginalization and racism. During our discussion in class, we also immersed ourselves in the process behind the music's composition. The students were superb!

In preparation for the composition of this new piece, I began the reading of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* (2015), a collection of his entirety translated to English, as well as Ian Thomson's *Primo Levi: A Life* (2002), while paying attention to the themes and influences that reoccurred in Levi's writing and life: the measured but deeply felt style of writing and the meticulous and scientifically precise language. I then returned to *The Periodic Table* (1984) and *Understanding Primo Levi* (1995) for ideas on the tenor, structure, motivic potential, and extramusical references of literature, Italian regions, mythology, and family history for the individual chapters. On one hand, I identified the most impactful chapters of the book, which thus were longer in length; on the other, I discerned whether the plot or the emotional content of each chapter were the priority. In the first scenario, motives would be organized to correspond to the events in the chapters; in the second, structure would not relate to the plot itself. From these notes and Patruno's comments on the book in the classroom, I created a comprehensive structural chart which covers tonal and temporal centers, length, rough structure, connections to other movements, and motivic themes. Spanning roughly 75 minutes, each of the 21 element-named chapters corresponds to a movement that are divided in three large sections of youth, wartime, and post-war. There are two musical interludes, one between the first two sections and one at the beginnings of the post-war section that each consist of two of Levi's earliest stories.

Three aspects form the basis of Levi's identity as well as the main musical themes: chemistry, writing, and the long-lasting effects of fascism and antisemitism. Fascism was an ever-growing presence in his youth, coloring his schooling and relationships with others. Chemistry was a passion that started in his youth which provided the tools to make a living, survive the Holocaust, and reflect on the world around him. Writing was his ability to be a storyteller and a listener — someone with whom others wanted to share their stories. This trait emerges later in Levi's life, yet it has an equally strong influence on his character. The final facet, as a survivor of the Holocaust, was one that influenced the previous two identities. In post-war Italy, Levi struggled to make sense of what he

had endured with a compulsion to bear witness. Within his youth, my music is filled with enthusiasm and passion as each theme is laid out, then evolves with Levi's maturing and rising influences of fascism. The wartime section is confrontational and dissonant with the prevalent march theme of fascism gaining increasing dominance, against Levi's fighting to be heard. The post-war section is the most varied as Levi ruminates upon the multiplicities of life, work, and humanity. The final movement, *Carbon*, connects the threads weaving through the book in a scientific celebration of life.

With *The Periodic Table* — being the text in which "the author establishes his identity" as a "reaction to his education and preparation for life in the light of his life's events" (Patruno 57) — I wanted Levi's sense of self to permeate my music. To establish Levi's musical motive, I overlayed the twelve notes of the chromatic scale to the 26 letters of the alphabet and spelled out Primo Levi's name. Based on the tonal center of C, the derived nine notes guide the development of tonal centers from movement to movement and how individual movements modulate. Levi's name is used in its in entirety or by singular name (Figure A) or last name (Figure B) to be played horizontally to create a motive, first seen at the end of the first chapter, *Argon* (Figure C), and vertically (Figure D) to create chords at the beginning of the piece. Chapter 12, *Chromium* (Figure E), when the narrator rediscovers his identity in postwar times, is created solely from the notes of his own name. Throughout, echoes and fragments of other musical works are heard, coming from the incorporation of the books Levi and other characters read, folk songs of different areas, poetic structures, and personal connections outside the book. Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), which references Strauss' *Der Linderbaum* from *Winterreise* (1828) features prominently in Levi's second chapter, *Zinc*. Two fragments from *Der Linderbaum* are then used in *Zinc* to establish Levi's relationship with his classmate, Rita, and provide a melodic shape within the fascism theme. In *Nickel*, the movement comes to life through reshaped musical quotations from Levi's many references. Levi initially refers to the "messenger, the *Mercury* who guides souls" (Levi 62), leading to Holst (Figure F), the "schematic representations of Hell" (Levi 64), leading to Mussorgsky's *Night at Bald Mountain* (1867) (Figure G), and the legend of Anteaus (Figure H) guided incorporation of the Phrygian mode. *Arsenic*, featuring a sage character from Piedmont, is written

in a poetic ballad structure based on traditional Occitan folk music of the area.

Wanting to pay homage to each element, atomic numbers became the basis of the tempo, number of measures, and occasionally even the small-scale structure of the individual movements through factors and multiples. Returning to the chapter *Zinc*, with atomic number of 30, I factored it to 2, 3, 5, and 15. The center of the chapter is "the element Zinc as the metaphor for examining the Fascist position regarding the Jewish race" (Patruno 60) and thus the music oscillates between the fascist and Levi theme. To enforce this tension, the time signature alternates between 2/4 and 3/4. There are three main sections: 45 measures of the fascist theme, 45 measures of oscillation between fascism and Levi's motive, and an ending 31 measures of Levi's theme, the odd number representing Levi's being "the grain of salt or mustard" (Levi 35). The middle section is further divided into shifting groups of 2, 3, and 5 measures.

In each movement, I faced the decision of whether the plot or the emotional content of the chapter had precedence in forming the structure. In the case of *Nickel*, the chapter where Levi was introduced as a listener and storyteller, plot was imperative to capture the stories told by the narrator. Written as a rondo with an introduction and coda, the introduction is the Mercurial call to the mine (Figure F). The main rondo alternates the recurring theme of the devilish setting (Figure G) against the individual episodes of the stories (Figure H). The coda reflects backwards to Chapter 4, in reference to iron, and forwards to the next chapter where Levi shares the first stories he wrote. In the case of *Nitrogen,* a lighthearted chapter of his early years of marriage, the emotional content took precedence. I borrowed the shape of a Viennese Waltz: the slow Romantic introduction plays the part of the lecherous factory owner, while the free-flowing body of the movement gives the lighthearted mood of taking a vacation. As this chapter evokes Levi's view that "everything in life […] is recycled" (Patruno 70), no musical material is original, but reconfigured from previously written motives (Figure S).

Throughout the music, melodic and motivic themes develop in a reflection of Levi's own growth, particularly in the chemistry motive. It is introduced in *Hydrogen,* the second chapter, in a play off a Bach prelude, written with the right hand having an active moving line of 6/8 and the left hand providing nothing but basic

accompaniment representing Levi's first, untrained, efforts in the realm of chemistry (Figures I, J). The theme reappears in Chapter 5, *Potassium,* returning in 9/8 and with a more interactive left hand as Levi is advancing in his university studies (Figure K). It returns in Chapter 9, *Phosphorus*, in a more fragmented form (Figure L), as it reflects both at *Hydrogen* as well as at *Zinc* with Levi's first job, in an environment that is a precursor to his work within the Lager and his love of a former classmate, Giulia. Not until Chapter 17, *Tin*, does the work theme come back in its entirety but now both hands working in tandem, as Levi reaches his maturity as a chemist (Figure M). Chemistry's final iteration is within the following chapter, *Uranium*, where it reflects to a closer variation of *Hydrogen* in 7/4, as Levi returns to the lab and "undertakes this analysis with the same enthusiasm he had as a youth" (Patruno 73) (Figure N). The final chapter, *Carbon*, ties the book and the music together. Referencing first *Cerium* (Figure O) as an introduction of pounding chords (Figure P), "to carbon, the element of life, my first literary dream was turned, insistently dreamed in an hour and a place when my life was not worth much" (Levi 225), Levi then traces the story of *Carbon*. First in a hell which brings back the propulsion of *Nickel* where hell was originally mentioned (Figure Q), the atom of carbon is freed into a gaseous state evoking *Argon* (Figure R), then trapped in a leaf and working with the *Nitrogen* of photosynthesis (Figures S, T). After the full iteration of the cycle, *Carbon* repeats its journey another three times, spending time in the music of each of the elements, though never in the exact same form. To this end, Levi writes "this cell belongs to a brain, and it is my brain, the brain of *me* who is writing" (Levi 232), and the music returns to *Chromium*, "the chapter of rebirth" (Patruno 68) where, after Auschwitz, the narrator found himself again.

The Periodic Table will not be a one-time concert but an annual event and life-time practice. These events will honor the legacy of, and to continue forward, the teaching and scholarship of Nicholas Patruno, and the writings of Primo Levi to hold the memories of the past. I strive to continue through music to fight against apathy and cultural amnesia in the presence of injustice for the millions who were, and still are, unable to hold their memories and bear witness.

JESSI HARVEY BRYN MAWR COLLEGE, CLASS OF 2009
FREELANCE COMPOSER AND EDUCATOR

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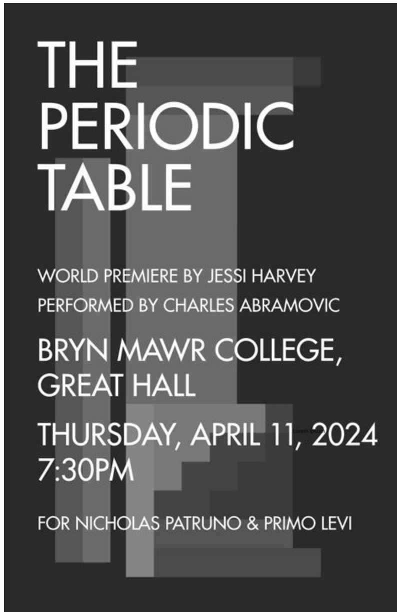

THE PERIODIC TABLE FIGURES

A. "Primo" notes

B. "Levi" notes

C. *Argon*, m.137, "Primo" first iteration

D. *Argon*, m.12, "Levi" chord (bass clef)

E. *Chromium*, m.93-94, "Primo Levi"

F. *Nickel*, m.5, Holst reference

f heralding

G. *Nickel*, m.18-21, Main Theme, Mussorgsky reference (bass clef)

ff infernal

H. *Nickel*, m.25-28, Episode 1, Antaean reference

sempre fff *Antaean*

I. *Hydrogen*, m.1-2, "Chemistry" theme 1

Youthful Enthusiasm ♩.=100

J. *Hydrogen*, m.26-29, "Chemistry" theme 2

K. *Potassium*, m.14-18, "Chemistry" theme 2 variation

L. *Phosphorus*, m.9-10, "Chemistry" theme 1 fragment

♩=75

mf argumentive

M. *Tin*, m.3-6, "Chemistry" theme 1 and 2 variation

♩.=75

mp *mp* *mf*

N. *Uranium* m.26-27, "Chemistry" theme 1 callback

Youthful Enthusiasm ♩=109

p *f*

O. *Cerium*, m.1-2

Burdened ♩=58

use fist of dominant hand covering white and black keys

fff *oppressive*

P. *Carbon*, m.1-3, *Cerium* reference

Elemental ♩=89

sffz *sfz* *sfz* *sffz*

sffz *sfz* *sfz* *sffz*

Q. *Carbon*, m.34-35, *Nickel* reference

ff *f*

R. *Carbon*, m.56-57, *Argon* reference

mf *p*

S. *Nitrogen*, m.12-13

mf

T. *Carbon*, m.107-109, *Nitrogen* reference

8va

Francois Rabelais by Primo Levi

Translator's Note

In his "Premessa" to *L'altrui mestiere*, published by Einaudi in 1985, Primo Levi offers an assessment of his poetics, writing that he is, "troppo chimico, e chimico per troppo tempo, per sentirmi un autentico uomo di lettere; troppo distratto dal paesaggio, variopinto, tragico e strano, per sentirmi chimico in ogni fibra" (Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* 585). Many of the essays in this collection were written for La Stampa over the course of Levi's career, described by the author as "il frutto di questo mio più che decenale vagabondaggio di dilettante curioso" (Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* 585).

I have selected for translation excerpts from the short essay "Francois Rabelais" for this collection. In choosing this work for this collection, my aim was not to provide a necessary retranslation of Levi's essay into English, but rather to showcase Levi's affinity for Rabelais, and to accentuate the great, if somewhat surprising, influence Rabelais had on Levi's own worldview and writing. In 2016, Nancy Harrowitz explored this connection in depth, writing on the Rabelaisian influence in Levi's collection science fiction stories *Storie naturali*. Harrowitz argues "one of the themes that he develops in this fiction is the relation between modern science and the Holocaust," expressed through "a discourse of monstrosity as a method of exploring and reading scientific epistemology and its relation to scientific ethics and politics" (Harrowitz 67). This discourse, she observes, is framed by Levi's choice of a particular passage from Rabelais which serves as Levi's epigraph for the text, and is the source of the title of the collection. Harrowitz's reading of the collection is provocative, and in translating anew this particular essay, I wonder to what extent Rabelais lent Levi and other twentieth-century writers, writing under totalitarianism and through moments of crisis and loss, a language to help critique, laugh, and mourn.

As I translated this work, I refrained from reading Raymond Rosenthal's translation (which I believe is the only other extant English translation) of *Other People's Trades* from 1989 until I was nearly done. Comparing our versions was quite fun: I felt I was in a dialogue with him, free to learn from, consult, and debate his choices. Levi, for instance, writes towards the end of the first paragraph that *Gargantua and Pantagruel* contains "sottilità aristoteliche da cui si diparte una risata gigante, altre sottoscritte e

avallate" (Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* 599). Rosenthal's solution to this peculiar altre was to include the conjunction "while," a clarifying choice to which I am indebted, as I translated Levi's comma splice. Also of note is Levi's comparison of Rabelais to a "*bosin*," a word with which I was entirely unfamiliar, and evidently (by my research) refers to a popular satirical poetic practice originating in Lombardy. Levi writes: "è vivo in ogni sua parola uno stato d'animo diverso… anche del *bosin*, dell'estemporaneo da fiera." Rosenthal translated the clause following "bosin" as "the extemporaneous barker at a country fair" (Levi, *Other People's Trades* 122). I entirely understand the instinct, when translating a text about Rabelais, to select the word "barker," though I am unable to confirm if the Lombard *bosin* correlates to the Rabelaisian barker. In my view Levi's choice of that word in this instance was meant to relate the Lombard tradition to Rabelais's project; "bosin" and "estemporaneo" should stand as independent, but connected, thoughts. My decision to translate this passage as "and even the *bosin* and the impromptu speech of the marketplace" was an attempt to communicate this point. Lastly, Levi's use of the verb "*tace*" in reference to Rabelais's attitudes on human suffering proved challenging. I cannot think of an equivalent English verb to express the act of being silent. *Tacere* suggests an active silence. My translation of this passage to "his silence" intends to convey a similar degree of activity through ownership.

I was extremely fortunate, in my time at Haverford College, to study Italian literature at Bryn Mawr College, a decision and privilege which enabled me to reimagine my conceptions of the world, language, and the possibilities of academic work, and to translate works of Italian literature in a course at Swarthmore College through the Tri-College consortium. As such, now as a PhD student, I am an academic grandchild of Nicolas Patruno, a man who I was fortunate to meet during my studies and whose warmth, humor, passion, and love for life (like Rabelais himself) made it evident to me that the studies of my second language were indeed a discipline from which I can endlessly learn; informed by these experiences, this work is an expression of my gratitude. I am also extremely grateful to Roberta Ricci and Chiara Benetollo for their invitation, support, and generosity as I worked on this translation.

Francois Rabelais

There are some books which become dear to us only when we can properly explain why. In these cases, by amply widening the scope of our investigation, we likely would uncover their hidden resonances, their richness with insights into the inconspicuous sides of our nature. And then, of course, there are some books which we carry with us over the years, for our whole lives, the reason why being clear, accessible, and simple to put to words. Among these, reverentially and lovingly, I dare name *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the colossal, singular work of Rabelais, *mon maître*. The peculiar path of this book is well-known. It was born from the love of life and worldly idleness of Rabelais, a monk, physician, philologist, traveler, and humanist. Over nearly twenty years and with absolutely no design, it grew and proliferated to over a thousand pages, accumulating with utter and fantastical liberty inventions evermore astounding, partly an emphatically farcical popular epic, partly steeped in the vigorous and vigilant moral sensibilities of a great Renaissance spirit. On any given page we encounter ribaldries, clever, lewd, or foolish, audaciously paired with quotations (real and unreal, and almost all of them drawn from memory) from Latin, Greek, Arabic, or Hebrew texts; paired with dignified, poetic oratorical performances; or paired with Aristotelian nuances, which at times swell into thumping laughter, and at times are signed and approved in good faith by a man of a pure life.

Considering that this fundamentally incongruous text, which teems with linguistic intricacies, includes vitriolic critiques and blatant satires against the Roman Curia, it is easy to understand both how *Gargantua and Pantagruel* could find a small audience in any age and why it is often a target to be banned or sliced apart and remade, opportunistically, into children’s literature. Nevertheless, only do I need to open it to feel how it is a book for today — really, a book for all times, immortal and speaking a language which will always be understood.

The book is unburdened by the fundamental themes of the human comedy. Indeed, in vain would the great classical sources of poetic inspiration — love, death, religious experience, our precarious destinies — be sought within it. Instead, in Rabelais there is no self-seclusion, no second guessing, and no inward searching. There is a distinct, fanciful, and flamboyant expression of the soul alive in every word he writes, in its essence befitting an innovator or a creator (but not a utopian), an inventor of things great

and small, and even the *bosin*[1] and the impromptu speech of the marketplace. Crucially, and intentionally, the book is a revival, as it is known to have a lost ancestor: the *Chroniques du grand Géant Gargantua*, a chapbook originating from peasant fairs, which has long since vanished from the record.

It must be said that the two giants of Rabelais's genealogy are not simply colossuses of flesh nor just prodigious eaters and drinkers. The two of them, paradoxically, are the legitimate heirs of the giants who warred against Zeus. They are the heirs of Nimrod and Goliath. They are at once noble princes and joyful philosophers. In his hearty breath and hearty laugh, Pantagruel contains the hopes of our times: an industrious and fecund humankind, which shrugs its shoulders at fear and walks resolutely towards a peaceful and prosperous path, towards the golden age described by the Romans. Neither past nor distantly future, it is near at hand, so long as the strong of the earth never abandon the way of reason, steadfastly preserving it from enemies both near and afar.

This is not some placid hope; it is a robust certainty. If you desire the world, it is enough to make it yours. Enough are education, justice, science, art, law, and the examples of the ancients. God exists, but only in heaven. Man is free and not predestined, he is *faber sui*, and he can and must triumph over the divine gift of the earth. It is because of this that the world is beautiful and full of joy, not tomorrow but today, because the glorious delights of goodness and consciousness are open to everyone. The delights of the body — the sumptuous banquet table, the "theologian's" libations, and the indefatigable Venus — are too a divine gift. To love humans is to love what they are, body and soul, *tripes et boyaux*.

The only character in the book of human proportions and who never strays into symbol nor allegory is Panurge, an extraordinary upside-down hero, a restless and curious condensation of humanity who, so much more than Pantagruel, Rabelais seems to see as himself. He represents the very complexities and contradictions of modern man happily embraced. Panurge, a swindler, pirate, *clerc*, alternately the trickster and the gull, full of courage "except when in danger," hungry, poor, and destitute, who enters the novel begging for bread in every language living and dead, is us, the Human. He is not an exemplar, and is he not "perfection," but he is humanity, living for each question, sin, pleasure, and thought.

[…]

Why does Rabelais speak to us now? We certainly do not resemble him. He is rich with virtues which are missing from the sorrowful, captive, and weary man of today. He speaks to us as a model. He speaks to us with his happily curious spirit, with his good-natured skepticism, with his faith in tomorrow and his faith in man, and lastly with his style, which is so incompatible with rules and genre. Perhaps we could trace from Rabelais and his Abbey of Thélème the notion of "writing how you please," which has flourished from Sterne to Joyce to now, abandoning customs and precepts to follow the thread of fantasy as it snakes from need to spontaneous need, different and surprising at every turn like a carnival procession. Rabelais speaks to us because we can sense in this boundless painter of earthly delights a forceful and enduring acknowledgement, enriched by countless experiences, that the whole of life is not contained in this book. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a single melancholic passage across the whole of his work, and yet Rabelais understands human suffering. However, as the good doctor writes, his silence is not acceptance; he wants to cure it instead:

> Mieulx est di ris que de larmes escrire
> Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

PETER KURTZ — THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

NOTES

[1] Levi appears to be referencing the singers of *bosinada*, a form of popular satirical poetry originating from Lombardy which dates back at least to the seventeenth century. See the introduction for more information on my approach to translating this passage. Scholarly references to *bosinada* can be found in Camerani, Sergio (1932) and in Bignami, Giovanni (1971).

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Author Biographies

Jessica Beasley is a writer and translator who graduated with her MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her master's thesis focused on translating anti-fascist poetry written by women from Portugal, Italy, and Spain, and providing a comparative reading of their work and fascist contexts. She has recently published an interview and translations of poet Ludovica Ripa di Meana, done in collaboration with Silvia Valisa, in *Delos: A Journal of Translation and World Literature*.

Chiara Benetollo is the Executive Director of the Puttkammer Center for Educational Justice and Equity, a research center on carcerality within the Petey Greene Program, one of the largest prison education providers in the United States. Chiara's research explores the simultaneous creation of model bodies and national identities through rhetoric and narrative, with a focus on the Italian and Russian political and literary traditions, as well as the carceral state and prison education in the US. She is completing a book entitled *Pregnant Language: Childbirth, Pain and Women's Consciousness in Soviet and Italian Discourses*, which investigates Catholic and Communist representations of reproduction in the decade after 1945.

Julian Bourg is Associate Professor of History at Boston College. His *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (2007; 2nd ed. 2017) won the Morris D. Forkosch Prize from *The Journal of the History of Ideas.* He translated Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy* (2007) and edited *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (2004). He is currently writing a conceptual history of terror and terrorism.

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