

# The word to tell. Trauma and writing in Primo Levi's work

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*Abstract.* The scientific training of Primo Levi, his clarity of language, the character –so hostile and far removed from “the language of the heart”- and the moral tension of his writing all creating a unique combination of psychological, stylistic and formal elements to give form to the most significant personal testimony ever written about experience in a Nazi concentration camp. Primo Levi builds his text using a Dantesque model; for instance, he describes the experience in the camp of Fossoli employing Dante's image of the limbo. When Dante's words don't come to help him, he turns to the language of the Bible to imbue his style with fire. Levi's marmoreal language, his dry, clear prose style, turned a moral duty into a literary strategy. Placing him on the borderline between a writer of true literature and a producer of written testimony only contributes to concealing and removing the question of writer's responsibility when dealing with the most disturbing problems of our most recent past. For many years the majority of readers failed to realize that “Se questo è un Uomo” (If This is a Man) is a philosophical and anthropological study of a drastic experience. In this respect, Levi's concept of “grey zone” – more present in his last work than in his first – has for him a heuristic value that goes beyond the description of human behaviour in extreme situations. In his last work, this “grey one” becomes a powerful cognitive instrument, which through a dual mirroring process, connects Levi's research with Hilberg's, Arend's and Stanley Milgram's work.

*Key words:* Dream, Holocaust, Franz Kafka, Primo Levi, Memory, Trauma, Stanley Milgram, Shoah.

«He who walks on his head sees the sky below as an abyss».  
Paul Celan, Speech on the occasion of receiving the *Georg Büchner Prize*,  
Darmstadt, Germany, October 2, 1960.

## Premise

Great books do not just appear from nowhere. They are nourished by the underground streams active in dreams and daydreams. For many years the majority of readers failed to realize that *If This is a Man*, in addition to being a great act of testimony based in the truth and documented in every detail, is a philosophical and anthropological study of a drastic experience, - which makes Levi a sociologist and psychologist of concentration camps. It is also one of the greatest literary works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (D. Meghnagi, 1991; 2005, pp. 45-81).

It is understandable that the role of witness assumed by Levi as a poet, for a long time overshadowed his importance as an author. The fact that Levi himself contributed to spreading the story about having dashed off his most important work without any proper planning or construction is only the most striking, colourful element of what should invite us to reflect more carefully rather than take such an explanation entirely for granted<sup>1</sup>. There are both subjective and objective reasons that have influenced the reading of this book, such as the fact that his testimony can be based only on the objectivity of the events narrated, and in this Levi was careful to verify the truthfulness of every statement he made.

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<sup>1</sup> 'During these last forty years,' Levi would confess later to Germaine Greer in 1985, 'I've built up a sort of legend about this work, by declaring I just dashed it off without any planning or meditation. Others I've discussed this book with just accepted this story. But in fact writing is never spontaneous. Now that I think about it, this book is brim full of literature – literature I soaked up through my pores even when rejecting or disdaining it.' P. Levi (1985), in Ferrero (ed. by), 1997, p. XII.

Placing him on the borderline between a writer of true literature and a producer of written testimony only contributes to concealing and removing the question of writers' responsibility when dealing with the most disturbing problems of our most recent past. According to this logic not even Solzhenitsyn could be considered a writer. Kafka's *Diaries* and countless other great masterpieces wouldn't be literature.

Repression of the literary value may be considered a symptom of the difficulties inherent in dealing with the problems it raises. On the other hand, the book had to wait for a decade before being recognized – it was rejected by several publishers and eventually printed in limited editions before reaching the general public. But even after being recognized it was limited to its value as a testimony. Five more years had to pass before authoritative critics (such as Paolo Milano, Giancarlo Vigorelli and others), after publication of *La tregua*, stood up and announced we had a real writer before us. And it was only when the Campiello Prize put the seal of recognition on Levi in September 1963 that the author began to connect in a real sense with his readers – and in fact continued to do so ever more intensely and profoundly after that.

The clarity and style of Levi's book are elements of a complexity that has not yet been adequately explored. It is sufficient to observe the use of tenses, the complementary antitheses with which he describes various situations “the noise made by the Russians” in *The Truce* with the “snarling of the Germans” in *If This is a Man*, the different narrative pace in the two books, the different tenses used to increase the reader's ability to fully empathise with the situation described. Or even his frequent linking of the end of a chapter to the beginning of the next one by repeating situations or words, as observed by Mengaldo (P.V. Mengaldo, in D. Meghnagi, 2006, pp. 34-35).

Levi as a writer of the highest level was already there in his first work. His scientific training, his clarity of language, the character – so hostile and far removed from 'the language of the heart' – and the moral tension of his writing all created a unique combination of psychological, stylistic and formal elements to give form to the most significant personal testimony ever written about experience in the Lager.

Primo Levi was directly involved in the unsettling question raised by Adorno as to whether it was possible to create poetry after Auschwitz. His answer was to write – in effect to create literature where it might have seemed impossible to do so, remaining anchored to objectivity opposing a dangerous trend used in the decades that followed when everything was reduced to narration and construction. Historical revisionism's attack on the truth about the concentration camps finds its ideological reference in this new trend, strengthened by the affirmation of what is “virtual” over what is “real.” According to this logic, if everything is “narration”, one is worth the other and the truth depends on who has power.

It was against this dangerous trend that appeared in the mid-eighties that Levi raised his passionate voice, emphasising the need to always distinguish the reality of the victims from that of their executioners.

The psychological mechanism at work in victims and their tormentors are analogous according to Levi, but the conditions are the opposite. In both cases there is a resorting to repression and denial mechanisms that distance the subjects from their profound feelings. But the situation is the opposite. The victim is a victim and as such, according to Levi, deserves our emphatic compassion and understanding, the only thing that can help overcome the abyss of feelings of guilt, be they real or imaginary. The persecutor remains the persecutor and should be considered as such. Each with his own direct responsibilities; those who created and programmed the extermination and those who implemented it, those who gave the orders and those who obeyed them, active supporters and the passive ones who pretended not to see and hear, as well as those who simply waited. Not even the victims are all equal. The “drowned”, the weakest and most fragile within the community of the oppressed, those whose voices were never heard and vanished into thin air and for whom Levi intends to be the spokesman, constitute a separate chapter, the most painful and terrible one in the tragedy of the massacre. The rejection of words such as the *Holocaust*, now used on a daily basis, was, according to Levi, an ethical gesture opposing the trivialisation of the extermination tragedy within a framework that is *reassuring* for culture, offensive to the victims who in this case would

see their destiny symbolically inscribed with a ritual order of meaning, such as for example the one that provides the victim's "sacrifice" with a value that regulates social order. (B. Bettelheim 1981, p. 91 and essays).

The expansion of the grey area in Levi's last book is not a kind of code word for the amnesias and behaviours of the past. The fracture one experiences between Levi's first book and his last are not only the result of the author's state of mind. In addition to these aspects, important for understanding Levi's inner world and the angst that consumed him and which he expressed in poetry, but of the difficult and complex dialogue the author held for forty years with the more important developments in research about the Holocaust. This was an invitation to constantly examine one's conscience, to forever meditate on the dangers that threaten human life. An invitation, albeit one laden with despair (the personal element plays a role here), to be aware of current matters in order to remain totally loyal to the commandment expressed in the opening poem for *If This is a Man*.

In the preface to his first book Levi had said, "as far as atrocious details are concerned", he would add "nothing" to "everything that is known to readers all over the world about the disquieting subject of extermination camps" (Levi, 1947, pp. 3-4). Discretion mitigates the reader's unwillingness to listen to what the world prefers to forget. The book had been rejected by the publisher Einaudi and those who rejected it included Natalia Ginsburg, A Jew like him and the wife of one of the most authoritative members of the resistance, tortured and murdered as a Jew and a partisan. If that was the reaction of Jews linked to the resistance, how would others, those who had looked away, react? Not to mention anti-Semites. It is with discretion, almost in a whisper, that Levi tells the reader that his book has nothing to add to what was already known as far as atrocities were concerned. As if the massacre's Pandora's Box had not yet to be opened and there was not much more to be known and revealed. Rhetorically, it was a way of ensuring a willingness to listen in a world that wanted to look to the future and not to the past.

Forty years later, when Levi wrote his summa on concentration camps, the situation was totally different. Not only was a great deal more known, but the perception of the past was also changing. From being perceived as a totally brutal episode in the long list of Nazi crimes, the Holocaust was about to assume the meaning of a paradigm of evil. (J. C. Alexander, 2003; Th. H. Hamerow, 2008).

## **Between Levi and Milgram**

Levi was never at ease with books on psychology, but his contribution to psychological research is unequivocal. His descriptions of life in the Lager, his refusal of reductionist temptations with which they have at times been portrayed, are a lesson in ethics and knowledge. Cavani's film, which Levi described as "beautiful and yet false"<sup>2</sup>, is just one example, and not the worst in search of easy results. For Levi, the need to distinguish was a barrier against a new indifference, which was expressing its first premonitory signs in the flattening of forms of expression. Life's corruption always begins with the corruption of language.

There have been many debates concerning this mimesis, this identification or imitation or exchange of roles between the perpetrator and the victim. Both true and invented things have been said, disturbing and banal ones, acute and stupid. This is not virgin ground, on the contrary it is a field that has been badly ploughed, trampled [...]

I know nothing about the unconscious or the profound, but I know that few understand them and that these few are more cautious. I do not know and have little interest in knowing whether in my deep consciousness there is an assassin, but I do know I have been an innocent victim and not a murderer; I know that murderers have existed, and not only in Germany, and that they still exist, retired or still in service, and that confusing them with their victims is a moral disease and an affection in aestheticism or a dark sign of complicity; above all it is service rendered (intentionally or not) to those who deny the truth. (Levi, 1986, pp. 684-685).

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<sup>2</sup> "The director Liliana Cavani -wrote Levi -when asked to briefly explain the meaning of a film he had described as beautiful and yet false, said, "We are victims or assassins and voluntarily accept these roles. Only Sade and Dostoevsky fully understood this"; Cavani also said she believed that "in all environments, in all relationships, there is a more or less clearly expressed victim-perpetrator dynamic and it is usually experienced at an unconscious level". *Ibid.*, p. 685.

During those years, Levi did not appear to be aware of the experiment carried out by Stanley Milgram at Yale University's *Interaction Laboratory* just three months after the beginning of the Eichmann trial. Levi never mentions him in his books.

And yet, leaving aside doubtful elements and those morally and unacceptable in an experiment that had the traumatic consequences for those participants, the grey area he returns to reflect upon in his last book, represents a second melody, Levi's specific contribution to an in-depth analysis.

From a strictly psychological perspective integrating the monumental research done by Hilberg and ideas expressed by Arendt, Milgram proposed to answer many of Levi's questions.

Those participating in the research carried out by Milgram had been recruited through an announcement in the local newspaper or invitations mailed to addresses taken from the phone book. The sample consisted of people aged between twenty and fifty, of different social backgrounds, who were told they would be paid to take part in an experiment on remembrance and its effect on learning.

These were normal people who would not have gratuitously harmed anyone. And yet, in the asymmetrical relationship instituted with the experimenter, their behaviour changed significantly. Although the forty people participating in this experiment had shown symptoms of tension and had protested verbally, a significant percentage had obeyed the experimenter's orders. The level of obedience shown was disquieting. This proved that the greatest dangers did not come from the "pathology" or from aggressiveness, but were posed by the mechanisms at the basis of obedience to authority, by a blocking of the moral functions caused by scotomization process of the Super-ego's functions: a *eteronomic state* in which the subject feels personally "non-responsible" for his or her actions<sup>3</sup>.

To explain this process, Milgram resorts to three important factors that are part of every social and human environment, a perception of the legitimacy an authority is invested with, the individual's adherence to the authority system, social pressure experienced by the subject when faced with an inner conflict between obedience and values. In this experiment the basis for obedience was the authoritativeness of science. Hence from the reality of a concentration camp, an extreme reality that cannot be compared to normal situations, we moved to the reality of a traditional psychiatric hospital or centre in which relations are changed by the lack of control and rules that restrain power. It was sufficient to temporarily replace the experimenter with an assistant to see command lose part of its effectiveness and a rising number of people refusing to obey orders and rebel.

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<sup>3</sup> Initially the experimenter and an accomplice and informed assistant both pretended to draw slips of paper to determine the roles, "teacher" and "learner". Not knowing this, the unknowing person was always drawn as the teacher and the accomplice as the learner. They were both then taken to the room prepared for the experiment.

The (unaware) teacher was placed in front of a control panel generating electrical currents with 30 switches placed in a horizontal row and under each switch the voltage ranging from 15V to 450V was written. Under each group of 4 switches there were the words: (1-4) light shock, (5-8) medium shock, (9-12) strong shock, (13-16) very powerful shock, (17-20) intense shock, (21-24) very intense shock, (25-28) take care, very dangerous shock, (29-30) XXX. The teacher was led to feel shock of up to 45 V in order to ensure that he personally understood that this was not a game and he was instructed regarding his task: a. Read pairs of words to the learner, for example, blue box, nice day. b. Repeat the second word of each pair accompanied by four alternative associations: "blue - car, water, box, lamp". c. Establish whether the learner's answers were correct. Should the answer be incorrect, inflict punishment by increasing the electric shock at every mistake made. The experiment also envisaged that the learner should be tied to a sort of electric chair with an electrode on his pulse linked to a generator placed in the next room. On the basis of the experiment the learner was to answer the questions pretending to beg and to scream as the current increased (while in fact nothing was happening at all) until he fell silent when 330 V were applied. At that point the learner was to pretend to faint. During these tests the experimenter was to repeatedly beg the teacher saying "The experiment requires you should continue." "It is essential that you should continue" . "it is absolutely essential you continue." "You have no choice, you must continue." The level of obedience was measured on the basis of the number of times the last switch was applied to each learner before he gave up the test or, should the learner have decided to continue to the very end, at the 30<sup>th</sup> switch. Only at the end of the experiment were they informed that no electrical shocks at all had been inflicted.

Hence from the reality of the Lager, an extreme reality that cannot be compared to normal situations, we moved to the reality of a traditional psychiatric hospital or centre in which relations are changed by the lack of control and rules that restrain power. It was sufficient to temporarily replace the experimenter with an assistant to see command lose part of its effectiveness and a rising number of people refusing to obey orders and rebel.

As far as the second element was concerned, adherence to the authority system, obeying authorities is a founding element in all educational and socialisation processes. At a human and social level disobedience has a high cost and is not easily forgiven by the group even when morally justified. Although a war hero and Vietnam veteran, John Kerry, continued to be found “guilty” of a moral decision and one that was in compliance with international law. In 1971, after he had returned from the war, he spoke in the Senate against unjust and immoral actions and orders.

There are, however, two factors that change people’s readiness to obey an order; the distance between the teacher and the student and distance between the experimenter and the subject experimented on. Having “sight” of the victim, and an emphatic identification with the victim’s pain is an important element in deciding whether or not to say no to an order causing inner moral conflict<sup>4</sup>.

These are aspects that have profound social implications and help at least partly to explain the manner in which a totalitarian system proceeds in the destruction of its victims.

The backdrop for obedience is the *redefinition of the situation’s meaning*. Every situation is, in fact, characterised by a cultural and psychological orientation that defines and explains the meaning of events occurring, providing the perspective on the basis of which individual elements acquire coherence. The coexistence of conflicting social norms (on one hand inducing people not to use force and violence, and on the other those that expect an aggressive reaction to certain stimuli) means that the probability that aggressive behaviour will arise is on each occasion influenced by an individual perception of the situation. It is this that orients and determines which rules are *pertinent to the context* and must therefore be followed. The danger a subject faces when accepting the definition of a situation presented by authorities, is the redefinition of a destructive at as not only as “reasonable”, but also as “objectively necessary.” The lesson learned is that the real prevention measure for the preservation of one’s mental and moral health occurs before entering an asymmetrical relationship with power.

Those who out of interest, a need for a approval or a wish to belong, accept to enter an asymmetrical relationship with power, are already morally flawed. They are predisposed to carry out actions that they would not in a different situation. The other lesson learned is that the fragmentation of information, the fact that there is not an overall picture of the situation, are central elements in strategic moral and cultural disaggregation that criminal power enacts against its victims. Cognitive and emotive unity in a situation, knowledge of what is really happening, are essential instruments for moral and civil awareness. Vigilance is compulsory. So as to prevent evil from spreading, there is a need for rules, laws and norms that explicitly forbid the acceptance of orders contrary to ethics. The creation of an international court against Nazi crimes was essential in this. From then on, both ideally and judicially humankind could no longer accept the idea that it is possible to justify one’s cowardice or open collusion with a criminal regime by taking refuge behind using obedience as an excuse.

During the years in which Milgram was carrying out his research, progressive narrations of the war were experiencing a crisis. The nuclear threat loomed like a ghost, while America’s image was

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<sup>4</sup> In this experiment four levels of distance between the experimenter and the students were tested in which the sight of the victim emerged as the central element in putting in motion the inner process of assuming responsibility when faced with the pain of others. At the first level the educator can neither see nor hear the moans of the victim. At the second level he could hear but not see the victim, while at the third level he could see and observe the victim. At the fourth level, in order to inflict punishment, he had to grab the victim’s arm and push it onto a plate. At the first level of distance, 65% of subjects continued to the strongest shock. Contrary to what had been expected at the second level the percentage fell only a little to 62.5%. Only at the third level did the percentage fall significantly to 40% and at the fourth level to 30%.

significantly tarnished by the Vietnam war and civil protests. Although apparently still very strong, the Soviet regime was showing profound divergences. The hopes raised on the Left by the CPSU Congress had largely faded and the USSR's cultural influence in the world was weakening. Changes that had occurred in Soviet life were only partial and addressed at the preservation of a criminal power. The regime once the homeland for "new men" was showing its real face also to those who for far too long had chosen not to see. When Levi wrote *The Drowned and the Saved* the Soviet Empire was drawing to an end, western Communist Parties were in decline, their power greatly reduced although this was not yet apparent in Italy. European geopolitics were about to change and with them world balance.

The world was once again in motion and Levi only had partial elements for analysing it. What his attentive observation could analyse what was only part of the complex mosaic and the many facets of human behaviour's grey area.

In order to portray this grey area, Levi chose a terribly disquieting image that was also pathetic and tragic, that of Haim Rumkowskij, the "king of the Jews" in the ghetto of Lodz. Haim Rumkowskij, wrote Levi, was not "a monster, nor was he an ordinary man". People just like him are unfortunately far more numerous than one would imagine. They live among us and with us, although luckily the situation is not the same as the one he experienced.

Rumkowskij's story, like other stories, albeit it with the necessary distinctions so as to avoid inappropriate generalisations, helps one understand situations in normal life. At the foot of "every absolute throne", wrote Levi firmly focused on the present, "men like Rumkowskij crowd in to grasp their small portion of power". They are a "recurrent spectacle". Power, warns Levi, is "like a drug". The need "for one and for the other is unknown to those who have not experienced them, but following initiation," which may happen by chance, "dependence is born as is the need for increasingly high doses." This may arise "also from a rejection of reality" and the "return of childhood dreams of omnipotence." But this is not sufficient "to explain the sense of urgency and threat it emanates, "its meaning," according to Levi "is far more extensive".

## The double dream

Levi was appreciated for his moderate optimism, his tendency to want to understand and not accuse. By reading or listening to the author one could participate in a whole world and not feel judged. After he committed suicide the opposing opinion prevailed. The image of an "optimistic" Levi was replaced by a more tragic perspective, which his last book contributed to enhance.

In truth, it was enough to read between the lines and in the gaps between one book and the other, in his poetry and the opening and closing remarks of all his accounts, to have a more complex view of the author's personality and that of his work. The tragic dimension was present from the very beginning, it was just set aside in the story, in the introductions and closing remarks, with a poem awaiting to be reread and analysed in greater depth with more suitable cultural means.

Who did not tremble in reading the poem that opens *If this is a Man* with its powerful transfiguration of the Jewish prayer of the *Shema* in an appeal to always remember and be vigilant? (P. Levi, January 10<sup>th</sup> 1946, p. 529; Id., *Shema*, in *OPL*, vol. II, p. 529). Who was not forever moved by the image of the double dream that marks the end of *The Truce*, where for those really wishing to read, the everlasting anguish of the survivor and his forever being elsewhere appear clear?

In contrast to the 'serene yet unsharing' style of his books (C. Cases, 1987, p. 24), the opening poem of *If This is a Man*, with its appeal to the memories evoked in the lines of *Shema Israel* ("Listen, Israel") (Levi, 1947, p. 1), is the motif for all the rest of the work – a sign of an unresolved torment that the beginning and the end of *The Truce* only make more explicit: It is as if Levi had wanted to add to every beginning and every finale of to his books some *mezuzot*<sup>5</sup> indicating and

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<sup>5</sup> *Mezuzot* (pl *mezuzot*) in Hebrew doorpost, is a Jewish ritual object, consisting in a container holding a scroll (*claf*)

portraying what prose and manners of thoughts he had acquired and cultivated could only contain up to a point. Reason could only suffice to a certain extent and could not fully explicitly express this experience. The greatest and most recurrent dream of those deported was to one day go home, eat, speak until “dawn was briefly and quietly announced” and “one’s heart broke in one’s chest.” For Levi coming back meant returning to one’s home. The Jews from the East did not even have that. There was no one waiting for them in the villages and cities. Their homes had been occupied and there was the risk of being lynched. In his hometown hunger was at last satisfied, but the end of Levi’s dream was the opposite:

“We have finished telling the story”.

The time has come. Soon we will once again hear the foreign order: *Wstawac*” (Levi, 1963, p.

As the title too explains this was a truce, the real truth was another that the end of the tale emphasises dramatically: A recurrent dream among the deported, that the author continued to have even after returning to the home he had been born in, and where he continued to live until his death. The dream of one day being able to come back and recount what had happened, interrupted by the order to get up, which is transformed into the nightmare of the concentration camp as the only true reality, as against the illusion and apparent unreality of the return to normal life, which seems to be only a truce

Like a message from beyond the grave, that dream never ceased to haunt Levi 'at sometimes short, sometimes long recurrent intervals'... A terror-laden dream that was full of anguish, 'a dream embedded in another dream, varying in its details but substantially the same'. The anguish-filled dream that is significantly similar to that experienced by many internees begins with a homecoming scene. What could be more important than seeing one's relatives again, one's friends of long before and the places one was taken away from! This homecoming is, however, marked by an insidious, dreadful suffering, because just at the moment when one starts to tell people about what has happened, they turn away or go off elsewhere, thus allowing a more terrible and devastating idea to take shape – that of being abandoned by everyone and everything.

And a terror-filled dream has never ceased to haunt me, at sometimes short, sometimes long recurrent intervals.

It's a dream embedded in another dream, varying in its details but substantially the same. I'm at table with the family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside – in other words, in a peaceful, relaxed atmosphere, apparently devoid of any tension or distress. And yet I have an insidious sense of profound anxiety, a definite sensation of something threatening about to occur. Indeed, as the dream proceeds, little by little or with brutal suddenness, and every time differently, everything falls away and disintegrates around me – the dream-scene, the walls and the people, and the anxiety becomes more intense and more precise. Everything has now turned to chaos: I'm alone in the middle of a grey, turbid void, and this is when I suddenly know what this means, and also know I have always known it. I'm once again in the concentration camp, and nothing outside the concentration camp was ever real. The rest was a brief holiday, or a trick of the senses, a dream – the family, the flowering countryside, my home. Now this inner dream, the dream of peace, is over; and in the outer dream, which icily proceeds, I hear a well-known voice resonating – a single word, which isn't authoritarian but short and low. It's the dawn command in Auschwitz – a foreign word, feared and expected: 'Get up', *Wstawać*. (P. Levi, 1963, pp. 422-423).

A dream's normal function is to provide a buffer between the real and reality ordered by the pleasure principle and by the chain of representations. In this way it allows us to stage performances – however camouflaged they might be - of our inner world. The dream draws the real into a fictional space, as if it were putting it on stage, measuring it up as it takes it over and concurrently creates a possible sense for it. And, even in the very production of the dream-scene, our consciousness doesn't completely adhere to the visual perception of the entities represented, to the point that Freud says the dreamer is often well aware he is really only dreaming (S. Freud, 1899 it ed. p. 311). It is only when he wakes up that the subject's usual representations according to the

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on which the passages of the *Torah* corresponding to the first two part of the *Shema* are written, and is placed at the entrance of homes and at the doors to rooms.

logic of the secondary process begin to function again, and the function of the consciousness, in its proper coherence and unity, can be fully re-established around them. Sometimes, after being woken by a pressing need, one consciously goes back to bed to complete the dream.

With respect to this function, the nightmare represents an anomaly. By breaking down the intra psychic defences, it proves to be traumatic and intolerable inasmuch as it produces in the dreamer a sense of being petrified and stuck in a living dimension that is like a sort of total excess, from which nothing allows any distance. The dreamer is unaware he is dreaming, and in fact perceives himself absolutely clearly in the midst of the dream-scene, feeling himself split between perceiving an inert body that is prevented from making any move to save itself and being fully aware of looking on externally and in an unreal way. There's no scream or any words – the subject is captured in a point of endless, unbearable suspense.

## The poetic of silence

Levi's poetic production wasn't just a draft for something else, or as sometimes has been believed, an indication of something best expressed in prose. As Fortini has remarked, the poetry written by this writer from Turin stands in relation to all his work like the poem *Shema* (P. Levi, 10 January 1946), p. 529 *Shema, in OPL*, vol. II, p. 529) stands in relation to the testimony of *If This is a Man*. It was 'the opening cry' of one who couldn't give himself out of choice, or because he had been *prevented* – 'the final cry', an agonized counter-song staged by the other Levi. (F. Fortini, 1991, p. 166).

This inexpressible aspect of the unrepresentable, consigned to poetry by Levi – in the openings and closings he puts on the side lines of his prose narrative, keep alive in the reader the possibility of an even more complex idea than he himself had been able to envisage. In this sense, also the homage paid to Yiddish society, in the opening to *Il sistema periodico (Ibergekumene tsores iz gut tsu derstelyn)* / "It's good to recount past troubles", Primo Levi, 1975, p. 427), can be read with the opposite meaning. The reference to the *Pirkei Avot* of *Se non ora quando?* (Primo Levi 1982) is an exception: it marks a passage in the working out of unresolved grief through imagined deliverance from the humiliations suffered in real life. An ideal link to what Levi would have liked to be but couldn't – an open wound that has never healed nor found any consolation, or rest, in forgetfulness.

All that had earlier been denied in the wave of interpretations that gave prominence to the positive, vital aspects of the message – the measured optimism filtering through in articles and interviews – began to appear in quite a different light after Levi's death.

Even the reproach that Jean Améry had got 'into a fight' with the rest of the world to redeem the wounded Self could now be interpreted if not exactly as a warning sign then at least as a phase in a hard battle that Levi had never given up fighting. He had made his friend into his *idealized ego*, with whom he could argue in a complex game of divided and split viewpoints that didn't even exclude a merciless passing of judgement about the reasons leading to his suicide.

It is awful to think that the shifting of one of the figures in 1978, the date of Améry's death, could give us 1987, the date of Levi's death. But the ambivalence with which he regarded his Austrian friend reveals the secret fascination that must have attracted him to his 'inarticulated cry' that he himself feared to be overcome by<sup>6</sup>.

Making his obsessions clearly visible, Levi stated, unusually, that his friend's suicide, although like all suicides permitting 'a nebula of explanations', '*a posteriori*', offers one interpretation'.

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<sup>6</sup> This was the Austrian philosopher Hans Mayer who changed his name after his Auschwitz experience to the French anagram Améry. He had been in Auschwitz along with Levi, although the pair never had the chance to meet there. Before his capture and deportation, Améry had been part of the Belgian resistance movement and had been tortured by the Gestapo. After the war Améry and Levi began a long period of correspondence.



I admire Améry's resipiscence – his courageous decision to leave his ivory tower and enter the battlefield – but this was, and still is, out of my reach. I admire it: but I feel bound to say that this decision, maintained for the whole of his post-Auschwitz period, has led him to such severe and intransigent positions as to make him incapable of finding any joy in life – in fact, incapable of living. Anyone who 'gets into a fight' with the rest of the world regains his dignity but pays an extremely high price, because he is certain he will be defeated. Améry's suicide, in Salzburg in 1978, like all suicides permits a nebula of explanations but, *a posteriori*, the episode of challenging the Pole offers one interpretation. (*Ibid.*, p. 762).

Levi does not absolve. But he does not launch anathemas or accusations. When his voice is about to become strident he turns to poetry placing it at the beginning and at the end.

When writing about Trakl and Celan – with whom in particular he could identify in his feelings – he abandoned his traditional reserve and pointed out a link between their suicides and 'the obscurity of their poetry'. In a game of split and mirrored viewpoints that give some hint of the obsessions he was fighting most, Levi wrote that 'their shared fate' leads one to think 'of the obscurity of their poetry as being a pre-killing of themselves, a non-desire to live, a flight from the world, the crowning conclusion of which was death'.

Perhaps frightened by his own thoughts, he added that they had a right to respect because their *animal moaning* was dreadfully justified.

The expressible is preferable to the inexpressible, human words to animal moaning. It's no coincidence that the two least decipherable German poets, Trakl and Celan, both died by their own hands, two generations apart from each other. Their shared fate leads one to think of the obscurity of their poetry as being a pre-killing of themselves, a non-desire to live, a flight from the world, the crowning conclusion of which was death. They are to be respected, because their *animal moaning* was dreadfully justified. In Trakl's case, by the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, in which he believed, in the chaos of the Great War; and Celan, a German Jew who had escaped the slaughter in Germany by a miracle, suffered the effects of displacement and irreparable anguish at the inexorable triumph of death. (P. Levi, 1976a, p. 636).

In Celan's case, especially, the message 'has to be serious and responsible'.

We feel that his poetry has a tragic and noble quality to it, but in a confusing way: penetrating the meaning is a near-hopeless task, not only for the ordinary reader, but also for the critic. Celan's obscurity is neither disregard for the reader, nor weakness of expression, nor a lazy sliding into a stream of unconsciousness. It really is a reflection of the obscurity of his own fate and that of his generation, which increasingly builds up around the reader, closing in on him as if it were a cold metal vice [...]. This dark impenetrableness that keeps on building up page after page, ending in a last incoherent stammer, dismays the reader like the incomprehensible sounds of a dying man, which in fact it is (*ibid.*, pp. 636-637).

After confessing a secret attraction for Celan, he then emphasized his distance from him, comparing his writing to a sense of obscurity that envelopes us 'like a dark chasm', but also defrauds us of something 'that should have been said but wasn't', frustrating us and alienating us. Obsessed by a fear of getting lost in this sense of obscurity, he adds that the poet should 'rather be meditated upon and sympathized with than imitated' (*ibid.*)

If his is a message, it's lost in 'the background noise': it isn't communication, it isn't language, or at most is dark, inadequate language, like that of someone who is dying, and it's completely alone, as we shall all be at the moment of death... But since we living beings are not completely alone, we shouldn't write as if we were. We have a responsibility as long as we are alive: we should be answerable to people for what we write, every word of it, and make sure that every word has the desired affect (*ibid.*).

In the conclusion he softened his tone of questionable judgement. His were merely preferences and not rules. Writers are 'free to choose the language, or non-language, that best suits them, and anything is possible: that obscure language in the writer's own mind may be plain and obvious for the reader; or that language that is incomprehensible to contemporaries may become clear and distinguished decades or centuries later (*ibid.*, p. 639).

## Levi and Kafka

Levi's difficulty in understanding Celan's work is clearly evident in his relationship with one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest authors: Franz Kafka. The pages devoted to his relationship with the Jewish author from Prague, with whom he ventured on a complex and conflicting project involving the linguistic transaction for a translation of *The Trial* (C. Cases, 1987, p. 16; Primo Levi, 1983), reveal the reasons he attributed to his writing. Levi believed there was a more profound explanation that justified the linguistic choice.

After the comments following his translation and the repeated remarks about the 'lack of affinity' with Kafka's original work, Levi felt it his duty to clarify in the newspaper *La Stampa* why he would never have been able to write like Kafka.

I love and admire Kafka because he writes in a way that is totally denied to me. In my writing, whether for better or worse, consciously or not, I have always aimed at going from obscurity to clarity – as... a filter pump that sucks up cloudy water and expels purified – hopefully even sterilized – liquid. Kafka goes about things in the opposite way: he gathers up endless hallucinations drawn from incredibly deep subterranean reserves, but never filters them. The reader feels they are crawling with germs and spores – they are pregnant with burning hot meaning, but the reader is never helped to break through the veil or skirt round it to go and see what lurks behind it. Kafka never touches ground and never condescends to give you the end of Ariadne's thread to follow. But this love of mine is ambivalent – close to fear and rejection: like the feeling you have for a person who's suffering and asking you for help that you just can't give [...]. [Kafka's] suffering overcomes you and doesn't let go: you feel like his characters, condemned by a loathsome, inscrutable, ubiquitously pervasive court that invades the whole city and the world itself. You hide in squalid garrets but also in the dark solemnity of the cathedral; or are transformed into an ungainly, cumbersome insect, hated by all, desperately alone, obtuse, incapable of communication of thought, capable only of suffering. (Levi, 1983, pp. 920-923).

Levi's writing couldn't be anything other than the polar opposite of Kafka's. Kafka had lived before the rise of Nazism, and when it came to confronting the chasms of horror, his writing couldn't be anything other than evocative and obscure, because not even he could clearly perceive where his words sprang from and took shape.

Kafka was addressing a generation that had grown up outside the ghettos, but whose hopes raised by the emancipation edicts were beginning to look ambiguous and vacuous. Kafka felt there were spiritual walls that were thicker than those that for centuries had isolated the Jews from the rest of the population – a form of hostility in the face of which reason was to no avail, and even revealed itself to be particularistic and full of prejudice. With his febrile imagination, he was capable of perceiving the menacing forces lurking behind the apparent calm of the years preceding the Great War. He could detect the gaping chasms of the Jewish condition, and the illusion at the roots of their demand for integration. In his hallucinations he was even able to glimpse the future condition of a generation who had been hoping it would suffice to strip themselves day after day of the most striking attributes and characteristics that offended the Gentiles' sensitivities – up to the point where their sense of existence and joy in living were lost – thus anticipating in this spiritual malady the broader scale stripping processes the Nazis would later organize.

Kafka's statement about psychoanalysis being the *Rashi's Midrash*<sup>7</sup> of contemporary Judaism during his lifetime was more than a shrewd remark, albeit one of his most effective (F. Kafka, 1964, pp. 399-400). It was also a sign of how profoundly he had experienced in his inner self the upheaval in the Jewish consciousness and the difficulty in resolving it – to the point where safeguarding inner freedom was near to becoming the last refuge against the absurd. His writing addresses us from the brink of a deep chasm at the bottom of which lurks Auschwitz.

Kafka anticipates in K's condition the awful fate the Jews and the whole of humanity were exposed to in a *situation of dire extremity*. (H. Arendt., 1981, pp. 73-103). In his state of mental feverishness, the writer from Prague could intuit all this, though only vaguely. He could write about it, though not knowingly, as hunted animals instinctively sense the approach of danger, but without

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<sup>7</sup> *Rashi's Midrash* is the most authoritative biblical commentary written by Rashi of Troyes (Rabbi Shlomo ben Ytzchak).

knowing exactly what it is. Levi, on the other hand, felt obliged to describe what he had actually seen and experienced in the concentration camp – and this is the ineradicable gulf between them for anyone attempting to confront the problem.

Unlike Kafka, Levi was speaking and writing after the catastrophe. He had been in Hades not in fantasy, but really. A terrifying mechanism of death had been devised with the use of the latest technology and an entire nation had been working on it in order to annihilate another.

Levi's marmoreal language, his dry, clear prose style, turned a moral duty into a literary strategy. Gravitating from the unclear to the clear also served to distinguish in an absolute sense the victims from the perpetrators, those who thought out and planned from those who carried out the orders, and among the latter those who did so in ignorance from those who kept silent and pretended not to know. Levi was aware that it was precisely this sort of confusion that stoked old prejudices and spawned new ones.

The description of the penalty meted out to Joseph K, Levi wrote, is a page that 'takes one's breath away'. 'I, a survivor from Auschwitz, would never have written it, or never in that way – out of lack of ability or of imagination, certainly, but also out of reserve in the face of death, which Kafka was unaware of, or if he was, rejected, or maybe out of lack of courage'. (Levi Primo, 1983, p. 923).

In actual fact Levi would never have been capable of writing in that way, even if he had been able to, because the aim he set himself in writing his testimony took him in completely the opposite direction. In Auschwitz, death wasn't a fantasy, and those who died weren't individuals whose mental anguish foreshadowed the future - it was a whole population that was dying.

Seen in a wider perspective, Kafka and Levi represent two opposite poles of a terrible, complex historical event, where an anguish-ridden foreshadowing of an uncertain future and impending catastrophe meets with the description of what has really happened and was beyond the stretch of any possible imagination.

Many years later, when he was already familiar with Kafka's work, Levi was to identify another component of K's sense of shame – that 'of being a man' (Levi 1983, p. 922). K, wrote Levi,

is ashamed of having disputed with the court of the cathedral, and, at the same time, of not having sufficiently energetically resisted the court of the garrets. Of having wasted his life in mean office-worker jealousy, in insincere love, in sickly bouts of shyness, in static, obsessive accomplishments. Of existing when he shouldn't have been alive any longer – not having found the strength to put an end to himself by his own hand when all was lost, before the two bungling bearers of death came to visit him (*ibid.*).

But in this sense of shame there was something else, which Levi was aware of personally: the *shame* of belonging to the human race, when confronted by the horror of Nazism.

But I feel in this sense of shame another component that I know: Joseph K, at the end of his anguish-ridden journey, feels shame at the very existence of this occult, corrupt court, which pervades all that surrounds him and which includes even the prison chaplain and the prematurely perverted little girls who torment the painter Tintorelli. Finally, it is a human, not a divine, court, made up of men and created by men, and Joseph K, with his knife already lodged in his heart, feels shame at being a man (*ibid.*).

The man who in 1963 declared he would never again deal with the subject of the concentration camp soon became aware of how impossible this was. The illusion of being able to put the problem behind him was short-lived – the illusion being encouraged by the new, positive climate surrounding his first two published works, with Levi sending a hidden message to a world that had initially repressed then later seemed more willing to engage with the trauma of the survivors. In fact he was, and always would be, totally unable to put Auschwitz behind him. Nonostante la gioia del rimpatrio Levi continuò a sentirsi di lunedì, dopo la pausa lavorativa, oppresso e tormentato (Primo Levi, Lunedì, 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1946).

What can be sadder than a train?  
That leaves when due,  
that has but a single voice,  
and has but a single route  
[...]

And a man? Is a man not sad?  
If he lives for long in solitude  
and thinks that time has reached its end  
[...]. (Primo Levi, Lunedì, 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1946).<sup>8</sup>

Once the first chapter of the story of what had happened had been told, others started about how and why, about the present and the future, questions that in his last years Levi turned to address with disquieting eyes.

## The words to tell

In describing life in the Lager, Primo Levi often used metaphors inspired by Dante. His voyage through a real “inferno” is described as a descent in which internment at Fossoli was “limbo”.

However, when Dante's words don't come to help him, he turns to the language of the Bible to imbue his style with fire, as he did in the opening poem for *If this is a Man* where the musicality of the text merges with the musicality of the *Devarim/Deuteronomio* that inspired it.

The poem *Shema*, is an example of his ability to transpose one of the best known traditional Hebrew texts – the passage from *Devarim/Deuteronomy* that includes the Jewish creed, which children learn by heart from a very early age, and which is recited twice every day – into one of the most powerful appeals to memory and historical awareness<sup>9</sup>.

You that live in the safety/ Of your lukewarm homes,/ You that are greeted in the evening/ By warm food and friendly faces:/ Consider if this is a man/ One that works in the mud/ That knows no peace/ That fights for half a loaf/ That can die at a mere yes or a no./ Consider if this is a woman/ Without any hair and without a name/ With no more strength to remember/ With emptiness in her eyes and cold in her womb/ Like a frog in winter./Meditate that this has been:/ I commend these words to you./ Carve them into your hearts/ When you are at home and when you are in the street./ When retiring to sleep and on rising from it:/ Repeat them to your children./ Or may your homes be destroyed./ May illness disable you./ Your offspring turn their faces from you. (Levi, 10<sup>th</sup> January, 1946, *cit.*)

«Wehavtà et Adonai Eloekha bekhòl levavkhà uvkhol nafsechà uvkhol meodekha.  
vehayu advarim haelle asher anokhì mezavekhà hayom ‘al levavekhà  
veshinnantam levanekhà vedibbartà bam beshivtekhà bevetekhà uvlekhtekhà badderekh uvshokhbekhà uvumekhà.  
Ukshartmam leoth ‘al yadekha vehayu letotafoth ben ‘enekha...»

This current version of the most ancient Jewish prayer merges the past and the present in a sublime appeal for remembrance and the sentiments of human responsibility.

In *The Drowned and the Saved I Somme* the biblical portrayal of the world before the creation, the *tohu va-bohu* provides the images used to describe psychological life in the Lager:

Colds and flu – the splendid lines from *The Drowned and the Saved* tell us – were unknown in that world, but people died, sometimes quite suddenly, from things doctors have never been able to study. Stomach ulcers and mental illnesses healed (or the symptoms disappeared), but everyone suffered from an incessant form of uneasiness, which disturbed sleep and to which no name could be given. To define it as 'neurosis' is reductionistic and ridiculous. Perhaps it would be more just to recognize an ancestral anxiety in it – the echo of which can be heard in the second verse of Genesis: the anxiety inscribed, in every person, of *tohu wa-bohu*, of the deserted and empty universe, crushed under the spirit of God, but from which the spirit of man is absent – not yet born or already dead. (Levi, 1986, *cit.*, p. 66)

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<sup>8</sup> The poem was written a week after *Alzarsi*, the poem that opens *La Tregua* (“The Truce”), *cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Shema Israel Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad* (Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God, the Lord is One) – the inspiration for the opening poem in *Se questo è un uomo* (*If this is a Man*).

When he was asked to provide a personal reading itinerary, Primo Levi made reference to the most disturbing of biblical texts in order to establish a hypothetical starting point: in the book of Job, whose 'splendid but atrocious story contains the questions of all times'. Levi went on to say that we can't avoid asking Job's questions. Even if those questions remain unanswered forever, human beings 'need them in order to exist, to understand themselves and the world they live in'. (Primo Levi, 1981, p. 1369).

But if Job can be taken as a hypothetical starting point, destiny and human purpose are a black hole and that question a cry in the void and in nothingness. (P. Levi, *Siamo soli*, in Id., *La ricerca delle radici*, cit., p. 1524)<sup>10</sup>.

If Levi assumed the role of epic poet of an entire generation, it was because what he wrote corresponded exactly to what he had set out to do. The personal reasons he had often evoked, justified and explained with his training as a chemist and a scientist that made him shun all superfluous display combined with the search for a unique model of expression to represent suffering and accurately describe what went on during the greatest of tragedies.

This is why his writing can be hailed as a matchless model – an ethical necessity much more than a literary one. His words, evolving into literature, became a vehicle for self-representation of contemporary Jewish consciousness. In his own way, he himself was aware of this; so, when he published his *Natural Histories*, he thought he ought to give himself a pseudonym – though one that didn't make it all that difficult to identify him<sup>11</sup>.

His position of bard more or less prevented him producing from other forms of writing. Adorno's principle, whereby it was no longer possible to produce poetry in the same way after Auschwitz, was for Levi a painful, personal reality. He had no wish to *profit* from the fame he acquired as a result of his testimony.

The reason that drove Levi to write, and made him one of the greatest writers of the century, was also the same reason that prevented him from establishing himself and defining himself as such, and imposed on him a sort of interior exile that separated him and made him feel entirely different from the rest of the social caste. He was always to speak of his dilemma with an apparent personal distance, like a detached observer objectively describing events from the exterior, measuring his words and rejecting personal and intimate representations. A dilemma that has to be handed over and shared with his readers: one can kill not only by forgetting, but also by changing one's ways, dealing with something else, making other chords of the spirit vibrate – we are as if forever fixed in our roles, and we can never really shake them off without harming the most precious part of our personality by so doing.

To make a living, Levi continued to work as a chemist up until his retirement, and by doing so he accentuated the difference of his choice but accentuated also how impossible it was for him to live out his role fully as a writer.

There were also personal reasons of temperament involved in this choice, but these would seem to be strictly connected with the events of his life and the objective reasons for his writing. He could hardly have acted otherwise. The frivolousness that was typical of the whole world of literary prizes would in any case have alienated him. It would have been hard to imagine him being part of such a world.

When the reasons for this interdiction weren't due to interior causes, it was the events of external reality that reinforced it. Levi would have been willing to go on to other themes, but it was as if he were imprisoned in a role he couldn't escape from. His fantasy writing, though of great aesthetic merit, was only the odd brief interval – a respite before going back to fighting his nightmarish obsessions.

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<sup>10</sup> P. Levi, *Siamo soli*, in Id., *La ricerca delle radici*, cit., p. 1524.

<sup>11</sup> The first edition of *Storie naturali*, Turin, Einaudi, 1966, was published under the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila.

Reconstructing his own history and *preventing the situation whereby this history is remembered only through a book* becomes at this point an obligation. Reinventing his own destiny becomes a necessity. 'All you have learned in the marshes and in the woods mustn't be lost, and it isn't enough for it to survive in a book,' Levi significantly has Smirnov, the young Russian who has joined the Jewish partisans, say in the only epic novel he left to us. (Primo Levi, 1982, p. 222).

But for this to come about it's important not to lose touch with our origins, even if everything has gone to pieces and *Ibergkumene tsores iz gut tsu derstelyn*<sup>12</sup>, although inserted by Levi in the opening to a work of fiction, can in reality never again be good, as it was before.

In the final pages of *Il sistema periodico*, resorts to the metaphor of carbon, which is 'with us again, in a glass of milk' (P. Levi, *Il sistema periodico*, cit., p. 237). In this molecule, another metaphor for nourishing tradition, there's a hidden path leading to a recent and an earlier historical reference – a quello più antico In his great *Argon* metaphor, Levi was to call up in a multiple play of symbolic cross-references entire regions of Jewish belief and classical tradition. Through the metaphor of the 'foreign' and apparently 'inactive', 'elusive and invisible' gas, Levi would combine classical images of faithfulness with the earliest consolidated images in the Jewish tradition.

Argon- Argo- Ereg... In a game of symbolism and fortunate linguistic skills that went well-beyond the author's intentions, the word Argon, with its reminders of faithfulness and loyalty to origins that many were obliged to rediscover in spite of themselves, reminds one of Ulysses' dog Argo who never forgot his master and waiting until he returned to Ithaca. It was a happy linguistic coincidence unknown to the author who did not know Hebrew that well that Argon and Argo are close to the word *Ereg*, that which symbolically links and welds together generations.<sup>13</sup>

In an epic novel such as *Se non ora quando?*, although there are many characters, it's always the same person that speaks, from different places of the psyche. And it's always the Jewish soul talking to itself, reflecting its doubts on to itself, forming words out of the most intimate recesses of existence. The conscience may consolidate itself if it absorbs into its inner self all the places of a broken existence, including the voids and the doubts – its 'black holes'. The partisan leader Gedale's violin can only break at the very moment he starts to savour his imminent freedom and his transit through a land from whose ports he can reach the promised land. The violin is a constituent symbol of the Jewish experience in exile (to the extent that it has given rise to jokes such as the one that says a Jew can take up the violin or the clarinet, but not the piano, because if he has to flee he can take it with him). The violin brightened up Jewish evenings in warm southern lands or in freezing Polish winter nights. The violin evokes a sense of joyousness – but what joyousness is there in rebuilding an independent national existence (and God knows how much more this will cost with the inevitable tragic confrontation with Arab hostility) if catastrophe lies behind it all? If in fact Hitler largely won his most insane war – the one he declared against the Jewish people? 'When the war is finished, also the Jews in Poland will be finished' , as Schmulek declared in *Se non ora quando?*. (Levi, 1982, p. 199).

The image of the violin appears early on in *Se questo è un uomo* in the description of the *shibah* ritual – the mourning entered into by old Gattegno's 'large, hard-working' family that came from Tripoli 'after many long journeys' when they heard the news of imminent deportation, and the powerful evocation of 'the ancient suffering of the people with no land, the hopeless suffering of exodus that is renewed every century':

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<sup>12</sup> This Yiddish saying (it's good to tell of troubles past) opens Levi's *Periodic System*, Cf. Id., *Il sistema periodico*, cit., p. 427.

<sup>13</sup> *Ereg* (from the root of *alef, resh, ghimel*) in Hebrew means material. *Irgun* means movement and organisation. Another example of language creativity is the use of the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila, chosen by Levi for *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*. Curiously the breakdown of the name in Jewish can result in *Damian male evel* which means Damian filled with mourning. The name Damian contains the word *dam* which means blood. These unexpected aspects of language, not attributed to the author, have been addressed by Gombrich. (1965).

[...] they came from Tripoli, after many long journeys, always carrying with them the tools of their trade, and their cooking pots, and their mouth organs and the violin to play and dance to after the day's work, because they were happy, pious folk. Their women were the first among them all to get things ready for the journey, silently and quickly, so that they would have time left for their mourning. And when everything was ready, the bread baked, their bundles tied up, then they took off their shoes, let their hair down, set the funeral candles on the ground and lit them according to their forefathers' tradition, and sat on the ground in a circle for their lamentation, and throughout the night prayed and wept. Many of us stood outside their door, and into our souls descended the ancient suffering – that was new to us - of the people with no land, the hopeless suffering of exodus that is renewed every century. (Levi, 1947, *cit.*, p. 8)

The image of Gedale's band going through the Brenner Pass recalls to mind the description Primo Levi provided years previously, in *The Truce*, for his 'passage' back from Auschwitz (Levi, 1963, *cit.*, pp. 420-421). There too there's a description of a group of Zionists, guided by a confident leader with 'hawk's eye' vision. For Levi, it was large, joyful group that 'opened up the way as best it could', which the writer looked upon in fond approval. There's a description of them making their way up – an *aliyah* (ascent) – as the journey towards the promised land is defined - evoking the coming out of darkness and the return to life. The description of Gedale's violin breaking therefore corresponds to the feeling of emptiness and dejection experienced by Levi on his return to Italy through the Brenner Pass. Of the six hundred and fifty deportees from the Fossoli camp, only three had made it back: 'Leonardo and myself, in memory-laden silence' (*Ibid.*)

The novel that paid homage to the Jewish resistance – or at least its essential themes – was therefore concentrated in these closing pages of *The Truce*. And the message – that there was a positive identification with these bands - was already clear, even in the decision to return home, where they were awaited. This in contrast to the young people for whom the old country had nothing more to say – 'born and expelled', as Line, the militant girl of the Zionist Left, would say, to which Mendel, Primo Levi's alter ego, could only reply with his forefathers' ancient wisdom, '*Narische meidele, vos darfst du fregen*'. (Levi, 1982, *cit.*, p. 257)

The ending of *Se non ora quando?* therefore alludes to another novel the author knew he couldn't write, and that others, those who had made the same decision as Gedale, or their children, would be able to. For him, it was enough to follow, ideally and in his imagination, the route taken by the partisan bands, whom he would have liked to join and re-establish a single destiny, at least as far as the Brenner Pass. The choice was also a strategic one: talking of the past through the main characters' eyes could help to understand the present better, and make sense of a choice that structurally modified Jewish life and the terms in which it is now seen and discussed. In the midst of polemics about the Near East war and of a resurgence of anti-Semitism encouraged by those tragic events, shifting the historical clock back to those fateful moments when a new, painful, highly charged but also hope-filled chapter was about to begin was an invitation to bring back the discussion to its rightful terms, in order to understand where the future, with its many uncertainties and fresh dangers, was leading.

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