

Memory as Hunger of the Brain

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Abstract. In the chapter “Communicating”, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi compares a certain kind of memory – involuntary, ostensibly useless and senseless – to a sort of “hunger of the brain”, “the mental equivalent of our need for bodily nourishment” (Levi, 1989, pp. 73-74). I believe this analogy should be taken seriously, almost literally, and its implications thoroughly explored. Hunger and memory are often closely associated in the poems or dreams of the Lager, while in *If This Is a Man*, eating frequently appears to restore a semblance of temporal progression. Memory is, for Levi, a “hunger of the brain”, also in the sense of the free and fertile methodological choice of one who does not merely remember the facts, but continues to question them, contemplating both the dynamics and the problems of memory. And perhaps this “hunger” for memory must, in a certain sense, endure, if one wishes to use memory to “build [tomorrow] from its roots”, “without giving in to the temptation to recompose the shards of old shattered idols and without constructing new ones” (Levi, 1991, p. 95).

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«The Lager is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger»
(Levi, 1987, p. 80)

In the chapter “Communicating”, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi compares memory or rather a certain kind of memory – involuntary, ostensibly useless and senseless – to a sort of hunger of the brain: “the mental equivalent of our bodily need for nourishment” (Levi, 1989, pp. 73-74).

Even before reading the entire passage and examining the significance and implications of this comparison, I would like to suggest that it be taken seriously, almost literally.¹ Often, in *If This Is a Man*, in Levi's poetry and dreams of the Lager, “dreamed with soul and body” (Levi, “Reveille”, 1988, p. 10) by prisoners and survivors, hunger and memory (also in the sense of testimony and narrative) are practically and conceptually linked, if not nearly identical. Both are “basic impulses”, “compulsions” – the need, at one and the same time, to fill an anxious void and to purge oneself of a contagious and indigestible poison.² We read in the preface to *If This is a Man*:

The need to tell our story to 'the rest', to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs. The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation (Levi, 1987, p.15).

Even long after his imprisonment, memory appeared to Levi to flow more from the stomach than from the head. In a conversation with Giuseppe Grassano in 1979, in which Levi described the premise that would eventually lead to the writing of *The Drowned and the Saved*, we find the following words: “I have in mind ... in mind ... in the gut, the stomach in short, something not quite digested, connected to the experience of the Lager.” (Levi, 1997, p. 180).³

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¹ Levi himself noted that “all languages are full of images and metaphors, whose origin” – i.e. literal meaning – “is being lost” (Levi, “Chromium”, 2000, p. 125).

² “I... was writing in a haphazard fashion, page after page of the memories which were poisoning me” (Levi, “Chromium”, 2000, p. 127).

³ Robert Gordon translates this phrase “I feel in my stomach, in my guts, something I haven't quite digested, connected to the theme of the Lager.” (Levi, 2001, p. 131). I have chosen here, and elsewhere, to cite and translate the Italian rather than the published English translations, where the latter have departed from Levi's original imagery of mind, memory, hunger and digestion. In another interview, Levi recalls having recognised a fellow inmate in a photograph, many years later, remarking that it was “a real shock ... like a punch in the stomach” (Levi, 1997, p. 226).

As noted above, the image of “memory as hunger of the brain” pertains to a certain kind of memory, to which Levi refers in other texts⁴ as “strange”, “anomalous”, “paradoxical”, involuntary, ostensibly useless and senseless, yet particularly persistent. In any event, the comparison would appear to be not merely a “curious” (Levi, 1989a, p. 73), almost secondary and anecdotal effect of the memory of Auschwitz, but something that lies at its very heart. Moreover, it would appear to convey a fundamental lesson regarding the role and value of memory in general (if only through its “curious effect”) that Auschwitz and the entire issue of the Nazi “war against memory” (Levi, 1989a, p. 73), have brought to the fore in a “dreadfully 'exemplary'” fashion (Levi, 1989a, p. 8).⁵

“Memory as hunger of the brain” lies at the heart of the need to understand “the double sense of the term 'extermination camp'”(Levi, 1987, pp. 33, 57, 61): to annihilate the prisoners as human beings, before or simultaneous-to their physical annihilation, and to eliminate memory as a faculty even before destroying evidence of the crime. The millions of men, women, elderly and children “swallowed ... up, purely and simply” (Levi, 1987, p. 26)⁶ on the one hand, and the grey “human mass” (Levi, 1987, pp. 23, 24, 68) of the camp, the empty “involucre” (Ibid., p. 48) that had lost “the ability to observe, to remember, compare and express themselves” (Levi, 1989a, p. 64), “forgetful of dignity and restraint”, “reduced to suffering and needs” (Levi, 1987, p. 33). A man who no longer possesses memory *is* hunger: “The Lager *is* hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger” (Levi, 1987, p. 80).⁷ “[Everything is nothing down here, except the hunger inside” (Ibid., p. 141), an “anonymous and concord ... hunger” (Ibid., p. 75), collective and subjectless; a hunger “of a kennel or of a sheepfold” (Ibid., p. 76), forgetful of man; a “*fressen*”, the way of eating of animals” (Ibid., p. 82).

The image of “memory as hunger of the brain” provides the link, the “bridge” (Levi, “A Bridge”, 1988, p.55; cf. Levi 2000, p. 35) – evil and sinister – between the two adjacent, smoking chimneys. Levi evokes this connection with a simple but terrible juxtaposition of phrases, in the chapter on the great selection, “October 1944”: “At Birkenau, the crematorium chimney has been smoking for ten days” and, a few lines later, “the kitchen chimney smokes as usual, the distribution of the soup is already beginning” (Levi, 1987, pp. 132-133). In light of this juxtaposition, it is perhaps worth rereading the beginning of the chapter:

[O]ur hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal.... We say “hunger”.... They are free words, created and used by free men.... If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born. (Levi, 1987, p.129)

The comparison between memory and hunger also appears in the chapter “Communicating”, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, in which Levi explains the destruction of language at Auschwitz. The condition of prisoner was that of “not being talked to” (Levi, 1989a, p. 72), in which howls, foreign commands, threats and blows were all “a variant of the same language” (Ibid., p. 70). At Auschwitz, one did not merely suffer, but “died ... due to insufficient information” (Ibid., p. 72), rather than hunger. Knowing German or not was crucial to survival – to the point that Levi exchanged bread for German lessons, remarking that “never was bread better spent” (Ibid., p. 75).

Levi remembered the Lager as a “perpetual Babel” (Levi, 1987, p. 44), like “a grey and black film” (Levi, 1986, p.72),⁸ filled with the “dreadful sound and fury” of a “continuous deafening background noise, from which, however, the human word did not surface” (Levi, 1989a, pp. 72-73). Departing from this “void and need for communication”, Levi notes a “curious effect” on memory: “At a distance of forty years we still remember, in a purely acoustic form, words and sentences

⁴ “Something anomalous”, “that I cannot fathom” (Interview with Marco Vigevani: “Words, Memory, Hope (1984), Levi, 1997, p. 255); “memory's curious salvage operations” (Levi, “A Mystery in the Lager, 1989b, p. 67).

⁵ Cf. “awful privilege” in *The Truce* (Levi, 1987, p. 188).

⁶ Cf. “Auschwitz had gulped down millions of human beings, and many of my friends, and a woman who was dear to my heart.” (Levi, 2000, p. 126).

⁷ The “musselmans”, however, “the men in decay”, are those who “eat only the ration”, who no longer even feel hunger (Levi, 1987, pp. 95-96).

⁸ Raymond Rosenthal translates “black and white” (Levi, 1989a, p. 73).

pronounced around us in languages we did not know and did not learn afterwards.” (Levi 1989a, p. 73).

In particular, Levi remembers the final syllables of the registration number of the prisoner who preceded him on the roster: “stergishi steri”. Only much later did he discover that these sounds meant “forty-four” in Polish. Levi offers a possible explanation of these “curious” memories: hunger. When the soup was distributed, in order not to miss your turn, “it was a good idea to jump when the companion with the immediately preceding registration number was called”. “Stergishi steri” thus “stimulated an immediate secretion of saliva”, “like the bell that conditioned Pavlov's dogs” (Levi, 1989a, p. 73).

This memory, which Levi calls “mechanical” (Levi 1989a, p. 78)⁹ later in the chapter and elsewhere, would thus appear to be a simple, animal, stimulus-response association – an environmental adaptation dictated by the survival instinct, whereby prisoners learned to recognise the key sounds of commands and calls, along with the appropriate response or behaviour by means of which they might secure soup or, perhaps, avoid beatings.

The persistence of these sounds in the memory could be the effect of unelaborated trauma, unassimilated, “indigestible food” that returns, over time, in the guise of “repetition compulsion” or “conato”¹⁰ (Levi, 1986, p. 39). “These foreign voices became engraved on our memories as on an empty, blank magnetic tape; in the same manner, a famished stomach rapidly assimilates even indigestible food.” (Levi, 1986, p. 73).

All of Levi's work can be read in light of the “indigestible food” for the body and the mind that he was compelled to ingest – “more trials, more toil, more hunger” (Levi, 1987, p. 212) – even after the Lager. In the story “A Mystery in the Lager”, Levi calls the “memory's curious salvage operations” where Auschwitz is concerned “pathological” (Levi, 1989b, p.67), making him feel that he is “the brother of Ireneo Funes”, Borges's character who is unable to forget anything. Yet there is something in the passage from *The Drowned and the Saved* cited above, something in the way in which Levi describes that kind of mechanical memory, that goes beyond the simple stimulus-response of Pavlov's dogs. There is an element in Levi's description that is more “harmonious” and aesthetic than “indigestible” and “pathological”: “a tangle of sounds that ended harmoniously, like the indecipherable counting jingles of children, in something like 'stergishi steri” (Levi, 1989a, p. 73).

It is harmonious merely to distinguish certain sounds within the general confusion of pure noise. Similarly, in *The Truce*, newly liberated, walking around the Crakow market, Levi manages to gather “scraps of information” in Polish, if only of a formal, grammatical nature (a “termination of the genitive”), which suddenly clarify some of the incomprehensible Polish oaths he had heard in the Lager, also engraved in his memory: “scraps of information which filled me with a foolish and puerile joy” (Levi, 1987, p. 221). This joy is “puerile”, like the “counting jingles of children”, because it is marked by the wonder and pleasure of learning through sounds, words and meanings – the faculty of language itself. It is a kind of wonder and pleasure that is mostly forgotten in the everyday, “adult” use of language, but which the mutilation of language that occurred in the “cruel laboratory” (Levi, 1989a, p. 74) of Auschwitz forcibly revealed to be a necessary “hunger”.

And “perhaps”, as Levi himself admits later in the same passage, “this useless and paradoxical memory had another significance and purpose”, which he explains as follows, adding further nuances:

They were fragments torn from the indistinct; the fruit of a useless and unconscious effort to carve a meaning or sense out of the senseless. They were also the mental equivalent of our bodily need for nourishment, which drove us to search for potato peelings around the kitchens: little more than nothing, better than nothing. Also the undernourished brain suffers from a specific hunger of its own. ... [I]t was the unconscious preparation for 'later', for an improbable survival, in which every shred of experience would become a tessera in a vast mosaic. (Levi, 1989a, pp. 73-74)

⁹ Cf. footnote 3, above.

¹⁰ Literally “retching”. Raymond Rosenthal translates “conato”, “attempt” (Levi, 1989a, p. 36).

In an interview, given during the same period, Levi characterised this kind of memory as “almost an unconscious preparation for the task of bearing witness” (Levi, 2001, p. 255).

These anomalous memories were thus not merely a mechanical or animal response to hunger, nor were they the pathological effect of an undernourished mind, but a positive and “specific hunger” of the brain. It is as if, under the threat of what Levi called the Nazi “war against memory”, the memory exercised itself as pure faculty, as an effort, preparation, record of sounds, collection of tesserae, as pure form without content, between “scraps” of non-sense and memory of non-memories. As if this involuntary, useless and senseless memory – perhaps *because* it is involuntary, useless and senseless¹¹ – were, paradoxically, the memory or image of memory itself,¹² illustrating the imperfect coincidence between memory as a condition and specific memories, between memory and perception, between potential memory and the Nazi attempt to destroy it.

It is not merely a matter of rescuing memory, however, or even of preparing for the improbable “later” (in quotation marks in Levi's own text) – to give testimony to others, to reconstruct history, to tell the story of the drowned through the rescued fragments. The non-coincidence of condition and conditioned, possibility and reality, constituted, already in the camp, a kind of survival or form of resistance – perhaps the only form of resistance possible at Auschwitz.¹³

In *If This Is a Man*, other fragments float unpredictably into Levi's mind (Levi, 1987, p. 118),¹⁴ to his own amazement, but also affording him nourishment. The verses of Dante's Canto of Ulysses that come to Levi's mind – perhaps not coincidentally – while going to get the rations with Pikolo. Levi would have given up his ration of soup to remember the entire canto, and perhaps also to understand how and why it came to his mind.

As with the purely acoustic memories, Levi sees “still more” (Levi, 1987, p. 118) beyond the obvious significance of the remembered fragments: the nostalgia and pleasure of knowledge, poetry and even the ethical content of those verses. It is “something gigantic”, pertaining to “the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism”, something “that has to do with all men” (Ibid.). The necessary and still-possible, albeit “unexpected” anachronism of the mind is “so human” because it is a necessary condition for every human experience.

Reciting Dante, Levi feels that his mental faculties are still alive – memory and language, as power and form, even before content: “A fragment floats into my mind, not relevant”; “*Language, the tip of it flickering to and fro*” (Levi, 1987, p. 118). He feels, once again, able to communicate, to explain to others, even to translate from one language to another, to be heard by Pikolo, with curiosity, intelligence and deep sensitivity. Even before remembering his humanity in the past, measuring and suffering the distance, he manages to feel human again in the present, identical to humanity and different from Auschwitz: “*for brutish ignorance your mettle was not made*” (Levi, 1987, p. 119).

Surviving in the present is already the future and, paradoxically, already memory, inasmuch as it restores the dimension of potentiality to the destiny-time of the camp. But “I am in a hurry, a terrible hurry” (Levi, 1987, p. 119), “it is late, it is late” (Levi, 1987, p. 120), “this hour is already less than an hour” (Levi, 1987, p. 118), Levi says anxiously. “[W]e have reached the kitchen”, and the *essen* of the mind is once again submerged by the *fressen* of urgency, of the anonymous queue,

¹¹ In this, Levi is very close to Walter Benjamin. As Levi cautions in *The Drowned and the Saved*, memory that is too voluntary, too filled with meaning and purpose, too useful, too attributable to established patterns, ultimately coincides with oblivion: “in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallised, perfected, adorned, which installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense” (Levi, 1989a, p. 12).

¹² Cf. Di Castro, 2012, and Di Castro, 2008. “Ricordare la memoria” [*Remembering memory*], pp. 100-145. The subject of “memory of memory” was also addressed by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, in his paper on “The Canto of Ulysses”, presented at the *International Symposium on Primo Levi: “Literature and Testimony”*, Rome 27-30 March 2012.

¹³ Cf. “Ritratto di dignità e della sua mancanza negli uomini” [*A portrait of dignity and its absence in human beings*], interview by Barbara Kleiner (1986), (Levi, 1997, p. 81).

¹⁴ For a more in-depth reflection on the chapter “The Canto of Ulysses”, see Di Castro, “Sognare la filosofia ad Auschwitz”.

the cabbage and turnip soup that seems to drown all thoughts and memories, as Levi ends the chapter with Dante's words: "And over our heads the hollow seas closed up" (Levi, 1987, p. 121).

Many years later, in the chapter "The Intellectual in Auschwitz", in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi remembers and describes the incident of the Canto of Ulysses as follows:

I had neither lied nor exaggerated. I really would have given bread and soup – that is, blood – to save from nothingness those memories.... Then and there they had great value. They made it possible for me to re-establish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity. They convinced me that my mind, though besieged by everyday necessities, had not ceased to function. They elevated me in my own eyes and those of my interlocutor. They granted me a respite ephemeral but not hebetudinous, in fact liberating and differentiating: in short, a way to find myself.... A food that certainly contributed to keeping a part of me alive" (Levi, 1989, pp. 112-114).

We know that Levi had an aversion to generalisations of the kind that relate to individual experiences as if they were comprehensive representations of reality, but also to ideas and abstract moral values as if they followed fixed patterns, never testing or measuring them against reality, against specific cases, against the offence of Auschwitz.

Thus, although he offers a number of examples throughout his writings (beyond those cited here) of mental and moral "food" that probably contributed to the survival of his mind and body, Levi is sceptical about attempts to formulate hard-and-fast rules, as in the case of ex-sergeant Steinlauf ("Initiation", *If This Is a Man*) who, in Auschwitz, teaches him the importance of washing, even in turbid water in a filthy washbasin, in order not to become beasts, "to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization" (Levi, 1987, pp. 44-47).¹⁵ He expressed similar scepticism years later, when Philip Roth emphatically observed, in a 1986 interview ("A Man Saved by His Skills"¹⁶), that Levi's survival had not been the result of "brute biological strength or incredible luck" but of his mental hunger: his insatiable curiosity, need to observe and understand, passion for analysis, testing, and subtle thought.

In keeping with Levi's anti-rhetorical and profoundly anti-idolatrous scepticism and in light of the double sense of the term "extermination", I believe the comparison between memory and hunger must also be applied in reverse¹⁷ (which is why I have referred to it as a comparison rather than an analogy). Thus far, I have considered memory as hunger of the brain that must somehow be nourished in order to preserve one's humanity and resist the transformation of man into *musselman* – a transformation to which it in fact appears remarkably resistant. But let us also try to envisage physical, brute hunger, *fressen* – the "prime stimulus" that "lived in our cells, and conditioned our behavior" (Levi, 2000, p. 116) – as a kind of memory: a memory of the body, or perhaps memory itself (of the mind and the body together, without distinction).

At Auschwitz, hunger "filled up every thinking moment" (Levi, 1987, p.132),¹⁸ annihilating time and thus memory along with thought. In order to survive hunger, time – the living, three-dimensional time "of living men" (Ibid. p, 123) – must be "laboriously expelled" (Levi, 1958, p.132),¹⁹ like undigested food.

¹⁵ One might consider why this chapter (so manifestly anti-idolatrous, in my opinion) is entitled "Initiation" rather than the previous one, in which Levi characterises the process of tattooing – of all of the Lager's rites of initiation – as a "baptism", "the real, true initiation" (Levi, 1987., p. 33) that transformed men into *Häftlinge*.

¹⁶ Levi, 2001, pp. 13-22.

¹⁷ On reversal as an interpretative tool and the broadening of perspective frequently employed by Levi, see Robert S. C. Gordon, "Perspective, or Looking Again", in *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (2001, pp. 149-172). In particular, Gordon cites the following passage by Levi (trans. Gordon): "I am coming to realize that in these pages there are many instances of upturnings. I can sincerely say that this was not a deliberate project on my part, in fact it is a result I had not foreseen. And yet, painters know well that in a painting turned upside down, virtues and defects that had not been seen before jump at the eye" (Levi, 1991, p. 179).

¹⁸ "The work, cold and hunger are sufficient to fill up every thinking moment" (Levi, 1987, p.132). "One feels the selections arriving.... Yet the result is hardly a wave of despondency.... The fight against hunger, cold and work leaves little margin for thought, even for this thought." (Levi, 1987, pp. 130-131).

¹⁹ Stuart Woolf translates "*laboriosamente espulso*", "laboriously driven away" (Levi, 1987, p.110).

The moment of entry into the camp was the starting point of a different sequence of thoughts, those near and sharp ... like wounds re-opened every day ... hunger and desolation so concrete, and all the rest so unreal, that it did not seem possible that there could really exist any other world or time other than our world of mud and our sterile and stagnant time ... hours, days months, spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past, always too slowly, a valueless and superfluous material, of which we sought to rid ourselves as soon as possible. (Levi, 1987, pp.122-123)

The problem of the remote future has grown pale to them and has lost all intensity in face of the far more urgent and concrete problems of the near future: How much one will eat today.... Here I am, then, on the bottom. One learns quickly enough to wipe out the past and the future when one is forced to. A fortnight after my arrival, I already had the prescribed hunger, that chronic hunger unknown to free men, which makes one dream at night, and settles in all the limbs of one's body. (Levi, 1987, pp. 42-43)

Hunger also consumed the night time: time of dreams, imagination and the unconscious.²⁰ All of the prisoners (and later, all of the survivors) dream of eating, taking the food in their hands, smelling it, feeling its texture but, just as they are about to bite into it, like the fruit of Tantalus, the dream dissipates. Or, they dream of surviving, of returning home and sitting at the table, eating, talking about their imprisonment and of the “never-ending hunger”, but not being believed or, even worse, as in the final dream in *The Truce*, discovering that home is merely a fiction and nothing is true outside the Lager. (Levi, 1987, pp. 379-380). Two dreams, or perhaps “variations” (Ibid. p. 66) of the same dream. Indeed, later in the chapter “Our Nights”, Levi tells us that “The dream of Tantalus and the dream of the story are woven into a texture of more indistinct images” turning into “shapeless nightmares of unheard-of violence”:

It is us again, grey and identical, small as ants, yet so huge as to reach up to the stars, bound one against the other, countless, covering the plain as far as the horizon; sometimes melting into a single substance, a sorrowful turmoil in which we all feel ourselves trapped and suffocated ... with a blinding giddiness and a sea of nausea rising from the praecordia to the gullet. (Levi, 1987, p. 68).

“Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?” Levi wonders. What he appears to be asking is why, in the prisoners' dreams, the hunger of the body is translated into the need for narrative, testimony, memory and time. As we have seen, in his preface to *If This Is a Man*, Levi reveals that he and his fellow prisoners felt this need while still in the Lager, as an “immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs” (Levi, 1987, p.15). Banished during the day, memory returned at night, as if hunger, which Levi calls the “prime stimulus”, flowed almost seamlessly in their dreams into that other basic stimulus – as if the two were merely different faces of the same need. On the other hand, already at the time of his capture, as a partisan in the mountains of Piedmont, facing probable death for the first time, Levi says: “I felt time running through my fingers, escaping from my body minute by minute, like a hemorrhage”. And that hemorrhage of time left him with “a piercing desire for everything”, “a gulf” (Levi, 2000, pp. 114-115), an almost desperate and insatiable hunger even then.

Both impulses however, of hunger and memory, were “censored”²¹ by the third dream that is, perhaps, the oneiric representation of the “vague”, unjustified yet “unceasing” “discomfort” that cannot be erased, which Levi calls “shame”.²² The prisoners themselves are reduced to the state of poisoned food, a revolting and nauseating “grey pulp” that leaves no room for anything else, neither memory nor hunger, beyond the shameful matter they have become.²³

In their dreams, memory censored during the day reappears as a basic need, as if somehow contained within hunger itself. Indeed, in *If This Is a Man*, we find that hunger is not only a sponge

²⁰ “Our Nights” (Levi, 1987, pp. 62-70; cf. pp. 49-50 and 76).

²¹ “Il sogno si censura da solo in sostanza, si rimane in corpo con la voglia di mangiare non esaudita e la voglia di raccontare non esaudita” [The dream essentially censors itself: the body remains with the desire to eat unsatisfied and the desire to tell unsatisfied] (Levi, “Tornare, mangiare, raccontare” [*To return, to eat, to tell*], interview by Virgilio Lo Presti (1979), 1997, p. 51).

²² Cf. the chapter “Shame” (Levi, 1989, pp. 52-67).

²³ Similarly, Levi tells how, immediately after his capture, he ate his forged identity card, finding his own photograph particularly disgusting (Levi, 2000, p. 109), demonstrating how much unwarranted “shame” the Fascist racial laws had already provoked.

that “wipes out” (Levi, 1987, p. 24) time, but also a kind of clock that marks it. In various passages, hunger (even in the animal way of *fressen*) seems to restore to the absolute present of Auschwitz, a semblance of time with past and future, memory and expectation that gives the appearance of “respectable” time:

When I return to work the lorries with the rations can be seen passing, which means it is ten o'clock. It is already a respectable hour, as the midday pause can be almost glimpsed in the fog of the remote future, allowing us to derive a little more strength from the expectation.... Then the *corvée* returns at 11.30, and the standard interrogation begins: how much soup today, what quality.... And at last, like a celestial meteor ... the midday siren explodes, granting a brief respite to our anonymous and concord tiredness and hunger.... [W]e all run to the hut, and we queue up with our bowls ready and we all have an animal hurry to swell our bellies with the warm stew.... Then comes the bliss ... of the distension and warmth of the stomach. (Levi, 1987, p.75)

As we are all satiated, at least for a few hours ... we are able to think of our mothers and wives.... For a few hours we can be unhappy in the manner of free men. (Levi 1987, p. 82)

Even after the selection (remember the two chimneys, of the crematoria and the kitchen, smoking simultaneously), the soup returns the prisoners to articulated time, interrupting and submerging the terror:

The selection is now over in our hut, but it continues in the others.... But as the soup pots have arrived in the meantime, the *Blockältester* decides to proceed with the distribution at once.... Now everyone is busy scraping the bottom of his bowl with his spoon so as not to waste the last drops of the soup; a confused metallic clatter, signifying the end of the day. (Levi, 1987, p. 135)

As noted above, it was perhaps not a coincidence that Levi found the time and memory to recite the Canto of Ulysses, “with the poles for the soup on our shoulders” (Levi, 1987, p. 120) It is as if bowl and stomach were “the securest safe” (Ibid., p. 81), the “limbo of things not perceived or immediately forgotten” (Levi, 2000, p. 51), the “attic” in which time and memory – all of those things that are in the way right now, but cannot be completely forgotten – are preserved (Levi, 1989, p. 115).

“In the Lager, there was no way of keeping anything,” recounts Levi in an interview with Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja. “We had nothing [of our own]: a bed, a pallet, clothes, a pocket” (Bravo, Cereja, 2011, p. 19). Hunger, in *If This Is a Man*, appears almost as suit of clothing, the only clothing one could keep: “And we will have our old comrade hunger with us ... our odour ... the odour of turnips and cabbages, raw, cooked and digested” (Levi, 1987, p. 109). Or as a pocket, in which to put time and identity away, for safe keeping:

A day begins like every day, so long as not to allow us reasonably to conceive its end, so much cold, so much hunger, so much exhaustion separate us from it: so that it is better to concentrate one's attention and desires on the block of grey bread, which is small but will certainly be ours in an hour, and which for five minutes, until we have devoured it, will form everything that the law of the place allows us to possess. (Levi, 1987, p.69)

On “the bottom of the bowl, where others have carved their numbers” and Primo and Alberto their names, the prisoner Clausner had written “*Ne pas chercher à comprendre*” (Levi, 1987, p. 109), as if physical hunger were a shelter from “a deeper hunger” (Ibid., p.328), more dangerous, perhaps fatal – like a life preserver that allows one to stay afloat “in the void of bottomless despair” (Levi, 1987, p. 23). For Levi, not understanding was “a painful void, a puncture, a permanent stimulus that insists on being satisfied” (Levi, 1989, p. 143) and, what is more, “a shame and an abomination” (Levi, 2000, p. 19) Clausner's inscription, recounted by Levi, appears to assume the value of a reminder more than an exhortation to forget, the value of “a discourse on 'behalf of third parties'” on behalf of the “submerged” (Levi, 1989, pp. 63-64), as if to say 'Remember that behind this hunger, there is another hunger,²⁴ and beyond those who died of starvation there are others,

²⁴ “Ci aspettavano altre prove, altre fatiche, altre fami, altri geli, altre paure” [Other trials, other labours, other hungers, other chills, other fears awaited us] (Levi, 1963, p. 43). Stuart Woolf translates: “More trials, more toil, more hunger, more cold, more fears awaited us.” (Levi, 1987, p. 212).

who died of other hungers or other poisonings.' A hunger that can never and, in some ways, should never be satisfied, if not at the risk of erecting idols over the ashes of Auschwitz.

The believers lived better.... Their hunger was different from ours; it was a divine punishment or expiation, or votive offering.... [It] was decipherable, and therefore did not overflow into despair. (Levi, 1989, p. 118)

This is the “lacuna”²⁵ at the core of every testimony regarding Auschwitz: neither a lacuna in knowledge or documentation, nor the impossible testimony of the submerged, but a desperate hunger that is still, despite everything, carved on the bottom of the bowl. It seems significant that Levi mentions Clausner's inscription, shortly before writing: “Today, at this very moment, as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened” (Levi, 1987, p. 109). This inscription has the power of a document, a testimony – or rather a testimony-outburst (Levi, 1989, pp. 36-37) – against the negationist tendency, also fuelled by reason and shame, that is the long shadow of the Nazi war against memory.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Levi, newly liberated, in the infirmary, his fever broken, famished for food and contact with the world, ready to resume his role as witness, chooses to tell the story of Hurbinek, “child of Auschwitz”, who lacked language but was able to express, with his entire body, his need to speak and his insistence on existing. And it is, perhaps, no coincidence that the secret word or rather the inarticulate sounds that Hurbinek managed to utter were “certainly not a message ... not a revelation ... ” but “perhaps ... meant 'to eat', or 'bread'; or 'meat'” (Levi, 1987, pp. 196-198). And finally, it is no coincidence that in the chapter entitled “Communicating”, in the *Drowned and the Saved*,²⁶ immediately following his comparison of memory to hunger of the brain, Levi, in his last effort, shortly before his death, remembers and reminds us, once again, of Hurbinek, living hunger-memory.

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²⁵ See *Le parole, il ricordo, la speranza [The words, the memory, the hope]*, interview by Marco Vigevani (1984) (Levi, 1997, p. 215). Cf. Levi's reflections on the “complete witnesses”, included – not coincidentally – in the chapter “Shame”, *The Drowned and the Saved* (pp. 63-64).

²⁶ Levi, 1989, p. 74.