

Weightless Flight. Primo Levi and the “Break of Civilization.”

Io che non so resistere al vizio di citare.
Primo Levi, “L’anima e gli ingegneri”

Alla precarietà dell’esistenza della sua
tribù, – siccità, malattie, influssi maligni –
lo sciamano rispondeva annullando il peso
del suo corpo, trasportandosi in volo in un
altro mondo.

Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane*

Translating Dante in Hell

The passage is one of the most celebrated and quoted of Primo Levi’s entire work. In the chapter “Il canto di Ulisse” from *Se questo è un uomo*, the writer recounts an “insperata ora d’aria” within the atrocious routine of the Lager. Levi is chosen by the Frenchman Jean, the “Pikolo” - the Kapo’s right hand man and “un gradino assai elevato nella gerarchia delle Prominenze” of the camp (Levi 105)—to accompany him in getting the vat of the daily ration. It is a desired and singular occasion, being one hour of time to reach the kitchen and return. An hour, therefore, without the torment of forced labor and the fear of being beaten. It is an occasion for exchanging a few words and Pikolo asks Levi to teach him Italian.

The conversation falls on Dante and on the famous twenty-sixth canto of *Inferno*, where Ulysses, alongside Diomedes in the eternal fire, tells the pilgrim and his guide about his last adventure. Levi tries to remember the Dantean tercets and to translate them into French, but his memory trudges along. His memories and thoughts related to the celebrated episode open a bottomless spiral within the closed world of Auschwitz. Dante’s passage is quoted according to the standard of transcription and humanistic interpretation in vogue in the Italy of the time and which Levi had probably learned by heart at the Liceo Classico *d’Azeglio* in Turin. The verses assume in the dark, forbidding condition of the Lager the light of an ancestral message: “Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver

come bruti / ma a seguir virtute e conoscenza” (Levi 113). For a moment Levi seems to glimpse in the Dantean verses “qualcosa di gigantesco... forse il perché del nostro destino, del nostro essere oggi qui” (Levi 115). It could be a glimmer of dignity, but also the pain of remembering inside the camp what “being a man” should have meant. Levi, in fact, appeals to his companion:

Pikolo mi prega di ripetere. Come è buono Pikolo, si è accorto che mi sta facendo del bene. O forse è qualcosa di più: forse... ha ricevuto il messaggio, ha sentito che lo riguarda, che riguarda tutti gli uomini in travaglio, e noi in specie; e che riguarda noi due, che osiamo ragionare di queste cose con le stanghe della zuppa sulle spalle. (Levi 115)

“Il canto di Ulisse” is probably the most evident of the innumerable Dantean inserts and cross-references within Levi’s work. A real “poetic memory,” in the sense given to this term by Gianfranco Contini,¹ can be spoken of for the Turinese writer, Dante being for Levi “before literature itself” as Lorenzo Mondo suggested (Ioli 224-9). In all of Levi’s work, in fact, the Dantean *Commedia* appears as rhetorical horizon as well as inexhaustible formal archive. Still, in this essay I would like to analyze another even more radical aspect – one that involves the rereading of the classics Levi accomplishes through his writing, and of Dante in particular. This rereading is consubstantial with the representational strategies that the Turinese writer offers not only of the experience of Auschwitz, but also of his entire interpretation of the Holocaust. The consequences of this aspect of his writing are reflected in the dramatic distance and negotiation between the Primo Levi represented in his books and the real person.

The occasion narrated in “Il canto di Ulisse” proves to be extremely significant in this regard. As Zaia Alexander noted in her essay on Levi’s relationship with translation, the true lacuna in the text is not the verses from Dante, but his translations in French for the benefit of his companion (Alexander 164). Yet, the course of this discussion radically changes when we learn that Jean Samuel, called Pikolo in *Se questo è un uomo*, also miraculously survived

Auschwitz. In addition, Samuel recently broke a decades-long silence by publishing his memoirs (Samuel and Dreyfus 2007), a work that further illuminates the passage in question. A quasi Pirandellian circumstance: it is as if the character of a book, at a certain point, knocked on the door of its author in order to protest the conventionality of his representation, or at least his own irreducible alterity. But the paradoxical aspects of this situation did not escape Levi himself: the Turinese writer would later take up precisely this motif, making it the principal theme of one of his stories, ironically entitled “Lavoro creativo.”² Nevertheless, what is at stake here is the impossibility of superimposition, of congruence between the two figures, which illuminates not only a profound existential divide, but singles out, at a deeper level, the intrinsic literariness of *Se questo è un uomo*, unveiling the internal rhetoric of a text that Levi conceived of as “documenti per uno studio pacato di alcuni aspetti dell’animo umano” (Levi 9).

Returning to *Il m’appelait Pikolo: un compagno de Primo Levi racconta*, already in the title Jean Samuel relates his memoirs and his experience in Auschwitz openly connecting them with the relationship of deep friendship that bound him to Levi for the rest of his life. For this reason Samuel’s memoirs show traces of and complement, as in a response, those of his friend, which had been already codified and hypostatized in a series of texts. It appears decisive, then, that his memories diverge from those of the Turinese writer precisely on the essential point of the occasion narrated in “Il canto di Ulisse.” The episode’s pathos stems largely from Levi’s understanding of the virtues he saw in the Dantean character as he remembered it. Secular qualities, like courage and the generous will for individual affirmation, which had been completely extinguished in the *Häftlinge*, the prisoners of the Nazi Lager.³ Levi lingers in particular on a fundamental point of the Dantean text: “Ma misi me per l’alto mare aperto” (Levi 108). He adds: “è molto più forte e più audace, è un vincolo infranto, è scagliare se stessi al di là di una barriera, noi conosciamo bene questo impulso. L’alto mare aperto: Pikolo ha viaggiato per mare e sa cosa vuol dire” (Levi 109). The passage, crucial for the Dantean exegesis, is also essential to understand both Levi’s book as well as the psychological and

existential condition experienced by the prisoner of the Lager. Yet Samuel, in his memoirs, reports of having seen the sea only after the war; Levi's clarification is therefore an apparent inexactitude. Elaborating on it, Samuel concludes:

Ancora oggi m'interrogo su questo mistero della memoria: entrambi abbiamo avuto la sensazione di un incontro cruciale, indimenticabile, eppure quel ricordo non si fondava sugli stessi gesti, sulle stesse parole, sulle stesse emozioni. (Samuel and Dreyfus 30)

The pathos of the entire passage appears to be based on an illusion of reciprocity, on an illusory ethos. Accordingly, Robert Gordon suggests that the true hero of this episode is neither Levi nor Ulysses, but rather Pikolo (Gordon 70). However, with more careful examination, one realizes that the fictional reciprocity is rhetorically aimed at the real and singular reciprocity of understanding the text asks for: that with the reader. The passage has in fact no real mimetic intention, as there is no verbal exchange between the two characters. Yet for Levi the tools for the representation of the existential and psychological complexity of humans within the concentration camp are the recollection of the forms of literary culture. The Levian Ulysses is not only different from the Dantean Ulysses, he is the upside down account of the condition of humans within that enormous biological and social experiment created in Auschwitz. By rewriting the Dantean episode and overturning its meaning through its own verses, Levi operates a subtle but irreversible semantic fluctuation. By the same token, he carries out what I contend is instead his most convincing and never abandoned answer to the epistemological and literary problem of representing the Shoah. Levi chooses to narrate Auschwitz through the languages and formal imagery that are typical of the foundations of Western culture, appropriating and reversing their discursive practices and therefore entirely changing their meaning. Beginning precisely with the literary canon.

In Italy, Dante *is* the center of the canon. It is not by chance, then, that Levi chooses to (re)use the formal structures of the *Commedia*, and in particular of *Inferno*, in order to turn their

meaning upside down, to delineate a historically real territory that, as he himself states, is “al di qua del bene e del male.” A territory that does not presuppose any of the ethical and epistemological categories on which Western culture is based and grounds its self-representation, one that breaks up their heuristic validity from within

Right from the first studies on Levi’s prose and language the references to Dante were clearly defined and put in relation to the structure of his texts, both in Italy (Tesio 1991; Mengaldo 1997) and abroad. In a 1986 essay Lynn Gunzberg noted that in *Se questo è un uomo* “the geometry of the Inferno and Dante’s technique of casting into relief some sinners... afforded Levi a structural framework,” and added that “his assimilation of Dante’s text informed his perception of reality by providing him with a conceptual grid” (Gunzberg 13). These observations are easily verifiable, but they do not tell us much today about the reason why the Dantean reference is so relevant and functional to the representation of the concentration camp. Moreover, the classical reference for testimonies of the Shoah is rather another text of the canon, the *Exodus*, and for self-evident reasons: it is the book that lays the foundations of Judaism as a religion and as an *ethnos*. And for this reason it returns as a point of reference in “In viaggio,” the first chapter of Levi’s memoirs. In her analysis, Gunzberg refers to Lawrence Langer whose work, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, had opened the way to studies on the literary representations of the Holocaust. Langer had focused in particular on the appropriateness of the *Inferno* as metaphor (or framework) of the *univers concentrationnaire* and had concluded that it was not a suitable choice because of its teleological dimension, as it was part of a superior vision in which individual death and suffering have a transcendent justification, and because of its allegorical structure.⁴ The truth about death in Auschwitz is that it lacks meaning, and this meaningless defies the possibility of elaborating it as a tragedy (Langer 42). A more appropriate literary reference is to be found in the bewildering death of Josef K, as Levi himself hinted indirectly in the insightful article “Tradurre Kafka” (Levi 940-1). The risk is once again to take the Holocaust to extremes, without historicizing or contextualizing its complexity as a *European* phenomenon as well as an experience internal to

Jewish culture, and to avoid accordingly the historicization of its very representations.

Levi never concealed the fact that the Lager seemed to him first of all like a world turned upside down. One of the brief introductory texts to the chosen readings of his personal anthology, *La ricerca delle radici*, adds something revealing to this insight. Introducing a twentieth-century science fiction story after works such as *The Book of Job*, or authors such as Lucretius and Melville, Levi feels the need to halt the continuum of his prose with a significant *caesura* in order to inform the reader that “mi sto accorgendo che in queste pagine si sono accumulati molti esempi di capovolgimento” (Levi 1491). As Stefano Levi Della Torre indicated, the “overturning,” or change in perspective, and “inversion,” are constituent methods of Levi’s prose (131). In the same way, an agile “leap” of thought is the fundamental element of his poetic imagination and the vector of his reasoning. This is a constant and deep-rooted attitude, confirmed by the title of his chemistry thesis, *L’inversione di Walden* (“Walden’s Inversion”). Whether he testifies about or discusses Auschwitz or whether he talks about science fiction or the world of natural phenomena, Levi utilizes the change of point of view, overturning the levels of the current discourse, as a gnoseological as well as an ethical process. According to Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, “Levi subconsciously adapts his fascination for asymmetry into a form of optics, a way of seeing and understanding the ordinary world.” The asymmetry and the consequent “enantiomorphism” (the impossibility of making two symmetrical figures correspond according to a scheme of rotation) on the one hand, and ethical values on the other, constitute the sources of the vocabularies from which Levi draws the languages employed to narrate Auschwitz (Belpoliti and Gordon 57-60). I would add that these two vocabularies reveal also a distance and therefore a constituent irony in his cultural operation. In fact, the two vocabularies establish not only a viewpoint and a set of tools through which Levi can tentatively analyze a harrowing memory, but also form the necessary linguistic barrier, the distance between the self and the overwhelming experience.

Comparing now Langer’s theorizations on the concentration-camp discourse with Levi’s use of the formal Dantean solutions and

thinking of the *Commedia* as a rhetorical horizon for *Se questo è un uomo*, it is not difficult to recognize how Levi's discourse is actually more radical. In order to interpret the meaning and the value of the Holocaust as a deep *caesura* in history and in Western culture, the most recent historiographical theories conceive of it as a *Zivilisationsbruch*, a "break of civilization." Historian Dan Diner condensed in this term the enormous epistemological fracture that occurred in Western civilization with the Holocaust, capable of making a clean sweep of the ethical, aesthetic, and anthropological categories and foundations of the preceding culture. Since Auschwitz, that civilization is no longer capable of being meaningful when faced with the present time (Diner 2000). As Jean Améry wrote, "no bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*" (Améry 16), and Georges Bataille corroborates, "comme les Pyramides ou l'Acropole, Auschwitz est le fat, est le signe de l'homme. L'image de l'homme est inseparable, désormais, d'une chambre à gaz."⁵

Returning to Levi, inside the concentration camp Ulysses' words reveal an unbridgeable distance. They unveil the irony of the actual reality of the detainees' life, capable of breaking up their value once and for all, of making the lie literally "l'ordinatrice dell'universo," as Levi himself writes in translating Kafka (Kafka 242). If in the literary discourse and the humanistic tradition rhetoric *is* itself the form of ethics, Levi would then use the very same foundations of Western culture to denounce the catastrophe of meaning that took place in Auschwitz. The literary discourse would then be the point of departure for this infinite distance, the denunciation of a definitive break. Since the entire Western tradition found its own catharsis and negation in Auschwitz, Levi must describe its destruction starting from what is the ethical and aesthetic center of this cultural tradition: Dante. If his testimony is to be credible but at the same time also able to narrate events that call into question the epistemological statute of language and of culture itself, there remains nothing for Levi to do but rewrite this tradition, its language, and its culture. And he does so by dismissing its meaning, reversing it through an asymmetrical image that is not superimposable on the original.

According to Langer, the *Inferno* cannot function as

a metaphor for Auschwitz since it is ethically connoted by an allegorical structure that transcends it. But this is exactly one of the reasons for the efficacy of Levi's representation. It is the bitter irony of representing oneself called to articulate a past that has become opaque, that has revealed its irreducible alterity. Levi represents this process just as he is desperately seeking, in the Lager, the support and reciprocity of this past through the recollection of its most luminous representation – the verses of the Dantean Ulysses recited to Pikolo. It is furthermore the reason why Levi chooses to describe his companions through a series of encounters and “Dantean” close-ups and to draw on the lexicon of the *Commedia*: because these structures of meaning are constantly disregarded within the Lager. The systematically disappointed literary memory and horizon of expectations are the figures of the catastrophe of meaning experienced by the prisoner. Meaning has not been shattered as in the experience of the front during the First World War, but it has somehow disappeared. And as allegorically loaded each literary word is, that much greater is the enormity of the catastrophe. This gap in meaning, this discretion toward himself facing this shock is the source of Levi's best art. The same initial question on the ontological statute of humans, from which the title of his first book and the verses of the opening poem are taken, loses its *raison d'être* in the carrying out of his own testimony. And thus the question mark in the title.

The poem opening Levi's testimony, which returns in the title and in its verses to the *Shemà*, the fundamental prayer of Judaism (*Deuteronomy* 6: 4–9), points out that the reversal of perspective is only the first step of his cultural operation. Levi translates the *Shemà* as a warning to memory and as a metaphysical condemnation, but while he maintains the grand and solemn tone of prophecy, he does not refer back to any religious vow. Levi's *Shemà* is a parody of religious prayer, it finds its truth in reversing and emptying the transcendental meaning inasmuch as the name of God is never mentioned by Levi. There is a substantial difference between the simple change of perspective and the treatment of these texts. The poem illustrates how the literary reexamination is not only a rhetorical habitus, but also a precise heuristic strategy.

In order to suitably represent the “break of civilization” produced by the Holocaust, Levi must depart from emptying the meaning of its bases. Thus, the heuristic strategy adopted becomes the most significant method of representation. If the fundamental figure of his prose is the person narrated as a witness, delineating at the same time his own voice as testimony, the foundations of our culture visited by the voice of the narrator-witness are not only distorted in meaning but they acquire at times a completely new, dramatically arbitrary prophetic character. It is a strategy similar to the one proposed by Elie Wiesel: “After Auschwitz, even that which is most remote leads to Auschwitz. When I talk about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when I recall Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva, it is better to understand them in the light of Auschwitz.”⁶ Paradoxically, this conclusion betrays the traits of a real poetics, much more compelling than the statements on “scrivere chiaro” (Levi 676–82) which, after all, point more in the direction of an ethical-intellectual stance *vis-à-vis* the reader than towards a narrative strategy. In Levi’s work, style has to be judged not in terms of verisimilitude, but of ethical truth: this is why the references to Dante are at times more important than the icastic details of the atrocities he witnessed and experienced.

A recently published work by Hayden White focuses attention on this very same aspect of Levi’s writing. In particular, the author ponders on the relationship of *Se questo è un uomo* with its main literary source, Dante’s *Inferno*, raising an interesting theoretical question. According to White, the significance and the merit of a book like *Se questo è un uomo* resides in large measure in its following of the narrative structure of a poetic fiction, the *Commedia*. But in the preface to the same volume, through an apparent paradox, Levi had stated that none of the narrated events was invented. In this regard, White argues that:

Levi’s memoir is an allegory, and insofar as it is modeled on Dante’s *Commedia*, it is doubly allegorical, an allegory of allegory itself. In putting to the forefront the relation of his book to Dante’s classic text, Levi, whether he willed consciously or not, succeeds in bringing the entire edifice of Christian providentialism and myths of divine justice under question. Levi

gives us a ‘Divine Comedy’ with the *Paradiso* left out. (White 118)

Chapter “Ottobre 1944” of *Se questo è un uomo* narrates the abomination of the selection process of the detainees destined to the gas chambers. The text closes with Kuhn’s words of gratitude to God for having spared him from going to his death and with Levi’s vehement proclamation, “se fossi Dio, sputerei a terra la preghiera di Kuhn” (Levi 130). This chapter makes clear that both the metaphysics and the philosophy of Christian history as well as those of any religion or theological construction are fiercely repudiated. *Se questo è un uomo* is an act of accusation before human society as a whole, as it deliberately delegitimizes any divine court. In the formulation of this testimony, Levi provides arguments that are urged more by the necessity of reestablishing international rights, not unlike Hannah Arendt after the Eichmann trial.⁷ In so doing, he places himself on the opposing side of Elie Wiesel’s intent of reestablishing the possibility of religion. In one of his last interviews, forty years later, Levi confirmed with dramatic coherence that “c’è Auschwitz, quindi non può esserci Dio. Non trovo una soluzione al dilemma. La cerco, ma non la trovo” (Camon and Levi 72) In this respect, *Se questo è un uomo* intentionally parodies the *Commedia* and it cannot be argued, as Hayden White does in reference to Dante as model for Levi, that *Se questo è un uomo* is the allegory of an allegory. In fact, Dante has the same role in Levi’s writing that Virgil has in the *Commedia*: he is a model to emulate, but also one from which to take distance. Levi employs Dante as the horizon of his discourse in order to expose the reversal of cultural foundations perpetrated in Auschwitz. Ultimately, Levi exploits the Florentine poet as an inexhaustible reservoir of images to illustrate the unpredictable significance these foundations acquired after the Holocaust.

Yet, through his parodic rewriting of the *Commedia* in *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi is pursuing another objective: to challenge the vision of the world championed by Humanism and to question its epistemological validity. In the perspective of the young chemist Primo Levi, who chooses, for humanistic reasons, the technical-scientific culture in opposition to and as a protest against the idealistic,

rhetorical humanistic-literary culture of fascism,⁸ Auschwitz reduced to rubble not only that culture, but also the possibility of a morally humanistic scientific culture. The “biological-social” experiment of Auschwitz becomes so central in human history as to rewrite the recognizable traits of what is human, as Giorgio Agamben suggested drawing the threads of his discourse precisely from Levi.⁹ If written through the words of the great classics of Western tradition (Homer, Dante, Shakespeare), the testimony of the camps makes these very classics become prefigurations, “allegories” of the event at stake. They change into symmetrical images, though obviously not super-imposable ones since Auschwitz overthrows the ethical-metaphysical basis on which Western culture (Jewish, Christian, idealistic-positivist) was constituted. Thus Hayden White’s statement that *Se questo è un uomo* is an allegory of the *Commedia* needs to be corrected through its (enantiomorphic) reversal: *Se questo è un uomo* makes the *Commedia* an imperfect allegory of Auschwitz. Inspired by Adorno’s famous claim, Levi once declared that “dopo Auschwitz non si può fare poesia *se non* su Auschwitz.” Auschwitz becomes then an indispensable optical perspective through which to read our past and our cultural traditions.

Angelica farfalla

However, humanistic culture constituted an irreplaceable value for Levi as a reference for “rebuilding the world” after Auschwitz. As Domenico Scarpa observes, no-one of the writers in Italy after World War II on par with Levi made the classics of Italian (and other) literature(s) the tangible point of reference of his historical, ethical, and literary meditations. In the harrowing effort to find a voice capable of articulating the unprecedented, when the very event changed the statute of language,¹⁰ Levi finds his own foundation in the moral urgency of testimony on one hand, and in the voice and rhetorical and ethical authority of literature, both as an institution and as a set of discursive practices, on the other. Furthermore, once the mission of the witness was fulfilled, Levi would have to once again return to this tradition, in order to become a narrator even beyond the camp experience. Looking back

to this tradition, Levi finds out and establishes an archeology for his own narrative, a sort of compensation for his own “betrayal” with a literature not directly engaged with concentration-camp themes (allegedly, this is one of the reasons why Levi also chose to publish his first collection of fictional stories under the pseudonym “Damiano Malabaila”).

Yet his texts will not stop symbolizing the Holocaust and this retroactive motion will be present in all of Levi’s successive creative activity, well beyond *Se questo è un uomo*. In fact, many of his most successful stories and poems originate precisely from particular elements from other authors’ narrations or lines. Among his many readings, Levi selects single images that, divided from their original literary context, engender violent associations in his memory. Ultimately, he elaborates them as autonomous literary creations in his works, through a process of selection, isolation and new combination that resembles the craft of a chemist. These narratives very often illuminate a specific aspect of the complexity of the concentration-camp phenomenology. As Jonathan Usher demonstrated, Levi’s writing often departs from other people’s cues to arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions, even narrative ones (Usher 171-88). Single images or figures taken once again from the *Commedia* become complete and deeper literary creations. The examples are innumerable — from the story “Capaneo” to poems like “Schiera Bruna” or “Il superstite.”¹¹ In addition, Usher correctly points out how often the references to the *Commedia* in Levian descriptions and portraits are mediated by the visual interpretation provided by Gustave Doré (Usher 102), a fact that confirms that ethical stature and Dantean imagery are indispensable elements of the Levian discourse. Dante is obviously in good company: “Fair is foul and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air,” concludes in his ruminating the protagonist of a science fiction story, “Versamina.” The Shakespearean overturning is the emblem of the narration and his moral meditation.¹² The British scholar then comments: “Levi used his own personal canon of authors and texts to inscribe himself into the literary universe and to feed his imagination creatively. His texts are full of borrowings... sometimes ironically” (Usher 173). Intertextuality is, in other words, a key element of

Levian writing and imagery. Once he found his voice as witness through the words of Dante or the Bible, the narrator of *Se questo è un uomo* would make this rereading-rewriting the foundational moment of his prose and of his best poetry. Thus, Usher's statement is to be revisited in much more radical terms: Levi's borrowings and his quotations can be nothing *but* ironic. If the Levian narrator in all of his phenomenology must return to the position of the witness, his statements through another author's words cannot help but "indicate the fire," as Walter Benjamin would probably put it, and send us back, once again, to Auschwitz and to the "break of civilization."

The images of the classics (however at this point not even the images of his technical-scientific readings are to be excluded) serve not as trigger but as re-workings of the memory. Yet they also have a deeper function, which I will attempt to describe. Through another's voice and words, Levi expresses the unbearable burden of bearing witness as well as that of the survivor's return. Inclined towards an unattainable impartiality and endeavoring the fusion of his own personal voice with that of testimonial narration, Levi aims at hiding himself in his own writing, in his own testimony. If, on the one hand, he protests the non-congruency of his person with the public persona that he himself contributed to creating through his texts, on the other, Levi seems to want to dissolve his own weight — an explicitly existential and experiential weight — in his writing. And to do so to the point of disappearing or consuming itself in the very act of writing like the carbon atom at the end of *Il sistema periodico*, or of flying away from the page like the letters of a poem in the story "La fuggitiva" (Levi 121–25). It goes without saying that the reality of the internal tension of his texts throws a disturbing shadow on his own biography.

Moving on now from his testimonial books and themes to his fictional stories, the same tension sustains his fantastic and science fiction narration, despite the constant presence of his persona within the narration. Daniele Del Giudice called it "finzione testimoniale." It is not only a matter of personal attitude for a writer who, with self-irony, states that he does not know how to "resistere al vizio di citare" (Levi 197). Levi's literary creations can be seen as the endless writing of apocrypha. Just like in the game of mirrors of

the epigraph to *Storie naturali* (Natural Histories): the title of the book comes from Pliny the Elder but by way of a quotation from Rabelais (a sort of “master of overturnings” for Levi.) The Turinese writer then quotes Rabelais exactly where the French author affirms the truthfulness of his own fictions to the detriment of the fantastic “Naturelle Histoire” of the Latin author (Levi 399).¹³ A decidedly paradoxical introduction for a book of science fiction stories called *Storie naturali*. But the quotations and apocrypha are not only functions of the author’s irony, they have the task of reducing the responsibility for the writer’s claim through another’s voice and authority (or the supposedly impersonal voice of the scientific relationship). The effects are comical, but at times also disturbing, as the quotations re-direct our attention to “alcuni aspetti dell’animo umano,” reexamining our moral world from the perspective of the Lager. Once again, the re-working of memory calls into question the epistemological foundations of our culture.

The need to lighten the burden of one’s own experience and the desire to disappear from the story without giving up on the responsibility of bearing witness, together with the will to rework Western culture after Auschwitz through the literary tradition, find completion in arguably one of the most distressing among the *Storie naturali*, “Angelica farfalla” (Levi 434-41). Once again, with one of the most incisive images of *Purgatorio*, the story borrows both title and departing point from the *Commedia*. Faced with the sufferings of the proud in *Canto x*, Dante stops the narration and reaffirms the analogy, sustained by a textual tradition that spans from Augustine to Innocent III, between our earthly life and that of worms that are “nati a formar l’angelica farfalla, / che vola alla giustizia senza schermi” (125–26). The analogy is resolved in the truth of the soul before God’s justice to the detriment of our mortal remains, as the potential butterfly is in the caterpillar, named with a Grecism in the successive verses: “quasi antomata in difetto, / sì come vermo in cui formazion falla” (128–29).

Through this image and zoological knowledge, Levi constructs an implacable and disturbing indictment of one of the most topical aspects of the Third Reich’s arrogance. And in particular of its scientists who, like the infamous Doctor Mengele,

made use of human guinea pigs for their wretched experiments. Levi's story has the structure of a detective story: in a Germany reduced to rubble, an international team investigates what remains of the top secret experiments of Doctor Leeb, a follower of Alfred Rosenberg and a mad Nazi scientist. Doctor Leeb's madness is above all "hermeneutic." Associating the knowledge of the axolotl, a Mexican amphibian that procreates in the larval stage, to the Dantean verses, Levi draws the conclusion that human beings are also in the larval stage and that with the necessary experiments it is possible to raise them to the level of superhuman-angels. Following the notes and plans of the scientist (another example of apocrypha), the multiple artistic representations of the angel-man, "dai Sumeri a Melozzo da Forlì, da Cimabue a Rouault" (Levi 438) would be nothing other than anticipations of a truth now possible on a vast scale through the power and science of the Nazis. "If inscribed in the code of experimentation is a trying out of all possibilities with a view toward revealing the real, there is a risk that the boundary between the experimental and the monstrous will not be perceived at first sight" (Canguilhem 144). Georges Canguilhem's words, describing the newborn scientific teratology of the early nineteenth century, illustrate well the metaphysical risk and the cultural matrix of Levi's disturbing character. Without any responsibility and in full "abandonment to the vertiginous fascination of the undefined, of chaos, of the anticocosmos" (Canguilhem 138), for the good positivist scientist Doctor Leeb "anomaly appears called upon to explicate the formation of the normal" (Canguilhem 143). Levi paints the metaphysical Nazi arrogance and its ominous corollary on the perception of the human itself. But he also captures another crucial characteristic: the miserable aspect of an act that is, above all, "kitsch." The historian Modris Eksteins writes:

Nazism was an attempt to lie beautifully to the German nation and to the world. The beautiful lie is, however, also the essence of kitsch. Kitsch is a form of make-believe, a form of deception. It is an alternative to a daily reality that would otherwise be spiritual vacuum. It represents "fun" and "excitement," "energy" and "spectacle," and above all "beauty." Kitsch replaces ethics with aesthetics. Kitsch is the mask of Death. (Eksteins 304)

The distortion, the mystification of the Dantean verses on the part of Leeb is a considerable part of the Nazi kitsch, kitsch that is also part of the very substance of their moral abomination. The break with the ethics and aesthetics of the preceding culture, of which Dante's verses are a shining example, could not be more radical. And precisely the very presence of the Dantean verses is an irreducible warning of this *caesura*, a *caesura* of meaning above all. Levi's imagery and his literary vocabulary are once again the form of his testimony even in his fictional works.

I must return to the narrative development of this theme for further substantiation. Needless to say, the guinea pigs of Doctor Leeb's experiment are Jewish prisoners. Levi does not directly describe their metamorphosis but delegates its telling to incidental third-party witnesses, like the German girl who offers to speak at the end of the story. Alternatively, Levi recounts through the material evidence of the "report," exposing what remains of these poor creatures after their final ruin when, following the last conflict, the German inhabitants of the city break into the building where they are chained up to eat them. The proof of their existence is entirely in their corporeal, creatural remains, here also in open dissonance with the principal meaning of the Dantean verses. Their remains and their memory, expressed in the girl's words, characterize them as monsters, as unformed beings, present to the extreme in the language of, once again, *Se questo è un uomo*. But the monsters produced by the Nazi abomination, to which it no longer makes sense to address questions regarding human belonging and toward which every known normativeness becomes useless, keep their creatural order through their corporeal traces:

Per terra era uno strato di stracci immondi, cartaccia, ossa, penne, bucce di frutta; grosse macchie rossobrune... In un angolo, un ponticello di materia indefinibile, bianca e grigia, secca: odorava di ammoniaca e di uova guaste e pullulava di vermi. (Levi 434-45)

The distance from the Dantean “original” is telling: Levi’s description is entirely directed toward the corporeal level, towards sensible characteristics. There is no rhetoric of monstrosity, which is the perversion of the physical laws of nature, but of the shapeless, or the residual scrap of biology itself. The Nazi experiment made its angels incapable of flight, but not even incredibly heavy; it gave them a weight that is beyond the biological substance. These creatures are chained to the earth by the very infection that created them, and created them imperfect: “Sembrava anche che si sforzassero di prendere il volo, ma con quelle ali...” the girl remembers (Levi 440). It is as if Nazi arrogance made the evil it produced fall back onto its very victims, and the burden of this evil made them unable to fly. This is completely in accordance with what Levi would assert decades later in the chapter “La zona grigia” of *I sommersi e i salvati*. Once again the Dantean image has been overturned: the caterpillar, the image of a slow and awkward animal, unbalanced in its movements and in its existence, is less burdened to earth by weight than the Nazi “angelic butterfly” is burdened by the infection of evil. Furthermore, and here the separation between original and remake could not be clearer, the image of the butterfly is linked in Dante only to the soul, to the spirit, according to the principles of medieval imagery. In Levi instead, the image and its reference are purely corporeal. The flight of these creatures in the end is not towards God, the guarantor of a higher justice, but is an escape from humankind, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. In the appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*, published in 1976, Levi indeed deliberately describes the Nazis, in Darwinian terms, as counter-humans: “Sono [*le loro*] parole ed opere non umane, anzi, contro-umane, senza precedenti storici, a stento paragonabili alle vicende più crudeli della lotta biologica per l’esistenza” (Levi 198).

Nothing remains of the lightness of the Dantean image in the Levian transfiguration. If in Dante the soul removes the corporeal defect by purifying itself and flying towards God, the monsters created by Nazism exist as a residual biological material that does not follow any normativeness, any articulation of meaning, meaningful only *because* of their weight. “Angelica farfalla” is not only an admonition of the abuses of a science disconnected from ethical

behavior or an accusation leveled against an inhuman science, it is primarily the story of the impossibility of lightness. It is the story of the impossibility of lightness after Auschwitz.

Weightless flight

On May 6, 1948 Italo Calvino, who had understood before many others the depth of Levi's work, published a laudatory review of *Se questo è un uomo* in the newspaper *L'Unità*. The first critic to go beyond the unquestionable historical and moral value of Levi's testimony, Calvino called attention to his literary qualities (Ferrero 31). The review engendered what was to become a most dynamic literary friendship, based on the recognized philosophical and literary commonalities and on a shared understanding of the broader relationship between literature and culture, especially scientific culture.

In attempting "una definizione complessiva del mio lavoro" in *Lezioni americane*, Calvino maintains that "la mia operazione è stata, il più delle volte, una sottrazione di peso" (Calvino 7). The writer elaborates his thoughts on "lightness" in reference to writing through an agile *entrelacement* of literary examples and successive approximations, beginning with the myth of Perseus to conclude with Kafka. Towards the end of the essay, however, he realizes that he has left unresolved the aspect initially described as the most problematic. "Resta ancora un filo," Calvino writes, "quello che avevo cominciato a svolgere all'inizio: la letteratura come funzione esistenziale, la ricerca della leggerezza come reazione al peso del vivere" (Calvino 33). These words are decisive for my analysis, as they introduce a particular ethical aspect in the broader problem of writing, one that is never completely resolved, certainly not in Levi's work.

Despite the diversity of their respective biographies and intellectual itineraries, Levi and Calvino were both shaped as intellectuals by the ordeal of the war and the experience in the Resistance. These events represented for the two young writers a profound historical disruption as well as a personal breakthrough. Without forcing their irreducible peculiarities, their respective

works were conceived as active interventions in the world they were living in. Besides being analytical elaborations of their personal experiences and, in the case of Levi, of the existential shattering of the Holocaust, Levi's and Calvino's literary and intellectual activity confirm a close engagement with their historical reality. Undeniably, their intellectual agenda carried out the search for new possibilities of active engagement with their historical reality *through writing*. In the first of his *Lezioni Americane*, Calvino perceives one of these possibilities in the idea and the practice of "lightness." He drives this search of lightness starting from a position of stall, of opacity, of existential and historical heaviness capable of "petrifying" the world itself:

In certi momenti mi sembrava che il mondo stesse diventando tutto di pietra... Era come se nessuno potesse sfuggire allo sguardo inesorabile della Medusa. L'unico eroe capace di tagliare la testa della Medusa è Perseo, che vola coi sandali alati, Perseo che non volge il suo sguardo sul volto della Gorgone ma solo sulla sua immagine riflessa nello scudo di bronzo. Ecco che Perseo mi viene in soccorso anche in questo momento, mentre mi sentivo già catturare dalla morsa di pietra, come mi succede ogni volta che tento una rievocazione storico-autobiografica. (Calvino 8)

To avoid turning to stone and to sustain the weight of history through writing, Calvino cannot respond if not by using the allegory, directing, like Perseus, "il suo sguardo su ciò che può rivelarglisi solo in una visione indiretta, in un'immagine catturata in uno specchio" (Calvino 8). In an incredibly dense passage, Levi writes:

Noi sopravvissuti siamo una minoranza anomala oltre che esigua. Siamo quelli che per loro prevaricazione o abilità o fortuna, non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato, o è tornato muto... Noi toccati dalla sorte abbiamo cercato, con maggiore o minore sapienza, di raccontare non solo il nostro destino, ma anche quello degli altri, dei "sommersi" appunto; ma è stato un discorso "per conto terzi," il racconto di

cose viste da vicino, non sperimentate in proprio. (Levi 1055-56)

It is clear that in Calvino and Levi the allegory refers back to two different situations, conditions, and meanings. However, it does not seem imprudent to read Calvino's proposal of a literary legacy that emerges from the myth as an ethical attitude that runs parallel to Levi's concrete praxis of writing and bearing witness. Looking in the mirror of literature (and in the languages of ethics and the sciences), Levi indirectly remembers and describes the Gorgon, sketching her through approximations, *lacunae*, as well as by overturning and rereading the experiences of others. Even the ordeals of those who confronted the Gorgon's gaze and, turned to stone, could not come back to tell their story, "come nessuno è mai tornato a raccontare la propria morte" (Levi 1055-56). Presumably, complete testimony is to be sought only in the "mass-klo, matisklo" of Hurbinek, the three-year-old boy born in Auschwitz, and a fundamental figure of *La tregua*, who dies before learning any language. But if complete testimony is in the scrap that precedes every linguistic, ethical, and human articulation, in a space devoid of any normativeness, it is also manifest in the "break of civilization" and in the "Muslim" that is its emblem. In order to attempt a "rievocazione storico-autobiografica," while avoiding Medusa's gaze and turning to stone, Levi can do nothing else but to become Perseus. The solution adopted by other great writers of the Shoah was obviously different: it does not seem coincidental at this point that "the world of stone" was the image used by a radically different, but similarly effective witness like Tadeusz Borowski to refer to and to explain Auschwitz (Borowski 177). In his first *Lezione* Calvino clarifies that "il rapporto tra Perseo e la Gorgone è complesso: non finisce con la decapitazione del mostro" (Calvino 9).

It would be tempting to pursue the analogy between Perseus, who keeps the head of the monster hidden and exposes it only to enemies "[che] merita[no] il castigo di diventare la statua di se stesso," and Levi, who shows his tattooed arm to his German chemist colleagues at the end of the work meetings in the postwar period. What is however of most import to this analysis is pursuing,

following the possibilities of “scrittura storico-autobiografica” that Calvino recognizes in the myth, the potential similarity of the solutions adopted by Levi in narrating the Shoah. This is not a reductive overlapping of Calvino’s and Levi’s authorial persona, but rather a probing of their philosophical underpinnings for a possible reciprocal illumination of their individual writing practices. As a matter of fact, in his *Lezione* Calvino does not elaborate his point of departure, “la letteratura come funzione esistenziale, la ricerca della leggerezza come reazione al peso di vivere” (Calvino 33), on the theoretical level, but rather leaves it suspended, ending with an emblematic narrator, the same with whom Levi concluded, or nearly, his fictional writing: Franz Kafka.

It is not by chance that Levi translated Kafka and did not *rewrite* the author from Prague in his own stories. He translated Kafka with an ambivalent attitude of attraction and repulsion that he professed honestly in his journalistic writings (Levi 939-41). And it is not surprising that Levi characterizes the unhealthy divergence between himself and the writer from Prague through metaphors that refer to the contact with matter. In the essay “Tradurre Kafka,” Levi describes the “allucinazioni” of the writer from Prague as drawing, unfiltered, from “falde incredibilmente profonde” that the reader feels “pullulare di germi e spore” (Levi 940). The reference in this case is not to the unconscious (even if Levi knows perfectly well that this is a metaphorical field compatible with psychoanalysis and that the reader would recognize it as such), but to hydromechanics. In fact, according to Levi, his own writing works as a “pompa-filtro, che aspira acqua torbida e la espelle decantata: magari sterile” (Levi 940). For Primo Levi the chemist, Kafka embodies Hyle, Dante’s dark forest, opacity, and performs something that is impossible for himself: a possible first-person narrator of the monsters created by Doctor Leeb. In Kafka Levi discovers not only the limits of appropriating the voice of another through writing, but also the limits of reducing one’s own existential burden through the authorial discourse of literature. Then it is not surprising that Levi describes, in his relationship with Kafka, the antithesis of his usual attitude, which is the antithesis of Perseus’ strategy. “Kafka comprende il mondo,” Levi maintains, “con una chiaroveggenza che stupisce,

e che ferisce come una luce troppo intensa: spesso si è tentati di interporre uno schermo, di mettersi al riparo; altre volte si cede alla tentazione di fissarlo, e allora si rimane abbagliati” (Levi 940).

I described Levi’s need to hide behind the words of others not just as a parodic mask but also as a strategy aimed at turning upside down the cultural roots of the words themselves. The existential thread, the one Calvino himself left deliberately hanging, confusing its possible outcomes with the ambiguous allusions to Kafka, remains open. And what if hiding behind the words of others were not just a strategy against “turning to stone” but further concealed Levi’s attempt at self-erasure? As if he wanted to obliterate his own body and its very weight to become pure voice and, without the weightiness of the world, be free to lift himself in flight?

Levi seems to vacillate continuously on this point. As he feels that the most conspicuous attribute of his own body is no longer his weight but his natural history: the tattoo inflicted upon him in Auschwitz. Subtracting weight to his own body through flight means canceling out the indelible signs (not only his tattoo) of an experience that makes him as heavy as stone. The metaphor of flight would go well beyond, then, the Leopardian “invidia degli uccelli,” as it would mean disconnecting oneself from the opaque materiality, from the burden of the body-memory.

In his little-known, but at this point surprisingly significant article published in *La Stampa* on December 24 1985, Levi explains this connection. The opportunity is provided by the televised images of astronauts, but his reflection in the text takes another course. It is not by chance that the title of the article is “L’uomo che vola.”

Purtroppo non ho più l’età per partecipare, ma l’esperienza che proverei più volentieri sarebbe quella di trovarmi, anche solo per qualche minuto, sciolto dal peso del mio corpo. Non che questo sia eccessivo (oscilla entro un intervallo più che ragionevole), tuttavia provo un’invidia intensa per gli astronauti senza peso che per avarissimi istanti ci è concesso di vedere sui teleschermi. (Levi 974-76)

“L’uomo che vola” develops the theme of *abaria*, the experience of corporeal weightlessness, by unfolding its possible consequences but also to affirm that such a decidedly “non terrestre” experience is strangely familiar to us as it has been probably lived through in “un sogno giovanile” (Levi 975); and maybe it was with the help of a youthful dream, Levi continues, that Dante could imagine his flight on the back of Geryon in Canto xvii of *Inferno*. In it, “inconsapevolmente, ha riprodotto... l’universale sogno del volo senza peso, a cui gli psicanalisti attribuiscono significati problematici e inveroscondi” (Levi 975). In describing the plausibility of the Dantean reconstruction of Geryon’s flight, Levi depicts the character as:

immaginario e insieme splendidamente reale... Dante, all’inizio, se ne dichiara spaventato, ma poi quella magica discesa su Malebolge sequestra tutta l’attenzione del poeta-scienziato, paradossalmente intento allo studio naturalistico della sua creatura fittizia. (Levi 975-76)

It is difficult to deny the impression that this passage is not about Dante but about Levi himself. Or, better, it is a passage where Levi describes Dante *as a model* for his own writing strategies (or the strategies of *his* imagination). Once again the Turinese writer uses the classical literary archive (but also his scientific-technical knowledge), as a diaphragm to relate his experience, his painfully recurring dream. Always extremely controlled in his choice of vocabulary and of examples for his reasoning, Levi nevertheless opens a breach. He allows a spore to germinate, referring back to a dimension that the filtering pump of his writing did not filter out. Right at the moment of introducing Dante, Levi describes *abaria* as “*persistentemente sognata*,”¹⁴ an adverb expressing excess, decidedly unjustified, both in the context of his reasoning and in that of a supposed “universal dream,” in which Dante serves as illustrious spokesperson. Here Levi seems to project his personal malaise on a universal level. Honest even in this moment, Levi speaks ironically about possible psychoanalytic interpretations, as he is fully aware of how any reference to an irrational elsewhere

is yet another attempt at covering over. Being “stanco di finzioni,” like the protagonist of one of his stories, Levi could still find, in the metaphor and the dream of flight, the sublimation of his own self-erasure.¹⁵ Of his attempt to become pure voice, an almost “aerial” point of view in his writing.

In fact, the “aerial” perspective, wide enough to embrace the entire reality of the camp, is also central to his last work, *I sommersi e i salvati*. Returning after forty years to the powerful material of *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi adopts this new perspective in the attempt to understand and to re-read, from a more objective distance, the experiences and memories of the Lager. It is a matter of finding an observatory from which to distinguish “un orizzonte più esteso” (Levi 1002), as the internal gaze, immediate and close, does not allow one to understand the complexity of the phenomenon. Does the right distance from which we can observe and understand Auschwitz exist? Levi is aware of the methodological contradiction of his operation: the further away the perspective, the more one’s gaze becomes distorted, altered. As in modern science, the subject who arranges and carries out the experiment becomes part of that very same experiment. In order to complete his testimony, or at least not to interrupt the conversation on the camps, Levi is forced to relinquish *abarìa*, a search for weightlessness that ultimately coincides with the self-erasure of his own body. The fictions on which his own voice is built do not hold up, to the detriment of the truth of his own assertions. As in the complex myth narrated by Calvino, Perseus cannot be light if not while sustaining the weight of the Gorgon. The dream of flight and of the loss of weight find, then, its constituent limit and its counterpart in the statute of the witness on the literary, historical, and ontological level. It finds them in the voice that says “I” in order to reiterate the story inscribed on the body, in the biological remains that precede the articulation of thought and language and that testify to every language through its very own opacity.

In a 1977 article entitled “I nostri sogni,” quoting Monsignor Della Casa, Levi observes that “i nostri sogni possono essere gravidi di significato, o almeno di emozione, per noi, ma sono sempre puri e noiosi non-sensi per il nostro interlocutore. Perciò chi li ‘recita’ è

molesto all'interlocutore" (Levi 931). Despite this statement, dreams return *persistently* in Levi's work and play a significant role, but for what they conceal rather than for what they reveal. As if scorning the idea of becoming a nuisance to his readers, Levi's dreams refract the narrative, projecting his unresolved imagination on the convex and deforming surface of his writing, like the witches represented of Goya's *Los Caprichos*, who repeat "if day breaks, let us leave" (Canguilhem 141). Modesty, undeniably an ethical quality of Levi's writing, helped him find his voice in his testimony, but also to hide it behind that of others, a strategy that strengthened his role of narrator-witness. It is in the experience of being turned upside down that the constituent form and creative function of Levian knowledge and irony join together to make sense of that absurd upside down world that is Auschwitz. An experience that Levi was able to communicate by overturning the epistemological foundations of the languages and images that constituted his main cultural references, the natural sciences and the Western literary tradition.

Levi's work is not a parody of the knowledge that imagined and then produced Auschwitz. It is rather the attempt to create a space for rebuilding knowledge after the *Zivilisationsbruch*, the "break of civilization." Such a space can come to being only if preceded by the historical validation of the offense, if accompanied by the stubborn persistence of memory, and if nourished by the anthropological overturning as a mode of interpretation of its constituent moments. Once again Levi's call to clarity in a literary and cultural setting is the ethical moment that demands reciprocity rather than a concrete strategy of formal representation.

The supposed clarity and order of Levi's writing, as well as of literature itself, can be considered, like Perseus' shield, a mirror from which to observe the Gorgon while resisting her petrifying gaze. Does the Gorgon herself possess a voice? Does she possess her own constitutional language? Levi's unsolvable problem is, then, that of translating for us readers, and not just for Pikolo, the Dantean Ulysses into an ontological alterity, an alterity that he himself defines as "contro-umana." Levi's strength, like Perseus', resides, as Calvino wrote, "in un rifiuto della visione diretta... ma non in un rifiuto della realtà del mondo di mostri in cui gli è toccato

di vivere, una realtà che egli porta con sé, che assume come proprio fardello” (Calvino 9).

Franco Baldasso

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ENDNOTES

¹ Quoted from Jonathan Usher (94).

² In spite of the different registers, three of Levi’s stories - “Lavoro creativo” and “Nel parco” published in *Vizio di forma* and “La ragazza del libro” in *Lilit e altri racconti*—have precisely this theme as their narrative center, probably raised privately by some of his prison companions after a first reading of *Se questo è un uomo*.

³ Despite the many interpretations of this passage, an indication toward its reading comes from Levi himself, who in an interview, amidst some hesitation, alludes to it: “il senso di Auschwitz, in quel momento – poi è una cosa non elaborata, e che non sottoscriverei; l’ho lasciata così per aria, perché non l’ho mai elaborata e neanche ne sono tanto sicuro – ma che Auschwitz fosse la punizione dei barbari, della Germania barbarica, del nazismo barbarico, contro la civiltà ebraica; cioè fosse la punizione dell’audacia, così come il naufragio di Ulisse è la punizione di un dio barbaro per l’audacia dell’uomo.” Primo Levi, “Conversazione con Daniela Amsallem,” in *Primo Levi*, ed. Marco Belpoliti, *Riga* 13 (60).

⁴ On the possibility of the *Commedia* as a literary reference for testimonies of the Shoah, Lawrence Langer comments, with particular emphasis: “A world by the withdrawal of spiritual possibility is unusual, though not unique, in the history of literature; but the demonic powers that trod this God-abandoned landscape, and the acts carried out at their behest and under their supervision, tinted everything with an unfamiliar hue of death that even Dante’s *Inferno* failed to reflect” (42).

⁵ As quoted in Enzo Traverso (211), “Like the pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is the deed, the sign of man. By now the image of man is inseparable from that of a gas chamber.” The original French was published in Georges Bataille (11: 226).

⁶ Yet, although similar in form, the two operations are almost opposite in their ends, as I will clearly point out later. For Levi the hammering “Hier ist kein warum,” repeated on and on in *Se questo è un uomo*, is the standpoint of his speculations throughout his work (Cattaruzza, Flores, Levis Sullam, Traverso 426).

⁷ However, the only true punishment that Levi thinks can be appropriate for the “specialista nella questione ebraica” tried in Jerusalem in 1960, would be that of being able to relive all the deaths, the millions of deaths that he caused, as Levi writes in a poem entitled “Ad Adolf Eichmann” (540). It is not a matter of *contrappasso*, but of another case of Levian upside down turning.

⁸ See Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico*, in *Opere*, I.

⁹ “Si tratta, piuttosto, di arretrare talmente il significato del termine ‘uomo,’ che

il senso stesso della domanda ne risulta interamente trasformato” (Agamben 52).
¹⁰ “Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo” (Levi, *Opere*, I:20).

¹¹ The story “Capaneo” is found in the collection *Lilit e altri racconti*, the poems noted here are in *Ad ora incerta*. Both volumes are now in the second volume of Levi’s *Opere*.

¹² See Nancy Harrowitz “Primo Levi’s Science as ‘Evil Nurse’” (59-73).

¹³ In this regard, see two remarkable essays: Nancy Harrowitz, “‘Mon maître, mon monstre’” (51-64) and Farneti (724-40).

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Many of Levi’s stories have a similar tone: the already mentioned “Lavoro Creativo” (“Creative Work”), as well as “Nel Parco” (“In the Park”), “Il Passa-muri” (“Through the Walls”), and “La ragazza del libro” (“The Girl in the Book”). “Lavoro Creativo” and “Nel Parco” are included in the collection *Vizio di forma*, in the first volume of *Opere*; “Il Passa-muri” and “La ragazza del libro” are included in *Lilit e altri racconti*, in the second volume of *Opere*.

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