

Attento, Pikolo, apri gli orecchi e la mente: Listening to Primo Levi's Holocaust Tales

The chapter “Il canto di Ulisse” in Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* is an intriguing episode which has received a great deal of scholarly attention. As the point in which Dante’s *Commedia* most clearly enters his memoir, this intertext has been analyzed as a reflection of the author’s overall style and message.¹ In addition, Jean Samuel, the *Pikolo*, has been interpreted as an Auschwitz Virgil, guiding Levi through a 20th Century hell.² What has been given less attention is Jean’s role as *listener* to Levi’s translation of Dante, and therefore to the message that Levi attempts to convey to readers about their role in “listening” to the text. Jean can be read as an “ideal listener,” that is an image of Levi’s expectations of how his readers should interpret and understand his work. Comparing Levi’s description to Jean Samuel’s own version of this episode, we will attempt to uncover to what extent this chapter is a literary construct and what significance it has for the memoir as a whole. Then, this paper will examine short stories from *Il sistema periodico* and *Lilit e altri racconti* in which Levi foregrounds the act of storytelling as well as sections of *La chiave a stella* to examine Levi’s depiction’s of listening (and therefore reading) behavior. The reading will uncover Levi’s manipulation of the reader to instruct readers on how they are *supposed* to understand him and how they are supposed to encourage his narrative while forgiving his *lacunae*.

A summary of the action in “Il canto di Ulisse” might at first not strike anyone as worth more than a passing comment. Levi is invited to fetch the lunch soup with Jean Samuel, a French prisoner who has the role of *Pikolo* or special “pet” of the Kapo. Jean and Levi set out across the camp, allowing Levi to avoid work, chat with a fellow inmate, and feel human for a short time. During the course of their walk, Jean announces his desire to learn Italian, and Levi agrees to teach him. Levi’s choice of instructional material launches this episode into something meaningful and symbolic: he chooses to recite a section of Dante’s *Inferno*. It is an odd selection because Jean is initially attracted by a few mundane words he overhears Levi and another Italian utter: “Zup-pa, cam-po, ac-qua” (100). Simple

words necessary for daily survival in the camp appear to be Jean's desired material. Instead, Levi begins the story of Ulysses as told by Dante, which he in turn attempts to translate into French.

Passages like the Ulysses episode raise Levi's memoir beyond a simple account of what happened during the Holocaust to the level of literature. The author uses an event that, in the hands of other witness-writers, may be an unforgettable interlude (and we shall see that Levi's companion did not find it as memorable as he did) to create a remarkable lesson, not on Italian, but on the human condition, on storytelling and literature, on memory and how stories live within their listeners. The insertion of "*literariness*" is not unique in the world of Holocaust memoirs,³ but it does point to an intention of accomplishing something more than what simple "witnessing" implies. That is, Levi wants to do more than inform readers of the litany of horror and violence he endured, and it is that "something more" that attracts literary scholars to examine the Ulysses chapter to determine what message Levi attempts to convey. Clearly as intertext, it is a comment on communication and language. In this vein, Valerio Ferme notices the central placement of "Il canto di Ulisse" and sees the episode as an "epiphanic moment" (62). Ferme locates passages in *Se questo è un uomo* that depict the author's attempt to regain his sense of being human. The chapter of Dante signals for him the apogee of Levi's quest to conquer the language of Auschwitz: "The subversive transformation of the torturers' signifying system provides Levi with the means both to undermine the semiotics of the Lager and re-appropriate his own linguistic system; but it also exposes Levi to further considerations related to his moral values as a man" (64).

Ferme's point is all the more interesting if we consider that we really do not know if the episode took place as Levi recounts it. That Levi and Jean Samuel fetched soup one day in Auschwitz is not in dispute, but whether Levi recited Dante in the way he tells it is what is uncertain. It is interesting to note that this chapter was not included in the first edition of *Se questo è un uomo* published in 1947 by De Silva. As Nicholas Patruno noted, it only appeared in the first Einaudi edition in 1958 (8). Moreover, Jean Samuel does not have a clear memory of the event. When asked in an interview

with Susan Tarrow if his memories corresponded to Levi's, Jean Samuel responded: "To be honest, the half-hour of the air raid was a unique memory for me, while for Primo it was the Ulysses canto!" He goes on to say "But I did share with him a kind of intellectual exaltation, that has formed a part of our bond ever since. We tried to engage in these conversations to forget our ever-present hunger, the proximity of death, the daily disappearance of our comrades" (104). In that same interview, Jean remembers that Levi had discussed writing a book on the carbon molecule - the story that concludes *Il sistema periodico*. With the Dante-Ulysses episode Levi expresses on a symbolic level an intellectual relationship with Jean, one that made Levi feel human.

The truth of the episode or, conversely, the revelation of its invention as a literary construct may not seem like an important determination. However, in the area of Holocaust literature, fiction has posed an aesthetic-ethical problem. Holocaust memoirs have been seen as a literature "witnessing" and bound to a writing that depicts events with factual accuracy in unadorned prose. James Young describes the situation before he goes on to defend the use of figurative language:

Unlike other historically based literature, however, the writing from and about the Holocaust has not been called upon merely to represent or stand for the epoch whence it has derived, which would be to sustain the figurative (i.e. metonymical) character of its 'literary documentation.' But rather, writers and readers of Holocaust narrative have long insisted that it literally deliver documentary evidence of specific events, that it come not to stand for the destruction, or merely point toward it, but that it be received as testimonial proof of the events it embodies. (10)

Similarly, Sara Horowitz has written about the fear of fiction and imaginary language as one of displacing truth and:

The commingling of fact with fiction, reality with artifice, memory with imagination, seemingly undermines the pursuit of truth, so vital to witnessing: of knowing *what* happened

in that night world, *to whom, by whom, and how*. Between verisimilitude and veracity yawns a wide gulf... Unlike a bare chronology, which aspires to the facts as such, the literary text, in avowing its own artifice, rhetoricity, and contingent symbol-making – threatens to shift and ultimately destroy the grounds by which one measures one set of truth claims or one historical interpretation against another. (20)

Fortunately, thanks in part to the work of Young, Horowitz and others, the field of Holocaust literature has found a language to discuss imaginative works and understand what they bring to the comprehension of the event we call Shoah. In short, the literariness and the symbolic nature of the episode do not undermine the essential truth of Levi's memoir. Instead, the chapter expresses an internal truth about the author's experience. As Young has stated in discussing imaginative memoirs: "...through the narrative interplay of history and imagination, insights and understanding into events are both generated and disclosed" (45). Ultimately, for Levi's memoir, determining this specific fact changes nothing of the *information* he wishes to impart about his deportation to Auschwitz and the subsequent experience of atrocity. It also changes nothing of the *information* contained in other writings in which he discussed his life post-Auschwitz. In other words, even if this episode is not factually accurate, it does not undermine an overarching truth of what he experienced in the Lager. The invention of violent acts (witnessed or endured) could be seen as crossing an ethical line. If authors invented atrocity to exaggerate what had occurred during the Holocaust, there would be pause to consider the literary ramifications. However, an episode like the Ulysses interlude points to an inner truth, and a symbolic rendering of an emotional state can be accomplished in imaginative ways without disturbing the facts of the event.

The change that occurs when we know the factual status of the passage is our understanding of whether Levi *invented* it to serve as a *mise-en-abyme* of the whole memoir as opposed to a true episode that was *raised to a symbolic level* to serve as *mise-en-abyme*. The difference is very small, and ultimately it does not much change the

literariness of the passage if it is pure invention or lived-experience-turned-symbol. If Levi invented his recitation of Dante, it shows his gift at creating fiction that expresses an intuition and a relationship. If he really experienced this dialogue with Jean, it shows his gift as a writer for grasping an important moment in his life and translating it into narration that communicates effectively with readers.

In any case, it is safe to assume that much of the passage *is*, in fact, literary invention because Levi imparts in this chapter more purported inner thoughts than he seems likely to be able to remember. The reconstruction of inner dialogue, comments on meaning, specific mental asides all point to invention at some level. Such interference can be seen at the moment where Dante enters the text, as we witness temporal slips: post-war author and in-the-moment narrator move back and forth in the narration. At times, Levi reports something that happens during the walk or something he appears to be thinking at the time of the walk. Other times, he appears to be reflecting from a distance, as when he says, “Chissà come e perché mi è venuto in mente” (100). This utterance seems to be the thought of an author at the time of writing, wondering at the choices of a former self. Immediately, he shifts back into the moment of narration, saying: “ma non abbiamo tempo di scegliere, quest’ora già non è più un’ora” (100-1). While the time shift to the present creates the illusion of immediacy, it still appears to be the thought of an author reflecting on the event. Would the Levi at Auschwitz really take the time to say there was no time and that the hour is already diminished?

Unlike other chapters of the memoir, “Il canto di Ulisse” is not particularly informative about life in Auschwitz. It represents one of the moments of reprieve in the horrors of the camp, and as Risa Sodi has pointed out, there is a parallel between Dante’s Ulysses and Levi, both of whom become absorbed in their tale and forget the torments of their current situations. And like Dante’s Ulysses, Levi will return to the harsh reality after experiencing the sweetness of recalling his past life (66-7).⁴ By its very lack of new details about the camp and its literary and intertextual quality, the chapter is really a comment about the nature of narrating and listening. The section accomplishes a narrative act that, in Ross Chambers’ words, allows

Se questo è un uomo to “theorize itself as narrative act” and gives the memoir the “power to control its own impact through the act of situational self-definition” (24). Primarily, Chambers describes fiction in the context of what he says is an alienated literature that can no longer claim an authority to communicate information so it needs to seduce the reader by claiming its status as “art” (11-12). The *mise-en-abyme*, which can be defined briefly as “narrational embedding,” that is narrational act within narrational act (33), is for Chambers a means of claiming that status: “In short, the self-reflexivity of literary texts is part of an apparatus whereby they can ensure that they are read as literary and thus make their claim to an interpretative history” (25). Later Chambers describes the *mise-en-abyme* as a way for a work to state a philosophy of literature to prescribe an understanding of itself: “In the final analysis, each text that designates itself as ‘art’ or as ‘fiction’ subscribes to a conception of the artistic or the fictional that is valid for that text alone; in other words, it projects a reading situation that is uniquely the right one for that particular piece of discourse” (26-7).

Chambers focuses on fiction, and he lays bare the mechanisms of the seduction of literature, but his theories hold for memoirs as well since memoirs are not renderings of reality but textual mediations of lived experience. Holocaust works, in particular, are alienated texts. Although survivor-authors attempt to convey true information and can claim authority of having “been there” and seen the events recounted in their testimony, the content of their accounts creates problems of transmission and understanding. First, we might consider that readers would want to reject the information that survivors are keen to pass on or perhaps even turn away from the telling. Readers of Holocaust material are rarely motivated by pleasure, undoubtedly perceiving such reading as a duty and considering the information important. Furthermore, it has often been stated that the events of the Holocaust are unfathomable. Those of us reading were not there and cannot truly grasp what survivors endured. Robert Eaglestone posits a lack of shared life experiences common to the author and reader, which he sees as “a break between language and reference itself” (17). Ultimately, Eaglestone rejects the idea that we can identify with authors of Holocaust works because identification “often leads

to the ‘consumption’ and reduction of otherness, the assimilation of others’ experience into one’s own framework” (6). Due to a fear of reader misunderstanding, authors of Holocaust memoirs may feel an even stronger need to control the mechanisms of interpreting their work.

The *mise-en-abyme* of “Il canto di Ulisse” is a very rich intertext, which explains why so many scholars have examined it. It portrays Levi as a storyteller, it partly answers the question posed by the title of the work about what defines man, and it allows the reader to perceive Levi’s ideal reader. Jean, in the listening role, represents any reader, and Levi is not only the protagonist and narrator, but he is also writer Levi, manipulating his audience. A clear one-to-one relationship between the characters in Dante’s Ulysses episode and those in Levi’s “Il canto di Ulisse” does not, however, work. In Dante, there are three, or perhaps four, identifiable slots: Virgil, Ulysses and Dante, who can further be distinguished as Dante-pilgrim and Dante-poet. In Levi’s depiction, there are only two, and trying to assign roles becomes complicated. Jean could be Virgil, since he is Levi’s guide during their walk. He is the one who knows the way and how quickly they should walk at various points. However, he is at times, Dante-pilgrim, as he listens to Levi’s narration. Levi, too, can be seen as Dante-pilgrim since he follows Jean, but he is also Dante-poet and Ulysses. In short, one should refrain from seeing too close of an allegory between these characters.

In Levi’s *mise-en-abyme* depicting an ideal reader, we can detect a literary manipulation that begins with the details Levi chooses to reveal about Jean. First, he is young: the Pikolo was the youngest of a work group, and Jean is said to be twenty-four and a student. Second, although he is a member of the privileged group, he is “molto benvenuto” among the men (99), he did not abuse his position, and he could be very helpful (100). So, as readers set out on the soup-fetching journey with Primo, they are well-disposed to Jean. As the description moves on, Levi provides other descriptions of Jean: “Se Jean è intelligente, capirà” and “Jean è attentissimo” (101). Jean is also empathetic and understands the narrator’s needs without being told: “Pikolo mi prega di ripetere. Come è buono Pikolo, si è accorto che mi sta facendo del bene” (102). Importantly,

Jean is forgiving of *lacunae*, wanting to hear whatever the narrator can tell him without concern for the presence of every detail. When Levi forgets several lines, Jean prompts him: “-Ça ne fait rien, vas-y tout de même”⁵ (102). Placed in comparison to the preface of *Se questo è un uomo*, we can observe a parallel. From the opening of his memoir, Levi directly asks his readers to be forgiving and understand his underlying motives: “Mi rendo conto e chiedo venia dei difetti strutturali del libro” (9). He talks about the “bisogno di raccontare agli altri” and the need to write as a “liberazione interiore” (9). Jean’s character is a personification of these traits outlined in the beginning of the work and the Ulysses episode serves as a means of reiterating his request.

As Levi continues his recitation of the *canto*, he gives some commands within the narrative. They, too, are indicative of the temporal slippage, being an imperative from the future of the episode. In part, they are meant to convey the urgency of Levi’s message for Jean, his need to communicate his understanding of Dante that he found in Auschwitz. After all, at the end of his recitation, he claims that it is only in Auschwitz, trying to explain this passage to a Frenchman, that he thinks he understands Dante (103). But there is a message for the reader of *Se questo è un uomo* as well. The first command to Jean is: “Ecco, attento, Pikolo, apri gli orecchi e la mente, ho bisogno che tu capisca” (102). The next command comes in the form of the subjunctive mode: “Trattengo Pikolo, è assolutamente necessario e urgente che ascolti, che comprenda” (103). The narrator is the person who holds back (*trattenere*) the listener/reader, to focus their attention. The listener/reader’s role is to open ears and mind in order to understand. This act of listening (or reading) and understanding is necessary and urgent. Such advice applies even to readers as they read Levi’s larger narrative about Auschwitz. Jean appears to acquiesce to Levi’s commands, and in doing so conveys to the reader the *reading* behavior necessary to understand Levi’s tale.

In part, Levi also shows a failure to understand his listener/reader, but this is not something we can comprehend from the text alone. In his narration, he informs us: “L’alto mare aperto: Pikolo ha viaggiato per mare e sa cosa vuol dire” (101). However, in an

interview published in 1994, Jean laughs at this portion of the text: “And then he thought that I had travelled at sea, when in fact I had never seen the sea” (Yarrow 104). While at first this may seem a minor detail, it opens an interesting insight into writing that was mentioned above while discussing Eaglestone’s work. That is, authors assume that readers will be able to identify or understand from experience what they read. However, here, the assumption is flawed, and we can only learn that from outside information that Levi has incorrectly presumed this knowledge.

The episode “Il canto di Ulisse” also informs us that Levi might omit details that he, as author making choices, might deem superfluous. As he makes a linguistic connection in the text that helps him understand better, he says: “Ma non ne faccio parte a Jean, non sono sicuro che sia una osservazione importante. Quante altre cose ci sarebbero da dire, e il sole è già alto, mezzogiorno è vicino” (102). These words are echoed years later in an interview with Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja, where Levi explained that he omitted the events narrated in “Cerio” in *Il sistema periodico* from *Se questo è un uomo* because he “felt that the note of indignation should prevail.” He considered his first work “testimony... an act of witnessing” (Belpoliti 223).

In terms of its “truth,” I think we can safely say that Levi and Jean did make the trip to fetch the luncheon soup and that Jean did request some Italian lessons. Both men remember these facts. Whether or not Levi recited Dante is an open question. If he did, I think we can fairly say that his narration of the event is a literary construct. It is there for purposes that occur at the time of writing: for Levi to let us know how he wrote and to instruct us on how we should listen. Further, I believe it contributes to a project outlined by Lina Insana in her recent book *Arduous Tasks*, in which she sees Levi as occupying the role of the translator attempting to construct a community of witnesses: “By using a literary Italian untouched by the language of atrocity as a vehicle for the Babel of the *Lager*, Levi creates the community of witnesses that the *Lager* sought to destroy.” The purpose of a “community of listeners” is important, and it is part of the goal of witnessing, to make others aware of the horror of Auschwitz. An ideal listener is a contribution to Levi’s

task, as Insana goes on to say: “Levi seeks to reverse the dystopian society of the camp to form a narrative testimonial utopia made up of those readers in the postwar situation inclined to figuratively and literally ‘gather around’ Levi’s testimonial text” (47).

For Insana, Levi is the translator of many survivor accounts. He takes their broken Italian, Yiddish, German, and other languages and translates the essence of their tales into a literary Italian. In fact, Levi did write the stories of many fellow inmates who perished in the Holocaust or who made it home. These stories can be found in *Lilít*. In stories like “Capaneo” and the eponymous “Lilít,” Levi occupies a listener position, and his writing is more or less a translation of the story he hears. Additional stories depict Levi as a listener: *Il sistema periodico* contains stories like “Arsenico” and “Uranio,” and in *La chiave a stella* Levi listens to Faussonne’s tales.⁶ Insana sees Levi and Jean creating a translation together because Jean actually helps Levi choose his words (50). The difference with these stories is that the speaker is no longer present, sometimes no longer of this world, unable to dispute Levi’s narrative decisions. The choice of “translating” stories, not choosing to convey the raw testimony of the words, also indicates that Levi is, in Chambers’ words, bidding for an interpretive history.

So what kind of listener is Levi? He is indeed attentive and, at times, he seems to listen passively. That is, during the storytelling, he focuses on the internal narration usually in direct discourse, thus lending his voice to the protagonist. He tends not to contribute to the tale unfolding. The best example of this technique is “Arsenico” in *Il sistema periodico*, a tale focused on a shoe repairman who has received a “gift” of sugar from a younger rival shoe repairman. The man has come to Levi to confirm the presence of arsenic in the sugar, and when he comes back for the lab results, he tells Levi about his philosophy of shoe repair and the arrival of the young man. The man’s words are relayed in direct discourse, and Levi’s only comments refer to the man’s dialect, where he in effect apologizes for the translation into Italian. Levi excuses *his* rendering of the man’s tale because it loses something in the translation: “La storia è questa, un po’ deperita per effetto della traduzione dal piemontese, linguaggio essenzialmente parlato, all’italiano marmoreo, buono

per le lapidi” (175). While “Arsenico” gives little information about Levi as a listener beyond giving the impression of being attentive, it does tell the reader the importance of *oral* narration in his mind and of vocabulary in retelling.

The opening story of *Lilit*, “Capaneo,” about an arrogant, insultingly vibrant, and vital fellow prisoner named Rappoport, is another example of a primarily passive Levi. Rappoport is Polish but has traveled to Italy and speaks some Italian. He contrasts sharply with the other character present, Valerio, an Italian who literally falls constantly and who is regularly befallen by trouble. The story takes place in a lull in work, during an air raid in which the three men have taken shelter. As Rappoport laughs off the whistle of a bomb, Levi is struck by an image of Capaneus, straight from Dante, and he says “Hai dei buoni nervi” (376). This prompts Rappoport to explain his philosophy of life: to enjoy life to the fullest and partake of all of the physical pleasures of the earth. Rappoport would write this in a book, if he survived. He feels he has collected enough good experiences to hold him through the harsh reality of camp life: “ho accumulato una grande quantità di bene, e tutto questo bene non è sparito ma è in me, al sicuro... Nessuno me lo può togliere” (377). His nerves of steel and arrogance are apparent as he utters the last words that Levi transcribes: “Se all’altro mondo incontrerò Hitler, gli sputerò in faccia con pieno diritto... - Cadde una bomba poco lontano, e seguì un rombo come di frana: doveva essere crollato uno dei magazzini. Rappoport dovette alzare la voce quasi in un urlo: -... perché non mi ha avuto” (378). As the story concludes, Levi tells the reader that Rappoport did not survive Auschwitz and therefore did not write his book. This story, then, is Levi’s way to fulfill Rappoport’s request to repeat his message. For that reason, it has been translated as “Rappoport’s Testament”⁷ in the collection *Moments of Reprieve*.⁸

In many instances, Levi depicts himself as a critical listener, both in the sense of being critical and in the sense of using critical thinking as he takes in a story. In that vein, he shows a difference between himself and Jean. In “Capaneo,” this critical listening takes the form of a realistic view of Rappoport (neither demonizing nor revering), and in the tale “Lilit,” it takes the form of skepticism.

Levi himself does not mention the word nor are there sections in which Levi expresses this sentiment. Instead, the reader understands from the internal narrator's story that Levi reacts in a skeptical way. Such a trait may be the element that identifies Levi as writer as well as listener. Unlike Rappoport, the story-teller of "Lilit," Tischler, is presented as a positive character who knows some Italian from opera (and who sings arias from *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore*): "Il Tischler mi piaceva perché non cedeva all'ebetudine: il suo passo era svelto, malgrado le scarpe di legno; parlava attento e preciso, ed aveva un viso alacre, ridente e triste" (386). He is also portrayed as being a storyteller of some artistry. His stories and rhymes in Yiddish have profound effects on his listeners, such that Levi claims he is sorry he could not understand them. In "Lilit," Tischler spies a woman that he calls Lilith, after the woman who according to Jewish legend preceded Eve in the creation story. Levi is unfamiliar with the legend, so Tischler proceeds to instruct him. As with "Capaneo," the tale contains little dialogue with Levi. Beyond expressing his ignorance of the legend, Levi does not convey much about his thoughts, but we know one of his reactions from a comment made by Tischler that interrupts his narrative. He asks Levi: "Perché ridi?" (388). The laughter shows Levi's skepticism. But more curious is Tischler's next comment: "Certo che non ci credo ma queste storie mi piace raccontarle, mi piaceva quanto le raccontavano a me, e mi dispiacerebbe se andassero perdute. Del resto, non ti garantisco di non averci aggiunto qualcosa anch'io: e forse tutti quelli che le raccontano ci aggiungono qualche cosa, e le storie nascono così" (388-9). So here is where an attentive listener is placed on guard: perhaps sections of the stories are invented, and even the parts that the narrator claims are true may be fabricated by someone else: the previous narrator.

Tischler represents the image of a "good" storyteller, someone with a particular knack for recitation and performance. His declaration of additions to what are supposed to be true stories may also reflect Levi's idea of what makes a good author. Elsewhere, Levi shows an interest in "poor" storytellers like Bonino, his conversation partner in "Uranio," from *Il sistema periodico*, and with these tale-tellers, he shows himself to be critical in the sense

of critiquing their methods. Technically, Levi is there on a visit to a customer to insure business with his company. Bonino reveals that he knows Levi as “quello che ha scritto un libro” (198), that is, *Se questo è un uomo*, and Bonino reveals that he too took part in the *partigiani* struggle and risked ending up like Levi, prisoner in a camp. Instead of tending to business and the stated purpose of the visit, Bonino launches into his own tales from the past, but Levi is unimpressed: “Bonino non era un buon narratore: divagava, si ripeteva, faceva digressioni, e digressioni delle digressioni. Aveva poi il curioso vizio di omettere il soggetto di alcune proposizioni, sostituendolo con il pronome personale, il che rendeva ancora più nebuloso il suo discorso” (199).

To underscore Bonino’s lack of story-telling ability, Levi chops up his direct discourse into discreet units that allow a reader to understand the gist without being able to create a coherent whole.⁹ Much of the narrative material of the visit consists of a description of Bonino’s office and Levi’s thoughts, as if to impart the notion that a listener cannot remain focused on the tale being told. At a certain point, Levi reacts to his interlocutor in an interior monologue to communicate his confusion about the participants in the tale: “Lui chi? Ero perplesso; il racconto si andava ingarbugliando sempre di più...” (200). Up to a point, Levi is able to maintain his composure and affect an attitude that allows Bonino to continue, perhaps appearing empathetic (as his ideal listener Jean did during “Il canto di Ulisse”), but when the tale takes an unlikely turn, Levi cannot contain his reaction. As Bonino declares that he received a bar of uranium from Germans attempting to escape to Switzerland at the end of the war, Levi says: “Anche al controllo sulla propria fisionomia c’è un limite: Bonino doveva aver colto sulla mia qualche segno di incredulità, perché si interruppe, e con tono lievemente offeso, mi disse: -Ma lei non ci crede?” (201). As an outcome, the next day Levi receives a piece of metal from Bonino, and after several tests, he concludes that it is cadmium.

Levi’s purpose for relating Bonino’s tale is less about the experiences themselves or even that there are poor storytellers in the world. Levi appears interested in communicating the mystery of human interiority. As the story comes to a conclusion, Levi tells the

reader that he is not interested in how Bonino found the cadmium. Instead, he finds “più interessante, ma indecifrabile... l’origine della sua storia” (203). He discovers that Bonino told the story often to anybody who would listen and that the story became more colorful with the iterations (203). Moreover, Levi finds himself envious of the man, a surprising detail at first, when one considers that during his visit with Bonino Levi had judged that he was not an important person in the company because of the size of his desk: “Era una scrivania miserevole: non più di 0,6 metri quadrati, ad una stima generosa. Non c’è SAC sperimentato che non conosca questa triste scienza delle scrivanie: ... una scrivania scarsa denuncia inesorabilmente un occupante dappoco” (199). He goes on to tell the reader that the objects on the desk and the apparent order or disorder are not an indicator of a person’s importance. Some like to have a pristine desk; others cover the surface with papers (200). Levi also informs the reader that *his* desk measures 1.2 meters: twice the size of Bonino’s (201). Nonetheless, Levi envies Bonino his imagination, his ability to escape the present and the past: “Invidiai, io impigliato nella rete del SAC, dei doveri sociali ed aziendali e della verosimiglianza, la libertà sconfinata dell’invenzione, di chi ha sfondato la barriera ed è ormai padrone di costruirsi il passato che più gli aggrada, di cucirsi intorno i panni dell’eroe, e di volare come Superman” (203). The passage expresses here something akin to the experience Sodi expresses about Ulysses and Levi: they can escape the harsh reality of their circumstances by telling their tale (66-7). The main difference in Bonino’s case is that his tale is an invention of his imagination while Ulysses is said to be recalling his own life and Levi is remembering his experiences reading Dante. Further, there are two prongs to Levi’s envy. First, he envies the ability to escape the present, since he feels “impigliato nella rete” of his job and social norms (203). In fact, his interaction with Bonino has sent him back into the lab, which Levi finds to be “sorgente di gioia” because of its potential for discovery (202). Second, Bonino is free to escape his own past, perhaps one that is mediocre and unassuming. Levi, on the other hand, cannot remove the horror and atrocity of Auschwitz from his memory. When he “tells tales” of the past, he talks about real experiences.¹⁰

It is clear from the depiction of his own act of listening in “Uranio” that Levi is not the ordinary listener and potentially would not be an ideal listener to his stories. Like Jean, he is attentive and empathetic, he displays a critical distance to the narrative material, but instead of the listener he conceives as his companion of “Il canto di Ulisse,” he is a listener-author. His listening is not just a means to empathize with someone else, although it is that too. Levi accomplishes a particular form of listening intent on locating something essential about the individual, the relationship, or the encounter that goes beyond attentive, intelligent, and compassionate listening.¹¹ “Capaneo,” “Uranio,” and “Arsenico” are all tales that feature characters that leave an impression: Rappoport’s vital arrogance, Bonino’s delusions of past grandeur, the shoemaker’s quiet ethics. In each case, the men’s narratives uncover their inner lives, and Levi feels that he has understood something important about each one that he wants to communicate to his readers.

Levi’s frequent depiction of storytellers and their narrative acts underscores his fascination with the quality of communication. Ideal listening cannot be accomplished without good narration, as another ideal listener, Faussonne, relates during the second installment of Levi’s narrative, “Acciughe II”: “-Deve raccontare le cose in una maniera che si capiscano, se no non è più gioco. O non è che lei è già dall’altra parte, di quelli che scrivono e poi quello che legge si arrangia, tanto ormai il libro lo ha già comprato?” (178). Levi concurs with Faussonne: “Aveva ragione, e io mi ero lasciato trascinare” (178). In this case, Levi needs to explain certain chemical properties of filaments, but in the case of Auschwitz, it could be the typical work or food, or it could be explaining what rations consisted of or how the black market functioned. For Insana, with her focus on the element of translation, listener and translator work in tandem in the creation of a text: “[Levi] doesn’t merely *teach* Jean the passage, rather, they create a translation of it together, in community” (50, author’s emphasis). Narratives exist in an in-between space, neither wholly in the narrator nor wholly in the listener. While one might determine that a person holds a memory of a lived event or a fictional one, it is only narrative when it is transmitted between two or more people, when it is activated with words in a communicative act.

Whether Levi conceived of literature in this way or not either while at Auschwitz or as he wrote *Se questo è un uomo* is unclear. It is equally uncertain if he believed in clear communication. He claimed in *I sommersi e i salvati* that communication was necessary in a chapter dedicated to the topic. However, the tales in *Lilith* record fictional encounters where communication fails. It would seem that by trying to give us this image of his ideal reader, he is communicating to the reader a way to comprehend the information he has for us and to overcome some of the issues to poor narration. In part, too, Levi seems cognizant of his role of witness, a point also noted by Ferme in his study of the Ulysses episode: “Levi is fully aware that not everyone can decode the Lager” (64). Levi’s type of listening contains a special attentiveness to details of the storyteller and what tales reveal about the teller. It is not the same kind of listening he asks us to engage in because it is incisive, attending to details the teller may otherwise decide to let go unnoticed.

Elizabeth S. Scheiber

RIDER UNIVERSITY

ENDNOTES

¹ Many of these studies will be discussed in this article. Two others are: Rastier, François. “Le survivant ou l’Ulysse juif.” *Littérature*. 126 (2002): 96-20 and Truglio, Maria. “The Task of the Witness: Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*.” *Forum italicum*. 34 (2000): 136-56.

² Lynn Gunzberg suggests this in “Down among the Dead Men: Levi and Dante in Hell.” *Modern Language Studies*. 16 (1986): 10-28, and Paul Alpers also discusses connections between Jean and Virgil in “Pastoral and the Moments of Reprieve.” *The Threepenny Review*. 38 (1989): 18-19.

³ Literariness here refers to a certain amount of artifice in the narration of an episode that can but does not necessarily imply fictionalization. The episode may have occurred, but the author embellishes the narration to some other end besides telling what happened to or by whom or what was thought, felt, said and so on. Such literariness could include Jorge Semprun’s choice of framing his first Holocaust fictionalized memoir *The Long Voyage* around the train journey to Buchenwald. Semprun was deported to Buchenwald and many of the events and people he described were true, but others were literary constructions to aid his narration. Equally, literariness could be attributed to much of Charlotte Delbo’s work, which portrays her experiences at Birkenau in an imaginative way.

⁴ There is a double nature to Levi that Sodi does not discuss in her chapter on

memory. Levi is both inmate-Levi, recalling his reading of Dante, and author-Levi, recalling how he recalled Dante in Auschwitz. The former managed for a brief time to forget the “hell” of the Lager (a true reprieve from atrocity) whereas the latter experiences a return to the Inferno, in memory, and it is impossible to know what mix of emotions he may have felt.

⁵ This line could be translated as “It’s no big deal, go ahead anyway” or “It doesn’t matter, go on anyway.”

⁶ The theme of listening is pervasive in his work, and Levi depicts many storytelling situations between characters of different types. In this article, we will focus on those stories where Levi is one of the characters.

⁷ Indeed, the original title “Capaneo” may not appeal to a non-Italian audience since English-speaking readers may not be as familiar with Dante’s *Inferno*. Interestingly enough, the change of title also points to a different intention. The Italian version contains an intertext that indicates a relationship to and dialogue with literature. It emphasizes Rappoport’s arrogance and audacity and alludes to a sojourn in hell. The story aligns with “Il canto di Ulisse” in parts of its commentary. The English title also refers to an act of writing, but its literariness is removed. Instead, the legal realm is foregrounded.

⁸ *Moments of Reprieve* is a translation of only a portion of *Lilit*, specifically only the Holocaust material of the opening section “Passato prossimo.” Other stories from *Lilit* can be found in *A Tranquil Star*, but as a collection, *Lilit* does not exist in English.

⁹ A correspondence cannot be made between a good and a bad storyteller based on the choice to relay the story with direct or indirect discourse. In *Lilit*, “Il cantore e il veterano” is relayed with indirect discourse without impugning the protagonist’s narrative style. Instead, it may be a way to avoid the choppiness that Levi experienced upon listening, since he tells us in the end that Ezra told the story “a pezzi e bocconi” as they carried sacks of cement (410). Similarly, the protagonist-narrator in *La chiave a stella*, Faussonne, is described as a poor narrator: “Non è un gran raccontatore: è anzi piuttosto monotono, e tende alla diminuzione e all’elissi come se temesse di apparire esagerato, ma spesso si lascia trascinare, ed allora esagera senza rendersene conto. Ha un vocabolario ridotto, e si esprime spesso attraverso luoghi comuni che forse gli sembrano arguti e nuovi” (3). Despite these shortcomings, Faussonne’s tales are related in direct discourse.

¹⁰ Perhaps he enhances the past, as in the episode of “Il canto di Ulisse,” in which thoughts and dialogue are constructed while the factuality of the story remains true.

¹¹ Whether Levi has truly understood the essential quality of the individual or not is not something the reader can actually determine.

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