

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

**RECORDING AND RECONSTRUCTION IN THE TESTIMONIAL  
LITERATURE OF PRIMO LEVI**

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of  
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by

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Cited works by Primo Levi are referred to in the text by the following abbreviations followed by the page number:

*L'altrui mestiere* (AM)

*Conversazione con Primo Levi* (C)

*Lilít e altri racconti* (L)

*Opere*, vol. II (O, II)

*Ad ora incerta* (OI)

*Rapporto sulla organizzazione igienico-sanitaria del campo di concentramento per Ebrei di Monowitz (Auschwitz - Alta Slesia)* (R)

*La ricerca delle radici: Antologia personale* (RR)

*Racconti e saggi* (RS)

*I sommersi e i salvati* (SES)

*Se questo è un uomo* (SQ)

*La tregua* (T)

## INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi tragically died in 1987, leaving a remarkably varied body of work. In the past few years his reputation as a writer has grown, both in Italy, where his texts are used in schools, and also in Europe and amongst English-speaking nations, as a result of translations of his work. His reputation, however, tends to reside in his writings about his experience as a victim of Auschwitz. For my thesis I wish to examine primarily Primo Levi's testimonial narrative, that is, those texts in which the author discusses Holocaust experience, and also those writings which can be considered relevant to this discussion. My intention is to examine the nature of the experience, the means by which it is expressed linguistically, and the way in which Levi mythologizes certain aspects of human experience in order to communicate it more completely.

In some instances the text is an account of Primo Levi's own experience, written in the period immediately after his return to Turin in 1945. These texts include the report which he co-authored with Leonardo Debenedetti for the medical journal *Minerva Medica* and which, as far as I am aware, has not previously been publicly discussed; his best-known work of testimonial narrative, *Se questo è un uomo*, first published in 1947 in a limited edition, then republished in 1958 by Einaudi; *La tregua*, which describes the period following the liberation of Auschwitz by soldiers of the Red Army, and Levi's painful journey home; and also a number of poems dating from the period in which he was busy writing his testimonial accounts. He

returns to a discussion of his experience in Auschwitz with later works, such as *I sommersi e i salvati*, a collection of essays, and with the short stories published in *Lilít*, as well as in later poems.

Lawrence D. Kritzman in his essay "In the Shadows of Auschwitz" writes that the Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi tells us that:

the Hebrew word *zakhor* (to remember) is always problematic, since memory "is amongst the most fragile and capricious of our faculties." Ironically, what is remembered is not always recorded, and what is recorded is sometimes selectively forgotten. The problem of remembering Auschwitz is how to remember it in order not to forget what happened at Auschwitz, or how to talk about Auschwitz without betraying or trivializing it. [...] the Shoah cannot be forgotten, for it remains an object of mourning and remembrance, a hauntingly present absence.<sup>1</sup>

Kritzman's words are reminiscent of those of Primo Levi in the first chapter of *I sommersi e i salvati*, "La memoria dell'offesa", which is a reflection upon the experience of the concentration camp. Levi discusses the psychological reasons why the memories of such survivors may change between the act of remembering and that of recounting; traumatic accounts often remain untold because the memory stays too painful for those who have suffered, whilst unusual, - but not necessarily painful, - incidents, those which did not form part of the camp's routine,

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<sup>1</sup> L.D. Kritzman, "In the Shadows of Auschwitz: Culture, Memories and Self-Reflection", *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture, and "the Jewish Question" in France*, ed. L.D. Kritzman, New York & London, Routledge, 1995, p.8.

are recounted. He considers that the most painful memories are submerged by the conscious mind in order to prevent the anguish from being experienced anew, and in time these memories become less clearly delineated. Levi writes that "a scopo di difesa, la realtà può essere distorta".<sup>2</sup> The jagged edges of reality may be smoothed over in the victim's memory to protect the mind from suffering rekindled pain.

This blurring of memory is often of concern for those studying Holocaust testimonial in the hope of coming to some sort of understanding of what the victims experienced. An additional consideration is that eye-witness testimony does not necessarily equate to documentary testimony. Primo Levi tells us that for an understanding of the concentration camps the camps themselves were not a good observation post since their victims could rarely acquire a vision of the entirety of this universe. This was because the victim "si sentiva [...] dominato da un enorme edificio di violenza e di minaccia, ma non poteva costruirsi una rappresentazione perché i suoi occhi erano legati al suolo dal bisogno di tutti i minuti" (*SES*, p.8). Thus, the value of testimonial literature must reside in something other than its documentary accuracy.

Indeed, the value of testimonial literature is much more complex than that of the simple recounting of accurate historical fact; it is a synthesis of what A.H. Rosenfeld terms

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<sup>2</sup> P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Torino, Einaudi, 1986, p.21. Henceforth all references to texts by Primo Levi will follow the quotation and will be in accordance with the list of abbreviations which appears at the start of this thesis.

historical truth, imaginative penetration and narrative effect.<sup>3</sup> Rosenfeld is referring to the relationship between proximity and authority in writings about the Holocaust, in a discussion of what validity can be ascribed to the testimonial writings of even eye-witnesses of the camps. What is historically truthful may also be accurate, but that which is accurate may not necessarily be truthful. Undoubtedly the truthfulness of an account lies not merely in its accuracy but more so in the ability of the narrator to get to the heart of the nature of the event for the individual, and also to render that account in such a way that its significance may be comprehended by those who have not participated in it. Thus the principal point which I wish to discuss in this thesis is that the human and historical value of Primo Levi's testimonial literature resides not in its documentary accuracy, not in any reliance upon dates, figures and facts, but in its personal, subjective nature, its recounting of the experience of the individual, and, in so doing, its reconstruction of that experience in such a way that the reader - any reader, at any time - can come to some understanding of it.

*Se questo è un uomo*, written in the weeks directly following Primo Levi's return from Auschwitz to Turin, is an example of such personal testimony. There the matter may have rested and Levi may have become one of the many survivors who wrote valuable testimony of their experiences but who, upon publication wrote no more. Levi's writings are so very

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<sup>3</sup> A.H. Rosenfeld, "The Problematics of Holocaust Literature", *Confronting the Holocaust*, eds. A.H. Rosenfeld & I. Greenberg, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1978, p.9.

valuable, however, because they offer so many different approaches to the same subject matter, from reportage to narrative account, from essays to poetry. This diversity of testimonial style accords with what Annetter Wieviorka sees as the dual nature of such testimony, being not only archival documentation but also a means of keeping the memory of the events alive for future generations.<sup>4</sup> Holocaust testimonial literature is, by its nature, necessarily very specific; it can only be the peculiar experience of one individual at a particular time and in a particular place. It cannot give the wider picture. It cannot list the chronological stages in the historical process. What it can do is to depict and scrutinize the effect upon individuals of the events taking place about them, even when those events are not fully understood by the narrators themselves. The relationship between chronicle and testimonial narrative is akin to looking at a huge embroidered wall-hanging, - we may be awed by the overall effect, but it is only when we examine an individual section of the hanging that we truly appreciate the complexity of the whole structure.

The nature of the experience of concentration camp survivors varies enormously, even amongst those who were in the same camp at the same time. Examples of this can be found in the writings of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, both of whom were in Buna-Monowitz in 1944. Their accounts of the experience, respectively *Se questo è un uomo* and *Night*,<sup>5</sup> are very different in style and content. Elie Wiesel's testimony was first

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<sup>4</sup> A.E. Wieviorka, "On Testimony", *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. G.H. Hartman, Oxford U.K. & Cambridge U.S.A., Blackwell, 1994, p.24.

<sup>5</sup> E. Wiesel, *Night*, London, Penguin, 1981.

published in 1958 and is a retrospective account, whereas that of Primo Levi was written immediately upon his return home and is primarily written in the present tense. Yet in essence both narratives combine to form part of the tableau that depicts the suffering and degradation that was endured by all of the victims of the camps.

Primo Levi's reconstruction of such experience in his various writings is so effective because he is able to accompany the disorientated reader in a study of a frighteningly unknowable universe. The concentration camp universe is one which is so horrific that the reader is not required to have a willing suspension of disbelief as with other tales of alien experience such as the fictional worlds of Kafka, Poe or Stephen King; rather, the reader is constantly reminded by the author's own confusion that what is required is an unwilling compulsion of belief. However, some sort of framework is required in which to contextualise this alien experience if the reader is not to flounder hopelessly. The assimilation of historical truth into metaphor and mythicization and also Levi's linguistic technique combine so that the event can be reconstructed by the reader. As Mircea Eliade writes "the memory of the collectivity is anhistorical".<sup>6</sup> It is not the chronology of the historical events as they affect either society or the individual which is of importance to posterity. Rather, it is the ontological reconstruction. It is this which allows the story to be assimilated into popular collective memory.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. W.R. Trask, London, Arkana, 1989, p.44.

CHAPTER ONE  
TIME AND IDENTITY

La vita fugge, et non s'arresta una hora,  
et la morte vien dietro a gran giornate,  
et le cose presenti et le passate  
mi danno guerra, et le future anchora.

Petrarca, *Canzoniere*: CCLXXII<sup>1</sup>

Primo Levi was one of a number of survivors of the Holocaust who felt impelled to record their memories of the offence, and yet he is probably one of the best known among the wider reading public, as a result of an English language translation of *Se questo è un uomo*, as well as translations into a number of other languages. The writings of Levi have received much acclaim, whereas other valuable, contributions to the body of Holocaust literature remain less well-known as far as the general readership is concerned. Levi's effectiveness at communicating his personal experience of the Lager is not necessarily due simply to the veracity of his account; for example, there is no doubt that Levi's account of Buna-Monowitz is no more true than Bruno Vasari's account of Mauthausen.<sup>2</sup> As Alvin H. Rosenfeld writes:

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<sup>1</sup> F. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, testo critico e introduzione di G. Contini, annotazioni di D. Ponchioli, Torino, Einaudi, 1964, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> B. Vasari, *Mauthausen: bivacco della morte*, presentazione di Furio Colombo, Firenze, Giuntina, 1991.

Such veracity does not finally depend, however, on any exact fidelity to history so much as it does on the writer's ability to absorb history into myth or legend. In reviewing the fiction of the Holocaust, one is struck by the fact that it often is most memorable when it departs from the traditional ways of the novel and begins to approach the condition of poetry. What lingers on frequently has less to do with the narrative elements of plot development and character portrayal than with the presentation of feeling through certain brilliant images.<sup>3</sup>

Here Rosenfeld is talking of the fiction of the Holocaust rather than Holocaust literature in its wider context, but the sense of his statement remains equally applicable to the latter. Indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish between the various categories of Holocaust literature. If we look for a copy of *Se questo è un uomo*, or a copy of its English translation, in both Italian and English bookshops we are likely to find it on the fiction shelves. Even in an authoritative bibliography of Holocaust writing<sup>4</sup> the American translation of *Se questo è un uomo*, entitled *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, appears under the section heading "Death Camps and Death Marches - Memoirs and Accounts", that is, where we might reasonably expect to find a first-hand account of Auschwitz. However, *The Reawakening*,

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<sup>3</sup> A.H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988, p.80.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holocaust: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide*, ed. D.M. Szonyi, New York, Ktav, 1985.

the translation of *La tregua*, is listed in the "Fiction" category of a section entitled "Literature of the Holocaust: A Select Bibliography", despite the fact that this text can also be classified as survivor testimonial narrative. Although *La tregua* may be fictionalised memoir, it is still firmly based upon first-hand experience and is not a novel in the same sense as *The Last of the Just* by André Schwarz-Bart which also appears in the "Fiction" category.<sup>5</sup>

But to return to the "brilliant image", it is like a photograph: it captures a moment but evokes a complex web of emotions and recollections and lingers in the memory even when the words that have helped to form that image are no longer remembered. As George Steiner writes in his essay "Literature and post-history", in contemporary culture "the word is mere servant to the sensory shock".<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in *Se questo è un uomo* Levi does not recall his experiences in chronological sequence and offer the reader an itemised account of his suffering, but rather he concentrates upon the moment, the particular episode, the instant that epitomises for him the nature of the concentration camp experience, the dehumanisation of his state. Rather than a chronicled series of events, Levi presents the reader with a succession of powerful images, each of which documents the

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<sup>5</sup> A. Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, Translated by S. Becker, Middlesex, King Penguin, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> G. Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966*, London & Boston, Faber & Faber, 1967 (reprint 1990), p.416.

gradual destruction of individual humanity. We can therefore look upon Levi's writing as 'storia' rather than 'cronaca', that is, it is the understanding and interpretation of the narrated events on the part of both the author and the reader that is important rather than the simple retelling of them in chronological sequence, and it is the urgency of the author's tale which makes the interpretation of it such a vital element in its wider historical significance. This concept of the 'need to tell' is common to much Holocaust testimony, as Lawrence L. Langer points out in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, an analysis of the way in which oral testimony of survivors of the Nazi death camps contributes to our understanding of not only the Holocaust, but also the forms and functions of memory.<sup>7</sup> Having analysed Holocaust literature and memoirs in his previous critical works - *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* and *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*<sup>8</sup> - Langer now attempts to approach memory of the event through the medium of videotaped interviews and testimonial, rather than memory of the event through the mediation of written text. Langer becomes aware that the oral witness, as opposed to the literary witness, is less concerned with the style and language of the testimony than with the 'need to tell'. He explains that:

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<sup>7</sup> L.L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> L.L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975; *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1978.

Two clocks dominate the landscape of Holocaust testimonies, a time clock (ticking from then to now) and a space clock (ticking from there to here). They seek to sensitize our imaginations to twin currents of remembered experience. One flows uninterruptedly from source to mouth, or in more familiar historical terms, from past to present. The other meanders, coils back on itself, contains rocks and rapids, and requires strenuous effort to follow its intricate turns, turns that impede the mind's instinctive tropism toward tranquility. To vary the analogy and translate it into literary terms: these testimonies include both story and plot. The "story" is the chronological narrative, beginning with "I was born" and ending with "I was liberated" (though some add epilogues about life after liberation). The "plot" reveals the witness seized by instead of selecting incidents, memory's confrontation with details embedded in moments of trauma.<sup>9</sup>

This idea is borne out by Levi's reference to the "carattere frammentario" (*SQ*, p.8) of his first book, the writing of which was determined by the order of urgency of his need to tell rather than as a rational succession of events. Indeed, in the preface note to the dramatic version of *Se questo è un uomo*, written in 1966, twenty years after the original text, Levi says that he wrote the chapters of his first book:

quasi esattamente al contrario, voglio dire a partire  
dall'ultimo. Poi scrissi la prefazione, ed infine aggiunsi

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<sup>9</sup> L.L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p.174.

ad epigrafe una poesia che mi danzava per il capo già in  
Auschwitz e che avevo scritto pochi giorni dopo il ritorno.<sup>10</sup>

Here perhaps we come to some understanding of why Primo Levi is so often cited as one of the most important and well-known narrators of Holocaust experience. Although his testimony is written and thus mediated to some extent by an unconscious literary style, the latter does not overshadow the urgency of his recollections, and so the written narrative reflects the oral narrative that one might expect to hear and retains that same impact, unmitigated by excessive literary style. However, in this point lies the very paradox of testimonial narrative, for to preserve the memory it must be recalled and retold and in the telling it will change its nature. Nevertheless, the task has to be fulfilled otherwise the memory cannot be preserved.

Just as chronological order is of secondary importance to Levi, the need to recount being of primary importance and dictating not only the sequence of writing but also the narrative structure, so too do human chronological timescales become de-structured in the Lager. This is a universe the aim of which is not simply death, which implies individuality, and also a sense of past and present for the individual, and a belief in a future, if not for individuals at least for their

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<sup>10</sup> P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo: versione drammatica di Pieralbero Marché e Primo Levi*, Torino, Einaudi (Collezione di Teatro, 99), 1966, p.7.

descendants. This is a universe of annihilation, the erasing of all knowledge, - past, present or future -, not of individuals but of a mass of humanity. The lager is a human-made black-hole, for those who are sucked into its vortex exist in a place where the normal human concept of time no longer prevails. As Giovanni Tesio writes, in the lager "il tempo ha un percorso piatto e non conduce da nessuna parte: non ha storia".<sup>11</sup> In a world where both past and future are negated by the spectre of annihilation the victim is forced into a constant present. Consequently, in *Se questo è un uomo* a number of passages are written in the present tense, lending them an immediacy which reinforces the impression that for the victim these experiences can never be over. Just as for the "personaggi" of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* whose reality consists in forever living out their drama, the experience of the lager has become the reality of the victims, it can never be extinguished. It is the Mother in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* who expresses the nature of this constant reality in terms which could almost be Levi's own:

avviene ora, avviene sempre! Il mio strazio non è finito,  
[...]| Io sono viva e presente, sempre, in ogni momento del  
mio strazio, che si rinnova, vivo e sempre presente.<sup>12</sup>

This is what Doug Thompson in *An Introduction to Pirandello's Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* calls the 'vertical' moment or

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<sup>11</sup> G. Tesio, *Piemonte letterario dell'otto-novecento: da Giovanni Faldella a Primo Levi*, a cura della Società Italiana per gli Studi di Cultura Regionale, Roma, Bulzoni, (Culture Regionali D'Italia, saggi e testi, 13), 1991, p.158.

<sup>12</sup> L. Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, Mondadori (Gli Oscar), 1976 (7a ristampa), p.98

the 'eternal moment', that is, an "absolute dimension" which exists separately from the dimension of linear time.<sup>13</sup> Thompson points out that Pirandello evokes the two separate dimensions "through a curious shifting between present and past tenses".<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Giovanni Tesio records Levi's correspondence with Heinz Riedt, the German translator of *Se questo è un uomo*. The latter, finding some difficulty in translating Levi's changing use of tenses into good German, decided to translate much of the text using just the present tense. In a letter of the 26th March 1960 Levi comments as follows upon Riedt's translation:

Nell'intero capitolo 'Der Sommer' l'uso costante del tempo presente mi lascia perplesso. Si tratta di pagine di cronaca, di narrazione piuttosto tranquilla a cui mi pare che si addica il tempo passato, sia in it(aliano) che in ted(esco): inoltre, in questo modo viene a mancare il distacco con altre pagine in cui l'uso del presente è invece necessario (...) perché non si tratta più di narrazione localizzata nel tempo ma di considerazioni generali sul comportamento dell'uomo in Lager.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the extermination camp victim inhabits a dimension not just of a constant present, but of a constant, cyclic present, the present tense being that used for the habitual, recurring action and state of being. The suffering of the victims is akin to that of the damned souls of Dante's *Inferno* for whom

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<sup>13</sup> D. Thompson, *An Introduction to Pirandello's Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, Hull, University of Hull (Department of Italian), Italian Texts Series, 1985, pp.52-3.

<sup>14</sup> D. Thompson, *An Introduction to Pirandello's Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p.56.

<sup>15</sup> G. Tesio, *Piemonte letterario dell'otto-novecento*, pp.159-160.

the state of being is an endless, unvarying torment. But here the comparison ends, for whereas the infernal souls have embraced their sin and therefore their eternal condition, the victims of the Nazi extermination camps are there through no fault of their own; rather:

Per noi invece il Lager non è una punizione; per noi [...] il Lager non è che il genere di esistenza a noi assegnato, senza limiti di tempo [...] (SQ, p.103).

The changing nature of the tenses in "I fatti dell'estate" is indeed essential to the reader's understanding of the chapter. It is one of the few episodes in which a note of hope creeps into the narrative, partly because in August 1944 the Allied bombings began disrupting the organization of the concentration camp, and partly because it is at this point that Levi meets Lorenzo, the Italian forced labourer who reminds the author that a better world can exist through his selfless acts of compassion which will help Levi and Alberto to survive at least until the liberation of the camp in January 1945. However, in the first section of the chapter Levi describes the meaninglessness of time in the camp up to this juncture. There is no point in looking to the future, because in the words of one of the sayings that had developed in the camp "Quando si cambia, si cambia in peggio" (SQ, p.146). Memories of life outside the camp become dim, like those of a distant past, whereas:

per ognuno il momento dell'ingresso al campo stava all'origine di una diversa sequenza di ricordi, vicini e duri questi, continuamente confermati dalla esperienza presente, come ferite ogni giorno riaperte (SQ, pp.146-7).

However, Levi's relationship with Lorenzo allows him to prevail over the ethos of the camp which can only conceive of a "here, now and me" mentality in order to survive. Levi writes:

a Lorenzo debbo di essere vivo oggi; e non tanto per il suo aiuto materiale, quanto per avermi costantemente rammentato ... che ancora esisteva un mondo giusto al di fuori del nostro, ... una remota possibilità di bene ... (SQ, p.153).

It is ironic, however, that the nature of this relationship is so unusual in the context of the lager that it is difficult to comprehend the remarkable nature of it in the world outside the camp, a world in which human concepts of time and behaviour rule once more. As Levi comments:

essa e una storia di un tempo e di una condizione ormai cancellati da ogni realtà presente, e perciò non credo che potrà essere compresa altrimenti di come si comprendono oggi i fatti della leggenda e della storia più remota (SQ, p.150).

Lorenzo's altruism is mythologized: the reality of his actions is not simply the mundane provision of a morsel of bread, a ragged jumper and his services as a scribe; these become the heroic feats of another time, another place. Lorenzo merits the highest accolade that can be awarded to an individual in the universe of the extermination camp, he is "un uomo", and

this precisely because he allows Levi "di non dimenticare di essere io stesso un uomo" (SQ, p.154).

The epithet "un uomo" is one which few other individuals achieve in Levi's account of Buna-Monowitz, but of those that do it is noticeable that all allow their companion(s) a moment which transcends the reality of the universe in which they are encaptured. In the chapter "Storia di dieci giorni" which details the limbo of liberation in the camp Levi refers to the young schoolmaster from the Vosges who helps make bearable for those around him the ten days before the arrival of the Russian troops as "l'uomo Charles" (SQ, p.205). During these final days the experience that Levi describes is that of a limbo "fuori del mondo e del tempo" (SQ, p.196). However, as a result of the altruistic co-operation of Levi and Charles, together with the assistance of Arthur, they and the eight other invalids in their room in Ka-Be, the former sick-bay, "siamo lentamente ridiventati uomini" (SQ, p.201). As a result they commence their return to a world in which time once more regains its meaning when they sit around the laboriously installed stove, smoking cigarettes made from aromatic herbs and "parlando di molte cose passate e future" (SQ, p.202). Indeed, the description of the following day, the 20th January 1945, is the closest that Levi comes in *Se questo è un uomo* to writing a chronicled account, for the events of the day are placed into the context of dawn, afternoon and evening.

The connection between the humanity of the individual and the experience of the nature of time is further explored in the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Kraus" in which Levi tells of being on the same work detail as the young, over-keen and therefore unwelcome Kraus. During the return march to the camp Levi feels the need to concentrate upon keeping in step to avoid being kicked into line by the Kapo whilst Kraus tries to apologise for having covered him in mud that day by his clumsiness. This section of the narrative is in the present tense, but on catching sight of the eyes "dell'uomo Kraus" Levi feels impelled to tell him of a dream that he had concerning him, a dream of return to the bosom of the family. To recount the dream Levi uses the past tense and only returns to the present tense in the final paragraph of the chapter in which he says that "per me anche lui è niente" (SQ, p.170). For a brief moment, however, each man has been able to restore the humanity of the other. In contrast, in the later chapter "L'ultimo" Levi tells of the public hanging of the last surviving participant in an uprising which took place in Birkenau, and here the nobility of the death is highlighted because it is described as "la morte di uomo" (SQ, p.187). The insurgent faces up to his death, calling out to his fellow sufferers at the moment of his death. The term he uses, "Kameraden", is a reminder of the possibility of community spirit in the face of adversity which is integral to the world outside Auschwitz. This serves to impress upon Levi and his friend Alberto that their own humanity has been submerged in the camp. Their shame

is such that they are unable to look one another in the face because of their realisation that, despite all their ploys and subterfuges aimed at prolonging their existence, in reality they are "rotti, vinti" (SQ, p.189); they have become part of "la massa anonima", the "non-uomini" (SQ, p.113) without even realising it.

The extermination camp survivor's realization of being less than human is a concept which Lawrence L. Langer explores in his analysis of videotaped survivor testimony, referring to it as "humiliated memory" which is brought about by "the loss of moral dimension in [the survivor's] life because of the absence of control",<sup>16</sup> since control has been removed entirely from the individual upon entry into the camp. The individual discovers that survival does not mean that the degradation and horrors of the lager have been transcended, but rather that they have been absorbed, and that accepted standards of morality in the world outside the concentration camps have become irrelevant and absurd. Morality exists within certain parameters which are accepted as the norm by the whole of any given society. The code may change from age to age, and from society to society, and individuals may rebel against the code, but even where the parameters are not accepted they are still understood to exist. However, it becomes evident from the testimony of survivors that the universe of the concentration camps lies outside any sphere of morals. Dignity is an alien concept since in order

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<sup>16</sup> L.L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, pp.86-87.

to survive the prisoners are forced into actions which make them ashamed of themselves, but there can be no pride in overcoming their revulsion at these actions, just humiliation at the level to which they were forced to descend. Time cannot heal the open wound of this humiliation, for, as Langer states:

Memory today offers no refuge from the desolate conclusion that human identity and behavior are determined as much (if not more) by external circumstances as by inner beliefs or values.<sup>17</sup>

One of these external factors is the attitude of others to oneself. It is accepted by child psychologists that an infant's personality will flourish in a household in which it is given encouragement and in which its dignity as a person is accepted, but that a child whose efforts to win favour are continually treated with contempt will soon begin to exhibit behavioural problems. Where the child is not allowed to become an engaged member of the household it will attempt to demonstrate its selfhood through destructive activity. In the camps the victims are reduced by their captors to the level of childlike dependency, requiring permission to carry out even the most basic of functions and stripped of all adult ability to make any autonomous decisions. Any attempt at self-assertion is immediately crushed and the victims understand that an act of identification will lead to death, and so they are forced to live with their non-personhood; they

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<sup>17</sup> L.L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p.114.

come to accept themselves as "non-uomini". In a lecture at Northwestern University Robert McAfee Brown discussed Elie Wiesel's novel *The Town Beyond the Wall* in which the protagonist, a Jewish survivor of the death camps, returns to the town from which he was deported by the Nazis. He realizes that he has returned to question a spectator who watched impassively as the deportees were rounded up, but he discovers no hatred for the spectator, only contempt:

a contempt which implies not humanity but something less than humanity, something decadent. It is noteworthy that the spectator realizes this and seeks desperately to be hated, because hatred will at least be an acknowledgement of his humanity and personhood.<sup>18</sup>

McAfee discusses the role of "victim", "executioner", "madman" and "spectator" in the work of Wiesel. But the role of the "victims" is in itself quite a complex one, for in many ways they were spectators of their own fate, stripped of all ability to act in any way that might allow them some sense of autonomy, of being in charge of their own destiny. Treated as non-human by their Nazi captors, their life being snuffed out like that of an insect at the whim of their oppressors, it is completely unsurprising psychologically that the victims should come to perceive themselves as "non-uomini".

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<sup>18</sup> R. McAfee Brown, "The Holocaust as a Problem in Moral Choice", *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Evanston: Illinois, Northwestern University, 1983, pp.54-5.

This concept of "uomini" and "non-uomini" is one with which Elio Vittorini was also wrestling in the closing months of the Second World War. Although neither a Jew nor a concentration camp survivor he was a witness of Nazi atrocity in occupied northern Italy. In his novel *Uomini e no*,<sup>19</sup> first published in 1945 shortly before Primo Levi wrote his first book of testimonial narrative, he posits the question of whether those that commit atrocities and take life with indifference or inhumanity can be termed "uomini". In one of the most powerful episodes of the novel a poor chestnut seller, mistakenly identified as a partisan and captured by the Nazis after having killed one of their police dogs in self defence, is set upon and devoured by the other dogs at the instigation of the SS captain and before the startled, but ultimately indifferent, eyes of the Fascist militia. One of the dogs involved in the act is given the chance of freedom, a chance which just a few hours previously it had longed for, but which it is no longer able to take. Having killed a man it is no longer able to look its human liberator in the eye and it knows that henceforth it is divorced from the world of humanity and must forever bear the shame of its action. However, the humans involved in this act have no feeling of shame or awareness of the heinousness of their crime, indeed, they indulge in a wild party at which they boast of their behaviour. It is the animal which acts in accordance with an awareness of the responsibilities of humanity, and the humans who behave bestially. Vittorini's

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<sup>19</sup> E. Vittorini, *Uomini e no*, Milano, Mondadori (Gli Oscar Narrativa, 83), 1989 (16a ristampa).

concept of "uomini" and "non-uomini" is, however, a little different from that of Levi, for all of the characters of the novel, whether partisans, Nazis, Fascists or ordinary citizens, have adopted a freely chosen stance in relation to the Nazi occupying force, one of active support, active resistance or passive endurance; they have an autonomy which did not exist for the inmates of the extermination camps. Even the dead of Vittorini's novel, shot in a Nazi revenge attack and displayed upon the pavement, retain a certain human dignity, despite their state of undress, as well as an individuality which was denied to both the dead and the living of the lager.

The issue of exclusion from the world of humanity is one which emerges also in the writings of Primo Levi when he refers to the Sonderkommandos, that is those Jewish prisoners whom the SS forced to carry out cremation duties: conducting the unsuspecting victims to their death in the gas-chamber, removing the bodies, extracting gold teeth, sorting out the belongings of the dead victims and attending to the burning of the corpses. They cannot be neatly categorized as either victim or murderer, but rather they are referred to by Levi in *I sommersi e i salvati* as forming part of "la zona grigia" (SES, pp.24-52), those for whom no clear-cut judgement of 'guilty' or 'innocent' can be pronounced, for the predicament in which they found themselves, that of being unwilling executioners in order to survive the present moment, is one for which existing human law has no ready pronouncement, as such

situations are beyond the scope of everyday human morality. In *Se non ora, quando?* Gedale's band of Jewish partisans attacks a concentration camp, killing the guards and 'liberating' the ten prisoners who form the Sonderkommando. However, when asked to come with the partisans one of the Sonderkommando explains that "Non siamo come voi, non stiamo bene con gli altri uomini" (*SNOQ*, p.165). This statement echoes the phrase of Gedale himself before the attack when he says "Non sono come noi. Non potranno mai piú guardarsi negli occhi" (*SNOQ*, p.161). Just like the dog in *Uomini e no* the Sonderkommando survivors consider themselves to be henceforth divorced from the world of humanity, unable to look themselves or the world in the eye.

The concepts of the absolute value of a person, of the human being existing as an end-in-itself, and of autonomy, are all concepts inherent to Kantian philosophy. On the principle of humanity Kant declares:

Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed at the same time as an end.<sup>20</sup>

It is the concept of moral worth which gives individuals their "personhood"<sup>21</sup>, a concept which is essential to Kant's

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<sup>20</sup> I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by H.J. Paton, New York, Harper & Row, 1964, p.95.

<sup>21</sup> Together with the terms "person" and "non-person", this is a phrase used primarily by American

formulation of the Categorical Imperative which, as explained by Geoffrey Warnock, states that:

a rationally accepted moral rule must be such that everyone could adopt it. [...] what morality really imposes on us are conditions on conduct which demand the assent of any possible community of rational creatures.<sup>22</sup>

The twentieth century Russian philosopher, Nicolas Berdyaev, built upon the Kantian concept of freedom to formulate his own philosophy of freedom, in which the process of 'objectification' is a fundamental concept. Fuad Nucho explains in his critical study of Berdyaev's philosophy that:

Objectification is the process by which a subject is converted into an object. The most common and easily recognizable objectification takes place whenever a person, a spiritual entity, is treated as a thing, as an object, as a commodity. [...]

The bridge of objectification [...] is constructed on wrong social and spiritual attitudes of hatred and injustice, of disdain and prejudice. Operating through abstraction, objectification invariably leads to the burning fires of dehumanization, depersonalization and degradation.<sup>23</sup>

In Berdyaev's view, as further explicated by Nucho, objectification leads to human beings using each other for the

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commentators on the Holocaust, such as McAfee Brown. It is used to denote the consciousness of one's autonomy as an individual.

<sup>22</sup> B. Magee, *The Great Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p.184.

<sup>23</sup> F. Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1967, pp.77-8.



attainment of their own ends. In so doing it is evident that both the user and the used become dehumanized and the aim becomes one which is to the detriment rather than to the good of humanity, as was the case during the French Revolution, in which the noble ideals of its instigators led to widescale slaughter in order to achieve the ends envisaged.<sup>24</sup> Berdyaev argues that when the human has been objectified but at the same time the State is conceived of as a personality, then a dangerous condition prevails, for that State, especially a totalitarian State, will claim that people exist for its own sake, rather than vice versa, and individual freedom will be removed. Thus, Berdyaev's philosophy of freedom encapsulates the attitude of the Nazi or Fascist State towards those within its domain and explains the process by which, and theoretical context within which, such atrocities as the extermination camps can be brought about.

The objectification of the individual brought about by a totalitarian State is most clearly seen in Primo Levi's description of the death of Sómogyi, which takes place as the liberating troops approach the camp. His death is gradual, but his last meaningful words after a silence of five or so days are an instruction to divide his bread ration, an instruction which signifies his restoration to the world of "uomini" because such a thought would be impossible in the time before this brief limbo period. His final hours of human

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<sup>24</sup> F. Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy*, p.83.

consciousness are spent in silence, but in his last few hours of existence it is what Levi later calls the "sogno mostruoso" (SQ, p.222) of Nazi totalitarianism which reclaims S6mogyi's soul, for he is wrapped in a final delirium which causes him to endlessly repeat the hated word of submission "Jawohl". S6mogyi's death lacks human dignity and, indeed, becomes almost symbolic of the spiritual death that all of the victims have undergone. Levi writes that "non ho mai capito come allora quanto sia laboriosa la morte di un uomo" (SQ, p.215). As the night of the 25th January 1945 wears on "S6mogyi si accaniva a confermare alla morte la sua dedizione" (SQ, p.216), but around him his companions strive to re-enter the world of "uomini" by conversing and telling of their experiences in a time before Auschwitz, and even those who cannot join in the conversation take in everything that is said.

The death of S6mogyi takes place in the dark night of the 26th January 1945, just before the dawn of the day of liberation. Primo Levi is unable to see the event because of the darkness, but he witnesses the sound of the death with precision, describing the final death throes which hurls the body onto the floor of the hut. Levi writes "ho udito l'urto delle ginocchia, delle anche, delle spalle e del capo" (SQ, p.217); unlike elsewhere in the same passage, he uses the *passato prossimo* instead of the *passato remoto* to describe what he hears and, through the use of this tense we understand that the experience lives with him as he writes. Rather than simply

stating 'ho udito l'urto del corpo' the detailed description of the body's contact with the floor of the hut reminds us that this is the death of a human being, because Sómogyi was restored to personhood in the brief moments of human consciousness before his final delirium. However, in contrast to the epithet "uomo" which is used elsewhere for those individuals who allow others a moment of transcendence over Auschwitz, that which lies on the floor of the hut the following dawn is "la cosa Sómogyi" (*SQ*, p.218); it is the shell which remains, the humanity having been stripped from Sómogyi by the creators of the camp.

Paradoxically, however, it is the realization by the victims of the death camps of their acceptance of their "non-humanity" which causes the "person" within them to react, often with a deep and abiding sense of shame and humiliation, and the realization often came about in circumstances in which they recalled the freedom of action which defined the "uomini". This is the case, as previously mentioned, of the last survivor of the attempted revolt at Auschwitz, recalled by Primo Levi in the chapter entitled "L'ultimo" in *Se questo è un uomo*, and indeed it is also the case for the survivors upon liberation from the camp. In the chapter which analyses this shame in *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi writes:

Nella maggior parte dei casi, l'ora della liberazione non è stata lieta né spensierata: scoccava per lo piú su uno sfondo tragico di distruzione, strage e sofferenza. In quel

momento, in cui ci si sentiva ridiventare uomini, cioè responsabili, ritornavano le pene degli uomini: [...] della propria estenuazione, che appariva non più medicabile, definitiva [...]. Non "piacer figlio d'affanno": affanno figlio d'affanno. L'uscir di pena [...] quasi sempre ha coinciso con una fase d'angoscia (*SES*, p.53).

Having rejected the Leopardian idea of pleasure resulting from anguish he goes on to explain that:

All'uscita dal buio, si soffriva per la riacquistata consapevolezza di essere stati menomati. [...] avevamo [...] vissuto per mesi o anni ad un livello animalesco (*SES*, p.57).

Levi explains that they had endured their depraved condition, suffering less from it than they would have suffered in ordinary life because "il nostro metro morale era mutato" (*SES*, loc. cit.). Moreover, Levi goes on to say that "da questa condizione di appiattimento eravamo usciti solo a rari intervalli", but that these occasions were "uscite dolorose, proprio perché ci davano occasione di misurare la nostra diminuzione" (*SES*, loc. cit.). This reduction of selfhood brings with it an alteration to the victim's concept of temporality, and Levi continues:

Avevamo dimenticato non solo il nostro paese e la nostra cultura, ma la famiglia, il passato, il futuro che ci eravamo rappresentato, perché, come gli animali, eravamo ristretti al momento presente (*SES*, loc. cit.).

The immediacy of experience in the concentration camp is perhaps best expressed in the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Una buona giornata", in which the word "oggi" is repeated throughout and the main tense used by the author is the present. The chapter opens with a statement by the author that:

La persuasione che la vita ha uno scopo è radicata in ogni fibra di uomo, è una proprietà della sostanza umana (SQ, p.88).

By his use of the phrase "di uomo", instead of "dell'uomo", Levi is here stressing that the belief that life has a goal is an innate and ineradicable factor in human consciousness. For the inmates of the concentration camp, however, life's goal is a very simple one and one which is firmly rooted in the present, that of mere survival, since they soon learn "a dare un colpo di spugna al passato e al futuro [...], se il bisogno preme" (SQ, p.42). The fixing of this goal into the present is brought about stylistically by the repetition of the word "oggi" ten times in the chapter, of which four repetitions come in the second and third paragraphs, those which describe the immediacy of the inmates' feelings because the day is warmer than those that have come before, it is a harbinger of Spring. But the repetition of "oggi" is echoed by the twelvefold repetition throughout the chapter of "fame" which reflects the desperation of the immediate moment. The goal of survival is inextricably linked to that of attempting to satisfy their hunger; the warmth of the Spring sunshine only serves to remind

the prisoners that their hunger is more than just a physical sensation because its gnawing pangs do not allow them to enjoy any sense of freedom from other pain, such as the winter cold which the sun has chased away; the hunger has become such that "noi stessi siamo la fame, fame vivente" (SQ, p.92). This statement is echoed by that of Elie Wiesel in *Night*, his account of the suffering he endured in Auschwitz. He writes:

Bread, soup - these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time.<sup>25</sup>

The chapter "Una buona giornata" is written principally in the present tense because it is a consideration of what becomes of the individual in the face of such tremendous adversity as that posed by Auschwitz. One of the few divergences from the use of the present tense comes in a paragraph that describes the morning routine of leaving the main site of the camp to go to work and seeing the surrounding mountains, the camp clocktower, the smoke of Buna and the forested hills, beyond which lie Birkenau. On another occasion Levi uses the future tense followed immediately by the use of the *passato remoto* in the paragraph that looks forward to the act of narrating the suffering endured. Levi writes:

Come diremo, dalla fabbrica di Buna, attorno a cui per quattro anni i tedeschi si adoperarono, e in cui noi

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<sup>25</sup> E. Wiesel, *Night*, Translated by S. Rodway, London, Penguin, 1981, p.64.

soffrimmo e morimmo innumerevoli, non uscì mai un chilogrammo di gomma sintetica (SQ, p.91).

But the use of the future tense here merely returns us to the present suffering of the prisoners: Levi is telling us what they will say whilst he is actually in the process of saying it. The intrusion of the *passato remoto* into the present tense of the account is of interest. It is a tense used to describe historical experience, whereas the present tense describes what Levi, the sufferer of that experience, is actually enduring.

The actuality of the suffering for the author is emphasised in the chapter "Esame di chimica", the second section of which ends with an authorial intrusion when Levi writes:

Oggi, questo vero oggi in cui sto seduto a un tavolo e scrivo, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose sono realmente accadute (SQ, p.131).

The principal tense used for this intrusion is the present, as in the rest of the preceding section in which Levi-victim considers the inevitability of death and the necessity of getting work in Buna if he is to survive a little longer. The use of the progressive construction "sto seduto" is the only means by which the physical present of the author is differentiated, since physically he is no longer in the camp, but the emotions raised by the suffering about which he writes are experienced afresh, as denoted by the use of the present tense "scrivo", rather than a continuation of the progressive construction. Although the author expresses a lack of

conviction that the events can have happened his use of the *passato prossimo* "sono [...] accadute" refutes any idea that the events might not have happened, for the tense links them to the present. The repetition of "oggi" recalls that in "Una buona giornata", where it is a stylistic device for describing the immediacy of the inmates' feelings. In this later chapter it evokes the immediacy of the author's feelings which are so strong that he can barely bring himself to believe the events which invoked them.

The predominant use of the present tense in the main body of the text of *Se questo è un uomo* can be compared with the use of tenses in the opening pages of the narrative. The first chapter is mainly written using the *passato remoto*, which is standard practice when narrating past events. Levi is describing the events that led up to his ordeal in Auschwitz. He tells of being caught with his partisan group by the Fascists, of being interned at Fossoli and of the journey to Auschwitz. At this point, however, neither he nor his companions have any conception of the horrific nature of the ordeal which awaits them, and it is only once this ordeal starts to impinge upon their consciousness that the present tense starts to be used. It is the gradual erosion of humanity, as hope for the future is stripped away, that is recorded by the use of present tense narration. The first use of the tense is in the final paragraph of the first chapter when the German soldier, who is the prisoners' escort, peers at

them out of the gloom with the aid of the feeble light of a torch and asks them to hand over their valuables. The very courtesy of his request underlines the hopelessness of their situation - their fate is sealed, why waste emotional energy on walking corpses who must know they have no further need of material belongings? Together with the anger that the request produces in them, the prisoners feel "uno strano sollievo" (SQ, p.22); perhaps this relief is that of the condemned who are finally told that their appeal has been dismissed and the death sentence is confirmed, for although new emotions may be aroused, uncertainty about the future is over.

The second chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* begins with the use once more of the *passato remoto*, but only whilst the final stage of the journey across the threshold of the camp is described, because the *passato remoto* describes sequence, and sequence is movement across time. With the first urgent sensation of suffering which the victims feel the present tense is adopted. The sentence "che sete abbiamo!" (SQ, p.23) followed by the description of the sign prohibiting drinking from the water tap in the room where the men wait is the reader's first introduction to the incomprehensible world of the concentration camp, just as it was Levi's, a world where human identity is destroyed by the eradication of any familiarity or identification with the universe into which they have been thrust. There is a symbolic force in the fact that it is water which is withheld, for water is the symbol of life

itself. Timescales themselves start to mutate, and although the chapter begins with a statement of chronological time "il viaggio non durò che una ventina di minuti" by the end of the third paragraph time has already started to become an evil endlessness, as expressed by the phrase "il tempo passa goccia a goccia" (SQ, p.23), rather like the legendary Chinese water torture. Water is also the symbol of the life-force, which is here slowly but surely dripping away.

This stylistic contrapositioning of the *passato remoto* and the present tense is used on several occasions throughout *Se questo è un uomo* to depict firstly the particulars of the ordeal and then the impact of it upon the individual. This is evocative of Dante's use of the contrapositioning of tenses in the *Inferno*, for example in Canto XXVI when Dante the Pilgrim recalls his experience of the eighth bolgia of Circle eight, of which he says:

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio

quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi.<sup>26</sup>

In "Esame di chimica" Levi describes the period in which the inmates who have volunteered to form part of the Buna Kommando wait to hear when the examination will take place. The description is in the *passato remoto* until, in mid-paragraph, Levi switches to the use of the present as the inmates taking the examination set out behind Alex, the Kapo. The paragraph

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<sup>26</sup> D. Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Inferno*, a cura di N. Sapegno, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1967 (20a ristampa), p.292.

begins "venne Alex nella cantina del Clomagnesio e chiamò fuori noi sette", continues "ecco noi [...] seguire Alex, and concludes "siamo sul pianerottolo [...]. Alex bussa rispettosamente, si cava il berretto, entra; si sente una voce pacata; Alex riesce" (SQ, pp.131-2). Alex's name is repeated throughout as though all action in the paragraph is dependent upon his presence. However, a time shift occurs in mid-paragraph from remote past time to the present. The vulnerability of the examinees is expressed by the sharp switch to the present tense, for the inmates know that if they do not succeed then they face imminent annihilation.

Alden F. Wessman in *The personal experience of time* details the phenomenological ideas of Erwin Straus in his book *Phenomenological psychology*. Straus posited that:

By freeing himself from the constraints of the immediate situation, man gives meaning to his experience and becomes responsible to himself [...].

The phenomenological experience of time is not merely a series of discrete and disconnected "nows"; rather it generally unfolds in continuing, interrelated, and meaningful sequences [...]

Events are seldom experienced as fragmentary and disjointed; we customarily apprehend interrelated and meaningful wholes through the mediation of imagery, language, and symbolic representation and transformation. Spatial and temporal schema relate our immediate here-and-now to the

locations of yesterday, today, and tomorrow in our own lives and the shared social frameworks for understanding [...]

[Straus] distinguished two aspects of personal time: the narrow repetitive cycle of immediate mundane needs and the extended perspective of the historical self. We generally remember few details of the banal daily routine once it is past and done [...]. Little remains to be remembered because nothing important or distinctive was registered in its particularity.<sup>27</sup>

In the extermination camp, however, the victim is unable to think in terms other than a series of "nows", for the constraints of the immediate situation are so fearful and so compelling that it is not possible to free oneself from them. The camps were so disconnected from any experience of the victims' former lives that it was not possible to relate them to the past, and the future was unthinkable, so that the details of the "banal, daily routine" take on an immediacy and a significance which cause them to be etched in the memory of the survivor, for it is the everyday tribulations which form the horror of the camp. Although the particulars of the routine may be forgotten, its inevitability renders the substance of the experience an indelible memory, a "*presente eterno*" which contrasts strongly with the "*passato remoto*" used for passages reporting sequential past events. In the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Kraus" Levi personifies the concept of

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<sup>27</sup> *The Personal Experience of Time*, eds. Bernard S. Gorman and Alden E. Wessman, New York & London, Plenum Press, 1977, pp.41-43

"oggi" as an enemy which the survivors of each day have managed to overcome. He writes:

Anche oggi, anche questo oggi che stamattina pareva  
invincibile ed eterno, l'abbiamo perforato attraverso tutti i  
suoi minuti; adesso giace conchiuso ed è subito dimenticato,  
già non è piú un giorno, non ha lasciato traccia nella  
memoria di nessuno (SQ, pp.167-8).

As in "Una buona giornata" and "Esame di chimica" the repetition of "oggi" renders the concept of present suffering part of an eternal, cyclic present experience for the victims of the camp. Just as the souls in Dante's *Inferno* experience a cyclic eternity of suffering, so the sameness of every "oggi" is part of the torment of the victims of Auschwitz; their humanity has been destroyed and the task which they perform is more important than the human being performing it. Consequently time has no duration but becomes a fixed point of unmoving time in the memory. Throughout Levi's period in the camp two lines of verse written by a friend have haunted his memory:

... infin che un giorno  
senso non avrà piú dire: domani (SQ, p.168)

The concept of a tomorrow has no meaning and, as Levi goes on to explain, the phrase "domani mattina" in the camp is used to express "mai" (SQ, p.168).

In comparison to *Se questo è un uomo*, in which time is a concept which has no relevance for the victims of the lager, in

the next of Levi's narrative accounts, *La tregua*, it is seen more in terms of a series of chronicled events, for the passage of time comes to have relevance for Levi once more as he seeks to regain the consciousness of his humanity. He refers to the "cesura di Auschwitz, che spaccava in due la catena dei miei ricordi" (*T*, p.305). Thus, just as with a caesura, the period before and the period after Auschwitz are linked by the possibility of the flow of memory, but the experience of Auschwitz itself stands outside of this stream of recollection, it breaks it into two and forms a diurnity apart. However the period of return is a hiatus, allowing the victims a respite before they are pitchforked back into the temporal world. Indeed, the return of the flow of memory linking the period before and after Auschwitz, like the flow of blood back into a numbed limb, is an urgent and painful sensation for the refugees. Levi writes:

La nostalgia è una sofferenza fragile e gentile, essenzialmente diversa, piú intima, piú umana delle altre pene che avevamo sostenuto fino a quel tempo [...]. È un dolore limpido e pulito, ma urgente: pervade tutti i minuti della giornata, non concede altri pensieri [...] (*T*, p.269).

In the extermination camp, on the other hand, "conservavamo i ricordi della nostra vita anteriore, ma velati e lontani [...] come sono [...] i ricordi [...] di tutte le cose finite" (*SQ*, p.146). So, memories were locked away because they were not only painful but also irrelevant, in which the sufferer quickly

learns that "non si può piú pensare, è come essere già morti"  
(SQ, p.23).

The return of the refugees is initiated by a bath administered by the Russian liberators. In many religions bathing is a rite that has an accepted symbolic sense of washing away the former imperfect life and being spiritually reborn into a new life. Similarly the bath that Levi undergoes upon liberation can be perceived as a symbolic break between the time spent as a captive and that as a freed man. The bath also serves to encapsulate his experience as a victim in Auschwitz, for upon entry to the camp he underwent a travesty of bathing, the shower administered by the Nazi camp guards, which he avers to have been "un bagno di umiliazione, un bagno grottesco-demoniaco-sacrale, un bagno da messa nera" (T, p.163). In contrast, the bath administered by the Russians, despite being, or, indeed, precisely because it is carried out in a manner which is "estemporaneo e approssimativo", is "un bagno [...] a misura umana" (T, loc. cit.). The motivation behind the physical act of bathing is one which confers humanity upon those doing the bathing as well as upon the bathed, for the former carry out their duties with "il desiderio inconsapevole [...] di spogliarci delle vestigia della nostra vita di prima, di fare di noi degli uomini nuovi" (T, loc. cit.). The relationship between the Russians and those they have liberated is that of human beings recognising the humanity of other individuals, and so the victims of the

extermination camps are proffered an insight into what it is to be "uomini" once more, rather than "non-uomini", albeit within the terms of their Russian liberators' own concept of being, since they wish to make of the survivors "uomini nuovi, conformi ai loro modelli", they want to "imporci il loro marchio" (T, loc. cit.). The reason for this is understandable enough: faced with evidence of such degradation and suffering, it is a benevolent aspect of human nature to wish to confer upon the sufferer some of the advantages which the rescuer enjoys, both physically and spiritually, even if this can extend no further than physical cleanliness and orderliness, and a perceived conformity to the rescuer's accepted standards of civilized behaviour. This in effect is what the Red Army does during the next few months feeding, sheltering and even entertaining the former concentration camp victims, all in a manner in accordance with their own particular code of conduct and hospitality.

The third major instance of bathing occurs when Primo Levi and the other refugees arrive at an American-controlled Austrian frontier. Within the text itself the description of this incident provides a balanced, cyclic pattern, coming as it does at the end of the penultimate chapter of *La tregua*, whereas the description of the bath administered by the Russians comes at the beginning of the second chapter. Thus, just as the descriptions of bathing under Nazi and then Russian supervision encapsulate the experience of Auschwitz, so the

descriptions of bathing under Russian and then American supervision encapsulate the 'limbo' period of return from the camp to the homeland.

In many ways the American-run transit camp would seem to have much in common with the terrible conditions in the extermination camp, to which their first shower introduced the victims. Badly organized, dirty and with primitive conditions, the transit camp has no lighting, heating or beds, and the refugees are forced to sleep on the wooden floor of the frighteningly rickety hut which is surrounded by knee-high mud. The bathing ritual itself is administered by huge, taciturn G.I.s, followed by disinfestation which is carried out by alien-looking, cowed officials, clad in white overalls and masks, and wielding strange implements. The description of the event is very similar to that of the Auschwitz experience. In *Se questo è un uomo* Levi describes the event as follows:

Adesso è il secondo atto. Entrano con violenza quattro con rasoi, pennelli e tosatrici, hanno pantaloni e giacche a righe, un numero cucito sul petto; [...] ci agguantano e in un momento ci troviamo rasi e tosati. [...] I quattro parlano una lingua che non sembra di questo mondo (SQ, p.25).

This can be compared to the description of the experience in the American transit camp:

ed ecco entrare in scena dieci funzionari dall'aspetto poco terrestre, avvolti in tute bianche, con casco e maschera antigas. Agguantarono i primi del gregge, e senza complimenti

infilarono loro le cannuccie degli arnesi pendenti, via via,  
in tutte le aperture degli abiti (*T*, pp.318-9).

When "gli incappucciati misero le mani" on a young woman, her fiancé steps forward threateningly, at which the officials consult briefly "con inarticolati suoni nasali" (*T*. loc. cit.). The abrupt entry of those carrying out the ablution is denoted by the phrase "adesso è il secondo atto" in the former case and "ed ecco ..." in the latter; in each case the number of the 'officials' is stated and their only identity is denoted by the equipment that they wield, their strange clothing and the fact that they seem not to be of this world; the verb "agguantare" is used in both contexts, echoed in the second case by the use of "mettere le mani"; and finally, the language used by the 'officials' in both situations is incomprehensible. But here the likeness ends, for although there may be physical similarities between both events, the manner in which they are performed render them very different for those undergoing the procedure. Whereas the camp barbers seize hold of the new inmates in a violent manner, the Americans do so brusquely but without any malicious intent, the phrases used to describe this being "senza complimenti" and "misero le mani, caste ma rudi" (*T*. loc. cit.). This echoes the phrase "con mani pietose, ma senza tanti complimenti" which is used to describe the manner in which the Russian nurses bathe the newly liberated survivors of Auschwitz (*T*, p.164). In both cases those being disinfested have first to undergo a shower. The differences are that at Auschwitz the inmates have to wait endlessly in the cold, naked

and without privacy for a perfunctory burst of water, whereas at the transit camp they are able to shower in wooden cabins, and are provided with shower caps and bath robes; the disinfection in the latter case takes place when they are fully clothed; both shower and disinfection in the transit camp serve a function, that is, of allowing the refugees a thorough physical cleansing, whereas the procedure in Auschwitz merely serves to demoralise and degrade the new inmates. Levi acknowledges the ritual significance of the cleansing in the transit camp, describing the officials as carrying out a "compito sacerdotale" which is "di purificazione e di esorcismo" (T, loc. cit.).

The "cleansing" process in Auschwitz and in the transit camp can be compared to Dante's vision of the nature of Hell and Purgatory. Both realms are full of suffering, but the eternal difference between the two is that in the latter case it has a point, because it purges the soul and allows it to proceed to eternal life with God, whereas in the infernal realm the suffering is part of the eternal degradation of the soul's condition.

The human element of the transit camp ablution is seen at the very end of the episode when one of the American officials doffs his mask and overalls to engage in a hand-to-hand contest with the young man who opposes the disinfection of his fiancée. The violence of the episode is countered by the lack

of aggression behind the action: indeed, the official puts himself on the same level as the young man, not resorting to weapons or the power of officialdom to carry out his duty, but by choosing a literally face-to-face competition of strength he acknowledges the personhood of the refugee. He thus allows the latter to retain human dignity despite the fact that he loses the contest, for almost inevitably he would have been the weaker participant due to starvation. Finally, it is notable that the present tense is used for the description of the shower upon entry to Auschwitz; the experience remains with the author as an evil and endless trauma. However, in the case of both the bath administered by the Russians and that supervised by the Americans Levi uses the *passato remoto* as his principal verb tense; chronological time had begun to operate once more upon liberation from the camp because their liberators, unlike their Nazi captors, treated the survivors as "uomini", with the dignity and respect due to the human individual.

The bathing of the body, however, serves merely to cleanse their physical self for upon their return the survivors feel themselves to be different from the family and friends to whom they return, because as a result of their experience "sentivamo fluirci per le vene [...] il veleno di Auschwitz" (T, p.324). This poison, though, affects not just the survivors, for it has a malignancy which is not immediately apparent but which lies in wait to infect future generations. Upon their return

journey as they pass through Vienna the refugees are painfully aware of:

un male irreparabile e definitivo, presente ovunque, annidato come una cancrena nei visceri dell'Europa e del mondo, seme di danno futuro (*T*, p.318).

Thus, present actions leave an inheritance to future generations from which they may not be able to recover. Levi has been away from his home in Turin for twenty months, and yet he states that he and his fellow-sufferers feel "vecchi di secoli" (*T*, p.324). The essence of this sense of the shapelessness of time that the returning inmates feel is captured by Levi in the chapter "Il bosco e la via" in which he describes the "due lunghi mesi" (*T*, p.269) from the 15th July to the 15th September 1945. He describes the pain of the nostalgia at this stage of his return which "pervade tutti i minuti della giornata" (*T*, p.269). This period of solitude in the Casa Rossa is described in terms reminiscent of a fairy-tale, and the Casa Rossa itself, an eccentric construction which the Russians use as a temporary barracks on the journey, is described as "un castello di fate" (*T*, p.269). Just as in the tales of the brothers Grimm, and in a scene reminiscent of the opening canto of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Levi gets lost in a deep and mysterious wood and tries to find his way back by means of the sun. Overtaken by a moment of panic as dusk falls, he is saved not by Virgil, but by the whistle of a train which leads him back to the railway lines and to the path to the barracks. It is after the stay at the red house at Staryje

Doroghi that the journey home begins, a journey of return which, like his journey to Auschwitz, is by train.

Thus, Primo Levi's experience of time in Buna-Monowitz would seem to be less in accordance with Erwin Straus's positing of temporal phenomenology, but perhaps more related to Berdyaev's philosophy of the individual's relationship to time. Berdyaev conceived of three dimensions to time: cosmic time, symbolized by the circle, which is connected to solar calendar reckoning; historical time, symbolized by the straight line stretching forwards and connecting the past, which is subject to cosmic time but relates to human activity; and existential time, symbolized by the point, which is inward time, subjective not objective time. Berdyaev states that:

The infinity of existential time is a qualitative infinity, not a quantitative. [...] The protraction of existential time has nothing in common with the protraction of objectivized time, cosmic or historical. This protraction depends upon the intensity of experience within human existence. Minutes which are short from the objective point of view may be lived through as an infinity, and an infinity in opposite directions, in the direction of suffering and in the direction of joy [...]. One moment may be an eternity, another moment may be an evil and repellent endlessness.<sup>28</sup>

Levi's experience of the extermination camp would seem to be more attuned to Berdyaev's concept of existential time, a

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<sup>28</sup> N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, London, Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1944, pp.260-1.

subjective endlessness which is only objectively a part of cosmic or historic time. As Levi writes in *Se questo è un uomo* "per noi, la storia si era fermata" (SQ, p.147).

The subjective nature of the passage of time in Monowitz is expressed in *Se questo è un uomo* in the sentence which describes the wait of the inmates for the chemistry examination. Levi writes:

Passarono tre giorni, tre dei soliti immemorabili giorni, così lunghi mentre passavano e così breve dopo che erano passati [...] (SQ, p.131).

The evil infinity of present time spent waiting for an examination which may mean survival for a little longer is contrasted with the brevity of the day that has passed, for each day that ends means another day closer to selection for the ovens. The cyclic endlessness of each day's suffering is described by Levi when he contrasts memories of life before entry into the camp as "dolci e tristi, come [...] tutte le cose finite" (SQ, p.146) with those which have their origins upon entry into Auschwitz. As we have seen, these latter are like "ferite ogni giorno riaperte" (SQ, p.147). Indeed, this phrase echoes the closing words of an earlier chapter, "Le nostre notti", for each morning upon getting down from his pallet and putting on his wooden shoes the wounds on Levi's feet open up once more "e incomincia una nuova giornata" (SQ, p.79). More effectively than any description of horrific brutality which the reader might be tempted to pass off as an

isolated incident, the phrase evokes the banal sameness of each day and the daily misery of existence for the victims of the annihilation camps.

Time in Auschwitz is meaningless because those factors which give a sense of shape and substance to our everyday lives are subverted and no longer signify elements of human experience. The sign above the entrance to the camp reads ARBEIT MACHT FREI, work liberates, and in the normal course of experience work in its wider sense of mental or physical activity does give the individual a sense of purpose, an aim in life; even boring, routine employment has some end result, even if the person so employed finds it to be tedious and meaningless, for it will bring in a wage packet, or render life easier for a third person. Work, when enjoyed, liberates because it allows one to feel a sense of progression towards a future which in some sense, however small, will be better than the present. In Auschwitz, however, over which the notorious epithet hangs to this day, the prisoners' work is futile and degrading, intended only as a form of punishment, and the only wage that they will receive for their effort is an untimely death, hastened on by their exhausting toil. Work will indeed "liberate" the inmate of Auschwitz, but only into death. Physical activity does not make time seem to pass any quicker for the prisoners, as it so often does in everyday life; indeed, it has quite the reverse effect. When Primo Levi and his eleven companions are told to

wait in silence before the chemistry examination, they do so willingly because:

Quando si aspetta, il tempo cammina liscio senza che si debba intervenire per cacciarlo avanti, mentre invece quando si lavora ogni minuto ci percorre faticosamente e deve venire laboriosamente espulso (SQ, p.132).

Labour in the concentration camp universe is a torment which has little connection with the fabric of time in everyday life. Each minute seems to have to pass through the corporeal being of the inmates who must make a physical effort to expel it from themselves. The image is almost scatological, as of food passing through and being excreted by an unhealthy body; the irony is that the bodies are indeed unhealthy, and time has become such a burden as a result of insufficient food to fuel bodies wracked by exhausting labour. This slowing of time has the effect of making every experience one in which the suffering is savoured in its every detail in a way that seldom occurs in normal "existential" time. An inactive period is a luxury; it is a brief pause in the progress towards annihilation. It is not sufficient, however, to restore their humanity to them, the prisoners do not use their moment of inactivity to reflect; rather, they have now become capable of waiting for hours "con la completa ottusa inerzia dei ragni nelle vecchie tele" (SQ, loc. cit.). Plucked for a moment from the perverted time sequences of the concentration camp, they do not revert to their experience of moments of inactivity before the camp, but rather they exist in a void, all senses shut down

until they should be jolted back into activity by a stimulus from their Auschwitz universe. The metaphor that is used to describe their behaviour is particularly apt, for many types of spider are known to be able to live for many years, although in periods when food is not available they go into what may be described as a state of suspended animation, to all intents and purposes appearing to be dead, but ready to awaken at the least tremor of movement on the old webs in which they are encapsulated. The reaction of the prisoners is analogous; more dead than alive, more animal than human, encapsulated by the universe of the concentration camp, when they do not have to respond to outside stimulus they are now capable of simply shutting down their mind so that the body remains like an empty shell.

The reason that the prisoners are able to cut off so readily from their surroundings, and to remove themselves from the time sequences that they have become used to in the camp, is that those time sequences are so perverted and horrific. The chapter "Die drei Leute vom Labor" begins with a series of questions which Primo Levi and his friend, Alberto, have been asking themselves about the length of time that has passed since their arrival at Auschwitz and since various experiences in the interim. The questions appear to be straightforward enough:

Quanti mesi sono passati dal nostro ingresso in campo?

Quanti dal giorno in cui sono stato dimesso dal Ka-Be? E dal

giorno dell'esame di chimica? E dalla selezione di ottobre?

(SQ, p.171).

The answer is not given in terms of days, weeks or months, or in any other form of temporal evaluation. It comes in the form of how many of the inmates survive:

Eravamo novantasei quando siamo entrati, noi, gli italiani del convoglio centosettantaquattromila; ventinove soltanto fra noi hanno sopravvissuto fino all'ottobre, e di questi, otto sono andati in selezione. Ora siamo ventuno, e l'inverno è appena incominciato. Quanti fra noi giungeranno vivi al nuovo anno? Quanti alla primavera? (SQ, loc. cit.).

New questions are posed, questions which, given the answers that have gone before, leave scant room for hope, and which can only give rise to fresh anxiety.

The word "annihilation" suggests the complete destruction of an individual, not just physically but also spiritually. This became the aim of many of the camps in the final years of Nazism, specifically the destruction of all western Jewry. This annihilation has popularly come to be termed "Holocaust" and in its correct context the term carries with it specific meaning. A.H. Rosenfeld writes:

"Holocaust" implies not just death but total destruction; not murder, which carries with it some still lingering if dreaded sense of personal violation, but annihilation on so massive and indiscriminate a scale as to render death void of all personal characteristics, and hence virtually anonymous or

absurd. Moreover, "Holocaust" suggests not only a brutally imposed death but an even more brutally imposed life of humiliation, deprivation and degradation before the time of dying.<sup>29</sup>

Many, however, reject the term "Holocaust" because it bears with it the Talmudic overtone of "a willing sacrifice", preferring instead the words "hurbn" or, more frequently, "Shoah", the latter having become more widely known because of the film of the same title by Claude Lanzmann which is composed of first-hand testimonies of the destruction of the Jews. Nonetheless, "Holocaust" remains the most commonly used term for this Nazi annihilation. The aim was to expunge the Jews completely from both western and eastern culture, history and even memory: no memorial was to be raised to them, as normally happens in European culture to remind one of the dead; no trace was to remain of them, consequently books by Jewish authors were burnt, Jewish graveyards were destroyed, and the bodies of lager victims, even those already thrown into mass pits, were plundered of all useable products and then reduced to ashes. Berdyaev's concept of "objectification" is seen to reach an obscene extreme in Nazi ideology.

Annihilation renders the idea of time, whether cosmic, historical or existential, devoid of meaning because nothingness cannot exist within time. Consequently,

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<sup>29</sup> A.H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988, p.3.

annihilation is a concept which the human mind cannot fully encompass. It is a concept which Jews have been confronted with once this century and which Levi feels the whole of humanity must now deal with in the nuclear age. In his essay "Eclissi dei profeti" he writes of our tendency in perilous situations to "avvicinare la probabilità di un evento terribile ai suoi valori estremi, zero e uno, impossibilità e certezza" (A.M., p.244). He quotes his words of almost forty years ago, the words which describe the reaction of the newly arrived Auschwitz *häftlinge*:

Se fossimo ragionevoli, dovremmo rassegnarci a questa evidenza, che il nostro destino è perfettamente inconoscibile, che ogni congettura è arbitraria ed esattamente priva di fondamento reale. Ma ragionevoli gli uomini sono assai raramente, quando è in gioco il loro proprio destino; essi preferiscono in ogni caso le posizioni estreme; perciò, a seconda del loro carattere, fra di noi gli uni si sono convinti immediatamente che tutto è perduto, che qui non si può vivere e che la fine è certa e prossima; gli altri, che, per quanto dura sia la vita che ci attende, la salvezza è probabile e non lontana, e, se avremo fede e forza, rivedremo le nostre case e i nostri cari. Le due classi, dei pessimisti e degli ottimisti, non sono peraltro così ben distinte: non già perché gli agnostici siano molti, ma perché i più, senza memoria né coerenza, oscillano fra le due posizioni-limite, a seconda dell'interlocutore e del momento (SQ, pp. 41-2).

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LANGUAGE OF MEMORIAL IN THE TESTIMONIAL WRITING OF PRIMO LEVI

#### 2.1: A COMPARISON OF *SE QUESTO È UN UOMO* AND THE *RAPPORTO OF NOVEMBER 1946*

The oft repeated phrase of T.W. Adorno that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"<sup>1</sup> echoes throughout Holocaust commentary. Adorno is frequently quoted out of context, making it appear as though he opposes all attempts to discuss Shoah in literature and his statement is often used as an apparent support for the assertion that only silence or a documentary account of Holocaust experience is allowable so as not to diminish the experience of the victims. In reality, Adorno was attempting to communicate the fact that the nature of literature is irrevocably changed when genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage.

Adorno does indeed discuss the uneasy relationship between art, including literature, and the victims of suffering, acknowledging that they become victims yet again through the very art which depicts their suffering. He writes:

These victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them [the victims]. [...] The moral of this art, not to

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<sup>1</sup> T. Adorno, "Commitment", *Literature in the Modern World*, ed. D. Walder, Oxford, Oxford University Press in association with The Open University, 1991, p.95.

forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic principle of stylization [...] make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims [...]. When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder.<sup>2</sup>

There is a paradox at the heart of representation of the victims' suffering, however, one which is revealed by Adorno within the same point of discussion when he writes:

Yet this suffering [...] also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.<sup>3</sup>

He also asserts that "no art which tried to evade them [the victims] could confront the claims of Justice".<sup>4</sup>

Geoffrey H. Hartman takes this discussion of the role that art can play in Holocaust testimonial a little further, commenting that:

The issue of how memory and history become art is always a complicated one; in the case of the Shoah the question is also whether they *should* become art. Adorno's dictum [...] was intended to be, as the context shows, a caution against

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<sup>2</sup> T. Adorno, "Commitment", p.96.

<sup>3</sup> T. Adorno, "Commitment", p.95.

<sup>4</sup> T. Adorno, "Commitment", p.96.

the media and any aesthetic exploitation. Yet like other prohibitions against representation it heightens the stakes and inscribes itself in the work of those who confront it.<sup>5</sup>

The question posited, that is whether Holocaust memory and history *should* become art, is one which confronts the reader of Primo Levi's testimony. Levi dealt with the memory of Holocaust experience in a variety of literary forms which can all come under the heading of 'art': testimonial narrative in *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua*, extended essays in *I sommersi e i salvati*, the novel *Se non ora, quando?*, numerous short stories, various journalistic essays and the 'barbarous' act of poetry writing. That many Holocaust survivors felt impelled to transmit their testimony through several literary forms is well known, Elie Wiesel, for example, has written of his experience through testimonial narrative, *Night*, and novels, such as *Dawn*, *Twilight*,<sup>6</sup> and several other stories. However, there is an argument which makes the valid point that testimonial narrative is often written in a literary idiom, whether consciously or not, which detracts from the actuality of the experience. Lawrence L. Langer considers this point in *Holocaust testimonies: The ruins of memory* when studying the oral testimony of survivors, some of whom have previously written memoirs. He comments:

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<sup>5</sup> G.H. Hartman, "Introduction: Darkness Visible", *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. G.H. Hartman, Oxford U.K. & Cambridge U.S.A., Blackwell, 1994, p.19.

<sup>6</sup> E. Wiesel, *Night*, London, Penguin, 1981; *Night, Dawn, The Accident: Three Tales*, translated by S. Rodway, F. Frenaye, A. Borchardt, London, Robson Books, 1974; *Twilight*, translated by M. Wiesel, London, Penguin, 1991.

Written memoirs, by the very strategies available to their authors - style, chronology, analogy, imagery, dialogue, a sense of character, a coherent moral vision - strive to narrow this space [the space of imagination separating what the victim has endured from the reader's capacity to understand it], easing us into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices. The impulse to portray (and thus refine) reality when we write about it seems irresistible.<sup>7</sup>

In his preface to *Holocaust testimonies* Langer compares this new approach of writing about oral testimony with his previous accounts of written testimony:

Writing about Holocaust literature, or even written memoirs, as I have done in my previous works, challenges the imagination through the mediation of a text, raising issues of style and form and tone and figurative language that - I now see - can deflect our attention from the "dreadful familiarity" of the event itself.<sup>8</sup>

Thus oral testimony provides a direct encounter with the survivor and the idiom that is used is that of spoken language. What, therefore, is the value of testimonial literature? This is the point which I wish to explore by means of an examination of Primo Levi's testimonial writing in comparison to the medico-scientific account of the victims' experience of

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<sup>7</sup> L.L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1991, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> L.L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, pp.xii-xiii.

Auschwitz which he published in 1946 with fellow survivor, Leonardo Debenedetti, upon their return to Italy.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writes in *By words alone: The Holocaust in literature* that:

it may be significant, in recognizing the preeminent role of Holocaust art as testimony, to note that a number of survivors have written memoirs or histories as well as fiction, as if to establish the historicity of the subject before admitting it to the imagination.<sup>9</sup>

This is indeed the case with Primo Levi who, before writing his novel *Se non ora, quando?*, had written *Se questo è un uomo*, *La tregua* and several short stories, all of which bear testimony to his experience. In addition he co-authored the *Rapporto sulla organizzazione igienico-sanitaria del campo di concentramento per Ebrei di Monowitz (Auschwitz Alta Slesia)*,<sup>10</sup> and, as is explained in the preface to the report, the co-authors, Primo Levi and Leonardo Debenedetti, described respectively as a chemist and a surgeon, had already given an oral report of sanitary conditions in the camp to the liberating Russian Army. The *Rapporto* contains additional information about the general conditions which the inmates had to endure.

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<sup>9</sup> S. DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.22.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix. For details of the discovery of this article see "Quando il pci scopri Primo Levi", *La Stampa (Tuttolibri)*, n.845, anno xviii, marzo 1993, p.3.

In essence the *Rapporto* contains within its ten pages of closely packed medical and sanitary information about the camp much the same information as that detailed in *Se questo è un uomo*. Both texts are valuable documents about the structure and organization of life in Monowitz-Buna and the debasement of the life of the victims of the lager. It is, however, within the pages of the testimonial narrative rather than the medical report that the reader gains deeper insight into the effect of Auschwitz upon the soul of the inmates, despite the fact that *Se questo è un uomo* often lacks the detailed reportage of the degrading conditions endured. An analysis of the two texts makes apparent the reasons why one text, the narrative testimonial, is so powerful and effective at conveying to the general readership some comprehension of the enormity and the distressing nature of the individual's diminution in Auschwitz.

The report was published under the index heading of "Igiene" in the issue of the medical journal *Minerva Medica* of 24th November 1946. It is not known which sections of the report were written by Levi himself, although it is probable that the descriptions of the most common medical ailments encountered in the camp can be attributed to Debenedetti. However, as the article is co-authored it is understood that the general contents are approved by both contributors, despite the fact that there is one obvious discrepancy between the report and Primo Levi's account of his experience in Buna-Monowitz. We

know from *Se questo è un uomo* that Levi did briefly work in the Buna chemical laboratory towards the final days of the camp's existence; in the report, however, it is stated that:

nessuno dei due sottoscritti potè mai lavorare in Ospedale o nel laboratorio chimico della "Buna-Werke", ma entrambi furono costretti a seguire la sorte dei loro compagni e dovettero sottostare a fatiche superiori alle loro forze, ora lavorando come terrazzieri con piccone e pala, ora come scaricatori di carbone o di sacchi di cemento o in altri modi ancora, tutti pesantissimi (R, p.538).

In the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Il lavoro" Levi describes the heavily physical nature of the daily work routine. However, in the essay "Pipetta da guerra" in *Racconti e saggi* he describes having to demonstrate a procedure in the laboratory for the benefit of a young German woman, and in the process knowing that he may pass on the contagion of scarlet fever. The reader of the *Rapporto* may therefore conclude that the aforementioned statement was written by Debenedetti and was not corrected by Levi.

The *Rapporto* details the deportation of the Italian Jews from Fossoli internment camp, the arrival of the prisoners at Auschwitz and their induction into the camp, the clothes distributed to the prisoners, the accommodation, the rations, the washing conditions, the work, the most frequent illnesses, the medical services, the 'selections' and gas chambers, and the final days of the camp. The report is outlined in strictly

chronological detail, the body of the report beginning "eravamo partiti dal campo di concentramento di Fossoli di Carpi (Modena) il 22 febbraio 1944" (R, p.535), continuing "il viaggio da Fossoli ad Auschwitz durò esattamente quattro giorni" (R, p.536), and later "appena il treno giunse ad Auschwitz (erano circa le ore 21 del 26 febbraio 1944) [...]" (R, loc. cit.). This chronological structure continues through to the final pages of the report which tell of the major "selection" in October 1944, the orders arriving for the doctors in the camp towards the end of 1944, and the medical course initiated at the beginning of January 1945 but interrupted in the middle of that month by the Russian offensive. Thus the chronological detail posits the experience of the victims within a specific temporal framework. This can be compared to *Se questo è un uomo* in which the temporal experience is primarily subjective rather than one of objective chronological measurements, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The move from objective, chronological account in the *Rapporto* to the narration of individual, subjective experience in *Se questo è un uomo* can perhaps best be seen by a comparison of the manner in which the Selection of October 1944 is reported in Danuta Czech's *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, the *Rapporto* and *Se questo è un uomo*. In the *Auschwitz Chronicle* the information given under the date 17 October 1944 is derived

from the Archive of the State Auschwitz Museum. The report baldly states:

2,000 prisoners who were selected in the Monowitz A.C near the Buna works of Auschwitz III are killed in the gas chamber of Crematorium II.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Rapporto* the description of the selection is extended to a paragraph, as follows:

Nell'ottobre 1944 la selezione, anzichè restare limitata ai soli padiglioni dell'ospedale, venne estesa a tutti i "blocchi"; ma fu l'ultima, chè, dopo quell'epoca, tale ricerca venne sospesa e le camere a gas di Birkenau furono smantellate. Tuttavia in quella tragica giornata erano state scelte 850 vittime, fra cui 8 Ebrei di cittadinanza Italiana (R, p.543).

The *Rapporto* gives the reader a little more information about the nature of the selections, including the fact that they were normally restricted to the hospital wards, and also that it was the last major selection to take place in Buna-Monowitz because of the dismantling of the gas chambers, which indeed took place some time at the beginning of November 1944, although shootings and other forms of killing continued to occur. The discrepancy over the number of victims involved can probably be accounted for by the fact that Buna-Monowitz had a women's camp, as well as that of the men, and also a number of other associated satellite camps in the vicinity. The figure given by Levi and

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<sup>11</sup> D. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, London & New York, I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 1990, p.733.

Debenedetti presumably just refers to the victims selected in the men's main camp. The only hint of a personal comment to make its way into the *Rapporto* is the use of the adjective "tragica", and of the victims of the selection only eight take on any sort of outline of individuality through the information that they are Italian Jews.

However, the true meaning of the Selection does not lie in figures or facts, but in the effect of the selection upon the individuals involved, and this is best seen in *Se questo è un uomo*. The figure mentioned by Primo Levi distressingly echoes that given in the *Auschwitz Chronicle*, but Levi's figure is not directly that of the victims involved, but of the potential number of such victims, and is quoted in relation to the inexcusable reason why they are selected to die. Levi writes:

La primavera scorsa, i tedeschi hanno costruito due enormi tende in uno spiazzo del nostro Lager. Ciascuna per tutta la buona stagione ha ospitato piú di mille uomini; ora le tende sono state smontate, e duemila ospiti in soprannumero affollano le nostre baracche. Noi vecchi prigionieri sappiamo che queste irregolarità non piacciono ai tedeschi, e che presto qualcosa succederà perché il nostro numero venga ridotto (*SQ*, pp.156-7).

The verb "ospitare" and the noun "ospiti" add a note of bitter irony to the narrative, and the inference of impermanence which they introduce is highlighted by Levi's reference to "noi vecchi prigionieri" for he has been in the lager for just eight

months, a very short period of time by the standards of the world outside Auschwitz, but more than the allotted lifespan for those within its perimeters. The Nazis are not seen directly as the perpetrators of the killing. Instead they are portrayed, rather incongruously, as the erectors of marquees who do not like irregularity, but Levi makes use of a passive formation to describe how this irregularity will be resolved, and killing is not mentioned at all.

Instead, Levi concentrates upon the meaning of the Selection for the individual in a chapter which sees a constant build up of tension, until the final couple of pages in which the tension is over but in its place resides a deadly calm and a rare glimpse of Levi's anger. Selections are represented almost as a malign but intangible presence. They are not announced but rather "le selezioni si sentono arrivare" (SQ, p.157). The increasing tension is reflected by the growing awareness of the individual of the meaning of the word "Selekcja" which "si sente una volta, due volte, molte volte" in other people's conversations, and which "dapprima non la si individua, poi si impone all'attenzione, infine ci perseguita" (SQ, loc. cit.). It is the abstract entity, the word, to which is assigned the role of persecutor, not those carrying out the selection procedure, who continue to be described in rather aseptic terms as those who "fanno queste cose con grande serietà e diligenza" (SQ, p.158), almost as though "queste cose" refers to a straightforward accountancy exercise.

In contrast to the detached depiction of the Nazis, the relationship between the prisoners prior to the selection is described as intimate and generously reciprocal. They show each other parts of their body seeking assurance that they will not be amongst those chosen for annihilation, and reassure each other, even when such assurances are patently absurd, that they will not be so chosen. A few of the men of barracks number 48 of Buna-Monowitz begin to assume a personality, an individual identity as Levi describes their part in the selection. They no longer form part of the factual but faceless 2,000 prisoners referred to by Danuta Czech, or the 850 victims detailed in Levi and Debenedetti's report; they stand out in relief against the background of faceless executors, unquestioningly carrying out their duty as part of an insane bureaucracy.

There is Wertheimer who looks sixty, has huge varicose veins and no longer feels hunger; Chajim who has been a prisoner in the lager for three years, but who is self-assured because he is strong and hardy, possibly the same Chajim mentioned by Primo Levi in *I sommersi e i salvati*, a devout Jewish clockmaker from Cracow who, despite the language difficulties, did his best to explain the rules for survival to Levi during his first days in the lager; Monsieur Pinkert, formerly an attaché at the Belgian Embassy in Warsaw; René, young and sturdy, but who wears glasses and walks with a slight stoop; Sattler, a huge Transylvanian peasant who is a recent inmate

and does not understand German; Ziegler, who humbly insists upon his double ration of soup because he has been chosen for the gas; elderly Kuhn who gives thanks to God aloud for having been spared, oblivious of those around him who have not; and twenty year old Beppo the Greek who knows he has been chosen and awaits his fate silently. Finally of course there is Primo Levi himself who, as he agrees with Alberto, has probably been spared because of an oversight, whilst René, who was judged immediately before him, has been condemned. Levi writes:

non so cosa ne penserò domani e poi; oggi essa non desta in me alcuna emozione precisa (SQ, p.163).

This lack of emotion indicates the numbing effect of the concentration camp upon its victim. However, that Levi has indeed thought about the situation in the years which followed is borne out by the fact that he revised the structure of the paragraph which describes René. In the 1947 edition the narrative continued directly on in the same paragraph with the phrase "così pure Sattler [...]". However, in later editions this has been revised so that the description of René is contained in a separate paragraph from that of Sattler. This second paragraph now commences "parimenti di un errore deve essersi trattato per Sattler [...]" (SQ, loc. cit.). Thus each victim of the selection is assigned a paragraph of narrative and a pen-outline of their individual identity. This serves as a form of memorial which rescues them from what the Nazis intended as the oblivion of annihilation.

Levi's numbed sensibilities are sparked into life when he hears Kuhn praying to God to give thanks for not having been chosen, whilst young Beppo, who has been chosen and knows he is going to die, lies motionless within earshot. Levi's angry outburst is brief but pungent, encapsulating the ineffability of the evil that is Auschwitz:

è accaduto oggi un abominio che nessuna preghiera propiziatoria, nessun perdono, nessuna espiazione dei colpevoli, nulla insomma che sia in potere dell'uomo di fare, potrà risanare mai piú (SQ, p.164).

Whilst Levi's comments relate to the evil that has been wrought by the Nazi perpetrators of Auschwitz, the sentence of which the above phrase forms a part is not a statement but a question relating to Kuhn's understanding of the situation in which they find themselves. This is one of the rare moments of *Se questo è un uomo* in which Primo Levi's anger at the situation rises to the surface, and it is notable that on the few occasions when this happens his anger is directed not at the Nazi persecutors but at a fellow inmate.

The first instance occurs when Levi is in Ka-Be, the medical block, and is prodded by the Polish nurse "come se io fossi un cadavere in sala anatomica" (SQ, p.59). His reaction is one of outrage:

mi pare di non avere mai, in tutta la mia vita, subito un affronto piú atroce di questo" (SQ, loc. cit.).

The next occasion which provokes Levi's justifiable anger is when Alex, the Kapo, wipes his oily hand on Levi's back as they return from the chemistry examination. This is not a vengeful act, rather it is done "senza odio e senza scherno" (SQ, p.136). However, it is the very lack of emotion, the objectification of another human being, which arouses Levi's anger, and he writes:

alla stregua di questo suo atto io oggi lo giudico, lui e Pannwitz e gli innumerevoli che furono come lui, grandi e piccoli, in Auschwitz e ovunque (SQ, p.137).

Both the Polish nurse and Alex, the Kapo, are inmates, albeit with privileges and positions of power in this universe of annihilation. Kuhn is simply a fellow victim. The anger that they arouse in Levi may well be at the realisation that they have become absorbed into the ethos of Auschwitz and now form part of the very fabric of that evil. This is the problem which confronts all of the prisoners of Auschwitz, for the only way that one does not become a part of the ethos is to go directly to the gas chamber upon arrival at the camp. In order to survive for even a limited period it was necessary to adapt to some extent to the conditions imposed.

This adaptation to Auschwitz is reflected in Tadeusz Borowski's collection of short stories, based upon his own experience of the camp, entitled *This Way for the Gas, Ladies*

and Gentlemen. In his introduction to the Penguin edition Jan Kott writes:

Borowski's Auschwitz stories are written in the first person. The narrator of three of the stories is a deputy Kapo, Vorarbeiter Tadeusz. The identification of the author with the narrator was the moral decision of a prisoner who had lived through Auschwitz - an acceptance of mutual responsibility, mutual participation, and mutual guilt for the concentration camp.<sup>12</sup>

Kott quotes Borowski's words in a review of a book about the camp:

The first duty of Auschwitzers is to make clear just what a camp is. ...But let them not forget that the reader will unflinchingly ask: But how did it happen that you survived? ...Tell, then, how you bought places in the hospital, easy posts, how you shoved the 'Moslems' [...] into the oven, how you bought women, men, what you did in the barracks, unloading the transports, at the gypsy camp; tell about the daily life of the camp, about the hierarchy of fear, about the loneliness of every man. But write that you, you were the ones who did this. That a portion of the sad fame of Auschwitz belongs to you as well.<sup>13</sup>

Although not directly analogous to Borowski's attitude to his experience of Auschwitz, Levi's realisation of his own

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<sup>12</sup> T. Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, selected and translated by Barbara Vedder, Introduction by Jan Kott, Introduction translated by Michael Kandel, London, Penguin, 1976, pp.21-22.

<sup>13</sup> T. Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, p.22.

adaptation, and thus involuntary participation in the ethos of Auschwitz, lies behind the fourth example of powerful emotion in *Se questo è un uomo*, this time not that of anger but of deep shame. This occurs at the end of the chapter entitled "L'ultimo" in which the inmates are forced to watch the hanging of a prisoner from Birkenau. The chapter opens with Levi and his friend Alberto swapping information on their march back to the camp from work about Lorenzo's provision of extra soup rations, and also the various clever stratagems that they have devised in order to create 'black market' goods which they can barter. The importance of this first section of the chapter is rendered more emphatic by the fact that much of it was not in the original 1947 edition, but was added to later editions. The paragraphs describing Lorenzo's generosity and the attempts by the two prisoners to find a suitable recompense for it remain as in the original edition. However, the paragraphs beginning "parliamo di tre nuovissime nostre imprese" (*SQ*, p.183) belong to later editions.

The reason for these additions may well be Levi's honesty in describing the ingenious ruses. He has already commented upon the effect that their large, new soup container has upon their standing in the camp:

è un diploma di nobiltà, è un segno araldico: Henri stava diventando nostro amico e parla con noi da pari a pari; L. ha assunto un tono paterno e condiscendente; quanto a Elias, ci è perennemente alle costole, [...] ci subissa di

incomprensibili dichiarazioni di solidarietà e di affetto, e ci introna con una litania di portentose oscenità e bestemmie italiane e francesi che ha imparate chissà dove, e con le quali intende palesemente onorarci (*SQ*, p.183).

Henri, L. and Elias have all been described in an earlier chapter as examples of the "salvati", those who survive the conditions of the camp. However, as Primo Levi explains in *I sommersi e i salvati*:

I "salvati" del Lager non erano i migliori, i predestinati al bene, i latori di un messaggio: [...]. Sopravvivevano di preferenza i peggiori, gli egoisti, i violenti, gli insensibili, i collaboratori della "zona grigia", le spie. [...] Sopravvivevano i peggiori, cioè i piú adatti; i migliori sono morti tutti (*SES*, pp.63-4).

In order to become one of the "salvati" one must differentiate oneself from the mass, from the "mussulmani", that is from "i deboli, gli inetti, i votati alla selezione" (*SQ*, p.111). In the lager one cannot differentiate oneself by worthy spiritual qualities, for all those who try this path are speedily exterminated. Instead, as Levi writes:

se qualcuno, con un miracolo di selvaggia pazienza e astuzia, troverà una nuova combinazione per defilarsi dal lavoro piú duro, una nuova arte che gli frutti qualche grammo di pane, cercherà di tenerne segreto il modo, e di questo sarà stimato e rispettato, e ne trarrà un suo esclusivo personale giovamento; diventerà piú forte, e perciò sarà temuto, e chi

è temuto è, ipso facto, un candidato a sopravvivere (SQ, p.111).

Levi's honesty, therefore, in including the new section of the chapter "L'ultimo" becomes obvious. It begins:

Parliamo [Levi and Alberto] di tre nuovissime nostre imprese, e ci troviamo d'accordo nel deplorare che evidenti ragioni di segreto professionale sconsiglino di spiattellarle in giro: peccato, il nostro prestigio personale ne trarrebbe un grande vantaggio (SQ, p.183-4).

Levi has become "un candidato a sopravvivere" and possibly, ipso facto, someone to be feared. He and Alberto have found ways of extending their existence by the use of ingenious ploys, such as smuggling brooms into the camp, selling files on the camp's black market and making coins to be used when showering, all in order to gain additional food rations. In so doing they have become unwittingly diminished spiritually because they have perforce become part of the ethos of Auschwitz.

The new section therefore renders the comparison more striking between Levi and Alberto on the one hand and the man they are forced to watch being hanged on the other. In *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi discusses the effect of this incident upon him. The hanged man is one of the "pochi, lucidi esempi di chi di resistere aveva avuto la forza e la possibilità" (SES, p.59). The shame which Levi and Alberto feel after having been forced to watch the execution is one which becomes

ever more acute for Levi the survivor. The shame consists of the recurring thought that "anche tu forse avresti potuto, certo avresti dovuto" (*SES*, loc. cit.). However, the obligation to take action in order to indicate non-compliance with the ethic of the camps was not a possibility for most camp inmates because only a human being can be conceived of in terms of obligations and the very purpose of the camps was to reduce the inmates to the non-human.

The significance of the chapter "L'ultimo" of *Se questo è un uomo* is twofold in that it not only details an event in the daily routine of the camp, it also highlights the extraordinary nature of that event because of the impact that it has upon one individual, Levi himself. This is not chronicle but rather testimony to the effect of the evil ethos of the lager upon the individual human being.

However, the chapter also goes further in that it is a memorial to someone whose death may otherwise have just become part of the dry, official statistics of the Holocaust. Indeed, if *Se questo è un uomo* is read in conjunction with the *Auschwitz Chronicle* I believe that it is possible to fill in the background to this hitherto anonymous man, and although one may not be able to come to any firm conclusion as to his identity, it may at least be possible to determine the fate of one of the victims of Auschwitz.

Primo Levi's account is not a chronicle, but we are able to gain some indication of timescales from the information that he gives us. The chapter opens with the words "ormai Natale è vicino" (*SQ*, p.182), and later he writes "il mese scorso, uno dei crematori di Birkenau è stato fatto saltare" (*SQ*, p.187). On October 7th 1944 a revolt of the Sonderkommando took place at Birkenau in which three SS officers were killed, several injured and Crematorium IV was effectively destroyed. Primo Levi makes a point of specifying that the man that they are forced to watch being hanged is different from those that he has previously seen executed. He has been forced to attend thirteen such public hangings in the mere nine or so months that he has been in Monowitz-Buna, but:

le altre volte si trattava di comuni reati, furti alla cucina, sabotaggi, tentativi di fuga. Oggi si tratta di altro (*SQ*, p.187).

Levi speaks of the revolt of the Special Squad at Birkenau and, although he does not know exactly who the condemned man is, he states "l'uomo che morrà oggi davanti a noi ha preso parte in qualche modo alla rivolta" (*SQ*, loc. cit.). He continues:

Si dice che avesse relazioni cogli insorti di Birkenau, che abbia portato armi nel nostro campo, che stesse tramando un ammutinamento simultaneo anche tra noi (*SQ*, loc. cit.).

One may assume from the time references given by Primo Levi that the hanging takes place some time in November 1944. Most of the insurgents had been killed on the 7th October by the

S.S. However, on the 10th October 1944 fourteen of the Sonderkommando were imprisoned to await interrogation by the Political Department of the SS in Block 11 of Auschwitz II, amongst whom were some of the organizers of the revolt. The ultimate fate of these prisoners is unknown, although it is assumed that all of those caught died under interrogation.

Danuta Czech writes:

The interrogations, during which torture takes place, continue for several weeks. The prisoners in the bunkers of Block 11 probably die as a result of these tortures, since no record of sentences or executions can be found.<sup>14</sup>

The final cry of the condemned man, "Kameraden, ich bin der Letzte!" (SQ, p.188), recorded for posterity by Primo Levi, may well indicate that other captured insurgents have indeed died under interrogation. However, in view of the fact that three SS officers were killed during the course of the revolt, I surmise that the SS decided to make an example of the last survivor by means of a public execution. A name that recurs in the *Auschwitz Chronicle* is that of a certain Wrobel who received the explosives to be used for the insurrection from female prisoners, who themselves were publicly executed by hanging on the 6th January 1945. Danuta Czech records that Wrobel, a Polish Jew, was amongst those arrested and imprisoned in Block 11 on October 10th 1944. It may well not be possible ever to discover the true identity of the hanged man, but perhaps it is that same Wrobel who handled the explosives

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<sup>14</sup> D. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, p.729.

intended for the revolt. The fact remains, however, that whoever the hanged man was Primo Levi's compelling personal testimony serves to render vivid the chronicled account, and to turn dry facts into a moving account of terrible, individual experience.

The shame of Levi and Alberto is rendered more acute because of the rumour that the hanged man had also been hoping to insitigate a revolt amongst the prisoners of Buna-Monowitz, and although the insurrection failed:

Resta il fatto che a Birkenau qualche centinaio di uomini, di schiavi inermi e spossati come noi, hanno trovato in se stessi la forza di agire, di maturare i frutti del loro odio (SQ, p.187).

The spiritual strength of the failed insurgents, themselves reduced to a state of abject servitude by the organization of Auschwitz, is contrasted to the reaction of the Monowitz prisoners, forced to watch the hanging without demurring or raising a voice in even the shadow of a protest, a protest which it appears the insurgents had been willing to sacrifice themselves to foment. In retrospect the ingenious stratagems of Levi and Alberto are no more than devices to prolong a miserable existence which is bereft of those human values which give true dignity to the individual, and all that they have gained is the meaningless prestige of survival according to the norms of an ethos of evil.

The style and language of the narratorial voice within the *Rapporto* can be compared to that of *Se questo è un uomo*. The preface to the report is written in the first person plural, at this point simply indicating that the report is a co-production of the two authors. The opening paragraph of the report continues with the use of the first person plural, but this time indicating the communal experience of the 650 Italian Jews deported from Fossoli. By the second paragraph of the report, however, the emphasis starts to shift away from communal shared experience towards that of a formal, impersonal narrative style, similar to that found in other scientific reports in *Minerva Medica*. It is this style which predominates throughout the report, which is only on rare occasions pierced by personal, sometimes wryly ironic, comment. In consequence, the authors are no longer in the foreground of the report but rather their importance recedes so that they form part of the anonymous mass of victims whose fate is described therein. The deportees are referred to in terms which catalogue their gradual debasement throughout the ordeal, being described first as the "partenti" (R, p.535), then as the "viaggiatori" (R, p.536), "la comitiva" (R, loc. cit.), followed by the "prigionieri" or simply "essi" (R, loc. cit.), and finally there is general comment on the "mussulmani" and "le vittime" (R, p.543).

The opening pages of *Se questo è un uomo* are written primarily in the first person singular as Primo Levi recalls

his brief and doomed experience as a partisan. He soon begins to use the first person plural, however, to denote the communality of experience of the Italian Jews interned at Fossoli and then deported to Auschwitz. The deportees of Levi's testimonial narrative are not, however, the anonymous mass of humanity that they appear to be in the *Rapporto*. Levi frequently makes specific reference to certain individuals, whose experience often cannot be seen as the norm, but which is, however, in some way representative of what others are enduring. Thus, the reader learns of the Gattegno family whose funereal lamentations on the eve of the departure from Fossoli touch the souls of the other internees with:

il dolore antico del popolo che non ha terra, il dolore senza speranza dell'esodo ogni secolo rinnovato (*SQ*, p.15).

In one of the most moving paragraphs of the book, not present in the first edition but added in later editions after the phrase "andavano in gas gli altri" (*SQ*, p.20), we are told of the makeshift bath of three year old Emilia, who, together with most of the other children, the women and the elderly, probably did not survive more than a few hours in Auschwitz. Emilia is the daughter of Ingegner Aldo Levi from Milan, possibly the same Ingegner Levi who is mentioned in the chapters "Sul fondo" seeking reassurance and in "Il canto di Ulisse" as not displaying demoralisation. Another who does not survive is the unnamed woman who shares the journey with Levi. The reader becomes witness to the finality and the intimacy of their leavetaking as "ciascuno salutò nell'altro la vita" (*SQ*, p.19).

Other deportees, however, are denied this last gesture of human warmth, as we learn by the description of the brutal blow which terminates Renzo's farewell to his fiancée Francesca (*SQ*, p.20). It is not altogether clear whether this is a specific incident or representative of several such incidents, but the humanity of those involved is not in doubt.

This device of highlighting particular individuals, even if only in a description of just a few words, is analogous to that of Dante Alighieri in his *Divina Commedia* in relation to the various souls in the afterlife. It is a device which continues throughout *Se questo è un uomo* and is also seen in *La tregua*, in which Levi gives brief pen portraits of the children of Auschwitz such as Peter Pavel, Kleine Kiepure, Henek and Hurbinek. Thus the victims of Auschwitz are no longer the anonymous mass of chronicles and reports; they have an individual existence, however brief, and a place in history which the Nazis had attempted to deny to them. Levi's references to particular individuals often serve as memorials when no grave or documentation may exist.

After the initial use of the first person plural in *Se questo è un uomo* the first major usage of the first person singular comes in the second chapter, "Sul fondo", when Levi's left arm is tattooed with the prisoner number which henceforth will be his identity. He is no longer a man, an Italian, a Jew, a deportee, a prisoner, he is a "*Häftling*: ho imparato che

io sono uno *Häftling*. Il mio nome è 174517" (*SQ*, p.30). The use of the first person plural still predominates, however, through to the end of the second chapter, when Levi tells of the abandonment of the nightly meetings by the Italian prisoners, overcome by tiredness and demoralized by their deteriorating appearance and diminishing numbers. The third chapter commences with the use of the first person singular, which henceforth predominates, reflecting the utter isolation of the individual in Auschwitz and the harsh lesson learnt that to survive one must only consider one's own needs. The terrible consequence of this total self-absorption is dramatically stated at the end of the penultimate chapter, "L'ultimo". In the *Rapporto* the prisoners' reduction is reflected by the use of the term "essi" in their regard; the third person plural subject pronoun reflects the fact that they are now an anonymous mass, no longer individuals. In *Se questo è un uomo* the objectification of the individual is stated more categorically. The sharp contrast between the man who is being hanged and the prisoners who are forced to watch is summed up by Levi's reference to the latter as a "gregge abietto", and he returns once more to the use of the first person plural to describe the surviving prisoners, himself included, in the following terms "noi domati, noi spenti, degni ormai della morte inerme che ci attende" (*SQ*, p.188).

The *Rapporto* is written in the past tense with the *passato remoto* being the principal tense used to describe sequential

events, although passive structures predominate throughout. In this respect the report is similar to many other chronological accounts of Nazi persecution of the Jews. In her essay "Voices from the Killing Ground"<sup>15</sup> Sara Horowitz notes the predominance of the passive voice in the *Lodz Chronicle*, the official chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto. This not only contributes to the "dispassionate tone" of the records but also "signals the precariousness of their [the inhabitants'] situation". In relation to the *Rapporto* the immediate danger of the situation is over but its effects linger in the consciousness of the authors, and there is less a dispassionate tone than a clinical analysis.

It is notable, however, that the passive voice serves to mask the identity of the perpetrators of the persecution. In the ten, closely packed pages of the report the German creators and custodians of the camp are referred to on only eleven occasions, five of which references come in the final three paragraphs. All but two of the references are couched in general terms, referring to a group identity rather than to that of an individual. Terms such as "tedeschi", "soldati", the "esercito tedesco" and "le Armate tedesche", and even "alcune SS" are so general as to render the tone of any comment almost neutral. On the two occasions on which an individual is cited only once is anything approaching negative comment

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<sup>15</sup> S. Horowitz, "Voices from the Killing Ground", *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. G.H. Hartman, Oxford U.K. & Cambridge U.S.A., Blackwell, 1994, pp.42-48.

recorded, that being the case of the German soldier at Fossoli who advises the deportees to take lots of heavy clothing, money and jewellery. This advice is given "con l'aria di dare un consiglio spassionato e affettuoso" and with "un sorrisetto benevolo e una strizzatina d'occhi *ironica*" (R, p.535) [*my italics*]. Criticism is implicit but is not overt because that is not the prime purpose of the *Rapporto*, which is to provide information about the sanitary conditions within the camp.

In contrast there are several references to persecutors who rank among fellow inmates. The nursing assistants, who are chosen for their physical attractiveness and, possibly as a consequence, because they have a friend with some influence in the hospital, are described as beating the patients - their fellow inmates - or inflicting other, more degrading punishments upon them for their own amusement. Before the setting-up of the hospital the death of those who fell insensible whilst at work would be confirmed by two strong inmates bludgeoning the body to establish if there was any movement. The Sonderkommando, the special squad of inmates chosen to carry out duties in the gas chambers and crematoria, is described as being rigorously segregated from contact with the other prisoners. Their description in the *Rapporto* is that of almost sub-human creatures:

Dai loro abiti emanava un odore nauseabondo; essi erano sempre sporchi e avevano un aspetto assolutamente selvaggio,

veramente di bestie feroci. Essi erano scelti fra i peggiori criminali condannati per gravi reati di sangue (R, p.543).

This latter statement may have been true in certain cases, however from later post-war testimony and chronicle it appears that not all the prisoners who formed part of the various special squads were criminals, but were simply chosen from amongst newly-arrived, able-bodied males.<sup>16</sup> The statement does, however, indicate the view of the Sonderkommando held by other inmates. Yet although the actions of certain groups of fellow inmates are recounted no individuals are named. The comment upon fellow inmates in the *Rapporto* can be contrasted to that in *Se questo è un uomo*, because although sometimes negative, it does not demonstrate any personal emotion in their respect like that regarding Kuhn and Alex, as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

In a similar way to that in which Primo Levi gives individual identity in *Se questo è un uomo* to many of the victims of the camp, he also gives an identity to some of the oppressors, although there are surprisingly few references to the SS guards in the text. This may well be accounted for by the fact that during the normal daily routine the prisoners were under the control of the various Kapos and would only occasionally come into contact with those responsible for the

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<sup>16</sup> See S. Felman & D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York & London, Routledge, 1992 for a study of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* which includes the testimony of Phillip Müller, a Czech Jew who was one of the few survivors who had formed part of the Sonderkommando. See also M. Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A Jewish Tragedy*, London, Fontana, 1987 for details of incidents involving the Special Squads.

functioning of the camp. We are, however, informed about the Charon-like soldier who is with the deportees as they cross the threshold of the lager; the SS officer who instructs the new-arrivals upon entry to the showers; the German who opens the door of the shower-house to enjoy the spectacle of the naked prisoners' discomfort as the icy wind hits them; Doktor Pannwitz, whose attitude to Levi during the chemistry examination is that of someone considering the value of an object. However, when describing the prisoner about to be hanged Levi refers to the SS only in general terms. The officers who harangue the assembled prisoners are not described physically but are referred to as "una rauca voce tedesca" and "un'altra voce tedesca" (*SQ*, p.187), or "il tedesco" (*SQ*, p.188): the oppressors are anonymous and lacking identity, as are the massed ranks of prisoners, whereas the unnamed man about to be hanged stands out as the only one present to possess human individuality.

Neither in the *Rapporto* nor in *Se questo è un uomo* is any mention made of the originators of the concentration camps. In both chronicle and testimonial narrative Primo Levi adheres closely to a description of the immediate experience of the lager. It is only upon his return home that he is able to give any thought to the political leaders, bureaucrats and functionaries who conceived of and made concrete the abomination of Auschwitz. Thus it is after a period of several years and, no doubt, much reflection that Levi is able to

comment upon the culpability of Hitler, Eichmann and those industrialists who made their money out of the suffering and death of the victims of the lager. His reactions are recorded not in terms of an article of denunciation but rather in verse in "Per Adolf Eichmann" (OI,p.30), written in 1960, the year of Eichmann's trial, and "Annunciazione" (OI, p.42), written in 1979. In the latter poem an angel arrives to announce the birth of a child, but this is not Gabriel announcing to Mary the birth of the Redeemer; in this antithetical situation the wild and ruffled messenger resembles more a bird of prey as he announces the birth of one who will preach lies and abomination, spread terror, and who "morrà non sazio di strage, lasciando semenza d'odio". Although no specific reference is made to Hitler, any reader of the post-Second World War period will see the dictator reflected in the poem. Sixteen years later, in 1985, Levi wrote "A giudizio" (O, II, p.626) in which a German manufacturer stands before a judge explaining what good quality felt he produced. We learn the nature of the wool from which the felt was produced when he describes the colours of it as black, brown, fair, blonde, grey and white. We learn the nature of the judge upon the pronouncement of the judgement "Discendi, tessitore".

Primo Levi's curiosity about the nature of those who allowed the perpetration of Auschwitz through their own passive acquiescence to its existence, first seen in his encounter with Doktor Pannwitz in *Se questo è un uomo*, is explored further in

his essay "Auschwitz, città tranquilla" (RS, pp.43-7). The placing of this essay in the collection has a dramatic, thought-provoking effect because it is situated amongst fictional short stories. It recounts the story of Mertens, a German Catholic counterpart of Levi being a chemist of about the same age, who accepted a transfer to Auschwitz, where he went with his wife as a salaried, free employee, despite being advised by colleagues not to go, and even having made a preliminary visit to Auschwitz. He refuses to speak of his experiences until a few years after the war when he is interviewed by the historian and camp survivor, Hermann Langbein, to whom he says that he went to Auschwitz in order to prevent a Nazi being sent in his place. He says that he never spoke to the prisoners for fear of punishment, although he tried to alleviate their work conditions, and that he knew nothing of the gas chambers. When asked if he did not realise that his obedience helped Hitler's regime, he replies that he does now, but it never crossed his mind then. Levi writes to Mertens expressing his view that Hitler rose to power, devastated Europe and ruined Germany, because of good German citizens like Mertens, who tried not to see and kept quiet about what they did see. No reply is received.

It is in this essay that Primo Levi states the limits of chronicle to explore the nature of the human individual. In a reflection which would seem to confound those critics who

misinterpret the words of Adorno upon the writing of poetry after the Holocaust Levi writes:

Sono usciti centinaia di libri sulla psicologia di Hitler, Stalin, Himmler, Goebbels, e ne ho letti decine senza che mi soddisfacessero: ma è probabile che si tratti qui di una insufficienza essenziale della pagina documentaria; essa non possiede quasi mai il potere di restituirci il fondo di un essere umano: a questo scopo, più dello storico o dello psicologo sono idonei il drammaturgo o il poeta (RS, p.43).

Thus chronicle can state the historical facts and recount the actions of those involved, but it cannot interpret the facts, nor explain the motivation behind them. To return to the discussion of Berdyaev's concept of the three dimensions of time, as referred to in the previous chapter, chronicle can therefore be seen as being narrated in terms of cosmic and historical time, that is, events are described according to calendar reckoning and the linear succession of events. Chronicle is primarily concerned with the general experience of a mass of humanity, not with existential time, with the subjective experience of the individual who may form part of that mass.

As already noted, the passive voice in the *Rapporto* results in the anonymity of the oppressors, but this cannot be considered the prime purpose of its usage. The essential function of the passive mood can only be appreciated when it is contrasted directly with the active mood. The use of the

passive serves to divert the reader's attention away from the subject of each sentence towards the action being perpetrated.

M. Sensini explains in *La grammatica della lingua italiana*:

la forma attiva, proprio perché evidenzia chi compie l'azione, è particolarmente adatta a indicare la partecipazione di chi parla o di chi scrive ai fatti narrati. Invece, la forma passiva sottolinea maggiormente l'azione e, quindi, è più adatta per presentare il fatto in sé, con un certo distacco cronachistico.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, through the use of the passive voice the authors of the report are able both to depersonalize their own involvement in the events described and also to present an account in which it is the event which is important in its own right, unalloyed by personal, possibly emotional, description. It is the fact which stands in the foreground, unencumbered by details of those who are the subject of the action and those who are subject to the action. The tone of the account is therefore rendered dispassionate, in keeping with that of a clinical report.

The passive voice is expressed in several ways in the *Rapporto*, one of these being the use of the '*si*' passivante, as exemplified in the description of the suffering endured during the journey to Auschwitz:

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<sup>17</sup> M. Sensini, *La grammatica della lingua italiana*, collaborazione F. Roncoroni, Milano, Mondadori (Gli Oscar), 1990, p.227.

Altro tormento, quello della sete, che non si poteva spegnere se non con la neve raccolta in quell'unica fermata quotidiana, allorchè il convoglio sostava in aperta campagna e si concedeva ai viaggiatori di scendere dai vagoni, sotto la strettissima sorveglianza di numerosi soldati (R, p.536).

In this example the authors have used "non si poteva spegnere" instead of "non potevamo spegnere", even though they were amongst the group of people who were unable to slake their thirst. The emphasis is upon the thirst and its nature, as though the thirst in its own right were an evil and ever present being. Thus, the stress of the sentence is upon the fact that the thirst was a "tormento" which could not be quenched, rather than upon the victims of the thirst or their efforts to satisfy it. Similarly, in the phrase "si concedeva ai viaggiatori di scendere dai vagoni, sotto la strettissima sorveglianza di numerosi soldati" the emphasis is placed upon the permission to get out of the wagons, rather than upon either those who grant the permission or those who are permitted to get out. Indeed, we do not find out who it is that permits the action, for the clause relating to the soldiers supervising the action is divorced from the verb itself. Both "soldati" and "viaggiatori" are, in different ways, subject to the anonymously granted permission. However, this should not be read as an exoneration of the actions of both parties because if we read the rest of the sentence we see that the permission is granted to each of the groups of participants under very different terms. The unarmed

"viaggiatori" are allowed to get out of the wagons only once they are in open countryside and under the supervision of soldiers who are "pronti, col fucile mitragliatore sempre spianato, a far fuoco su chiunque avesse accennato ad allontanarsi dal treno" (p.536).

The passive voice is also expressed by the use of the auxiliary verb *essere* with the past participle of the given verb. This can be seen in the account of the prisoners' induction to Auschwitz:

Appena giunto al Campo, il gruppo dei 95 uomini fu condotto nel padiglione delle disinfezioni dove tutti i suoi componenti furono tosto fatti spogliare e quindi sottoposti a una completa e accurata depilazione [...]. Dopodichè, essi furono introdotti nella camera delle docce e quivi rinchiusi fino al mattino seguente. [...] Finalmente, verso le ore 6 del mattino seguente, essi furono sottoposti a una frizione generale con una soluzione di lisolo e poi a una doccia calda (R, p.536).

The chronology of the events is clearly expressed, and the passive voice heightens the impression that these events are undergone by the prisoners whether they will or no and not as a result of any conscious intention on their part. Indeed the irrelevance of the prisoners' conscious will is highlighted by the shift in noun from "uomini" to "componenti". What is more, the involvement of others in this sequence of events is tacitly understood, but not elaborated upon. It is not explained who

it is that leads the men to the disinfection ward, who makes them undress, who shaves them, who tells them to go into the shower-room, who closes the door upon them, nor who carries out the disinfection and showering process. In the *Rapporto* is the experience which is of scientific interest, and this is reflected in the terse narrative style; it is not the actions or reactions of the individuals involved which are of interest, and these are only comprehended when we read the opening pages of *Se questo è un uomo* in which the narrative account is subjective rather than objective.

The men's initial reactions to Auschwitz are described in much more detail in *Se questo è un uomo*, and the traumatic nature of the induction process becomes more evident. The confusion and painful uncertainties of the first few hours in the camp are highlighted, rather than the bureaucratic organization of the induction process. The description in the *Rapporto* takes just a paragraph, whereas in *Se questo è un uomo* it covers several pages. Those who carry out the procedures are described, their words reported, and sometimes their names are given; the SS officer who gives the men their first instructions; the German who opens the door to let in the icy winds so that he can watch the reaction of the naked men; the barbers who rough handle them; Fleisch, the German veteran of the First World War, who acts as interpreter but has difficulty delivering the "frasi tedesche piene di gelo", and for whom Levi feels "un istintivo rispetto perché sento che ha

cominciato a soffrire prima di noi" (*SQ*, p.26). This reference to Flesch was not included in the 1947 De Silva edition and was added to later editions, perhaps as a mark of the respect that Levi felt towards the man who helped the new arrivals to gain some understanding of the alien universe in which they had found themselves. On those occasions where no particular person is mentioned as being the agent of an action the third person plural is used, as for example when Levi writes "ci hanno fatti entrare in una camera vasta e nuda" (*SQ*, p.23). This usage differs a little from the passive formation in that the agents of the action are defined as 'them' (that is, definitely not 'us'), as opposed to 'someone/anyone in general' (that is, someone/anyone who is not 'us'). It also implies a shared knowledge between author and reader as to who 'they' are, in this case the Nazi guards.

On occasion in the *Rapporto* instead of *essere* the auxiliary verb *venire* is used with the participle as, for example, in the description of the shoes distributed to the prisoners:

Si poteva ritenere fortunato colui che veniva in possesso di scarponi della giusta misura ed appaiati. Quando deteriorati, essi venivano riparati infinite volte, [...]. Non venivano distribuiti lacci da scarpe, i quali venivano sostituiti da ogni singolo con pezzi di funicelle di carta attorcigliata o di filo elettrico, quando era possibile trovarne (*R*, p.537).

The use of *venire* in its simple forms instead of *essere* in passive constructions is quite common, but has a different nuance. *Venire* is often used when it is necessary to indicate the contemporaneity of the action. Instead of "non erano distribuiti lacci da scarpe", which would indicate that laces were never distributed, the authors write "non venivano distribuiti", which implies that each time the shoes were distributed laces were not, highlighting the pettiness of the organization of the camp. Similarly, "i quali venivano sostituiti" suggests that the laces had to be frequently replaced owing either to several changes of shoes, for reasons not here described, or to the deterioration of the substitutive materials; whereas "i quali erano sostituiti" would have implied that once a substitution was made there no longer existed a problem about tying one's shoes. The frequent changes of footwear are indicated by the phrase "colui che veniva in possesso di scarponi della giusta misura". Were the authors to have written "colui che era in possesso" it could have meant either that the prisoners retained their own footwear or that they were given shoes upon entry to the camp which they retained throughout their existence there, and that those people who were in possession of a good pair were fortunate. This latter idea would also have been fostered by the phrase "colui che era venuto in possesso". So, the passive construction adopted by the authors is carefully chosen to give as precise a description as possible of the depersonalized

bureaucratic organization of the camp. In addition it also reflects its unvarying continuity.

In *Se questo è un uomo* the bureaucracy surrounding the distribution of the shoes is revealed in all of its frightening and ridiculous pettiness. Levi refers to the "cerimonia del cambio delle scarpe" (SQ, p.39) in which the inmates must choose by sight a single suitable shoe without the possibility of a second attempt. The shoe is such an everyday item of apparel that one rarely gives much attention to it. It is usually the absence of shoes which gives rise to concern, frequently being an indicator of social poverty. When one thinks of inmates of Nazi concentration camps one is immediately able to conjure up an image of the striped jacket, trousers and cap that were distributed to them, and which are frequently seen in the photographic records. However, little regard is paid to the footwear, and yet Levi devotes an entire paragraph to the effects of the footwear, stating "la morte incomincia dalle scarpe" (SQ, loc. cit.). This is a paragraph that did not appear in the original edition but which was subsequently added. The ill-fitting footwear explains the "curioso passo impacciato" (SQ, p.21) of the concentration camp inmate, noted not only by Primo Levi upon his arrival at Auschwitz, but also by many other chroniclers of the camps. The inmates were not allowed to retain their own footwear. Instead, as described in the *Rapporto*, shoes were distributed which were made within the camp specifically for the inmates.

These were concocted of a wooden sole to which was nailed an upper of leather, rubber or cloth, they were repeatedly repaired, and were entirely unsuitable for the long, daily march to work. Ill-fitting shoes led to infected wounds on the feet, which might lead to entry into hospital. However:

entrare in ospedale con la diagnosi di "dicke FüÙsse" (piedi gonfi) è estremamente pericoloso, perché è ben noto a tutti, ed alle SS in ispecie, che di questo male, qui, non si può guarire (SQ, pp.39-40).

Thus, the rigid bureaucracy of the camps becomes evident through a reading of the *Rapporto*, but it is only in the testimonial narrative, *Se questo è un uomo*, that the effects of that bureaucracy can be appreciated. The inmates were deprived of their own footwear, provided with purpose-made and yet entirely unsuitable footwear, and it was this which led to the suffering and death of thousands of people whose own shoes form part of the mounds of confiscated footwear which now constitute a tragic memorial to their owners. Reduced by the Nazis to the level of the non-human and with a maximum 'viability' of only twelve weeks, the inmates were deprived even of the humble nobility of being adequately shod for the work that they were forced to carry out.

Active verbs are rarely used in the *Rapporto*, but it is interesting to note that one of the rare exceptions to this rule occurs in the description of Monowitz, where "sorgeva un campo di concentramento dipendente amministrativamente da

Auschwitz, da cui distava circa 8 Km" and which "ospitava da 10.000 a 12.000 prigionieri". The use of active verbs is continued in the next paragraph which describes the "Buna-Werke", or factory intended to produce synthetic rubber, which "occupava un'area rettangolare di circa 35 Km. quadrati" (R, p.536). Nearby "sorgeva un Campo di concentramento per prigionieri di guerra inglesi" (R, loc. cit.). Thus the camp itself becomes almost personified because of the unusual use of active verbs. The prisoners become objectified appurtenances of the camp as a result of the use of the passive mood applied in their respect. One of the few occasions when active verbs are used to describe the inmates occurs immediately after the description of the camp and the "Buna-Werke" when it is stated that:

la popolazione intera del Campo [...] sfilava inquadrata in ordine perfetto, al suono di una banda, che suonava marce militari e allegre canzonette, per recarsi ai luoghi di lavoro [...]. Prima della partenza per il lavoro e dopo il ritorno da questo, aveva luogo ogni giorno la cerimonia dell'appello (R, loc. cit.).

Thus it is not the suffering of the individual which is highlighted but rather the nature of the camp's routine as performed by the mass of inmates.

The routine of the camp is also reflected in the organisation of the *Rapporto*. Apart from the opening paragraph which forms a preface stating the purpose of the report, the

body of the document describes the physical nature of the camp as experienced from arrival to liberation. The description is formed of a narrative which can be divided into four distinct sections: the first section deals with the deportation, the train journey, the arrival, as well as the clothing, accommodation, food, personal hygiene and work of the camp; the second section is divided into a discussion of the six main illnesses encountered in the camp; the third section explains the set-up of the hospital; the final section details the organization of the hospital, the selections and gas chambers, the training course which was due to start but which was interrupted by the advance of the Allied armies, and the final days of the camp.

The vocabulary is formal, in keeping with the tone of a clinical report, and whilst fulfilling the function of providing documentation of the lager's organization it gives little indication of the nature of the camp as experienced by the individual inmate. Reference is made to "il corredo dei prigionieri di Monowitz" (R, p.536), "l'alloggio" (R, p.537), "il vitto" (R, p.538), and "il lavacro" (R, loc. cit.). These are terms which, under other circumstances, might refer to the organization of any large institution, and which in themselves give no indication of the actual conditions in Buna-Monowitz. A full description of each of the terms follows - a description of the clothing distributed, of the nature and condition of the accommodation, of the quantity and quality of the rations, and

the types of work carried out. For example, the description of the food rations begins "il vitto, insufficiente come quantità, era di qualità scadente" (R, p.538). There follows an account of what food was distributed, in what quantities and how frequently, what liquids were given and why the water supply to the camp was undrinkable. The facts regarding the daily food allowance are noticeably lacking in adjectival details. Apart from "insufficiente" and "scadente" the only other insight that we are able to glean come from the phrases "assolutamente insipida", "un po' più consistente" and "totalmente priva di condimenti grassi" (R, loc. cit.), all three phrases referring to the soup rations.

It is not until one reads *Se questo è un uomo* that the reader gains some conception of the insufficiency of the food rations both as regards quantity and quality. This is not expressed through any description of the food itself, which indeed is rarely described except in the context of the currency of barter, the reason for a brief respite from work, or the desperate search to find something edible to supplement the meagre rations. Instead the insufficiency of the rations is expressed by reference to the nature of the hunger endured by the prisoners, or rather, by reference to the inability of the author to fully describe the nature of that hunger. Indeed, at the same time Levi also gives the reader an insight into the insufficiency of the term "il corredo" to describe the clothing of the prisoners. In one of the best-known passages

of *Se questo è un uomo* Levi describes the onset of winter with all the suffering that it will involve. He writes:

Come questa nostra fame non è la sensazione di chi ha saltato un pasto, così il nostro modo di aver freddo esigerebbe un nome particolare. Noi diciamo "fame", [...] diciamo "inverno", e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. Se i Lager fossero durati più a lungo, un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato; e di questo si sente il bisogno per spiegare cosa è faticare l'intera giornata nel vento, sotto zero, con solo indosso camicia, mutande, giacca e brache di tela, e in corpo debolezza e fame e consapevolezza della fine che viene (*SQ*, pp.155-6).

The foregoing quotation encapsulates the difficulty of chroniclers of the Holocaust to convey fully the meaning of the experience about which they write. A report is intended to be a formal account of the author's observations of a situation which is destined to be read by some authority. Consequently the language used in the report should be formal and to a certain extent it is restricted because it must be in keeping with the initial purpose of the report. The *Rapporto* is a description of the sanitary conditions in Monowitz, intended to be read primarily by those in the medical profession. Other chroniclers, although they did not have a specific readership in mind, did have a particular purpose at the time of writing. Thus Bruno Vasari, who had been arrested as a partisan on the

6th November 1944 and who maintained his identity as such because he was able to remain in contact with certain colleagues during his internment in Mauthausen, wrote a brief account of his experience after his return home to Italy in June 1945. His book, *Mauthausen: bivacco della morte*, was published in August 1945, and was written:

per ricordare a tutti gli italiani lo spirito di sacrificio dei loro fratelli migliori che hanno combattuto per il ritorno della libertà nel loro paese e per mettere sotto gli occhi la triste strada che si percorre, fra stragi e delitti, quando si instaura la dittatura per ambizione di dominio.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently the text "ha il tono preciso e severo d'una documentazione",<sup>19</sup> and as Carlo Federico Grosso writes in the preamble, added to the text upon republication in 1991:

Il risultato ricorda piuttosto il modello della deposizione in giudizio: fatti, date, numeri su cui la parola non indugia, né insiste.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast *Se questo è un uomo* was written not as a formal account containing specific observations, but rather simply to bear witness to what the author and others had suffered in Buna-Monowitz. The model for this text is quite the opposite of a judicial deposition. In conversation with Ferdinando Camon Levi stated that:

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<sup>18</sup> B. Vasari, *Mauthausen: bivacco della morte*, Firenze, La Giuntina, 1991, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> B. Vasari, *Mauthausen: bivacco della morte*, p.14.

<sup>20</sup> B. Vasari, *Mauthausen: bivacco della morte*, p.5.

mi sono astenuto dal formulare giudizi in *Se questo è un uomo*. L'ho fatto deliberatamente, perché mi sembrava inopportuno, anzi importuno, da parte del testimone, che sono io, sostituirsi al giudice; quindi ho sospeso ogni giudizio esplicito, mentre sono presenti chiaramente i giudizi impliciti (C, p.20).

Thus in testimonial narrative the author is a witness to the events detailed, whereas the author of chronicle assumes the position of an observer of those same events. Although both an observer and a witness provide evidence of the event that took place, the nature of an observer is to watch and record, usually with a particular brief in mind, and without giving any indication that he or she was also perhaps a participant, whereas that of a witness is to testify to the event as one who was present and had personal experience of that event in order that those receiving the evidence can formulate their own opinion. This testimony is accorded greater depth when one also takes into consideration other meanings of the term "witness", as listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, to wit "knowledge, understanding, wisdom", and also "applied to the inward testimony of the conscience".<sup>21</sup> Thus, whereas an observer takes note of the the events as they unfold the witness testifies to their own consciousness of those events. In testimonial narrative subjective comment is as valuable as objective comment, if not more so.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. II, ed. C.T. Onions, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, p.2562.

## 2.2: IMAGERY AND HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

As I have previously discussed in the section on time, for Primo Levi, along with many survivors of the concentration camps, his period of captivity in Auschwitz was one which existed outside of normal human timescales and, moreover, one which bore no relationship to the nature of everyday human affairs. Thus the recording of such experience takes on Herculean proportions, for how is one to express the inexpressible, to reduce the ineffable to the effable without diminishing the gravity of the experience? The Holocaust may be seen as a hiatus in the life of the survivors, but it is essential that it must not be understood as an historical hiatus, that is, we must attempt to leave no gap in our knowledge of the Holocaust, for to do so would be to leave Holocaust experience outside the boundaries of historical understanding, not simply to marginalise it but to exclude it, and finally to negate it. The task of the survivor, therefore, is to bring the experience within the bounds of the understanding of the readers, and to do this the writer must have recourse to existing syntax, vocabulary and imagery. As James E. Young in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* comments:

How victims of the Holocaust grasped and responded to events as they unfolded around them depended on the available tropes and figures of their time no less than our own responses now depend on the figures available to us in a post-Holocaust era.<sup>22</sup>

In the telling of the events there is however a paradox because the use of available language and imagery in order to render the events available to the reader necessarily distorts to some extent the reader's understanding of the events. James E.

Young continues:

Like other elements of narrative, the figures and archetypes used by writers to represent the Holocaust ultimately create as much knowledge of events as they would reflect; and like other mediating elements in language, these figures screen as much of the realities as they would illuminate.<sup>23</sup>

This is because:

even though these events were indeed like no others, as soon as we [...] represent them in any fashion, we necessarily grasp them in relation to other events; even in their unlikeness, they are thus contextualized and understood in opposition to prevailing figures, but thus figured nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, p.84.

<sup>23</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p.84.

<sup>24</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p.88.

To some extent the survivors of the Holocaust are making use of the same weapon that the Nazis employed so dreadfully against them. As commentators of Holocaust memory have noted, the Nazis had what James E. Young terms "a profound grasp of both 'archetypal thinking' and its practical implications".<sup>25</sup> He argues that by employing the use of the yellow star, the ghetto, Jewish councils, and principal dates of the Jewish calendar the Nazis encouraged Jewish communities to perceive their current situation in the light of previous discrimination against them. Young writes that:

By thus lulling their victims into an analogy, as it were, by recreating all previous persecutions, the Nazis were actually able to screen from view *the difference* of the present persecution until it was too late.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the writer of Holocaust testimonial narrative has an additional problem, because if it was not possible for the victims of Nazi persecution to perceive the enormity of the circumstances in which they found themselves, it must be doubly difficult to communicate that enormity after the event to non-victims. Those writing testimonial narrative are, in effect, making use of the same archetypal thinking but for the opposite purpose, that is to expose rather than to screen.

In *Se questo è un uomo* Primo Levi records his own difficulty in comprehending the radically different nature of the

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<sup>25</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p.94.

<sup>26</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p.94.

persecution that he was suffering in the very face of all the evidence to the contrary. In the chapter in which he recalls his stay in Ka-Be, the hospital block, he tells of a conversation with two fellow patients, Walter and Schmulek. Levi's ideas about the fate that awaits the inmates are confused and the general response to his questions is silence. Levi is unaware of the naivety of his questions until Schmulek tries to enlighten him, pointing out the discrepancy between the tattooed number on Levi's arm, 174 517, and the actual number of inmates, perhaps thirty thousand in total. Schmulek demands of Levi "Wo sind die Andere? dove sono gli altri?" But Levi cannot be convinced of the truth about selections, gas and the crematoria of which he has heard talk. His reply of "Forse trasferiti in altri campi ...?" (*SQ*, p.64) would make sense in the world outside the camp, but appears wilfully ignorant within the confines of the Lager. It takes the evidence of his own eyes to convince him of the reality of the nature of the death to which the rumours refer following the selection of Schmulek himself. At this point Levi looks at Schmulek "e dietro di lui ho visto gli occhi di Walter, e allora non ho fatto domande" (*SQ*, p.65). The only response to such an event can be silence. It is Walter who breaks the silence following Schmulek's departure by asking Levi how he manages to conserve his bread ration for so long and explaining the finer points of how to cut the bread. Thus the only possible end to the silence is a conversation which concerns the victim's adaptation to and means of prolonging existence in the camp.

Levi writes "Walter mi spiega molte cose" (SQ, p.65); the last link with the world outside the camp is broken, for with the destruction of the belief that people cannot behave in the way that the Nazis are rumoured to behave Levi understands that the only realities which exist in Auschwitz are existence or annihilation, and that in order to exist he must learn to adapt to the norms of the camp. This understanding is made explicit in the last sentence of the chapter in which Levi declares:

Nessuno deve uscire di qui, che potrebbe portare al mondo, insieme col segno impresso nella carne, la mala novella di quanto, ad Auschwitz, è bastato animo all'uomo di fare dell'uomo (SQ, p.68).

Consequently, at the end of the chapter concerning Levi's stay in Ka-Be which relates the conditions in which the sick are treated in Auschwitz Primo Levi has finally come to an understanding of the true nature of the lager. It is whilst suffering physical sickness that he is unequivocally brought up against the spiritual disease upon which the concentration camp system is founded, that which not only allows human beings to treat others in this fashion, but which actually intends that the victims should so suffer and that they should die before they can inform others. The very phrase "portare al mondo" indicates Levi's consciousness that he is now no longer part of the world of humanity which exists outside the enclosure of the camp.

We observe the world around us in terms of our own humanity, and thus we relate to it accordingly. It is easy enough to conceive of the "subhuman" or the "inhuman", and literature is filled with novels depicting examples of both categories from *Frankenstein* to *Silence of the Lambs*. The term "non-human" however is more difficult to conceive of as it essentially has no connection with that which is human, it exists outside our scope of reference. Our difficulty with the term can perhaps best be seen by examination of our relations with the animal kingdom. If we say that people are acting "like animals" we mean that they are behaving in a "non-human" fashion; similarly if we say of an animal that "it could almost be human" we imply that it has a quality that we respect or which endears it to us. Those animals which have most qualities which render them "almost human" tend to be treated well in most economically stable countries, often actually treated as part of the family, as with cats, dogs, some birds and rodents and occasionally farmyard animals. Those animals which are farthest from our concept of what is "almost human" tend to be treated, even in the most enlightened countries, as fair game, literally, and are consequently hunted, used as forced labour or bred for consumption. As Milan Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, "the right to kill a deer or a cow is the only thing all of mankind can agree upon, even during the bloodiest of wars", and as theological and philosophical authorities for such a right human beings refer to Genesis and

Descartes, the latter having posited that a beast is simply a "machina animata".<sup>27</sup>

There exists no generally accepted prior image of what it is to be "non-uomo" to which Primo Levi can refer when attempting to depict the degraded state of the concentration camp victim, in particular the Jewish inmates. Treated as vermin by the Nazis they were effectively dealt with as a species which was "other than human". They too became fair game, being used as slave labour and considered as commodities, being stripped of all appurtenances, both external in the form of clothing and all belongings, and intimate in the form of hair. As we know from various records of the Holocaust, the pillaging of the inmates' bodies went even beyond these bounds. The final debasement was the use of Cyclon-B, a pesticide, as the method of extermination in the gas chambers.

In order to depict the level of degradation to which the victims of Buna-Monowitz have been reduced Primo Levi must therefore make use of imagery to allow his reader to have some comprehension of their state. In the main he chooses animal imagery as that which will best communicate his meaning, and it is apparent that this is often how the inmates viewed themselves. As a new *Häftling* he is rebuked for his lack of attention to personal cleanliness by Steinlauf, a fellow victim

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<sup>27</sup> M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. M.H. Heim, London & Boston, Faber and Faber, 1990, pp.286-288.

of the camp, who explains that "appunto perché il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie, noi bestie non dobbiamo diventare" (SQ, p.48), and in order to avoid this personal reduction Levi must wash himself, however futile such an activity may appear to be. However, this activity on its own cannot save the prisoners from the diminution of their humanity, and just a few pages further on Levi states "noi non siamo che bestie stanche" (SQ, p.52). The use of a metaphor here rather than a simile indicates that the transformation of the prisoners to a bestial state is complete, not simply with regard to their outward appearance but also in terms of their conception of themselves.

Various constructs of the term "bestia" recur throughout *Se questo è un uomo*. Of the Allied air-raids of August 1944, which temporarily disrupt the activity of Auschwitz but do not destroy it, Levi writes that the prisoners were forced to "tremare come bestie" by the force of the raids, from which they had no protection, but that the new dangers did not arouse fear in the prisoners who had already been destroyed by the conditions of the camp, but rather "il torpore opaco delle bestie [...] a cui non dolgono più le percosse" (SQ, p.149); the prisoners fight for the scraps of food thrown to them by the civilian workers "bestialmente e senza ritegno" (SQ, p.153); Levi recounts that in the final days of the abandoned camp "l'opera di bestializzazione, intrapresa dai tedeschi trionfanti, era stata portata a compimento dai tedeschi

disfatti" (SQ, p.217); his judgement of the new Kapo, Alex, is that he proved himself to be "un bestione violento e infido, corazzato di solida e compatta ignoranza e stupidità" (SQ, p.139).

The human being is reduced to the "animale-uomo" (SQ, p.109) by Auschwitz, and Levi is aware that to the civilians that they come into contact with their babel of tongues must sound like "voci animali" (SQ, p.152). Metaphors and similes regarding the behaviour or condition of the inmates frequently contain animalistic associations and many of these relate to three particular types of animal - sheep, chickens and dogs. The group behaviour of the anonymous mass of prisoners is repeatedly referred to in terms reflecting the mindless, subservient nature of a flock of sheep. Thrust unceremoniously into the terrifying and incomprehensible world of the camp, in which there is no offer of friendly advice to help them adapt, the new prisoners from Levi's convoy gather "istintivamente negli angoli, contro i muri, come fanno le pecore, per sentirci le spalle materialmente coperte" (SQ, p.45). Further on in the narrative Levi refers to the prisoners as the "sterminato gregge di schiavi" (SQ, p.148). Chicken imagery is used to describe the scrawny physical appearance of the inmates. When Alex, the Kapo of the Kommando Chimico, marches the volunteers off to take their chemistry examination they follow him like "sette goffi pulcini dietro la chioccia" (SQ, p.131). The simile expresses the awareness of the inmates of their degraded

and helpless condition, for earlier they have discussed the difficulty of passing such a test, not due to any lack of knowledge, but rather given their appearance, smell and inability to stand on legs weakened by hunger. Faced with the German women working in the laboratories the prisoners become fully aware of their degraded physical condition; they are dirty, smelly, flea-ridden, covered in filthy rags, physically repulsive and so wasted that they have "il collo lungo e nodoso come polli spennati" (SQ, p.179). Canine imagery is sometimes used to reflect the persistent nature of their suffering. Whilst working in the laboratory the inmates find themselves with a little more time to think because they are now working inside instead of expending valuable energy battling against the elements; but with the privilege of thinking comes also "la pena del ricordarsi [...] che mi assalta come un cane" (SQ, p.178). On another occasion, whilst sheltering indoors during the soup break, Levi describes how the damp clothes of the prisoners emit steam "con odore di canile e di gregge" (SQ, p.86), thus capturing by the use of two adjectival phrases the essence of the smell - both persistent and belonging to all the prisoners.

Where other animal imagery is used it implies a specific quality which raises the individual prisoner to the level of a "salvato", albeit temporarily, but the element of degradation remains. The new and violent Kapo of the Kommando Chimico, Alex, manages to maintain his position among the 'prominenten'

as a result of the fact that he is "corazzato di solida e compatta ignoranza e stupidità" (SQ, p.139), but Jean, known as Pikolo, slowly and cautiously makes himself indispensable to the Kapo in order to safeguard his own position and after a month "la difesa dell'istrice fu penetrata" (SQ, p.140). The prickly and unapproachable nature of Alex is highlighted by the analogy with the porcupine, but the defence which allows him to maintain his position also cuts him off from the world of other human beings.

Templer, who forms part of one of Levi's work details, is described in the chapter "Una buona giornata" as being able to find leftover soup to supplement the starvation rations to which they are subject:

Templer [...] ha per la zuppa dei Civili una sensibilità squisita, come le api per i fiori. [...] Templer parte seguendo piste impercettibili, come un segugio (SQ, p.94).

Here the canine imagery is refined but the element of persistence remains, heightened by the bee simile which emphasises Templer's single-minded concentration upon finding food. This is the sole goal of his existence on which even the functioning of his body centres, to the extent of being able to void his stomach contents at will in order to take in additional food.

There are several animal comparisons used with regard to two of the most notable of the "salvati" whom Levi describes -

Elias Lindzin and Henri. Levi writes of Elias that "quando è nudo, si distingue ogni muscolo lavorare sotto la pelle, potente e mobile come un animale a sé stante", adding "dalla sua persona emana un senso di vigore bestiale" (SQ, p.120); his abilities as a thief demonstrate "l'istintiva astuzia degli animali selvaggi" (SQ, p.122). More specifically, Elias is able to climb the scaffolding "come una scimmia" (SQ, p.120) despite the wooden soled shoes which he and all the other prisoners wear, and in front of the appreciative crowd before whom he performs ferocious scenes he paces about "come una belva" (SQ, p.122). The phrases used reflect the instinctive behaviour, ferocity and brute strength which allow Elias to survive in Auschwitz.

In contrast the imagery used in relation to Henri demonstrates his wiliness and cold calculation in deciding whose patronage to cultivate in his quest for survival. The parasitic nature of his existence is revealed by Levi's explanation of his method of providing himself with protectors:

Come l'icneumone paralizza i grossi bruchi pelosi, ferendoli nel loro unico ganglio vulnerabile, così Henri valuta con un'occhiata il soggetto, "son type"; gli parla brevemente, a ciascuno con il linguaggio appropriato, e il "type" è conquistato (SQ, p.125).

Henri's conquests are "vere galline dalle uova d'oro" (SQ, p.124), echoing the chicken imagery used of the mass of prisoners, but here symbolising those who are unsuspectingly

exploited. Henri speaks of his conquests, however, "come di prede di poco conto", and in the middle of a conversation he often leaves abruptly to go "alla sua caccia e alla sua lotta" (SQ, p.126). The feline nature of his attitude towards those upon whom he preys is reflected in the agility of his physical movements, for he can run and jump "come un gatto" (SQ, p.125), but the feline analogies belie the inner essence of Henri, for his sympathetic demeanour hides no human warmth. To the contrary, the simile which Levi uses to describe Henri's spirit is that of the ultimate evil, because he is:

nemico di tutti, inumanamente scaltro e incomprensibile come il Serpente della Genesi (SQ, p.126).

The use of the adverb "inumanamente" in regard to Henri echoes the adjective "extraumano" (SQ, p.122) employed in the description of Elias. Both are survivors, but despite, or perhaps indeed because of, their method of survival they are outside the boundaries which define the "uomini" and thus still belong to the category of the "non-uomini".

The animal imagery becomes even further debased in the final days of the decomposition of the camp. Whilst trying to gather the wherewithall to exist for a little longer the sick and debilitated prisoners drag themselves around the camp "come una invasione di vermi", and Levi writes that on the morning of the day prior to liberation "noi giacevamo in un mondo di morti e di larve" (SQ, p.216). The degradation of the prisoners is such that they are described in terms of the maggots which feed

off the dead. The analogy reflects that used earlier in the narrative in a cry from the heart when Levi describes the atrocious working conditions of the prisoners:

Oh poter affrontare il vento come un tempo facevamo, da pari a pari, e non come qui, come vermi vuoti di anima! (SQ, p.87).

The simile reflects not only the debased condition of the prisoners, but also their complete subjugation to the will of their Nazi masters.

In contrast to the epithet "uomo", as discussed in the previous chapter, is the epithet "cosa" which is the final aim of the "opera di bestializzazione" (SQ, p.217) undertaken by the Nazis. Levi considers the non-humanity of his fellow victims, overwhelmed by hunger and illness, in the last days of the camp and comments that:

Parte del nostro esistere ha sede nelle anime di chi ci accosta; ecco perché è non-umana l'esperienza di chi ha vissuto giorni in cui l'uomo è stato una cosa agli occhi dell'uomo (SQ, p.217).

Levi together with Charles and Arthur, the two young French victims with whom he shares the final days, are to some extent exempt from this culture of non-humanity because their cooperation following the abandonment of the camp has led to the re-awakening of their submerged humanity. Another companion of their final days is Sómogyi, once a Hungarian chemist, now a fellow victim of the camp who lies dying in their midst,

wracked by a delirium which causes him to utter "Jawohl" at each painful exhalation of breath. He dies during the night of the 26th January 1945, the day before the arrival of the Russian liberators, and at the moment of death hurtles to the floor from his pallet. At dawn it is not the body of a man that can be seen lying on the floor, but rather "l'infame tumulto di membra stecchite, la cosa Sómogyi" (SQ, p.218).

There is a paradox in Levi's account of the death of the victim who has been reduced to an object by Auschwitz, for although Sómogyi is referred to as a "cosa" he is also referred to by his name; his is not the anonymous death of so many thousands of the victims of Nazi annihilation. In addition his death-fall is noted in some detail and even commented upon by his companions. Levi writes "ho udito l'urto delle ginocchia, delle anche, delle spalle e del capo" (SQ, p.217) rather than commenting simply that he heard "l'urto del corpo", whereas Arthur comments of "L'pauvr' vieux" that "La mort l'a chassé de son lit" (SQ, p.217). There is even a perfunctory funeral ceremony as Sómogyi's body is tipped onto the frozen, grey snow next to a ditch overflowing with heaps of corpses. In this universe where death is stripped of all dignity a mark of respect is paid to Sómogyi's corpse both in deed and in desire by Charles, who takes off his prison cap, and by Primo Levi, who wishes that he had a cap in order that he could follow suit.

The episode of Sómogyi's death can be compared to that of Schmulek's departure for the gas chamber in the chapter entitled "Ka-Be". On both occasions Levi is a witness, together with one or more fellow inmates, of the final moments, if not of the actual death: in the case of Schmulek Levi is not present at that point, and in the case of Sómogyi Levi hears the death-fall but is unable to see the corpse in the dark. Schmulek's death brings about an understanding in Levi of his own reduction to the level of those considered "non-uomini". The only possible reaction to Schmulek's death in this universe of annihilation in which he is trapped is silence followed by a discussion of how to survive. The reaction of Levi, Arthur and Charles to Sómogyi's death, on the other hand, reflects both their understanding of the level to which they had been reduced, that of an object, but also their reawakening sense of their own humanity.

The use of active verbs in the *Rapporto*, when taken in conjunction with the use of the passive mood to describe the conditions endured by the inmates, gives the impression of the personification of Buna-Monowitz. In *Se questo è un uomo* this personification is echoed by the use of imagery regarding the lager. It is seen as a grotesque entity, alien and sterile, the "gran macchina" to which Steinlauf refers (SQ, p.48). Primo Levi describes the grey barrenness of Buna, saying "nulla è vivo se non macchine e schiavi: e piú quelle di questi" (SQ, p.90). By using the term "questi" rather than "noialtri" he

distances Levi the writer from Levi the "schiavo" and hence heightens the comparison of the latter with the machines in Buna. The blurring of the boundary between human being and machine is taken a step further by Levi's reference to the exhausted prisoners marching to work in the murky darkness before daybreak, watched by the SS guards. As described by Levi their gait is that of the automaton:

Non c'è piú volontà: ogni pulsazione diventa un passo, una contrazione riflessa dei muscoli sfatti. I tedeschi sono riusciti a questo. Sono diecimila, e sono una sola grigia macchina (SQ, p.62).

The concept of animated machinery with a life force of its own, as compared to the soulless human slave-machines working alongside is most vividly portayed in Levi's description of the excavator which the prisoners watch as it avidly gobbles up earth in its mechanical jaws, reminding them of their own intense hunger. Giuseppe Grassano writes about Levi's description of the lager that "le cose d'intorno [...] talora s'animano in altrettante deformazioni oniriche".<sup>28</sup> The actions of the excavator are not described in technical terms but as though it is a living entity:

Al di là della strada lavora una draga. La benna, sospesi ai cavi, spalanca le mascelle dentate, si libra un attimo come esitante nella scelta, poi si avventa alla terra argillosa e morbida, e azzanna vorace, mentre dalla cabina di comando

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<sup>28</sup> G. Grassano, *Primo Levi*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia (Il Castoro, 171), 1981, p.35.

sale uno sbuffo soddisfatto di fumo bianco e denso. Poi si rialza, fa un mezzo giro, vomita a tergo il boccone di cui è grave, e ricomincia.

[...] Non riusciamo a svincolarci dallo spettacolo del pasto della draga (SQ, p.92).

We know from descriptions throughout *Se questo è un uomo* that the work of the prisoners is heavy manual labour, designed to break the spirit as well as the famished body. For the excavator, however, work gives visible satisfaction. Thus, even the machinery of the camp serves as an additional punishment for the prisoners.

This scene resembles that described by Helen Lewis, a Czechoslovak and a Jew who was deported to Terezín, then to Auschwitz, and finally to Stutthof. In her account of her experience entitled *A time to speak* she writes:

Our work was to level a hilly, sandy area, in preparation for a concrete mixer - The Machine - that was to spread concrete over it. The Machine assumed a sinister role in our lives. Sometimes we could see it in the distance, at other times it loomed large and menacing close behind us, forcing us to work harder and faster in its shadow. If The Machine had to wait, the foreman and the guard became nervous, and that spelled danger.<sup>29</sup>

In both *Se questo è un uomo* and *A time to speak* it can be seen that the human creatures are subservient to the needs of the

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<sup>29</sup> H. Lewis, *A Time to Speak*, Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, 1992, p.78.

machinery which forms part of the camp, and whilst the former are subject to a human-to-object transformation the mechanical devices undergo the reverse process.

The quasi-physical nature of the camp's existence is highlighted by Levi's reference to "la voce del Lager" (SQ, p.61) which is composed of the tunes played by the band each morning as the prisoners leave for work. The music is not intended to lighten the spirit or gladden the heart, rather:

questa musica è infernale. [...] I motivi sono pochi, [...]; marce e canzoni popolari care a ogni tedesco. Esse giacciono incise nelle nostre menti, saranno l'ultima cosa del Lager che dimenticheremo (SQ, p.61).

Similarly the whistle of a nearby building site which is part of the camp and which is heard throughout the night, forming part of the prisoners' dreams, is so closely associated with the camp and its work that "ne è divenuto il simbolo, e ne evoca direttamente la rappresentazione, come accade per certe musiche e certi odori" (SQ, p.74). These sounds, which could be comfortingly familiar in the world outside the camp, transmute into the sinister representations of the lager with their implicit threat of suffering and death. Their debased nature is indicated by the use of the verb "abbaiare" to denote the sound made by the air-raid alarms (SQ, p.175), a verb which conjures images of the ferocious guard-dogs in the lager. Thus the alarms warn the prisoners not so much of danger from without, but act as a reminder of the ever-present danger

within the camp. This transmutation is part of what Adam Epstein in his article entitled "Primo Levi and the Language of Atrocity" calls Levi's "negative understanding". He explains that Levi's representation of the camp "depends on a negative comparison with this world for its representation".<sup>30</sup>

The character of the camp is the antithesis of anything that one would expect to find in the world outside its confines. Even in the sunlight the camp remains grey and desolate. Levi writes that "questo sterminato intrico di ferro, di cemento, di fango e di fumo è la negazione della bellezza" (*SQ*, p.89). The Carbon Tower which the prisoners are building is compared to the Tower of Babel because its construction is based upon the Germans' "disprezzo di Dio e degli uomini" and as such it is "una bestemmia di pietra" (*SQ*, p.90).

The size of the camp is also commented upon when Levi states "la Buna è grande come una città" (*SQ*, p.90); the use of a simile here rather than a metaphor heightens the reader's understanding that although the camp may be as large as a city it does not possess the basic attribute of even the most derelict of cities - a sense of community. The analogy is echoed in "Il Campo Grande", the second chapter of *La tregua*, in which Levi is amongst the sick on a cart being taken from Buna to the the main camp of Auschwitz; he and his companions

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<sup>30</sup> A. Epstein, "Primo Levi and the Language of Atrocity", *Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies*, n.20, 1987, p.37.

are amazed at what they see, for they realize that "Buna-Monowitz [...] era un villaggio al confronto: quella in cui entravamo era una sterminata metropoli" (*T*, p.163). The use of the adjective "sterminato", paralleling its use earlier in relation to Buna, has a dual impact because although it means literally "limitless" it is derived from the verb "sterminare" meaning "to annihilate". Thus by the use of one adjective Auschwitz is described both in physical nature and in purpose, for this limitless region stretching out as far as the eye can see is intended for the purposes of annihilation of those within its orbit.

The realm of death and destruction is itself destroyed by the Allied bombardments, and after the abandonment of the camp by its Nazi guards, taking with them all those who are able to walk, the camp soon begins to decay. Just as the camp previously appeared to be the physical entity that the prisoner-slaves served, its personification continues during the period of its decline. Under bombardment "la Buna dilaniata giace sotto la prima neve, silenziosa e rigida come uno smisurato cadavere" (*SQ*, p.175), but the Germans repair the damage and the routine of the camp goes on as before, despite all indications of impending defeat of the Nazi forces. Levi feels that in doing so the Germans are merely following the dictates of their nature and the destiny which they have chosen, considering that:

se si ferisce il corpo di un agonizzante, la ferita incomincia tuttavia a cicatrizzare, anche se l'intero corpo morrà fra un giorno (SQ, pp.177-8).

The "agonizzante" referred to is the camp, and not the prisoners, although it is they who are suffering the agonies of an imposed death, and it is they, many of whom, will die within days because the Nazis insist upon carrying out their orders to kill up to the bitter end. The corruption of the lager is such that "appena morto, appariva già decomposto" (SQ, p.199), and the prisoners crawl about its decaying mass like maggots. The final pronouncement of death comes as a result of a gesture of gratitude on the part of one of Levi's companions of the last days, a thing unheard of during the life of the camp. This small act "voleva ben dire che il Lager era morto" (SQ, p.201).

It will be noted that although Primo Levi in his account of Buna-Monowitz is describing a way of existence which goes beyond the bounds of most human experience, the vocabulary and imagery that he uses are neither complex nor exotic. He uses lexical structures in such a way that the event can be interpreted by readers in terms of what is readily comprehensible. This is a frighteningly unfamiliar world for the reader, as it was for the inmate, yet Primo Levi has the difficult task of attempting to convey the sense of its alien nature without, however, alienating the reader.

In the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Ottobre 1944" Levi states unambiguously that the language of the camp was very different from that in the world outside, not simply because of the babel of languages that the prisoners had to contend with but because of the untold agonies that were part and parcel of everyday survival. He struggles to define terms, because words such as "fame" and "inverno" come from the universe beyond the electrified fence and bear no relation to the circumstances faced by the inmates of Auschwitz. There is nothing in the outside world which Levi can use as a direct comparison, and yet somehow he must find effective analogies in order to allow readers some insight into the nature of the lager. This is an impossible task. Adam Epstein states that "the camp can only ever be a metaphor for itself".<sup>31</sup> Ferdinando Camon, in conversation with Primo Levi, amplified this idea, commenting of the lager that it is "la metafora per eccellenza dell'uomo che fa male all'uomo" (C, p.27). He invites Levi's opinion on Walter Benjamin's pronouncement that:

il lager non è che un grado condensato di una condizione che è generale nel mondo. Il lager è anch'esso, insomma, speculare alla struttura di ogni società anch'esso ha i salvati e i sommersi, gli oppressori e gli oppressi (C, loc. cit.).

Levi refutes this idea and says that slogans such as "fabbrica uguale lager" and "scuola uguale lager" disgust him because

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<sup>31</sup> A. Epstein, "Primo Levi and the Language of Atrocity", p.36.

such statements are not true. However, he adds a rider because he continues:

possono valere come metafora. L'ho scritto io stesso in *Se questo è un uomo*, che il lager era uno specchio della situazione esterna, però uno specchio deformante (SQ, p.28).

Thus, just as the lager mirrors the world outside it, albeit as a grotesque reflection, it is via the use of everyday vocabulary, that is, of "parole libere" (SQ, p.156), and in particular by the use of imagery, however inadequate it may be, that Levi must attempt to communicate the nature of the experience of the lager.

The inadequacy of language in certain circumstances is commented upon in J.J.A. Mooij's analysis of the nature of metaphorical expression, *A study of metaphor*. In relation to the function of the metaphor it is stated that:

standard vocabulary with its more or less fixed rules of application and mutual interchangeability - however comprehensive and detailed it may be - is (fortunately) not comprehensive and detailed enough to cover in advance every situation that may present itself in the external world as well as in the human mind. Occasionally, new provisions have to be made when there are no words with the literal meaning required. In rhetoric this condition of an inadequate standard vocabulary used to be called 'inopia' and the provision for the deficiency by means of choosing an existing

word with some other literal meaning was called  
'catachresis'.<sup>32</sup>

Mooij goes on to assert that:

Given the limitations of our mental faculties it is of great value, regardless of the drawbacks involved, that, partly thanks to metaphors, we are able to give utterance to ideas or feelings which we otherwise could not have expressed at all (or far less efficiently).<sup>33</sup>

In the context of testimonial narrative the reference to metaphors may be taken as indicating metaphorical expression in its widest sense, that is, not just metaphor but also simile, synecdoche, metonymy, and other related figures of analogy.

In his testimonial narrative Primo Levi must perforce have constant recall to catachresis in order to compensate for the deficiencies of a language which has been formed over the centuries without the need to express the horrors that constitute Auschwitz. Levi's use of metaphorical expression reflects this fact. His figures of speech are devoid of ornate or over-complicated analogy and are easily assimilable for the reader. The Polish word "wstawac" which is the order to all the prisoners to get out of bed "cade come una pietra sul fondo di tutti gli animi" (SQ, p.78), a simile which effectively encapsulates the hardness and coldness of the word's meaning

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<sup>32</sup> J.J.A. Mooij, *A Study of Metaphor: On the Nature of Metaphorical Expressions, with Special Reference to Their Reference*, Amsterdam, New York & Oxford, North-Holland Publishing Company (North-Holland Linguistic Series, 27), 1976, p.13.

<sup>33</sup> J.J.A. Mooij, *A Study of Metaphor*, p.16.

for the prisoners, as well as the inevitability of the word being obeyed. The whittling away of precious moments of respite from oppressive exertion gnaws at the inmates "come un cancro rapido e vorace" (SQ, p.87), which summarises both the diseased thinking which lay behind the type of labour which they had to perform, and also the wasted and raddled physical state of those who were forced to do such work. The cold which afflicts the prisoners during the winter is "un nemico" (SQ, p.88); it is the cold which is seen as the immediate enemy of the prisoners rather than their guards. The simplicity of the metaphorical expression gives greater validity to the testimony of Levi. In this context complexity of speech would simply divert the attention away from the urgency of the narrative.<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that Primo Levi does not use more elaborate analogy when the occasion demands. One such instance occurs when, as a relative newcomer in the camp, his back-breaking work is briefly interrupted by the passing of a train. As he waits to let it pass the sight of an Italian carriage which forms part of the convoy causes a fleeting day-dream of escape and of telling his tale. However, at the passing by of the last truck:

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<sup>34</sup> For a detailed computer analysis of Levi's use of language in his writings discussed from the point of view of the author's linguistic style see Jane Nystedt's *Le opere di Primo Levi viste al computer: osservazioni stilolinguistiche*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993. In order to gain a more complete insight into psychological insights which a linguistic analysis of Levi's writings can provide it is worthwhile reading Nystedt's text in conjunction with Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo's Introduction to Primo Levi's *Opere*, vol.III, Torino, Einaudi, 1990.

come al sollevarsi di un sipario, ci sta davanti agli occhi la catasta dei supporti di ghisa, il Kapo in piedi sulla catasta con una verga in mano, i compagni sparuti, a coppie, che vengono e vanno (*SQ*, p.52).

The day-dream ends and he is back in Auschwitz, but the sight before him is in itself as unreal as the dream of escape. It is as though the curtain has risen upon the set of a play, with the actor taking the part of the tyrant raised on high above those actors who perform the role of slaves. However, this is no stage set and these are not actors and the unreality of this scene, as glimpsed by Levi and expressed by his choice of simile, serves to highlight the complete disjunction between Auschwitz and the world outside.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MOTIFS

There is no disjunction in Primo Levi's narration of Holocaust experience because his testimonial narrative expresses an awareness of the universality of human experience, that is, to be more specific, of the mythicization of subjective personal experience. As George Steiner writes, "mythology is more than history made memorable; the mythographer - the poet - is the historian of the unconscious".<sup>1</sup> The literary inspiration that Primo Levi received from the writings of Dante, Petrarch, Coleridge and Gozzano, and his interest in the phenomenology of time and its related symbol, the tree, demonstrate his understanding that the witness of human experience must attempt completeness of communication rather than simply scientific exactness.

#### 3.1: Dante and the Infernal Realms

Several critics have acknowledged the literary connections between Primo Levi and Dante, including Risa B. Sodi in *A Dante of our time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz*.<sup>2</sup> Levi himself, in an interview with Giuseppe Grassano, obliquely acknowledges this debt, although his reference to the *Divina Commedia* as a basic influence is made almost in passing, together with references to a number of other books that he has read.<sup>3</sup> In his

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<sup>1</sup> G. Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966*, London & Boston, Faber and Faber, 1990, p.200.

<sup>2</sup> R.B. Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz*, New York, Peter Lang (American University Studies, Series II, Romance Languages and Literature, vol.134), 1990.

<sup>3</sup> G. Grassano, *Primo Levi*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia (Il castoro, 171), 1981, p.10.

testimonial writing Dante's *Inferno* is often evoked, as might be expected in the circumstances.

In *Se questo è un uomo* the infernal allusions are apparent from the very moment of the prisoners' arrival at Auschwitz. The orders barked out by the Germans as the prisoners are forced to disembark from the wagons remind one of Cerberus, the guardian of the third circle of Dante's hell, and the monstrous canine guard of Virgil's Hades. The guard who escorts the prisoners to the gates of Auschwitz puts Levi in mind of Charon, the ferryman, who takes Dante and Virgil across the River Acheron. In the chapter "Sul fondo" there are several references to the *Inferno*, from the inscription "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" over the gates of Auschwitz which recalls the inscription over the portals of Hell in Canto III of the *Inferno*, to Levi's quotation of the cry of the Malebranche in Canto XXI that:

...Qui non ha luogo il Santo Volto,  
qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio!<sup>4</sup>

This quotation underlines Levi's realization that Auschwitz is a place bereft of human reason, that "qui non c'è perché" (SQ, p.32). In the *Inferno* the sinners, the barrators, are not allowed to raise their heads above the pitch, as do the swimmers in the Serchio, the river which runs through Lucca, but must struggle painfully, being submerged souls. This image prefigures Levi's discussion of the "sommersi", that is the

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<sup>4</sup> D. Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Inferno*, a cura di N. Sapegno, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1967, 20a ristampa, p.240.

"mussulmani", in the chapter "I sommersi e i salvati", which in turn returns us to the image of Cerberus who presides "sopra la gente che quivi è sommersa".<sup>5</sup> The image of the souls of the barrators being prodded by the pitchforks of the devils like lumps of meat in a broth recalls the actions of the Polish nurse in Ka-Be who prods Levi's body to indicate his moribund condition to another inmate.

Upon entry into the camp, Levi writes "questo è l'inferno" (SQ, p.23) and the comparison to the souls of Dante's hell is reinforced by Levi's comment that for the new arrivals "è come essere già morti" (SQ, loc. cit.). Indeed, at first the Dantean concept of "contrappasso", or the suffering endured complementing the nature of the sin committed, appears to be borne out, because the new inmates, who suffer excruciating thirst after their four day journey, must await their induction into Auschwitz in a room with a tap from which drinking is prohibited and which provides undrinkable water. In this twentieth century hell the damned inmates, like Tantalus, are placed with the desired object, but it is out of bounds and noxious. However, unlike Dante's sinners who, through the exercise of their own free will, have chosen hell as their eternal state by embracing their sin, the prisoners in Auschwitz find themselves there against their will and through no deed of their own. Comparison with the infernal souls is reinforced in the chapter "Sul fondo" in which the naked and

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<sup>5</sup> D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, p.69.

frozen prisoners line up ready to enter the camp and are so nonplussed by their experience that "ci sentiamo fuori del mondo e l'unica cosa è obbedire" (SQ, p.24). Similarly the naked and frozen souls wait on the banks of the Acheron before being taken to their infernal abode, and, as is pointed out by N. Sapegno, their nakedness is a sign of the misery of their condition.<sup>6</sup> The naked souls of the *Inferno* gather on the bank of the river Acheron:

Come d'autunno si levan le foglie  
l'una appresso dell'altra, fin che 'l ramo  
vede alla terra tutte le sue spoglie.<sup>7</sup>

As they await their journey across the first of Hell's rivers, divine justice spurs the souls "sì che la tema si volve in disio".<sup>8</sup> Levi uses an analogous simile when describing the prisoners marching out to work in the morning to the sound of the orchestra, but it is not desire which stimulates their mechanical movements, because:

le loro anime sono morte e la musica li sospinge, come il vento le foglie secche, e si sostituisce alla loro volontà (SQ, p.62).

John Freccero describes the leaf imagery as being "the most famous of classical similes indicating a cyclic view of human destiny".<sup>9</sup> Comparing the Dantean simile with its classical antecedents he goes on to state that:

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<sup>6</sup> D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, p.37.

<sup>7</sup> D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, p.38.

<sup>8</sup> D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, p.39.

<sup>9</sup> J. Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England, Harvard University Press, 1986, p.141.

The death of the *Inferno* is a decision and not a fate. It is also irreversible. For these leaves, there is not even the biological comfort of a collective spring to come.<sup>10</sup>

For the victims of Auschwitz, like the Dantean sinners, death is irreversible, but it is neither a decision nor a fate, it is imposed.

In the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Il canto di Ulisse", Primo Levi tells of the brief hour within the camp in which he attempted to teach Italian to a fellow inmate by reciting verses from canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno*. Just as Dante must take the long road to reach Paradise, so Pikolo has chosen the longest route to the kitchens so that he and Levi may walk for an hour without raising suspicion. Levi writes of the Ulysses episode "chissà come e perché mi è venuto in mente" (*SQ*, p.142) and indeed, although Pikolo as a beginner in the language naturally chooses to repeat the everyday words of the camp, "zup-pa, cam-po, ac-qua" (*SQ*, p.141), Levi's decision, spurred on by the necessity of the moment, is to teach Italian by means of one of the most complex passages of mediaeval Italian poetry. The choice of text, Dante's *Inferno*, is eminently suitable within the confines of Auschwitz; the choice of episode is perhaps a little more thorny. After all, why should Levi decide upon the Ulysses episode rather than the more universally known opening verses of canto I, or the story of Francesca and Paolo, renowned in music and painting, or

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<sup>10</sup> J. Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p.148.

indeed the canto which precedes the Ulysses episode, that in which the thieves continually metamorphose into serpents and return to their human form? This latter scene would appear to be particularly appropriate in view of the discussion of the nature of "uomini" and "non-uomini" in *Se questo è un uomo*.

This question is one which Giuseppe Grassano considers in his book *Primo Levi*. He writes:

V'è un significato allegorico, un simbolo evidente oltre il contingente riferimento a versi scolpiti nella memoria dalla consuetudine scolastica? Levi ne è convinto. [...] Il filo nascosto dell'episodio è [...] questo: riconfermarsi uomini con sentimenti, desideri, ricordi nello specchio di una poesia che è messaggio e conforto, "simbolo della fiducia umanistica ... nel valore della parola e della letteratura" (C. Varese, "Nuova Antologia", marzo 1959).<sup>11</sup>

In *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi discusses "Il canto di Ulisse" and his need to remember the verses of the canto which, at the time, was so strong that he would have given his food ration, "cioè sangue" (*SES*, p.112), to recall. Levi states that the poetic verses:

Mi permettevano di ristabilire un legame col passato, salvandolo dall'oblio e fortificando la mia identità. [...] Mi concedevano una vacanza effimera ma non ebete, anzi

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<sup>11</sup> G. Grassano, *Primo Levi*, pp.31-32.

liberatoria e differenziale: un modo insomma di ritrovare me stesso (*SES*, p.112).

It is this re-affirmation of self-identity which lies at the heart of the choice of episode. In the verse "Ma misi me per l'alto mare aperto" the assertion by Ulysses of his identity as an autonomous individual gains its power from the use of the verb "mettersi", the force of which "è un vincolo infranto, è scagliare se stessi al di là di una barriera" (*SQ*, p.143), impulses which Levi admits would be well-known to Pikolo as one of the inmates of the lager, although the barrier in Auschwitz is the electrified fence upon which many prisoners chose to hurl themselves rather than have enforced upon them by the Nazis the more lingering death preceded by diminution.

Primo Levi's interest in Ulysses is further seen in the anthology *La ricerca delle radici* in which he chooses a passage from Homer's *Odyssey*, explaining that Homer's poetry:

nasce da una speranza ragionevole: la fine della guerra e dell'esilio, il mondo ricostruito sulla pace conquistata attraverso la giustizia (*RR*, p.19).

The passage is taken from canto IX in which Ulysses, known to English-speaking readers of the *Odyssey* as Odysseus, takes revenge upon the monstrous Polyphemus for his brutal inhospitality by blinding him. Rather than just saving his skin, Levi believes that Ulysses wants to ensure that Polyphemus knows who the mortal was who defeated him, since Ulysses is "fiero del suo nome" (*RR*, loc. cit.). The passage

is presented under the title "Un uomo da nulla", reflecting the polarity of the themes of "uomo" and "non-uomo" which are so dominant in *Se questo è un uomo*. Pride in one's humanity, and in one's name as a symbol of that humanity, may well reflect Levi's own consciousness of the attempt to annihilate the humanity of the victim of the concentration camps by first erasing the name and substituting it with a number.

The importance of Ulysses as a literary source for Primo Levi is further highlighted in *I sommersi e i salvati*, in the chapter "Stereotipi" in which Levi posits that there are two categories of former prisoners - those who are silent because they feel themselves to be guilty, and those who have the urge to speak. He takes Francesca's words to Dante in canto V of *Inferno*, that there is "nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria",<sup>12</sup> and turns it on its head, saying that the urgency to recount one's tale can be a good thing when seated in the warmth in front of food and wine. He compares this urgency to that of Ulysses at the banquet at the court of the Phaeacians. On another occasion, in conversation with Giuseppe Grassano, he confesses:

spesso ho pensato a Ulisse quando arriva alla corte del Feaci. Stanco com'è passa la notte a raccontare le sue avventure. È comune a tutti i reduci raccontare quello che hanno fatto.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, p.65.

<sup>13</sup> G. Grassano, *Primo Levi*, p.12.

In the Phaeacian court Ulysses does not at first announce his name, but is eventually encouraged to do so when Alcinous asks him to tell of his adventures. The foregoing quotation is preceded by a reference to the author's need to tell his tale to all who would listen upon his return from Monowitz-Buna, in the same way as Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Parallels can easily be drawn between the latter and Ulysses, for both recount an epic voyage upon troubled seas and, if one considers Dante's Ulysses rather than Homer's, both are responsible for their shipmates' death and are present at the sinking of the ship with the hill, which is their goal, within sight. Moreover, both capture the complete attention of their audience and tell their tale in full measure with no interruption. In just such a way must Levi have felt as a returnee from an epic but horrific journey from which scarcely any other companion returned. He had watched other inmates die around him whilst the world outside Auschwitz was still visible beyond the fences. He had felt in some measure responsible for those deaths, despite his inability to alter the situation. Furthermore, he had felt a need to tell his tale to anyone who would listen.

Primo Levi's choice of the story of Ulysses, within the concentration camp universe, would seem to have a direct connection with his experience of time, as discussed in the first chapter. This becomes evident if one compares Dante's Ulysses with Homer's. In the essay "Dante's Ulysses: From Epic

to Novel", in which he considers the temporal element, John Freccero writes:

Homer's *Odyssey* [...] seems to reflect in the spatial circularity of the journey's trajectory a temporal circularity as well. The gem-like episodes are strung together as on a necklace, one set of events succeeding another quite independently while the strand measures ten years of the hero's life - Ulysses leaves Ithaca, has his adventures, and to Ithaca he returns.<sup>14</sup>

Dante's Ulysses returns to Ithaca but leaves again, and eventually he is drowned along with his crew. Freccero continues:

It is as if the poet had accepted the ancients' allegorical reading of Ulysses' trajectory as a spatialization of human temporality and then had transformed the circularity of the literal journey in order to have it correspond to a linear reading of human time.<sup>15</sup>

The image of drowned humanity is evident in *Se questo è un uomo* in which "i sommersi" are the "uomini in dissolvimento" (SQ, p.111).

The use of Dante as a source is rather more complex in *Lilith*. The title of the first story, "Capaneo", is a direct allusion to the Dantean representation of Capaneus,

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<sup>14</sup> J. Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p.137.

<sup>15</sup> J. Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p.139.

who defied Jove, in canto XIV of *Inferno*. Levi's Capaneus is Rappoport, a Polish inmate of Auschwitz who had studied medicine at Pisa and who summons for Levi "l'immagine spavalda di Capaneo" (*L*, p.9) as he defies the Allied bombs. The comparison with Capaneus continues when he insists upon recounting his philosophy to Levi and another inmate, Valerio, so that they can tell it to others, as well as the fact that:

Leon Rappoport ha avuto quanto gli spettava, non ha lasciato debiti né crediti, non ha pianto e non ha chiesto pietà. Se all'altro mondo incontrerò Hitler, gli sputerò in faccia con pieno diritto (*L*, p.11).

His pronouncement echoes that of Dante's Capaneo that "Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto",<sup>16</sup> which raises the question of what exactly is he, for after all his condition in the lager is just as abject as that of the other inmates. Valerio, a Pisan, is befriended by Rappoport in what appears to be an unlikely friendship for the latter is often cowering in the mud, his flaccid skin indicating his former plumpness, rather like Ciaccio in canto VI of *Inferno*. To Levi it is evident that:

per Rappoport Valerio rappresentava solo un pretesto per questi suoi momenti di vacanza mentale; per Valerio essi erano invece pegni di amicizia, della preziosa amicizia di un potente, elargiti con generosa mano a lui Valerio, da uomo a uomo, se non proprio da pari a pari (*L*, p.8).

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<sup>16</sup> D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, p.162.

Although unlikely and unequal the friendship is precious within the bounds of Auschwitz because for a brief moment of communication Rappoport is not only able to mentally escape the confines of the lager but he is also able to bestow humanity upon Valerio.

Pisa is once more evoked in the final story of *Lilít*, "Breve Sogno", in which a young English woman travelling by train in Italy upon reaching Pisa station utters Dante's invective against the city from *Inferno*, canto XXXIII, "Pisa. Vituperio de le genti" (*L*, p.244). The young man whose acquaintance she has made in the train compartment points out to her landmarks which recall the story of Ugolino. Thus Levi chooses to begin and end the collection with stories which evoke both Dante and Pisa, that is both literature and homeland, two concepts which had no place in Auschwitz but which frequently help to form and define human identity.

### **3.2: Petrarch, Gozzano and Dream**

There appears to be a further literary legacy in the writings of Primo Levi which as yet has been unexplored, that of Francesco Petrarca. The first sonnet of the *Rime sparse* ends with the words "quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno",<sup>17</sup> indicating that mortal life is transitory and reality does not consist of earthly concerns, however pressing they may appear

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<sup>17</sup> F. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, testo critico e introduzione di G. Contini, annotazioni di D. Ponchirolì, Torino, Einaudi, 1964, p.3.

to the human mind, but rather of the afterlife, conceived in terms of salvation or damnation. Thus Petrarch opens the collection of poems with a palinode; however, the earlier stance that the poet is recanting is not described for the reader at this stage, but becomes apparent through a reading of the following *Rime Sparse*; it is assumed that the reader is able to identify with the poet because the reader has a similar worldly lifestyle to the poet. This is what makes the poetry of Petrarch in many ways more approachable than that of Dante, for the reader traverses the same path as the poet and is aware of the many frailties of the human spirit as described by the latter, rather than following in the footsteps of Dante, the didactic poet and seer, who maps out the path of righteousness for the reader, who, if foolish enough not to heed the word of the mentor, is doomed for eternity. Although Dante leaves us in no doubt that he has been guilty of various sins, and suffers through identification with the suffering of the sinners, his progress is only made possible because he learns from and overcomes each sin. Petrarch, on the other hand, encompasses the frailty of human nature because, although he realises his shortcomings, he remains subject to them.

So too Primo Levi's first book, *Se questo è un uomo*, like Petrarch's first poem in the *Canzoniere*, can be considered as almost palinodic, since the reader is taken into a world which has little connection with his prior existence, which is not described at this point, and indeed is not described in any

detail by the author until much later in his writing career. However, we assume that the author's prior situation has been very different from that in which he now finds himself, and indeed we can verify this from the facts that we are able to piece together as the narrative progresses. The opening words of *Se questo è un uomo* are: "Ero stato catturato dalla Milizia fascista il 13 dicembre 1943" (SQ, p.11); and thus we too as readers experience with the author the horrors of the events to come, being in a sense pitchforked directly into the narrative just as Levi was plunged directly into the nightmare of the lager.

This link with Petrarch is continued with the motif of dream. From the moment of Levi's induction into the concentration camp his dreams are troubled. He tells of the disturbed, brief sleep of his first night in the camp and of his dream of being asleep "su una strada, su un ponte, per traverso di una porta per cui va e viene molta gente" (SQ, p.45). The dream reflects not only his physical enervation and emotional tension, but also his subconscious realization that the lager is a place of transit, and that the threshold upon which he lies is that between life and annihilation.

In the chapter "Le nostre notti" of *Se questo è un uomo* Levi recounts the unalloyed anguish of the troubled dreams of the camp inmates. The night begins with the dream of the locomotive approaching Buna, a dream brought on by the snoring

of his fellow inmates and the heat of the body next to him in his narrow pallet; but this is not a companionable warmth, but rather the fetid warmth of unwanted and unspecified human proximity. Sleep, in such circumstances, is very light, it is "un velo, se voglio lo lacero" (SQ, p.73), and this the author does, but only to fall into a further dream. This is the 'breve sogno' which haunts Levi's narrative, and indeed his life, for this is the dream of being at home, surrounded by family and friends and recounting his experiences, the experiences that are in fact the reality, for the whistle that he describes, the hard bed, the unwanted companion with whom he shares it are all happening to the dreamer, even as he recounts them to his dream audience. However, those who listen are unable to follow his account, rather they are indifferent to it and talk amongst themselves, oblivious to the sufferer's presence. This is indeed a 'breve sogno', for its narration takes no more than a few lines, but its reverberations are evident throughout the testimonial narrative of the author, the desire to recount his story and be heard, to be listened to, for the full impact of his story to be understood. Despite the fact that the dreamer sleeps so lightly as to be still aware of his surroundings, the dream arouses intense emotions within him, firstly that of "un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile" (SQ, p.74) at finding himself at home, amongst friends and with this tale to tell. This tale, however, is immediately contrasted with that of "una pena desolata ...dolore allo stato puro" (SQ, loc. cit.) when his family pay

no heed to the tale which the returnee has to recount and, indeed, appear indifferent to his urgent need to tell it. The whole of this episode is recounted in the present tense, so that when the author writes "sono tuttora pieno della sua angoscia" (SQ, p.75) the word "tuttora" creates some confusion as to whether Levi refers to the present time of the sleeper or that of the author. The use of a colon immediately after the phrase reinforces this confusion, but the following phrase returns us to the world of the dreamer, for he remembers that this is no ordinary dream, but one dreamed many times before with little variation, and one dreamed not just by himself but by Alberto and by others.

To escape the intensity of the anguish that still clings to him from his dream Levi huddles in the dark, listening to the sound of anguished dreaming around him - the moaning and the sleep-talking, the lip-smacking and the jaw-cracking of those dreaming tantalisingly of food never to be consumed. Indeed, he calls this the "sogno di Tantalo" (SQ, p.77) and writes that this dream, together with that of starting to tell one's story, fuses together with a third to form a sort of infernal trinity of dream states. This latter, which is not always distinguishable from the other two, is experienced with an almost febrile intensity which renders the dream states "incubi informi di inaudita violenza" (SQ, loc. cit.). The third dream state encapsulates the *dishumanity* of the prisoners' condition,

that is, the reduction of the individual to a non-human state, for in it the everyday queues take on a symbolic meaning:

"siamo noi, grigi e identici, piccoli come formiche e grandi fino alle stelle, serrati l'uno contro l'altro, innumerevoli per tutta la pianura fino all'orizzonte; talora fusi in un'unica sostanza, un impasto angoscioso in cui ci sentiamo invischiati e soffocati; talora in marcia a cerchio, senza principio e senza fine, con vertigine accecante e una marea di nausea che ci sale dai precordi alla gola..." (SQ, pp.77-8).

They feel themselves as insignificant and lacking in individuality, so that they either become submerged into one grey substance, or they become part of a wheeling nauseous vortex.

Such dreams are obviously explicable in Freudian terms, for the dream of eating or of recounting one's story is the fulfilment of an undisguised wish, the material for the dream coming from recent events, such dreams often occurring to those suffering extreme privation. The third is an example of disguised dream in which the inmate's feelings of lack of individual worth in this alien environment take on varying symbolic guises to represent the subconscious awareness of one's level of existence, which the individual may or may not be prepared to acknowledge consciously. The vivid content of the dreams described and the pronounced tactile-kinaesthetic content, as though on the threshold of awareness, are constants

of the type of recurring dreams suffered by many people who have undergone a traumatic experience. As the psychologist, Harry T. Hunt, writes:

conventional psychiatric wisdom has it that such repetition is a constantly renewed attempt at mnemonic-emotional assimilation, prohibited from completion by the same ever-recurring terror.<sup>18</sup>

He goes on to report that in a study of post-traumatic combat nightmares in Vietnam veterans:

Gradual amelioration followed a shift from literal repetition to more fantastic elaboration - thus suggesting [...] that dreaming assimilates past experience only by transforming it in terms of its own inner imagistic possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

However, the dreams of the concentration camp survivors appear to differ from those of people who have suffered other traumas. Bruno Bettelheim, the psychoanalyst and survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, writes that "the prisoners' dreams were an indication that the extreme experiences were not dealt with by the usual mechanisms"<sup>20</sup> and describes his astonishment at finding that after his transportation to the camp he did not dream repeatedly of this particular traumatic event in such a way that the shock would become less vivid and the dream finally disappear, as his normal clinical experience would have indicated. Rather, that trauma was overtaken by those which

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<sup>18</sup> H.T. Hunt, *The Multiplicity of Dreams: Memory, Imagination and Consciousness*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1989, p.125.

<sup>19</sup> H.T. Hunt, *The Multiplicity of Dreams*, p.125.

<sup>20</sup> B. Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1979, p.64.

followed, and the dreams of the prisoners concentrated not upon the terrible physical abuse their bodies suffered, but upon apparently more insignificant events, but ones which they felt to have reduced their worth in the eyes of their companions. In similar fashion, the dream of returning home that Primo Levi describes does not relate to the everyday horrors of camp life, but rather to a nightmare condition of a return to normality and then finding it so traumatic an experience because his most urgent need is not met - that of recounting his story - that the dream of normality fades and the survivor finds himself once more in Auschwitz. The dream is indeed repeated, like other trauma dreams, but the shock does not diminish for the sufferer; on the contrary, the shock becomes more difficult to deal with. This is perhaps best pointed up by an analysis of several of Levi's poems.

When talking of autobiographical experience in relation to the work of Primo Levi I am referring not simply to the events that the author experiences, but also to the inner experience, the effect of his experience upon him. This combination of chronological detail and subjective comment may well be intrinsic to the nature of autobiography in general terms, but in the work of Levi the importance of subjective experience far outweighs the significance of chronological narrative. Perhaps the author himself is the best authority to refer to on this point, in particular his poem "Alzarsi", written on the 11th January 1946, whilst Levi was still writing *Se questo è un*

uomo, but which he later decided to use as a prologue to *La tregua*, written sixteen years later in 1962. This latter book is beautifully rounded because the poem foreshadows the theme of the final paragraph in which Levi tells of his recurring dream of being in the bosom of his family, or amongst friends in pleasant surroundings, when everything begins to fade about him, and he knows he is back in the concentration camp, that he has never really been away from it, and he hears once more the Auschwitz dawn command "Wstawać" (*T*, p.269). The account of this dream is in itself most moving, but the poem, because of its conciseness, is able to distill the very essence of the nightmare that Levi experiences each time he has this dream. He tells of the terrible dreams that the inmates of the concentration camps had, "Sogni densi e violenti / Sognati con anima e corpo" (*OI*, p.11), dreams of returning home, of eating and of telling their tale, dreams which are abruptly ended by the heartbreaking dawn command to get up. But now they have come home, their stomachs are full, and their tale is told - "Abbiamo finito di raccontare", but soon they will hear the dawn command again; this time it is not a dream; the truth is that the nightmare is a living reality. As in a Dantesque cycle of endless, atemporal suffering, telling the tale has not altered the situation, it will happen again. After reading the book we, the readers, will close it, we may discuss how moved we were by it, and agree on the remarkable skill of the writer. We will later be able to discuss the most poignant episodes, and in the telling of them they will be interpreted, altered

slightly each time they are recalled. But the virtue of poetry over narrative is, as Primo Levi himself has written, "chi legge buoni versi desidera portarseli dietro, ricordarli, possederli" (RS, p.116). Once it is remembered, possessed, carried inside, then it speaks for itself, interpretation is not necessary, or at least is secondary to the words themselves. The words have created an image which has burned into our soul, leaving an imprint which resembles the psychological scar that the experience itself left upon the author.

The telling of the tale does not in any sense seem to purge the horror of the experience, which Primo Levi returns to in February 1984 with the poem "Il superstite", prefiguring his third book of testimonial narrative *I sommersi e i salvati*, published in 1986. This is, if anything, even more harrowing than his earlier poem, to which it bears close similarities. He talks of the return of suffering "ad ora incerta" (OI, p.70), echoing the words of the Ancient Mariner in the eponymous poem by Coleridge. The suffering takes the survivor unawares, and if the tale does not find a listener then it burns within the sufferer. And the survivor sees once more the faces of erstwhile companions, tinged with death and chewing imaginary food in their dreams, the terrible dreams to which the earlier poem referred. The final seven lines of the poem are the words of the survivor, unable to cope with these spectres from the past, crying out "Nessuno è morto in vece

mia/ [...] / Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro". The sense of guilt for having survived is intense, and the survivors can never escape the remembrance of what happened in the camps because they keep returning to their experiences in their dreams, their subconscious mind will not let them forget. The constant question is "Why me? Why should I still be alive and so many others dead?" Despite the protestations of the survivors that they have not usurped the bread of another or taken another's place the guilt is ever present that in the hellish conditions of the camp they have not always acted as their conscience might dictate under more normal circumstances. In a world where death is everywhere and the human is reduced to an expendable object, survival becomes not a race won by the fittest or the most intelligent or the worthiest, but by those who learn most quickly that they can only be concerned for themselves. So, even if the survivors have not stolen nor allowed others to take the blame for their own deeds and suffer beating, torture or death as a consequence, they have ignored the misfortunes of others and shared in the dreadful plot to reduce fellow human beings to a tattooed number on a skinny wrist, however unwilling an accomplice they may have been.

The only way that there can be survivors is if there are also those who go under, the "gente sommersa". The telling of the tale has not helped the survivor to forget, and indeed it appears in this later poem that it is now more difficult to find people to tell the tale to, for it remains the same, its

ending does not change, its horror is not mitigated. But at the time that the poem was written, forty years had passed since the survivors had been released from Auschwitz, and we had all heard the tale before, we knew it well, and could leave the room before it was over, or close the book before reaching the end, because we knew what that end would be. But for the survivor there is no end, the experience is ever present, constantly gnawing at their soul, like the vulture mentioned in the last few lines of Levi's poem of April 1984 "Siderius Nuncius". The first part of this poem concerns the many great celestial discoveries of Galileo, made with the aid of a telescope which he himself designed. The final nine lines deal with the repudiation of his discoveries which Galileo was forced to make to the Inquisition. But the representative of the Inquisition was not a monster: he had a quiet, smooth voice and "Aveva la faccia di ognuno" (OI, p.73), he could have been anyone - the loving father of a family, the SS guard dutifully carrying out orders, ourselves. He is likened to a vulture gnawing at Primo Levi each evening, just as his dreams of the camp and his return there after an imaginary respite at home gnawed at his soul each night. Levi writes "L'avvoltoio che mi rode ogni sera / Ha la faccia di ognuno". I would suggest that the vulture here is indeed everybody, all of us who have heard the survivors' tales of the concentration camp and do not have the patience to listen to them again, those of us who even suggest that these tales are exaggerated, that although bad things did happen they cannot have been as terrible as the

survivors would have us believe, or those of us who are simply unable to comprehend the horror and inhumanity. This is an integral part of the survivor's nightmare, for unless we accept that the tales are true, that the horror did take place, then we are in no position to take any steps to oppose any future appearance of it. If, as in Wilfred Owen's poem "Insensibility", we allow ourselves to be numbered among those "who yet before they are killed / Can let their veins run cold",<sup>21</sup> then we become guilty of collusion with evil by our very passivity. This is the nightmare that is once again becoming a living reality, as the sinister rise of anti-Semitism and nationalist xenophobia in Europe demonstrates. However, even more sinister than this is the fact that the metaphorical vulture is simply a representation of the ugliness hidden by the bland face of the Inquisitor, it is the other side of the coin, the reality about ourselves that we do not like to face: we prefer to think of ourselves as rational beings, and yet under certain circumstances we find that we may collude with evil, albeit unwillingly, as Primo Levi himself found, this enforced collusion being a source of his sense of guilt.

Levi returns to the motif of dream in the later chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Kraus". The chapter opens with a description of the drenching November rains which leave the terrain looking like a marsh and the prisoners so saturated

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<sup>21</sup> W. Owen, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. J. Breen, London and New York, Routledge, 1988, pp.63-64.

that they could not be more so. Readers of Dante's *Inferno* will be familiar with the image of the muddy river Styx in which the wrathful are soused, and the torrential rains of *Inferno* VI. The image of the saturated inmate of the concentration camp returns in post-Second World War Italian literature as symbolic of the nature of drowned humanity. For example, in Giorgio Bassani's short story "Una lapide in via Mazzini" a young Jew, Geo Jozs, returns to his native city of Ferrara to find both his name on the memorial commemorating those who died in the camps, and a city which wishes to forget its own part in the deportation. His physical appearance is disturbing since "sembrava gonfio d'acqua, una specie di annegato" and his presence serves as a more chilling reminder than any memorial of the truth of what happened to the Jewish citizens of Ferrara.<sup>22</sup> The image of drowned humanity is also taken up by Levi himself in *I sommersi e i salvati*, a collection of essays which reconsiders the events of the camps from the point of the view of the survivor looking back on the nature of the experience forty years later. The 'sommersi' are, Levi explains, unable to speak on their own behalf because they have plumbed the very depths of human existence and in so doing have been rendered bereft of the ability to record or express their experience; in effect, their humanity has drowned within them.

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<sup>22</sup> G. Bassani, *Dentro le mura*, Milano, Mondadori, 1980 (II ristampa 1985), p.90.

All of these nuances are relevant to the story of Kraus, for, as was mentioned in Chapter One, he is young and too keen, which greatly annoys the fellow-workers on his work detail, for his rapid pace of work affects the rhythm of that of his companions. He has not as yet learnt the rules of survival in the camp - not to expend energy uselessly, and to come quickly to an understanding of what others say to him. Just as the wrathful in Dante's vision of Styx expend their energy in useless imprecation which does nothing to alter their situation, so those in the camp who work energetically will not avert the death which awaits them; indeed, their useless expenditure of energy will simply render worse their own situation and that of their workmates. Inability to learn quickly signifies early death and already Kraus has earned a kick from the Kapo because he is not able to walk in file. But on the march back to the camp Levi recounts a singular occurrence, that of suddenly seeing the eyes of the man, previously hidden by his rain-covered spectacles, and of starting to tell Kraus of a dream that he has had involving him. The eyes are commonly reputed to be the mirrors of the soul, and the soul is the essence of our humanity. Levi explains his dream slowly, stopping after each sentence to ensure that Kraus has understood.

What Levi tells Kraus has great meaning, as much for the teller as for the listener. He tells of being at home in Italy with his family and seated at a table covered with food. Levi

answers the doorbell to find the other man standing there, and he uses his full name, Kraus Pali, thus restoring the dignity of his identity to him in this place of dishumanity; but this Kraus Pali is dressed as a free man and bears warm bread with him, although he is drenched as is Levi, just as in reality, a fact which Levi tries to explain to his family. They soon dry in the mild air, however, and eat, drink and sleep in a good bed. Levi tells Kraus of the joy he feels at seeing him, and in return understands something of the emotion that Kraus feels upon hearing this tale despite the fact that the latter can only express himself in his native Hungarian tongue. The chapter ends upon a bleak note, however, for Levi writes "Povero sciocco Kraus. Se sapesse che [...] per me anche lui è niente" (SQ, p.170). The dream is not true and Levi casts himself in a rather heartless light at the end because for him Kraus meant nothing, he had become non-human. However, I would argue that this final statement is refuted by the fact that Primo Levi finds the compassion to recount the dream to Kraus. For that one brief instant Kraus had his dignity restored to him, and also in that one brief instant Levi too had his dignity restored to him, for he was able fleetingly to see the humanity of the doomed man beside him and to take pity on his state before once more being subsumed within the ethos of the camp. Giuseppe Grassano writes that the dream recounted "è finzione volontariamente escogitata, cosicché in essa può realizzarsi una tensione morale di comprensione destinata a

sopravvivere".<sup>23</sup> Bread is traditionally 'the staff of life', both in a physical sense as nourishment for the body, and in a religious and spiritual sense, for in numerous religions bread is used as the symbol of communication between God, or ultimate enlightenment, and the human being. The bread that Kraus carried with him in the dream is perhaps the symbol, in Levi's subconscious mind, of the spiritual 'life' that Kraus allows him to enjoy, albeit for a brief moment.

Thus, dream can be used as a mechanism to regain one's human dignity, though fleetingly. Dream, however, does not solely refer to the nocturnal activity of the unconscious mind, it can also refer to the activity of the subconscious mind through what is commonly referred to as day-dreaming or reverie. Such dreams are dangerous for the inmates, as Primo Levi realizes in *Se questo è un uomo* when he describes the enforced break from work as a train crosses his path and his sweet dream of escape, of kissing the free earth and of being fed and sheltered by a woman who believes the story he has to tell. The transient joy such dreams hold, however, is scarcely worth the suffering which ensues as consciousness of one's real surroundings breaks in upon the mind, and Levi exclaims "Guai a sognare: il momento di coscienza che accompagna il risveglio è la sofferenza piú acuta" (*SQ*, p.52).

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<sup>23</sup> G. Grassano, *Primo Levi*, p.35.

Some individuals, however, absorb their dream into their consciousness to such an extent that it becomes their reality. Such is the case of Kleine Kiepura, whom Levi meets in the sick ward of Auschwitz after the liberation, and who breaks his initial silence to shout and rave, wrapped as he is in his dream of enjoying power over the life of others in his role as Kapo. "L'infezione del Lager" (T, p.170), as Levi terms it, has become so much a part of his being that he clings to the dream of a past in which he may have been someone to be reckoned with, even if despised, in a world where death was the only reality, as opposed to the actuality of being just another moribund victim of that system.

Primo Levi develops this idea of conscious dream in a later chapter of *La tregua*, "I sognatori", in which he comments that "il prevalere dell'irreale sul reale" is "il frutto piú immediato dell'esilio, dello sradicamento" (T, p.233), having described the dreams which preoccupy his companions in the Russian refugee camp at Katowice. Levi himself has been seriously ill and dependent upon his companions for all the necessities of life, unable even to change position in bed unaided. He has therefore had ample opportunity to regard the behaviour of his colleagues and listen to the stories they tell of their life. He writes of the senile wrath of il Moro whose anger encompasses the whole of life, and yet is majestic, lending the demented sufferer the mythical dignity of Capaneus, defying the gods and fate. The image of Dante's Capaneus in

the *Inferno* is brought to mind in the description of the imposing figure of *il Moro* spending most of the day lying stretched out upon his bed breaking his silence only to indulge in a storm of vituperation. Despite his constant invective against life, however, it is *il Moro* who blesses the weary refugees as they return to Italy with a solemn gesture which in effect denotes the end of their journey, not only in a physical sense having travelled throughout a large stretch of Eastern Europe, but also in a spiritual sense, for they are home once more, with their individuality and their dignity restored to them, leaving behind them the Nazi curse upon those of the Jewish faith, and in need of a blessing for the new life that lies ahead.

Dantean imagery continues in the description of a second companion, the petty thief, *Tramonto*, who considers Society to be "*il grande nemico*" (*T*, p.229), the devilish adversary, against which he battles indefatigably. Prison and the stage form the two interlinked spheres of his existence: prison and the courtroom that precedes it are the theatre in which one must act out a part, but the theatre is:

uno strumento tenebroso di perdizione, la manifestazione esterna di una setta sotterranea, malvagia e onnipresente, che impera a danno di tutti, e che viene a casa tua, ti prende, ti mette una maschera, ti fa diventare quello che non sei e fare quello che non vuoi" (*T*, p.229).

This sinister sect is Society, but the manifestation of it which he fears so much in his dreams and which he claims forced him to commit murder is not dissimilar to a depiction of Fascist society. Two messengers sent to tempt him are diabolic representatives of a Society which ensnares by offering that which the heart desires, but who take everything he has - job, money, words, image, shadow and soul. The mask which Tramonto feels to be forced on the individual by Society could be seen as that of conformity, which, taken to extremes by a fascist Society, enforces attitudes and actions upon one so that personal identity is eventually lost. However, Tramonto strikes back at the enemy who has duped him, and the triumphal climax of his dream is the court scene in which he convinces the court of the righteousness of his actions, reclaiming his speech and his dignity by the eloquence of his defence.

A third companion of Levi's recovery at Katowice is Signor Unverdorben, whom the author describes as the prisoner of two dreams. The first concerns an opera that he had written and which had been praised by Toscanini himself, but which his enemies had scrutinized, finding similarities with *I pagliacci*. Holding himself aloof from legal procedures Signor Unverdorben renounced a life of music for that of a cook on a transatlantic vessel, sailing to distant parts and seeing exotic, and often dangerous, plants and animals. As a result of this experience he has learned that:

tutto in natura si ricollega, non vi è offesa contro cui non ci sia difesa, ogni veleno ha il suo antidoto: basta conoscerlo (*T*, p.233).

This is a comforting theory but one which does not hold good in their present situation. There are some evils for which there is no counterbalancing antidote, and that to which they have been exposed in the Nazi death camps makes this obvious. "Il contagio del male"<sup>24</sup> affects them all and has entered their soul so that, although their bodies might recover they must bear the scars of that which they have seen and experienced in the death camps for the rest of their life. It is sometimes not possible to hold oneself aloof from an injustice for by doing so one allows it to go unchallenged and undocumented. Thus, the "nemici cosmici, perversi e sottili" (*T*, p.233) which invade the dreams of the three dreamers allow them to conceptualize their enemy and deal with it in a manner which gives them some relief from their anxieties, although by conjuring up a dream enemy they postpone the moment at which they have to face up to the reality of having been so very nearly vanquished by their real enemy, Nazism.

A conscious dream of a rather more sinister variety is that of Nazi Germany itself. In the chapter of *Se questo è un uomo* entitled "Una buona giornata" Levi writes of the Carbon Tower which rises up in the middle of Buna, the summit of which is

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<sup>24</sup> P. Levi, *La tregua*, presentazione e note a cura dell'autore, Torino, Einaudi (Lecture per la scuola media, 30), 1965, p.265.

rarely visible through the mist encircling it. Levi informs the reader that this construction is known by the prisoners as the Tower of Babel and that its bricks have been cemented together by hatred and discord. The tower is a symbol of the evil ambitions inherent in Nazism. Levi writes:

odiamo in essa il sogno demente di grandezza dei nostri padroni, il loro disprezzo di Dio e degli uomini, di noi uomini (SQ, p.90).

This demented dream which causes the Nazis to despise God and humanity is the very cause of the concentration camp in which Levi and his fellow victims find themselves. The idea is echoed in a later chapter, "Esame di chimica", in which Alex, the Kapo of Kommando 98, the Kommando Chimico, tells the fifteen *Häftlinge* in his charge that they must undergo an examination. To the inmates what Alex has told them "sembra il sogno di un pazzo" (SQ, p.130). The idea of a chemistry examination in the middle of Auschwitz would indeed appear to be something which could only be dreamt up by a deranged mind; but then again, Auschwitz itself was also the product of just such a mind.

However, one must beware of thinking that the concentration camps were the products of madness. Although it is quite possible that some of those involved in their running may have been criminally insane, the existence of the camps, their organisation and their potential output, where applicable, as in the case of Buna which was intended to be an industrial

plant run with the use of 'slave' labour, all were conceived by minds which in many cases were frighteningly lucid. The victims' experience of the concentration camp universe was so alien to their everyday experience, though, that it often seemed to take on the nature of a dream. Writing about the arrival of the convoy of Italian Jews of which he forms part, a convoy which had originally been composed of six hundred and fifty children, women and men but of which only twenty nine women and ninety six men survive to enter the camp, Levi writes:

Tutto era silenzioso come in un acquario, e come in certe scene di sogni (SQ, p.19).

The dream-like quality is in part attributable to the detachment that the victims feel from the scene of which they form a part. It is as though they are gazing onto an alien world which they do not understand and to which their logic tells them they do not belong, and one to which their bodily senses have not yet become accustomed. On which side of the aquarium wall the victims find themselves is, however, left ambiguous, as it is later on when Primo Levi stands before Doktor Pannwitz who is to examine him upon his knowledge of chemistry. The German chemist looks up at the half-starved, half-dead specimen of humanity which stands before him and a glance passes between the two of them. Levi informs us that:

quello sguardo non corse fra due uomini; e se io sapessi spiegare a fondo la natura di quello sguardo, scambiato come attraverso la parete di vetro di un acquario tra due esseri

che abitano mezzi diversi, avrei anche spiegato l'essenza della grande follia della terza Germania (SQ, p.134).

In the first edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, the phrase was a little different, ending "avrei spiegato perché nascono le guerre". The change to the text makes the idea expressed much more specific because, rather than simply explaining why wars are started by human beings, the glance expresses the madness inherent in Nazi thought, a madness which is shared by all of those Germans who form part of the Third Reich, in effect the whole German nation.

The idea of alien species staring at each other through the sides of an aquarium echoes the description of the arrival of the Italian convoy, but in this later episode the ambiguous nature of the interchange is made explicit. From his glance Primo Levi is immediately able to understand the nature of Pannwitz's thoughts in his regard, these being:

Questo qualcosa davanti a me appartiene a un genere che è ovviamente opportuno sopprimere. Nel caso particolare, occorre prima accertarsi che non contenga qualche elemento utilizzabile (SQ, p.134).

The phrases "qualcosa", "un genere" and "nel caso particolare" indicate that Pannwitz does not see a fellow human being standing before him but rather an object to be used and discarded. But the attitude which strips the victim of his humanity also dehumanises the oppressor, as we see from Levi's reflections upon "il cervello che sovrintendeva a quegli occhi

azzurri e a quelle mani coltivate", and his reaction to

Pannwitz:

Gli occhi azzurri e i capelli biondi sono essenzialmente malvagi. Nessuna comunicazione possibile. Sono specializzato in chimica mineraria. Sono specializzato in sintesi organiche. Sono specializzato ... (SQ, loc. cit.).

As a result of the glance cast by Pannwitz, Primo Levi, the victim, is in turn not aware of an integral human being before him, but rather of the physical parts which compose the human machine, and his mind reacts accordingly in defence of the memory of his own human nature. The analytical scrutiny of Levi by Pannwitz is reciprocated and, for a fleeting moment, in the unlikely setting of Monowitz-Buna, Levi the scientist comes to the fore. In relation to his memory of Pannwitz it is Levi the scientist who remains in the foreground, interested, even at the time of writing about this experience over a year later, in the intimate functioning of his German counterpart, although the latter almost certainly would not consider Levi to be a 'counterpart'. Levi writes that as a freed man he wished to meet Pannwitz again, not out of any desire for revenge, but rather "per una mia curiosità dell'anima umana" (SQ, loc. cit.). Thus, those who contribute to the insanity of the Nazi dream themselves become figments of that dream, to be analysed in the hope of understanding what it is that possesses them to lend the credentials of their intelligence and intellect to such a nightmarish enterprise.

The importance of the Petrarchan idea of "breve sogno" returns in a later work, *Lilith*, a collection of short stories which had been previously published in *La Stampa* between 1975 and 1981. The author, however, edited the collection, dividing it into three sections entitled as follows: "Passato prossimo", being stories which relate to the concentration camp and anti-Semitic experience; "Futuro anteriore", which are in the main futuristic tales or tales of different time-settings; "Presente indicativo", which deal with human reaction to life. It is interesting, however, that Primo Levi has chosen as the final story of the collection that entitled "Breve sogno". In this a man travelling on business to Naples by train weaves a web of mystery and romance around a young English woman who shares his compartment during the overnight journey. He studies her hands, for by doing so "si [può] agevolmente risalire al passato, presente, e magari anche futuro del loro titolare" (*L*, p.240). Intrigued by a catalogue of a Petrarch collection that she is reading, upon falling asleep he dreams of being a Petrarch figure with his travelling companion as Laura. When he awakes they hold a laconic conversation interspersed with quotations from Dante's *Inferno*, and it transpires that the woman is a student from England whose thesis concerns Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. He asks her to get off at Naples with him, but her mispronounced reply is the line from Petrarch's first poem of the *Rime Sparse* "Quanto piacce [*sic*] al mondo è

breve sogh-no" (L, p.246), upon which the young man corrects her pronunciation of the final word.

The story itself contains a number of literary echoes, acknowledged or otherwise. Reference is made to tales of rail travel by Tolstoy, Maupassant and Calvino, the sleuthing of Conan Doyle's characters Holmes and Watson, and several references are made to both Dante and Petrarch. Resonances of Guido Gozzano's poetry also run throughout the story, which could almost be viewed as a literary conceit. Primo Levi's deliberate reorganization of the previously published stories for this collection would seem to argue that the author intended there to be a linking theme or message which would be rounded off by the final story. This deliberative approach to the collection appears to become more specific if one considers in more detail the poem of Gozzano's which seems to be evoked in the final story. In "La signorina Felicita ovvero la Felicità"<sup>25</sup> the description of the young woman with whom the poet is in love is not that of the traditional "donna angelicata"; rather she is described as "quasi brutta, priva di lusinga" in her "vesti quasi campagnole", with a face which is "buona e casalinga" although her hairstyle transforms her appearance in the poet's eyes into "un tipo di beltà fiamminga". In Levi's short story the young woman on the train is dressed in worn and patched clothing and seems to be "un tipo piuttosto casalingo". The salesman wonders whether she

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<sup>25</sup> G. Gozzano, *Le poesie*, Milano, Garzanti, 1971, 4a. edizione, pp.108-124.

might be American, but decides that she must be English because she has "un'aria troppo domestica", although her cheekbones and eyes lend her a vaguely oriental appearance. This single example might, taken on its own, be considered interesting but possibly just fortuitous, but there are too many other resonances for the matter to be disregarded, such as the image of the mattress upon which the young man in "Breve sogno" dreams he lies, but which rustles annoyingly because it is filled with laurel leaves. This corresponds to the worn mattresses the poet finds in Felicita's attic, and the Petrarchan play upon the idea of the laurel in the words "dell'oro, dell'alloro", the latter word being repeated at the beginning of the next verse. The young man in "Breve sogno" is stimulated into having his dream of Petrarchan literary fame and glory because of his "sicurezza profonda che sarebbe diventato un giorno uno scrittore celebre e stimato" (*L*, p.245); the poet in "La signorina Felicita" makes the comment "rinnegherei la fede letteraria / che fa la vita simile alla morte ...", although heavy irony is present in these words. In Gozzano's poem the poet says to Felicita "Tu mi fissavi [...] nei begli occhi fissi / leggevo uno sgomento indefinito"; in Levi's short story reference is twice made to the young man's awareness of the woman's gaze being upon him, although in this case it is respectively described as a "sguardo curioso" (*L*, p.246) and "uno sguardo fermo e gentile, ma con una connotazione d'attesa" (*L*, loc. cit.).

Levi was familiar with the work of Gozzano, one of the greatest Italian poets of the twentieth century and a native of Turin, as is demonstrated by his reference in his essay "Le farfalle" to the villa of Signorina Felicita (AM, p.135). The poem "La signorina Felicita ovvero la Felicità" belongs to a work entitled *I colloqui* which is divided into three sections, in just the same way as Levi's collection of short stories, *Lilit*. The sections of Gozzano's poem are entitled respectively "Il giovenile errore", "Alle soglie" and "Il reduce". The first section refers to the poet's pursuit of pleasure in his early years and the title of this section immediately brings to mind the third line of the first sonnet of Petrarch's *Rime sparse*, which refers to the poet's "primo giovenile errore".<sup>26</sup> This is the same sonnet from which the student in Levi's "Breve sogno" quotes the final line; in "Alle soglie" the poet, who at the time of writing was very ill, comments upon encounters with death; in "Il reduce" the poet discusses his narrow escape from death and return home to Turin. The correlations with the experience of Primo Levi, writing in his Turin home half a century later, are inescapable: the youthful years spent studying and only half aware of the danger which presaged; the concentration camp experience during which imminent death was an ever-present reality; the return home to Turin of the Auschwitz survivor. Throughout *I colloqui* there are constant references to dream, and indeed Lucio Lugnani refers to Gozzano's "grande tema del

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<sup>26</sup> F. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, p.3.

sogno che opera i suoi incanti sulle lunghe distanze temporali".<sup>27</sup> In Levi's case the temporal distances to which the theme of dream links are those contained in the headings for each of the three sections of *Lilít*, as previously discussed, although the references to dream in Gozzano's poetry appear to have no direct resonance with the theme of dream as depicted in the literature of Levi. However, amongst the lesser known short stories of the poet there is a novella entitled "Un sogno", which describes a recurring dream, akin to a nightmare, which the protagonist experiences whilst still in an apparent state of awareness in his own home surroundings and which he tries to tell his family about, but the news:

lasciò tutti indifferenti. [...] mi sono accorto che le parole erano mute, grossolane, incapaci di esprimere il mistero, l'indefinito, il subcosciente, l'ineffabile della mia visione.<sup>28</sup>

The protagonist's inability to express the enormity of the experience recalls Levi's own inability to tell others of his Auschwitz experience in the recurring dream he suffers both before and after liberation from the camp. Moreover, the dream of Gozzano's short story is what has been termed by Celia Green, a researcher into dream states, as a metachoric dream,<sup>29</sup> which the psychologist, Harry T. Hunt, defines as a lucid dream which occurs "in the actual physical setting of the sleeper".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> L. Lugnani, *Guido Gozzano*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia (Il castoro, 82), 1973, p.27.

<sup>28</sup> G. Gozzano, *I sandali della diva: tutte le novelle*, Milano, Serra e Riva (Biblioteca del Minotauro, 45), 1983, p.66.

<sup>29</sup> H.T. Hunt, *The Multiplicity of Dreams*, p.73.

<sup>30</sup> H.T. Hunt, *The Multiplicity of Dreams*, p.88.

This metachoric dream state is exactly that which Levi describes in his account of dreams experienced in Buna in *Se questo è un uomo*, the state of being aware of one's surroundings, but of the dream taking over so that those surroundings are transformed into an hallucinatory experience, as in the case of the noise of the deportation wagons, and of the fading image of his beloved family so that he finds himself once more back in the reality of Auschwitz. In "Un sogno" the protagonist's dream revolves around a young woman whose miniature hangs in the family home amongst those of grandparents and great-uncles and aunts. Unable to discover anything of her story he is nevertheless plagued by dreams of her and finds medical advice of little help, for:

la sede di questo male non è nel mio cervello, come non è in me quel rimorso inumano che mi strazia per un delitto che non ho commesso.<sup>31</sup>

The idea of remorse for a crime of which one is not personally responsible is a recurring motif throughout the writing of Primo Levi.

### 3.3: Coleridge and the Guilt of the Survivor

A reading of the final tercet of the opening sonnet of the *Canzoniere* shows a clear link between the motifs of dream and guilt:

et del mio vaneggiar vergogna è'l frutto,

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<sup>31</sup> G. Gozzano, *I sandali della diva*, p.74.

e'l pentersi, e'l conoscer chiaramente  
che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.<sup>32</sup>

The motif of guilt takes concrete form in the epilogue to Levi's final major text *I sommersi e i salvati* in which he quotes the lines of the Ancient Mariner to the wedding guest from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,

That agony returns:

And till my ghastly tale is told

This heart within me burns.<sup>33</sup>

So too does the memory of Buna-Auschwitz burn within the heart of Primo Levi. But it is interesting that Levi should choose this text in which to use the quotation as a preface, for this is the work which many critics consider to be his most outspoken indictment of the suffering endured in the concentration camps, described indeed on the flysheet as "un libro 'militante'". However, it is also the text in which he makes the deepest analysis of the nature of guilt, that of both the survivor and the persecutor, as well as the community at large. Levi is casting himself in the role of the Ancient Mariner, returning once again to tell his ghastly tale, to bring it alive for a new public, a new generation, for, with the passing of time memory fades, witnesses die, and testimony becomes more stylized with repetition. Yet the events he describes have happened and can happen again. These are not

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<sup>32</sup> F. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900*, ed. A. Quiller-Couch, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1912, pp.628-655.

"cose di altri tempi" (*SES*, p.12). The reader, like the wedding guest, is left sadder and wiser, and certainly, having read of the atrocity that an apparently cultured and civilized nation could commit against fellow human beings, the reader remains:

[...] like one that hath been stunn'd,  
And is of sense forlorn.

However, the curse of the ancient mariner is that of being a *morto-vivo*, the sole survivor of a crew whose accusing gaze he must endure, for:

The pang, the curse, with which they died,  
Had never pass'd away.

Levi too is a survivor, bearing testimony to all who will hear of the evil fate that has befallen his companions whose gaze does not fade but remains etched upon his memory. In his poem "Il superstite" (*OI*, p.70), written on the 4th. February 1984, the survivor "Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni / [...] / Tinti di morte nei sonni inquieti". Their accusation must surely be, as Levi himself writes:

che la storia dei Lager è stata scritta quasi esclusivamente da chi, come io stesso, non ne ha scandagliato il fondo (*SES*, p.8).

This is because:

Chi lo ha fatto non è tornato, oppure la sua capacità di osservazione era paralizzata dalla sofferenza e dall'incomprensione. (*SES*, loc. cit.).

In the poem the survivor, overwhelmed by guilt, cries out to his dead companions "'Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa, / [...] / Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro / E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni'".

Guilt is a motif which runs throughout much of Levi's work, and it is difficult for someone who has not endured the same suffering to comprehend the reason that the victim should react in such a manner. In *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi devotes an entire chapter to "La vergogna", explaining that it was the recognition of one's own moral diminution that led to so many post-liberation suicides, as the survivors came to realise that "il nostro metro morale era mutato" (*SES*, p.57). Liberation was greeted not with joy, as one might expect, but with anguish, for the survivors were now expected to return to their former lives and live among their former friends and family knowing that "avevamo [...] vissuto per mesi o anni ad un livello animalesco" (*SES*, loc. cit.). In order to survive they have been forced into actions that they would not dream of contemplating in their normal lives: they have all stolen, some of them from fellow inmates; they have forgotten not only their country but their family. Levi's description of the psychological condition of the survivor is echoed in a study by Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth of the chances of survival of the victims of the concentration camp system. They write:

Adherence to the codes of conventional morality was a luxury that camp life did not usually afford. [...] The Nazis intended camp life to be degrading, and it was. [...] If a person did not go straight to the gas chamber, survival in Auschwitz and other camps was possible only if one could adapt - physically, psychologically, and above all quickly to rationally organized savagery. Overwork, malnutrition, and despair often took their heaviest toll during the first few weeks. [...] in addition to the necessity of adjusting to a radically dehumanized environment, the surviving inmates were usually compelled to cope with the sudden loss of all family members. The trauma of arrival was commonly followed by a state of acute detachment in which the prisoners saw themselves as disinterested observers in a terrible drama over which they had little control. [...] For those "condemned to life," the next stage involved an almost total withdrawal of affect from those areas of human activity that were not absolutely indispensable to survival. Feelings such as compassion for others, concern for personal appearance, and sex commonly gave way to a solipsistic concern for sheer survival.<sup>34</sup>

Levi's own anguished guilt is expressed when he writes that although he did give some comforting words of help to one new inmate:

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<sup>34</sup> R.L. Rubenstein & J.K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Legacy of the Holocaust*, London, SCM Press, 1987, p.187.

[...] ricordo [...] con disagio, di avere [...] scosso le spalle con impazienza davanti ad altre richieste, e questo proprio quando ero in campo da quasi un anno, e quindi avevo accumulato una buona dose di esperienza: ma avevo anche assimilato a fondo la regola principale del luogo, che prescriveva di badare prima di tutto a se stessi (*SES*, p.60).

He also tells of the hot August of 1944 when all the inmates were wracked with thirst and there was no drinking water to be had. Finding a few languid droplets coming from a tap Levi shares his precious discovery with Alberto, but not with Daniele who becomes aware of their deception. An act, which is justified by self-preservation in the camp, appears mean and selfish in the light of Daniele's post-liberation question "perché voi due sí e io no?" (*SES*, p.62). The moral code of peacetime which has been re-established makes such a question seem reasonable, even in the face of the eminently unreasonable conditions of the lager, and Levi is unable to resolve the dilemma of whether such a moral code can be considered to have any relevance in the extreme conditions that they were forced to endure. He writes:

È giustificata o no la vergogna del poi? Non sono riuscito a stabilirlo allora, e neppure oggi ci riesco, ma la vergogna c'era e c'è, concreta, pesante, perenne (*SES*, *loc. cit.*).

But perhaps the most insidious cause of guilt is that which "rode e stride" (*SES*, p.63), this being the possibility that in some way one has survived at the expense of another person, and perhaps of someone more worthy of survival. When it is

suggested to Levi that he has somehow been 'chosen' to live in order that he may bear testimony to the suffering endured he feels an immediate and extreme reaction:

Mi dolse come quando si tocca un nervo scoperto [...]: potrei essere vivo al posto di un altro, a spese di un altro; potrei avere soppiantato, cioè di fatto ucciso (*SES*, p.63).

Levi has explained earlier in the text that those who lived were not necessarily the best, but rather it was usually those who demonstrated the worst human qualities. Thus, whilst feeling himself to be innocent, Levi finds himself ranked amongst the survivors "e perciò alla ricerca permanente di una giustificazione" (*SES*, loc. cit.).

The guilt pangs of the surviving victims contrast strangely, however, to the complete lack of guilt, indeed disavowal of all responsibility, on the part of both their Nazi persecutors and German civilians who supported Hitler's regime and witnessed the persecution. In Primo Levi's own experience the lager in which he was held was not primarily run by the SS, as in the case of the main camps of Auschwitz, but rather by the I.G. Farben industrial corporation who used the inmates as short term slave labour to develop the plant, knowing full well that their fate would be extermination once their energies had been exhausted. The lack of remorse on the part of the oppressors seems to be derived from the belief that the victims fall outside what Rubenstein and Roth call "their universe of moral obligation" recalling Helen Fein's definition of "that circle

of people with reciprocal obligations to protect each other whose bonds arose from their relation to a deity or sacred source of authority".<sup>35</sup> They go on to observe that:

whether human beings are regarded fully as persons has less to do with biological than with political and legal conditions. Individuals who belong to no community willing or able to protect their rights may be biologically human but politically they are nonpersons. Similarly, members of every group that has endured genocide in the twentieth century were effectively stigmatized as nonpersons before their final travail. Before or concurrent with their travail, they were deprived of their political and legal status as members of the community in which they lived.<sup>36</sup>

Rubenstein and Roth proceed by noting the observations of George M. Kren and Leon Rappaport that:

when a victim is targeted for destruction, as were the Jews in World War II, the fact that he or she is objectively innocent of wrongdoing can actually put that person at an enormous psychological disadvantage. The victim's first response is likely to be a futile attempt to prove innocence. Seldom does the victim comprehend that *justice is a political category before it can become an effective moral category.* [...] Only as a member of a humanly constructed, political community - that is, only as a full person - is it normally,

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<sup>35</sup> R.L. Rubenstein & J.K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, p.191.

<sup>36</sup> R.L. Rubenstein & J.K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, p.192.

but by no means always, possible to find some measure of justice.<sup>37</sup>

They conclude that:

The lack of remorse on the part of Germany's business leaders, and a very large number of other Germans and Austrians, after World War II can thus be seen as part of a larger phenomenon. Feelings of guilt and remorse are as much political and social as they are psychological. Especially in times of threat and danger, they are likely to be experienced only if one harms those who are part of one's own universe of obligation. No such feelings are likely to arise if one harms those for whom one feels no obligation.<sup>38</sup>

This lack of obligation is embodied in the chemist, Doctor Pannwitz, who - as we have already seen - examines Primo Levi for a post working in the laboratory, in *Se questo è un uomo*, and who evidently considers Levi to be of another species, to be exploited and then discarded, an impression which is reinforced directly thereafter by Alex, the Kapo, and therefore another inmate, one of the 'green triangles', imprisoned as a criminal, but one who vaunts his credentials as a Reichsdeutscher. As mentioned in Chapter One, on the way back to the barracks Alex wipes his oily hand on Primo Levi's back using him as a human rag, causing Levi to judge Alex in the same light as Pannwitz and all others like him. The lack of

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<sup>37</sup> R.L. Rubenstein & J.K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, p.193.

<sup>38</sup> R.L. Rubenstein & J.K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, p.196.

obligation felt by such as Alex and Pannwitz leads them to treat others as nonpersons, and thus they are unassailed by feelings of guilt or shame.

In others, however, there may well be a feeling of shame but without any real understanding of the nature of their personal involvement and guilt. A complex, although unsatisfying, correspondence is carried on between Primo Levi and Doctor Müller, a German chemist who worked at Buna and even spoke to Levi on occasion. Like Pannwitz and Mertens, he can be considered a German counterpart of Levi. The story is told in "Vanadio" in *Il sistema periodico*, the correspondence arising out of a straightforward business correspondence, with Levi and Müller acting as the specialist representatives of their relevant firms. Müller appears to realise the evil of Auschwitz, but to have no real awareness of the complicity of all involved, nor of the enduring effect of Auschwitz.

There is however another apparent motive for Primo Levi's feelings of guilt, one which he rarely touches upon, perhaps because it was subsumed by the horror of the concentration camps, which he later experienced. The event in question is the execution of a partisan comrade: the circumstances are not explained but Levi writes of himself and his colleagues that "eravamo stati costretti dalla nostra coscienza ad eseguire una condanna" (*SP*, p.136). Their reaction to the execution echoes

that of the concentration camp survivors regarding their own experiences:

ne eravamo usciti distrutti, destituiti, desiderosi che tutto finisse e di finire noi stessi (SP, loc. cit.).

It is interesting to speculate whether partisan Micca of the poem "Epigrafe", "Spento dai miei compagni per mia non lieve colpa" (OI, p.27), refers to the same executed comrade. The partisan narrator of the poem asks not for pardon, prayer or tears, but only to be allowed to remain in peace without fresh blood seeping through the earth and arousing sorrow anew in his petrified bones.

#### 3.4: Time Topos

Levi's interest in the phenomenology of time experience is evident not only in his testimonial writings, but also in his fiction and poetry. A short story, "Scacco al tempo" (RS, p.85-88), concerns an application for a patent for a substance which alters the subjective nature of the passing of time but without any of the side-effects which are experienced during the known ways of bringing about such an alteration, such as drugs or comatosis. By means of the new substance an individual can make time appear to pass more slowly or more quickly according to the nature of the experience being undergone and several humorous examples of its application are offered; thus a prisoner perceives thirty-five months of his sentence as being just four days, whereas another young man

perceives his orgasm of just a few seconds as being the equivalent of thirty-six hours duration. This story demonstrates the danger of trying to read concentration camp experience into all of Levi's writing, for one might be tempted by the phrase "il tempo soggettivo si allunga nel corso di esperienze o condizioni poco gradite" to see the story as a direct allusion to his past experience. This latter may well have been the stimulus for Levi's idea, but it is one which he has developed so that its context and structure are more in line with his scientific and experimental experience. Indeed, the fictional protagonist, Theophil Skoptza, is a sixty-seven year old scientist, just as Levi was at the time of writing, but the example of his own experience is not a tale of great emotional tribulation; rather it is one of scientific curiosity about the world around him, for upon finding a tiny mushroom he is able to watch it grow for three days and nights, which seem no longer than a half hour.

In Primo Levi's only novel, *Se non ora, quando?*, the main protagonist is a Russian Jewish clockmaker named Mendel, whose wife has been killed in a massacre which destroyed the village where they lived. As a result of his profession, and also owing to his philosophical bent, Mendel is aware both of historical time and of existential time, for he acknowledges the unremitting passage of time, but because of the emotional wound that he suffers, following the death of his wife, he finds the thought hard to accept; he tells his new-found

friend, Leonid, "mi taglierei una mano perché il tempo camminasse all'indietro e tutto tornasse come prima" (*SNOQ*, p.4). Clock images abound and he compares Leonid to "un orologio inceppato dalla polvere" (*SNOQ*, p.149) because of the latter's brooding and reticent attitude as a result of some unconfessable trauma. However, once Leonid realises that Mendel has made love with Line, the woman with whom he believed himself to have some sort of bond, his behaviour becomes so erratic and unpredictable that he reminds Mendel of:

certi altri orologi che gli avevano portati da riparare:  
[...] un po' ritardavano, un po' avanzavano follemente, e finivano tutti col guastarsi in modo irrimediabile (*SNOQ*, p.149).

Indeed, Leonid dies shortly after as he defies enemy gunfire in an attack upon the SS guards of a concentration camp, carried out by the Jewish partisan group which he and Mendel had joined.

In the poetry of Primo Levi, rather than the subjective nature of time explored in "Scacco al tempo", the theme of its relentless passage is one which runs throughout and which becomes more predominant in the poems written in the late 1970s to mid 1980s. In "Un topo" (*OI*, p.62-3), written on the 15th January 1983, a mouse comes into the poet's study to preach on time, uttering many clichés to the effect that there is much to be done but little time in which to do it. The irritated and ungrateful poet sends the mouse packing, claiming to know all

about time - it forms part of physics equations, doesn't it! - and ending with a latin quotation to the effect that "Charity begins at home". The poet's irritation is, however, primarily directed at himself, for the mouse symbolises his conscience nagging him to get on with his work, but in mundane terms which give him no real stimulus to forge ahead; at one point the phrase "bla bla" is used instead of any meaningful words to describe the mouse's peroration. It is interesting to note that this poem was finished on the same day as the one directly preceding it, "L'opera" (*OI*, p.61), in which the poet describes the act of creating a written work in terms which convey the complete identification of the writer with the work being created and the tools used in the creation, describing the pen in female terms, including the pronoun "lei" instead of "essa". But once the act of creation is finished the writer becomes redundant; he cries out "Che fare, adesso?" and laments that "Ad ogni opera nata muori un poco".

The juxtaposition of birth and death can also be found in the poem "Per Adolf Eichmann" (*OI*, p.30), written on the 20th July 1960, shortly after Eichmann's capture. The first stanza describes humans and their link with nature, begetting "dolci figli". In the second stanza, however, the poet addresses Eichmann directly as "uomo cerchiato di morte", and in the third as "figlio della morte". This third and final stanza echoes the last few lines of the third and final stanza of an earlier poem, "Shemà", written on the 10th January 1946

following Levi's return from Auschwitz, and which was to become the preface for *Se questo è un uomo*. In the earlier poem Levi places a curse upon his readers if they do not take to heart the words of his account. In the later poem Levi utters the equivalent of the Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times", in relation to Eichmann: for the man who brought death to millions is cursed not with death, but with five million sleepless nights filled with the suffering of those who saw the door to the gas chamber shut behind them. For the poet, Levi, a chemist/writer turned writer/chemist, this was the work of Eichmann, that of destruction rather than creation; but it was unfinished work, for thirteen million Jews remain to bear witness to the atrocity committed against their identity. The human span is short also for the enemies of life like Eichmann and, like the hard working man who is unable to accomplish his life's work, he has been prevented from completing "l'arte sua troppo lunga". In "Un topo" (*OI*, pp.62-63), written twenty-three years later, Levi echoes this phrase, although on this occasion it is the mouse who preaches to the poet that "la vita è breve e l'arte è lunga". The concept of 'Ars longa in vita breve' is one which is restated in "Le pratiche inevase" (*OI*, pp.51-2), written on the 19th April 1981. Here the poet hands in his notice claiming that there is still much work left unfinished - "Una parola saggia, un dono, un bacio" which should have been given, places visited, trees planted, a house built; but principally "avevo in animo un

libro / Meraviglioso, [...] / Che avrebbe rivelato molti segreti, / Alleviato dolori e paure, / Sciolto dubbi, donato a molta gente / Il beneficio del pianto e del riso". This is a book which will now never be written as we are able to deduce from the final verse: "Sarebbe stata un'opera fondamentale". This is not just notice being handed in for a job and a moving on to a new post, this is giving notice on life; the "Signore" addressed in the first line is the director not of a firm, but of existence.

### 3.5: Tree Topos

It is significant that Levi mentions the planting of trees in "Le pratiche in evase" for the tree topos is one which recurs on several occasions in his writings. The tree is an archetypal symbol which has a number of different, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. It can represent the passage of time, the impermanence of humanity, because it can sometimes grow to enormous dimensions and be apparently very robust, but like all living things, at some time it must die.

The connection of what C.G. Jung called "archetypes" and what Freud called "archaic remnants", with the concept of dream, is a topic which Jung deals with in his essay "Approaching the unconscious".<sup>39</sup> In his discussion of the analysis of dreams he refers to the essential importance of

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<sup>39</sup> C.G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious" in C.G. Jung and M-L. von Franz et al, *Man and His Symbols*, New York, Dell (Laurel edition), 1964.

understanding myths and symbols in order to understand the past of humankind as well as its present so as to be able to see things in their right perspective. In the creation myth the tree of Genesis is that of the knowledge of good and evil, or human conscience; once the fruit of the tree has been tasted humanity can no longer remain in a state of innocence, which may also be construed as ignorance.

On the 10th May 1980 Levi wrote "Cuore di legno" (OI, p.44), a poem about a horse chestnut tree growing on Corso Re Umberto in Turin where he lived. The tree was as old as Levi and despite the harsh, city life it continues to feel the changing of the seasons and reacts accordingly, year in year out. This tree foreshadows that of "Una valle" (RS, p.94), written four years later, although this time the tree no longer grows in the polluted city but in an idyllic valley, and its description renders it more symbolic and mystical than its predecessor. The valley appears to be a place linked to but not dependent upon time and the tree does not conform to seasonal changes but blossoms and fruits in all seasons "Anche quando la neve gli grava i rami". It fertilizes itself, having no similars, and has no name - "È forse quello di cui parla la Genesi". The old wounds on the trunk give a bitter-sweet resin which brings oblivion. As R. Cook points out in *The tree of life*,<sup>40</sup> the 'Axis mundi' or cosmic axis is an ancient idea often found embodied in the image of the tree which stands at the centre of

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<sup>40</sup> R. Cook, *The Tree of Life: Symbol of the Centre*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p.9.

the universe and connects the three cosmic zones - underworld, earth and sky. The vital sap which passes through the Cosmic Tree is the elixir of immortality, this sap being sometimes represented by the image of the serpent entwined around the trunk of the tree, as in depictions of the tree of knowledge from Genesis. Indeed, consciously or otherwise, Levi's description of the tree in the valley contains within it echoes of other creation myths, like that of the Yakut tribe of Siberia described by R. Cook. This is the story of the immense tree on a mighty hill which gives forth a sweetly perfumed resin and whose leaves never wither; the tree embodies the Mother Goddess near whom is found a lake of milk representing the life-giving force, and her branches penetrate "the nine spheres and the seven storeys of heaven".<sup>41</sup> In Levi's poem the traveller must pass "sette laghi / D'acqua incontaminata, / Limpidi, scuri, gelidi e profondi". The Kabbalistic Tree of Life, the Sephiroth, is an important concept in Jewish mystical tradition, representing the three interdependent worlds of intellect, imagination and matter. Cook writes:

An important (and perhaps better-known) Jewish symbol related to the cosmic tree is the seven-branched candlestick known as the menorah. [...] The form of the menorah derived, like so many other forms of the cosmic tree, from ancient Mesopotamia. Its seven branches originated in the astrological significance of the number seven, which stood for the seven heavenly bodies known at that time (Sun, Moon,

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<sup>41</sup> R. Cook, *The Tree of Life*, p.12.

Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn). For the great Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria [...], whose ambition was to unite the Mosaic Law and Oriental thought with the Greek philosophy of Plato, the branched arcs of the lampstand represented the paths of the planets around the Sun, represented by the 'fixed' vertical centre shaft, whose lamp was the Light of God from which the other six derived their reflected glory. The pattern shown to Moses upon the mountain was the inner spiritual form of the cosmos, of which the menorah was the outer reflection.<sup>42</sup>

The number seven would therefore traditionally appear to have a numinous connotation, revealing the presence of the divine. In Levi's poem, however, it might be more relevant to see the significance as pertaining to the cosmic rather than the divine, as Levi himself felt that he could not conceive of a divine presence in the universe as a result of his Auschwitz experience.

The topos of the tree is also seen in a couple of Levi's short stories written for publication in *La stampa*, the Turin newspaper, and later republished in *Lilith* and *Racconti e Saggi*. In the futuristic story "Disfilassi", published on the 6th August 1978, a world is described in which, as a result of the proliferation of an indestructible medicament in the environment, humans can be impregnated by other species, including insects and plants, thus creating many new types of

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<sup>42</sup> R. Cook, *The Tree of Life*, p.20.

hybrids. The protagonist's own grandmother was half-human, half-larch tree, and the story ends with her embracing a cherry tree, aware of the desire that it should bear fruit through her. The device of the tree, rather than that of any other species, is perhaps used in order that Amelia, the protagonist, should be able to propound her views about the effect on humanity of these changes. She chooses *disfilassi* as the subject of her oral university exam, knowing that it is one which is rarely discussed, because she reasons:

Come potevano, i giovani d'oggi, conoscere se stessi se non conoscevano le proprie radici? (RS, p.14).

This miscegenation has given rise to many new species, "alcune mostruose, altre graziose" and yet others which are "inaspettatamente utili, come le querce da latte" (RS, p.16). Yet nature has been able to reassert itself for with new species comes a new type of desire which those touched by it might not be able to satisfy but which, just like the *fin amors* of courtly love:

anche insoddisfatto, quel desiderio così vario, così vivo e sottile, li arricchiva e li nobilitava (RS, p.16).

There is a note of hope at the end for nuclear death has not arrived, the energy has been overcome, the population explosion has been wiped out, and instead the world is going in a different direction from that which had been forecast; who knows but that it might yet see the development of a new human being, "rapido e forte come la tigre, longevo come il cedro, prudente come le formiche?" (RS, loc. cit.). And yet there are

one or two disturbing notes in the narrative, for when considering her two grandmothers, Amelia finds that she has no problem communicating with *nonna* Letizia, who is fully human, but as to *nonna* Gianna, who was half-tree, Amelia remembers her "come un incubo" (RS, p.11). This problem of communication also recurs in the description of the exam, for Mancuso, the examiner, is evidently not paying attention to the latter part of Amelia's discourse, and in her anger at his behaviour she recalls rumours of his part-hamster identity. Miscegeny may account for some behavioural traits:

ma guai ad andare troppo in là con le giustificazioni; [...]  
Non siamo razzisti, ma dire che un somaro è un somaro, e un villano è un villano, non è razzismo, chiaro? (RS, p.15).

The question is rhetorical and remains unanswered since only the future will tell. However, perhaps the human part of future species will bring with it that intolerance of all that is different from itself, and rather than a paradisiacal world in which the whole of creation can live in harmony it may be that the taint of racism, or 'speciesism', will infest it instead. Amelia herself remains an ambivalent symbol both of hope for the future on the one hand and of inveterate and destructive human attitudes on the other.

The second story in relation to the tree topos is "L'anima e gli ingegneri", published in *La stampa* on the 23rd August 1981. In this story the narrator tells of a meeting with an old schoolfriend, Guido Bertone, who recounts the tale of a mining

job in Utah in which an elderly lady refused to sell up because she claimed that the soul of her dead mother resided in an oak tree, which had been planted on the property on the day of her mother's birth, one hundred and ten years previously. The firm investigates the reasons for the proprietor's refusal to sell, drawing up a report in which the possibility of a soul being in the tree is referred to as being neither provable nor confutable. A deal is reached whereby the tree will be transplanted elsewhere in a place of the daughter's choosing. Bertone describes the extraction of the enormous oak in anthropomorphic terms:

quelle radici lottavano come cose vive: resistevano, gemevano, e poi, quando sono emerse dalla terra, sembravano mani a cui si strappi una cosa cara (RS, p.36).

The story is remarkable in several respects, not least for the serious reflection which the firm is described as giving to the woman's reasons for refusing to sell. The oak tree is a genus which recurs throughout legend as a symbol of strength, longevity, dependability and security. J. G. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, tells us that the oak was the sacred tree of Jupiter and that the god's Capitoline temple was purportedly built by Romulus beside a sacred oak;<sup>43</sup> and one has only to recall tales of the oak of Sherwood Forest and the oak coffin of King Arthur to understand the role this tree plays in European culture. Indeed, as Frazer also explains in *The*

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<sup>43</sup> J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, London & Basingstoke, Papermac, 1922 (1992 reprint), p.148.

*Golden Bough*, the idea that the soul of a dead person may take up its abode in a tree, preferably a tall, stately specimen, is an idea which has been common to a number of civilisations throughout the world.<sup>44</sup> The tree would be treated with great respect and the felling of it would be fiercely resisted by the inhabitants of the district. There are echoes of Gozzano's poetry in this theme, a poet whose words on the "disperate cetonie capovolte"<sup>45</sup> Levi praises as "uno dei piú bei versi che siano mai stati composti nella nostra lingua" (*AM*, p.178). The uprooting of the tree recalls Gozzano's poem "Speranza" in the collection *La via del rifugio*.<sup>46</sup> In this poem the poet ponders upon the giant, uprooted oak tree lying throughout the winter upon the turf, displaying its advanced age, one hundred and ninety years, by means of the rings at its heart. But once Spring arrives from its mutilated stumps buds come forth and the oak dreams once more of being in leaf. The personification of the oak is conveyed by the antithesis of the concept of rebirth, the note of hope, conveyed in the phrase "rampolla e sogna", the idea that the tree dreams of the blue, serene vault of the sky, birds, fruit, the north wind and future centuries. However, the death knell is sounded by the poet who states, as though present at the death of a human being: "Non so perchè mi faccia tanta pena / quel moribondo che non vuol morire! ".

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<sup>44</sup> J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p.115.

<sup>45</sup> G. Gozzano, *Tutte le poesie*, Milano, Mondadori (I Meridiani), p.218.

<sup>46</sup> G. Gozzano, *Tutte le poesie*, p.107.

The literary sources from which Levi draws inspiration can be seen as having an element in common, that of the re-affirmation of self-identity. Dante's hell is that of debased humanity, but it is a hell in which the human personality remains intact, whether it be in the defiant blasphemies of Capaneus or the heroic rebellion of Ulysses. In this respect it is very different from the infernal suffering experienced in Auschwitz, the intention of which was to extinguish the human spirit. However, - as in the case of Rappoport in *Lilit*, or the story of Ulysses recounted by Primo Levi in *Se questo è un uomo* for the benefit of Pikolo, - Dante's conception of the damned human soul often serves as inspiration when Primo Levi wishes to express the struggle of the inmates of Auschwitz to retain their humanity.

The Petrarcan metaphor of life being a brief dream finds echoes in Levi's writings in which the dream-state is experienced as real but transient, whereas that which is experienced as 'reality' may be inconceivably alien and beyond the bounds of chronological time. The shame regarding actions committed or left undone in Petrarch's poetry is mirrored and magnified in the guilt of the survivor in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and in Levi's own writings. This is a guilt which remains unassuaged despite repeated telling of the tale; but it is also a guilt which reaffirms the humanity of the sufferer, since guilt is a necessary corollary to awareness of the effects of our own actions. Throughout the poetry of Petrarch,

Gozzano and Coleridge there are constant reflections upon the transience of those earthly concerns which form the framework of human self-awareness.

Primo Levi's references to archetypal topoi reflects what Mircea Eliade refers to as the "anhistorical character of popular memory, the inability of collective memory to retain historical events and individuals except insofar as it transforms them into archetypes". In so doing, the myth forces the historical story to "yield a deeper and richer meaning".<sup>47</sup> The universal symbol asserts the temporal nature of the human personality whilst at the same time transforming it into the mythical and timeless.

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<sup>47</sup> M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. W.R. Trask, London, Arkana, 1989, p.46.

## CONCLUSION

To read the testimony of concentration camp survivors is to be challenged by a world beyond our understanding. The narratives form a record of what was endured by the inmates of the camps without, on the whole, making the experience seem more real. We want to understand, yet knowing the details of this or that atrocity brings us no closer to comprehension. As much as we feel a duty to heed what survivors have to tell us, their accounts do not necessarily illuminate the terrible suffering that they chronicle.

In the first chapter I cited A.H. Rosenfeld's words on the importance of image-making in Holocaust literature which results from the "near-collapse of narrative power"<sup>1</sup> when writers attempt to convey Holocaust experience. To reiterate, he states that Holocaust fiction is most memorable when it "approaches the condition of poetry".<sup>2</sup> But what is this condition of poetry? George Steiner writes that "a poem is maximal speech",<sup>3</sup> in the sense that it concentrates the energies of inventiveness. Such inventive concision, however, is not simply the privilege of poetry or of fiction; Primo Levi's testimonial narrative also has a poetic quality of style in that it is creative communication of remembered experience and historical truth.

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<sup>1</sup> A.H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988, p.80.

<sup>2</sup> A.H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, p.80.

<sup>3</sup> G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.233.

In conversation with Giuseppe Grassano, Primo Levi gave as the four sources of inspiration for his writing the fact that he had enjoyed a humanistic education, that he had worked as a chemist, that he had been a deportee and that he had already written.<sup>4</sup> He thus acknowledges the various aspects of his life which have helped to form his literary output. A classical and literary education combines with a training in an analytical science, whilst the experience of Auschwitz and the need to write must necessarily inform his literary output.

As we have seen, Levi skilfully depicts what it is to be reduced to the level of the "non-uomo", lacking any individual conscious autonomy and thus existing in a void in which time has no meaning. The level of degradation that he describes is such that the victims of Auschwitz become objectified, passive components of the lager, whilst the lager becomes the active, personified construct, the existence of which is ensured by the enforced activities of the human slave-objects.

Levi reconstructs this transformation by means of a stylistic separation of narrative depicting specific temporality from that which examines the individual's subconscious state of being. Thus, in *Se questo è un uomo* the subjective experience of time is paramount in the narrative reconstruction of individual experience, whereas in *La tregua* Levi's re-entry into the world outside Buna-Monowitz is marked by an awareness of time as a succession of events which stylistically can be recorded by tenses other than the present reflecting an eternal here-and-

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<sup>4</sup> G. Grassano, *Primo Levi*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia (Il castoro, 171), 1981, p.14.

now. To record and reflect the variety of experience in the world outside Auschwitz a diversity of mood and register is required, whereas the uniformity of daily experience in Buna-Monowitz, which can only lead to annihilation, is echoed stylistically by a concentration upon the immediate and the personal. Individuals within Buna-Monowitz who allow Primo Levi as the victim of the concentration camp to spiritually transcend his confines, for however brief a period, become mythicised, and are themselves reconstructed into the figure of "un uomo".

The detached description of the sanitary conditions, or lack of them, in Auschwitz, provided in the 1946 *Rapporto*, is an example of the faithful recording of historical fact. We read the report and we know what the prisoners ate and when, the conditions in which they slept, the nature and furnishing of the hospital wards, and the level of hygiene maintained in Buna-Monowitz. What we do not know, and we only find out when we read *Se questo è un uomo*, is how these conditions affected the prisoners, not just physically but, more importantly, spiritually. It is in the testimonial narrative that we discover the nature of the camp. The filthy huts and the scanty provisions described in the *Rapporto* are simply the framework of a deliberately created ethos. In *Se questo è un uomo* we learn of the inhuman degradation and isolation which are imposed upon the victims. However, the ethos of evil and corruption also becomes involuntarily absorbed by those same victims because of the hermetic nature of the concentration camp universe. The shock of the individual's awareness of having become thus assimilated into the camp's ethos, and the resultant guilt of

the survivor upon his return to the world outside Auschwitz are emotions so personal that objective testimony could only give an indication of how the survivor reacts. It is only through a subjective examination and reconstruction of such reaction that Primo Levi is able to allow us some insight into the depth of his feelings of shame. Once he has left the confines of Auschwitz he begins to view his actions in the context of a different code of behaviour. Despite his own awareness of the circumstances under which he laboured in the concentration camp, shame engulfs him at actions committed or not committed. It is a result of his consciousness of the degraded means and nature of survival in Auschwitz. Such consciousness is depicted in Levi's narrative by means of both animal imagery to express what it is to be "non-uomo", and also the use of lexical structures which serve to reflect the reduction of the inmate to the status of a subjugated, passive object, whereas the camp, in contrast, appears to be an active and powerful entity.

The effect of the lager is to induce a troubled dream-state for the victim, which includes not just dreams of urgent longing, but of the anguished impossibility of fulfilment. The guilt engendered by the enforced participation of the victims of Auschwitz in the very imposition of their suffering is one which does not subside with the passing of the years, but which, rather, is rendered more acute by the realisation of such participation which comes after liberation, surrounded once more by a world in which Auschwitz is an alien concept.

The texts studied for this thesis are primarily those dealing with Primo Levi's account of Auschwitz. In order to express that experience, however, Levi must perforce find stimulus in the literature, symbols and myths which have moulded his youthful ideas and formed the basis for his more mature considerations on life. In his study of Holocaust narrative, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, James E. Young recalls the statement of the historian, Yosef Yerushalmi, that "myth and memory condition action".<sup>5</sup> Young goes on to argue that by critical interpretation of the myths which form part of our lives we can understand how the past affects the present. He also posits that "we are dependent on the "vocabulary" of our culture and its sustaining archetypes" and, whilst we might attempt to reject traditional archetypes in the post-Auschwitz age, "we are still unavoidably beholden to these same forms for both our expression and our understanding of the Holocaust".<sup>6</sup>

To record Holocaust experience was essential for Primo Levi as a survivor. However, in order that such experience form part of the continuum of his readers' historical consciousness Levi was forced to reconstruct it through the use of specific lexical structures, literary allusions and archetypes which we might recognise and accept. His writings provide testimony of the suffering endured by the victims of Auschwitz, but the evidence presented is not simply that constituted by dates, facts and figures; it is a re-creation of his remembered experience. With the exception of the *Rapporto*, Primo Levi's writings provide an

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<sup>5</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, p.192.

<sup>6</sup> J.E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p.192.

account of his personal ordeal, which, more than any objective documentary report, allows the reader some insight into the ordeal of the mass of victims, because to gain any understanding of the suffering of six million people is inconceivable, but to gain some understanding of a single person's anguish is just about possible.

In an interview with Germaine Greer, Primo Levi states that although he preferred chemistry at school and was bored by lessons in poetic theory and the structure of the novel, he could see in retrospect that *Se questo è un uomo* is a book "full of literature", that is, the literature of his humanistic education which provided him with "a whole 'programme'" for the writing of the text.<sup>7</sup> This 'programme' of the scientific and the poetic is what renders his writings so accessible.

In her study of the use of the archetype in poetry Maud Bodkin differentiates between the scope of scientific writing and that of poetic writing. She writes that "where science uses abstraction, narrowing and hardening the meaning of its terms to make communication exact, poetry uses suggestion, multiplying the evocative stimuli brought to bear in each particular instance, that communication may become complete".<sup>8</sup> It is the poetic inventiveness of Primo Levi's testimonial writing which allows it to be not simply exact in his description of personal historical experience, but also to evoke fully and communicate the effect of that experience upon his own consciousness.

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<sup>7</sup> G. Greer, "Interview with Primo Levi", *Literary Review*, no.89, November 1985, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> M. Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination*, London, Oxford University Press, 1934 (1971 reprint), p.323.

## APPENDIX

[original page number given in text in parenthesis]

### Rapporto sulla organizzazione igienico-sanitaria del campo di concentramento per Ebrei di Monowitz (Auschwitz - Alta Slesia)

Dott. LEONARDO DE-BENEDETTI, *medico-chirurgo*  
Dott. PRIMO LEVI, *chimico*

Attraverso i documenti fotografici e le oramai numerose relazioni fornite da ex-internati nei diversi Campi di concentramento creati dai tedeschi per l'annientamento degli Ebrei d'Europa, forse non v'è più alcuno che ignori ancora che cosa siano stati quei luoghi di sterminio e quali nefandezze vi siano state compiute. Tuttavia, allo scopo di far meglio conoscere gli orrori, di cui anche noi siamo stati testimoni e spesse volte vittime durante il periodo di un anno, crediamo utile rendere pubblica in Italia una relazione, che abbiamo presentata al Governo dell'U.R.S.S., su richiesta del Comando Russo del Campo di concentramento di Kattowitz per Italiani ex-prigionieri. In questo Campo fummo ospitati anche noi, dopo la nostra liberazione, avvenuta da parte dell'Armata Rossa verso la fine del gennaio 1945. Aggiungiamo qui, a quella relazione, qualche notizia di ordine generale, poichè il nostro rapporto di allora doveva riguardare esclusivamente il funzionamento dei servizi sanitari del Campo di Monowitz. Analoghi rapporti furono richiesti dallo stesso governo di Mosca a tutti quei Medici di ogni nazionalità, che, provenienti da altri Campi, erano stati ugualmente liberati.

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Eravamo partiti dal campo di concentramento di Fossoli di Carpi (Modena) il 22 febbraio 1944, con un convoglio di 650 Ebrei di ambo i sessi e di ogni età. Il più vecchio oltrepassava gli 80 anni, il più giovane era un lattante di tre mesi. Molti erano ammalati, e alcuni in forma grave: un vecchio settantenne, che era stato colpito da emorragia cerebrale pochi giorni prima della partenza, fu ugualmente caricato sul treno e morì durante il viaggio.

Il treno era composto di soli carri bestiame, chiusi dall'esterno; in ogni vagone erano state stipate più di cinquanta persone, la maggior parte delle quali aveva portato con sè quanto più aveva potuto di valigie, perchè un maresciallo tedesco, addetto al Campo di Fossoli, ci aveva suggerito, con l'aria di dare un consiglio spassionato e affettuoso, di provvederci di molti indumenti pesanti - maglie, coperte, pellicce - perchè saremmo stati condotti in paesi dal clima più rigido del nostro. E aveva aggiunto, con un sorrisetto benevolo e una strizzatina d'occhi ironica, che, se qualcuno avesse avuto con sè denari o gioielli nascosti, avrebbe fatto bene a portare anche quelli, che lassù gli sarebbero certo riusciti utili. La maggioranza dei partenti aveva abboccato, seguendo un consiglio che nascondeva un volgare tranello; altri, pochissimi, avevano preferito affidare a qualche privato che aveva libero accesso nel Campo, le loro robe; altri, infine, che all'atto dell'arresto non avevano avuto il tempo di [p.535] provvedersi di indumenti di ricambio, partirono con i soli vestiti che avevano indosso.

Il viaggio da Fossoli ad Auschwitz durò esattamente quattro giorni; e fu molto penoso, soprattutto a causa del freddo; il quale era così intenso, specialmente nelle ore notturne, che la mattina si trovavano ricoperte di ghiaccio le tubature metalliche che correvano nell'interno dei carri, per il condensarsi su di esse del vapor acqueo dell'aria espirata. Altro tormento, quello della sete, che non si poteva spegnere se non con la neve raccolta in quell'unica fermata quotidiana, allorchè il convoglio sostava in aperta campagna e si concedeva ai viaggiatori di scendere dai vagoni, sotto la strettissima sorveglianza di numerosi soldati, pronti, col fucile mitragliatore sempre spianato, a far fuoco su chiunque avesse accennato ad allontanarsi dal treno.

Era durante queste brevi soste che si procedeva, vagone per vagone, alla distribuzione dei viveri: pane, marmellata e formaggio; mai acqua nè altra bevanda. Le possibilità di dormire erano ridotte al minimo, poichè la quantità di valigie e di fagotti che ingombrava il pavimento, non consentiva ad alcuno di sistemarsi in una posizione comoda ed atta al riposo; ma ogni viaggiatore doveva accontentarsi di restare accoccolato alla meno peggio in un

piccolissimo spazio. Il pavimento dei carri era sempre bagnato e non si era provveduto a ricoprirlo neppure con un po' di paglia.

Appena il treno giunse ad Auschwitz (erano circa le ore 21 del 26 febbraio 1944), i carri furono rapidamente fatti sgombrare da numerose SS., armate di pistola e provviste di sfollagente; e i viaggiatori obbligati a deporre valigie, fagotti e coperte lungo il treno. La comitiva fu tosto divisa in tre gruppi: uno di uomini giovani e apparentemente validi, del quale vennero a far parte 95 individui; un secondo di donne, pure giovani - gruppo esiguo, composto di sole 29 persone - e un terzo, il più numeroso di tutti, di bambini, di invalidi e di vecchi. E, mentre i primi due furono avviati *separatamente* in Campi diversi, si ha ragione di credere che il terzo sia stato condotto direttamente alla camera a gas di Birkenau e i suoi componenti trucidati nella stessa serata.

Il primo gruppo fu portato a Monowitz, ove sorgeva un Campo di concentramento dipendente amministrativamente da Auschwitz, da cui distava circa 8 Km. e che era stato costituito verso la metà del 1942 allo scopo di fornire mano d'opera per la costruzione del complesso industriale «Buna-Werke», dipendente dalla I. G. Farbenindustrie. Esso ospitava da 10.000 a 12.000 prigionieri, benchè la sua capacità normale non fosse che di 7.000 - 8.000 uomini. La maggior parte di questi era rappresentata da Ebrei di ogni nazionalità di Europa, mentre un'esigua minoranza era data da criminali tedeschi e polacchi, da «politici» polacchi e da «sabotatori».

La «Buna-Werke», destinata alla produzione su vasta scala della gomma sintetica, della benzina sintetica, di coloranti e di altri sottoprodotti del carbone, occupava un'area rettangolare di circa 35 Km. quadrati. Uno degli ingressi di questa zona industriale, tutta cintata da alti reticolati di filo spinato, si trovava a poche centinaia di metri dal Campo di concentramento degli Ebrei, mentre a poca distanza da questo e adiacente alla periferia della zona industriale, sorgeva un Campo di concentramento per prigionieri di guerra inglesi e, più lontano, si trovavano altri Campi per lavoratori civili di diverse nazionalità. Sia detto per incidenza, il ciclo produttivo della «Buna-Werke» non fu mai iniziato: la data di inaugurazione, fissata dapprima per l'agosto 1944, venne via via rinviata a causa dei bombardamenti aerei e del sabotaggio da parte degli operai civili polacchi, fino all'evacuazione del territorio da parte dell'esercito tedesco.

Monowitz era quindi un tipico «Arbeits-Lager»: ogni mattina la popolazione intera del Campo - salvo gli ammalati e il poco personale addetto ai lavori interni - sfilava inquadrata in ordine perfetto, al suono di una banda, che suonava marce militari e allegre canzonette, per recarsi ai luoghi di lavoro, distanti per alcune squadre anche sei-sette chilometri: la strada era percorsa a passo accelerato, quasi di corsa. Prima della partenza per il lavoro e dopo il ritorno da questo, aveva luogo ogni giorno la cerimonia dell'appello in un'apposita piazza del Lager, dove tutti i prigionieri dovevano restare rigidamente inquadrati, da una fino a tre ore, con qualunque tempo.

Appena giunto al Campo, il gruppo dei 95 uomini fu condotto nel padiglione delle disinfezioni dove tutti i suoi componenti furono tosto fatti spogliare e quindi sottoposti a una completa e accurata depilazione: capelli, barbe e ogni altro pelo caddero rapidamente sotto forbici, rasoi e macchinette. Dopodichè, essi furono introdotti nella camera delle docce e quivi rinchiusi fino al mattino seguente. Essi, stanchi, affamati, assetati, insonnoliti, stupefatti di quanto avevano già visto e inquieti per il loro avvenire immediato, ma inquieti soprattutto per la sorte delle persone care dalle quali erano stati repentinamente e brutalmente separati poche ore innanzi, con l'animo tormentato da oscuri e tragici presentimenti, dovettero trascorrere tutta la notte in piedi, con le estremità nell'acqua, che, gocciolando dalle condutture, correva sul pavimento. Finalmente, verso le ore 6 del mattino seguente, essi furono sottoposti a una frizione generale con una soluzione di lisolo e poi a una doccia calda; dopodichè vennero loro consegnati gli indumenti del Campo, per rivestire i quali furono avviati in un altro stanzone, che dovettero raggiungere dall'esterno del padiglione, uscendo nudi sulla neve e col corpo ancora bagnato per la recente doccia.

Il corredo dei prigionieri di Monowitz nella stagione invernale era composto di una giacca, di un paio di pantaloni, di un berretto e di un cappotto di panno a rigoni; di una camicia, di un paio di mutante *[sic]* di tela e di un paio di pezze da piedi; di un pull-over; di un paio di scarponi a suola di legno. Molte pezze da piedi e molte mutande erano state evidentemente ricavate da qualche «thaled» - il manto sacro col quale gli Ebrei usano ricoprirsi durante le

preghiere - rinvenuto nelle valigie di qualche deportato e utilizzato in quella guisa in segno di disprezzo.

Già nel mese di aprile, quando il freddo, se pur mitigato, non era ancora scomparso, indumenti di [p.536] panno e pull-overs venivano ritirati e pantaloni e giacca sostituiti con analoghi capi in tela, pure a rigoni; e solamente verso la fine dell'ottobre gli indumenti invernali venivano un'altra volta distribuiti. Ciò però non accadde più nell'autunno del '44, perchè abiti e cappotti di panno erano giunti all'estrema possibilità di venire ancora usati, cosicchè i prigionieri dovettero affrontare l'inverno '44-'45 vestiti di tela, come durante i mesi estivi; soltanto un'esigua minoranza ricevette qualche leggero impermeabile di gabardine oppure un pull-over.

Era severamente proibito possedere ricambi di abiti o di biancheria, cosicchè era praticamente impossibile lavare camicie o mutande: questi capi venivano cambiati di autorità ad intervalli di 30-40-50 giorni, secondo le disponibilità e senza possibilità di scelta; la biancheria nuova non era già pulita, ma soltanto disinfettata a vapore, perchè nel Campo non esisteva lavanderia. Si trattava per lo più di mutande corte di tela e di camicie, sempre di tela o cotone, spesso senza maniche, sempre di aspetto ripugnante per le numerose macchie di ogni genere, spesso ridotte a brandelli; talvolta, al loro posto, si riceveva la giacca o i pantaloni di un pigiama o anche qualche pezzo di biancheria da donna. Le ripetute disinfezioni deterioravano i tessuti, togliendo loro ogni resistenza. Tutto questo materiale rappresentava la parte più scadente della biancheria tolta ai componenti dei vari trasporti che affluivano, come è noto, continuamente al Centro di Auschwitz provenienti da ogni parte di Europa. Cappotto, giacca e pantaloni, sia estivi che invernali, venivano distribuiti in uno stato di conservazione incredibilmente cattivo, pieni di toppe e impregnati di sudiciume (fango, olio di macchine, vernice). I prigionieri erano tenuti personalmente a provvedere alle riparazioni, senza per altro che venissero distribuiti *[sic]* nè filo nè aghi. Il cambio si otteneva con estrema difficoltà e soltanto quando ogni tentativo di riparazione fosse palesemente impossibile. Le pezze da piedi non venivano cambiate per nulla, ma il loro rinnovamento veniva abbandonato all'iniziativa di ogni singolo. Era proibito possedere fazzoletto da naso o comunque un qualsiasi cencio.

Gli scarponi erano confezionati in un'apposita officina esistente nel campo; le suole di legno venivano inchiodate a tomaie di cuoio o di simil-cuoio o di tela e gomma provenienti dalle calzature più scadenti ricavate dai convogli in arrivo. Quando erano in buono stato, costituivano una discreta difesa contro il freddo e l'umidità, ma erano assolutamente inadatti a marce anche brevi ed erano causa di erosioni della cute dei piedi. Si poteva ritenere fortunato colui che veniva in possesso di scarponi della giusta misura ed appaiati. Quando deteriorati, essi venivano riparati infinite volte, al di là di ogni limite ragionevole, cosicchè si vedevano rarissimamente calzature nuove e quelle comunemente distribuite non duravano più di una settimana. Non venivano distribuiti lacci da scarpe, i quali venivano sostituiti da ogni singolo con pezzi di funicelle di carta attorcigliata o di filo elettrico, quando era possibile trovarne.

Lo stato igienico-sanitario del Campo appariva a prima vista veramente buono: le stradine e i viali che separavano i diversi «blocchi» erano ben tenuti e puliti, per quanto lo permettesse il fondo stradale melmoso; l'esterno dei «blocchi», in legno, ben verniciato e l'interno coi pavimenti accuratamente scopati e lavati ogni mattina, con i cosiddetti «castelli» a tre piani in perfetto ordine e le coperte dei giacigli ben distese e lisciate. Ma tutto ciò non era che apparenza, la sostanza essendo assai diversa: infatti nei «blocchi», che avrebbero dovuto ospitare normalmente da 150 a 170 persone, ne erano stipate sempre non meno di 200, spesso anche 250, per cui quasi in ogni letto dovevano dormire due persone. In queste condizioni la cubatura della camerata era certamente inferiore al minimo richiesto dalle necessità della respirazione e dell'ematosi. I giacigli erano forniti di una specie di saccone, più o meno riempito di paglia di legno, ridotta quasi a polvere dal lungo uso, e di due coperte. A parte il fatto che queste non venivano mai cambiate e non subivano, se non di rado e per motivi eccezionali, alcuna disinfezione, esse erano per lo più in pessimo stato di conservazione: consunte da un lunghissimo uso, lacerate, ricoperte di macchie di ogni natura. Soltanto i giacigli più in vista erano dotati di coperte più decenti e quasi pulite e talvolta addirittura belle: erano questi i giacigli dei piani inferiori e più vicini alla porta di ingresso.

Naturalmente questi letti erano riservati ai piccoli «gerarchi» del Campo: Capi-squadra e loro assistenti, aiuti del Capo-blocco o semplicemente amici degli uni o degli altri.

Così si spiega l'impressione di pulizia e di ordine e di igiene che riceveva colui che, entrando in una camerata per la prima volta, ne scorresse l'interno con uno sguardo superficiale. Nelle impalcature dei «castelli», nelle travi di sostegno, nelle tavole dei giacigli vivevano migliaia di cimici e di pulci che rendevano insonni le notti ai prigionieri; nè le disinfezioni delle camerate con vapori di acido azotidrico praticate ogni tre o quattro mesi, erano sufficienti alla distruzione di quegli ospiti, che continuavano a vegetare e a moltiplicarsi quasi indisturbati.

Invece contro i pidocchi era condotta una lotta a fondo, allo scopo di prevenire l'insorgenza di una epidemia di tifo petecchiale: ogni sera, di ritorno dal lavoro e con maggior rigore il pomeriggio del sabato (dedicato fra l'altro alla rasatura dei capelli, della barba e talvolta anche degli altri peli) veniva praticato il cosiddetto «controllo dei pidocchi». Ciascun prigioniero doveva denudarsi e sottoporre all'esame minuzioso di appositi incaricati i propri indumenti; e, qualora si fosse trovato anche un solo pidocchio sulla camicia di un deportato, tutti gli indumenti personali di tutti gli abitanti della camerata venivano immediatamente inviati alla disinfezione e gli uomini sottoposti alla doccia, previa frizione di lisolo. Essi poi dovevano trascorrere nudi tutta la notte, fino alle prime ore del mattino, quando dalla baracca della disinfezione venivano riportati, impregnati di umidità, i loro abiti.

Però nessun altro provvedimento veniva messo in opera per la profilassi delle malattie contagiose, che pure non mancavano: tifo e scarlattina, difterite e varicella, morbillo, erisipela, ecc., senza contare le numerose affezioni cutanee contagiose, come le [p.537] epidermofizie, le impetigini, la scabbia. C'è realmente di che stupirsi se, data tanta trascuranza di norme igieniche in una così alta promiscuità di persone, non siano mai scoppiate epidemie a rapida diffusione.

Una delle maggiori possibilità di trasmissione di malattie infettive era rappresentata dal fatto che una discreta percentuale di prigionieri non era provvista di gamella o di cucchiaino, cosicchè succedeva che tre o quattro persone erano costrette a mangiare successivamente nello stesso recipiente o con la stessa posata, senza aver la possibilità di lavarla.

Il vitto, insufficiente come quantità, era di qualità scadente. Esso consisteva in tre pasti: la mattina, subito dopo la sveglia, venivano distribuiti 350 gr. di pane quattro volte la settimana e 700 gr. tre volte la settimana, quindi una media giornaliera di 500 gr. - quantità che sarebbe stata discreta, se nel pane stesso non fosse stata incontestabilmente contenuta una grandissima quantità di scorie, fra le quali, visibilissima, segatura di legno; - inoltre, sempre la mattina, 25 gr. di margarina con una ventina di grammi di salame oppure un cucchiaino di marmellata o di ricotta. La margarina veniva distribuita soltanto sei giorni la settimana; più tardi, tale distribuzione veniva ridotta a tre giorni. A mezzodì, i deportati ricevevano un litro di una zuppa di rape o di cavoli, assolutamente insipida per la mancanza di qualsiasi condimento e la sera, al termine del lavoro, un altro litro di una zuppa un po' più consistente, con qualche patata o, talvolta, con piselli e ceci; ma anche questa era totalmente priva di condimenti grassi. Raramente vi si poteva trovare qualche filamento di carne. Come bevanda, la mattina e la sera era distribuito mezzo litro di un infuso di surrogato di caffè, non zuccherato; soltanto la domenica esso era dolcificato con saccarina. Mancava a Monowitz l'acqua potabile; quella che scorreva nei lavatoi poteva venir utilizzata soltanto per uso esterno, essendo di derivazione fluviale e giungendo al Campo non filtrata nè sterilizzata e perciò altamente sospetta: il suo aspetto era limpido, benchè, vista in strato spesso, di colore giallastro; il suo gusto era fra il metallico e il sulfureo.

I prigionieri erano costretti a fare la doccia da due a tre volte la settimana. Tali lavacri però non erano sufficienti a mantenere pulita la persona, poichè la quantità di sapone che veniva distribuita era molto parsimoniosa: una sola volta al mese il sapone era distribuito in misura di una saponetta da 50 gr.; la sua qualità era pessima. Si trattava di un pezzo di forma rettangolare, molto duro, privo di sostanze grasse, ricco invece di sabbia, il quale non produceva schiuma e si sgretolava con estrema facilità, cosicchè dopo un paio di bagni esso era completamente consumato. Dopo il bagno non c'era possibilità di strofinarsi il corpo, nè di asciugarlo, perchè non si possedevano asciugamani; e, usciti dal bagno, si doveva correre nudi, qualunque fosse la stagione, comunque fossero le condizioni atmosferiche e quelle meteorologiche e la temperatura, fino al proprio «blocco», dove si erano depositati gli indumenti.

I lavori, ai quali era adibiti la grande maggioranza dei prigionieri, erano di manovalanza e tutti assai faticosi, inadatti alle condizioni fisiche e alla capacità dei condannati; ben pochi di

questi erano impiegati in lavori che avessero qualche affinità con la professione o il mestiere esercitati durante la vita civile. Così, nessuno dei due sottoscritti potè mai lavorare in Ospedale o nel laboratorio chimico della «Buna-Werke», ma entrambi furono costretti a seguire la sorte dei loro compagni e dovettero sottostare a fatiche superiori alle loro forze, ora lavorando come terrazzieri con piccone e pala, ora come scaricatori di carbone o di sacchi di cemento o in altri modi ancora, tutti pesantissimi; lavori che si svolgevano naturalmente all'aperto, d'inverno e d'estate; sotto la neve, sotto la pioggia, al sole e al vento, senza protezione di vestiario sufficiente contro le basse temperature e contro le intemperie. Tali lavori poi dovevano sempre venir eseguiti con ritmo celere, senza alcuna sosta, eccetto quella di un'ora - da mezzogiorno alle una - per il pasto meridiano: guai a colui che fosse stato sorpreso inerte o in attitudine di riposo durante le ore di lavoro.

Dalla rapida descrizione che abbiamo fatta delle modalità di vita nel Campo di concentramento di Monowitz si può dedurre con facilità quali fossero le malattie più frequenti da cui erano colpiti i prigionieri e le loro cause. Esse si possono classificare nei seguenti gruppi:

- 1) malattie distrofiche;
- 2) malattie dell'apparato gastro-intestinale;
- 3) malattie da raffreddamento;
- 4) malattie infettive generali e cutanee;
- 5) malattie chirurgiche;
- 6) malattie da lavoro.

*Malattie distrofiche.* - L'alimentazione che, se dal punto di vista quantitativo abbiamo visto essere di gran lunga inferiore al fabbisogno, da quello qualitativo era priva di due importanti fattori: mancavano infatti i grassi e soprattutto le proteine animali, se si eccettuano quei miseri 20-25 grammi di salame, che venivano somministrati due o tre volte la settimana. Inoltre mancavano le vitamine. Si spiega perciò come tali e tante carenze alimentari fossero il punto di partenza di quelle distrofie che colpivano pressochè tutti i prigionieri fin dalle prime settimane del loro soggiorno. Tutti infatti dimagrivano molto rapidamente e la maggior parte di essi presentava edemi cutanei, localizzati soprattutto agli arti inferiori; non mancavano tuttavia edemi del volto. Similmente, a carico di queste distrofie si potevano mettere la facilità con cui venivano contratte le diverse infezioni, soprattutto quelle a carico dell'apparato cutaneo, e la loro tendenza alla cronicizzazione. Così, certe erosioni della cute dei piedi, direttamente provocate dalle calzature, antifisiologiche per la loro forma e la loro misura; i foruncoli, frequentissimi e numerosi nello stesso soggetto; l'«ulcrus cruris», altrettanto frequente; i flemmoni, ecc., non mostravano alcuna tendenza alla guarigione, ma si trasformavano in piaghe torpide, dal fondo lardaceo, con suppurazioni sieropurulente interminabili, e talvolta con esuberanza di granulazioni grigio-giallastre, che non venivano avvivate neppure dalle pennellazioni di nitrato d'argento. E infine, una parte non indifferente della diarrea, da cui venivano colpiti quasi tutti i deportati, era ugualmente da attribuirsi alla distrofia alimentare. Così [p.538] si spiega come i deportati perdessero rapidamente le forze, poichè la fusione del pannicolo adiposo era accompagnata dallo stabilirsi di una notevole atrofia dei tessuti muscolari.

A questo punto dobbiamo ricordare le vitamine: da quanto abbiamo raccontato finora, parrebbe ovvio che sindromi avitaminosiche - e particolarmente da carenza di vitamina C e di vitamina B - fossero frequenti. Invece non ci risulta che si siano verificati casi di scorbutico o di polinevrite, almeno in forma tipica e completa; e ciò crediamo in rapporto al fatto che il periodo medio di vita trascorso dalla maggioranza dei prigionieri fosse troppo breve, perchè l'organismo avesse il tempo di manifestare segni clinici evidenti di sofferenza per la mancanza di quelle vitamine.

*Malattie dell'apparato gastro-intestinale.* - Trascuriamo qui quelle malattie, da cui erano colpiti molti prigionieri e che non erano in stretta dipendenza con le modalità della vita nel Campo; così come le ipo- e le iper-cloridrie, le ulcere gastro-duodenali, le appendiciti, le enterocoliti, le malattie epatiche. Ricordiamo soltanto che questi stati patologici, preesistenti in molti deportati prima del loro arrivo a Monowitz, si aggravavano o rappresentavano ricadute, se antecedentemente guariti. Qui vogliamo soprattutto ricordare la diarrea, di cui abbiamo già fatto cenno nel paragrafo precedente, sia per la sua diffusione che per la gravità del suo decorso, molte volte rapidamente mortale. Essa per lo più esplodeva all'improvviso,

qualche volta preceduta da disturbi dispeptici, in seguito a qualche causa occasionale, che rappresentava il fattore determinante accidentale, come, ad esempio, una prolungata esposizione al freddo o l'assunzione di cibi avariati (talvolta il pane era ammuffito) o di difficile digestione. Giova ricordare a questo proposito come molti prigionieri per calmare gli stimoli della fame mangiassero bucce di patata, foglie crude di cavolo, patate e rape marcie che raccoglievano fra i rifiuti della cucina. Ma è probabile che alla base delle diarree gravi stessero altri molteplici fattori, e particolarmente due, interdipendenti: una dispepsia cronica e la conseguente distrofia alimentare. I colpiti presentavano numerose scariche alvine - da un minimo di cinque o sei fino a venti e forse più al giorno - liquide, precedute e accompagnate da vivaci dolori addominali, molto ricche di muco, qualche volta accompagnate a sangue. L'appetito poteva essere conservato, ma in molti casi i pazienti presentavano un'anoressia ostinata, per cui rifiutavano di alimentarsi: questi erano i casi più gravi che evolvevano rapidamente verso l'esito fatale. Esisteva sempre una sete assai intensa. Se la malattia tendeva verso la guarigione, il numero delle scariche diminuiva, riducendosi a due o tre al giorno, mentre la qualità delle feci si modificava, trasformandosi esse in poltacee. Da questa malattia diarroica i pazienti uscivano sempre mal ridotti, con un notevole aggravamento del loro stato generale e con un più accentuato apparente dimagrimento per l'importante disidratazione dei tessuti. La cura, standardizzata, era duplice: alimentare e medicamentosa. Entrati in ospedale, gli ammalati erano sottoposti a digiuno assoluto per la durata di 24 ore, dopo le quali ricevevano un vitto speciale, fino a che le loro condizioni non fossero decisamente migliorate e cioè fino a quando, diminuito il numero delle scariche e fattesi le feci poltacee, la prognosi della malattia non si fosse fatta chiaramente favorevole. Quel regime alimentare consisteva nella soppressione della razione di salame e della zuppa del mezzogiorno; il pane nero era sostituito da pane bianco e la zuppa della sera da un semolino dolce, abbastanza consistente. Inoltre i medici consigliavano gli ammalati di bere poco liquido o, meglio, di non berne affatto, benchè la quantità del caffè della mattina e della sera non venisse ridotta d'autorità. La cura medicamentosa era fondata sulla somministrazione di tre o quattro compresse di tannalbina e di altrettante di carbone «pro die»; nei casi più gravi gli ammalati ricevevano anche cinque gocce (!) di tintura d'oppio unitamente a poche gocce di cardiazol.

*Malattie da raffreddamento.* - Le quotidiane prolungate esposizioni al freddo e alle intemperie, contro cui i prigionieri non erano affatto protetti, e alla umidità spiegano la frequenza delle malattie reumatiche a carico dell'apparato respiratorio e delle articolazioni, delle nevralgie e dei congelamenti.

Bronchiti, polmoniti, broncopolmoniti erano, si può dire, all'ordine del giorno anche durante la stagione estiva; ma, come è naturale, infierivano particolarmente durante l'inverno, l'autunno e la primavera. Esse venivano curate in modo molto semplice: impacchi freddi sul torace, qualche compressa antipiretica e, nei casi più gravi, sulfamidici in dosi assolutamente insufficienti; di più, un po' di cardiazol. Contro le nevralgie - frequenti particolarmente le lombaggini e le sciatiche - e contro le artriti, gli ammalati erano sottoposti a irradiazioni di calore; contro i congelamenti non si praticava alcuna cura, se non l'amputazione della parte ammalata quando il congelamento era di una certa gravità.

*Malattie infettive.* - Le più frequenti di queste erano rappresentate dalle malattie esantematiche, e in particolar modo dalla scarlattina, dalla varicella, dall'erisipela e dalla difterite. Si manifestavano anche saltuariamente casi di tifo addominale. Coloro che venivano colpiti da una di queste malattie erano ricoverati in un padiglione di isolamento, ma in modo promiscuo, senza cioè che vi fosse una separazione fra gli ammalati delle diverse forme morbose. Era quindi molto facile che un ammalato, entrato in infermeria con una forma infettiva, vi contraesse il contagio di un'altra; tanto più che nè le coperte dei letti nè le scodelle in cui era distribuita la zuppa erano mai disinfettate. La scarlattina e l'erisipela venivano combattute con i sulfamidici, somministrati però sempre in dosi ridotte; i difterici erano abbandonati a loro stessi per la mancanza assoluta di siero e la loro cura era limitata a gargarismi di una soluzione molto diluita di chinosol e alla somministrazione di qualche compressa di panflavina. Si capisce quindi come la mortalità per difterite raggiungesse il 100%, poichè chi riusciva a superare il periodo acuto soccombeva in seguito per paralisi cardiaca o per qualche altra complicazione o per la sovrapposizione di un'altra forma morbosa.

In quanto alla sifilide, alla tubercolosi e alla malaria non possiamo riferire dati sulla loro frequenza, poichè luetici, tubercolotici e malarici - questi [p.539] ultimi anche se guariti da molto tempo e accidentalmente scoperti per loro incauta confessione - venivano senz'altro inviati a Birkenau e quivi soppressi nelle camere a gas. Non si può negare che questo fosse un metodo profilattico radicale!

A carico dei tegumenti erano assai diffuse le infezioni di ogni genere, ma particolarmente i foruncoli e gli ascessi, che, come abbiamo già riferito, avevano un decorso sempre assai prolungato e a ricadute, con localizzazioni contemporanee molteplici; le sicosi della barba e le tricofizie. Contro i primi, si praticavano soltanto cure chirurgiche, con incisione e drenaggio dei focolai, mancando la possibilità di praticare stimoloterapie con cure vaccinoterapiche o chemioterapiche: soltanto nei casi più ostinati, i pazienti venivano sottoposti ad autoemoterapia. Contro le seconde, sicosi e tricofizie, non esistevano rimedi specifici e soprattutto lo jodio. Il volto degli ammalati veniva impiastricciato con qualcuna delle pomate a disposizione, il cui effetto terapeutico era poco meno che nullo. Di fronte alla diffusione sempre maggiore di queste dermatosi, si finì da un lato per adottare misure profilattiche, come la proibizione agli ammalati di farsi radere la barba per evitare la trasmissione dell'infezione a mezzo dei rasoi e dei pennelli, e dall'altra si provvide a intensificare le cure, sottoponendo gli ammalati a radiazioni ultraviolette. I casi più gravi di sicosi poi venivano trasferiti temporaneamente all'ospedale di Auschwitz per essere sottoposti a Roentgenterapia.

A carico della cute dobbiamo ancora accennare alla diffusione della scabbia, la quale veniva curata con una frizione quotidiana di mitigal in un padiglione speciale, dove gli ammalati venivano ricoverati soltanto la sera per passarvi la notte, mentre durante il giorno essi dovevano continuare regolarmente il loro lavoro nella squadra cui erano aggregati; non esisteva cioè uno speciale «Kommando» per scabbiosi, al quale gli infestati fossero addetti per la durata della malattia; perciò, continuando essi a lavorare in mezzo ad individui non ancora infestati, i contagi erano molto frequenti per l'uso comune degli attrezzi e per la stretta comunanza di vita.

*Malattie chirurgiche.* - Anche qui non vogliamo trattenerci su quelle affezioni che richiedevano interventi chirurgici, ma che non erano in relazione di dipendenza con la vita del Campo. Riferiamo soltanto che venivano correntemente praticate operazioni anche di alta chirurgia, prevalentemente addominale, come gastroenteroanastomosi per ulcere gastroduodenali, appendicectomie, resezioni costali per empiemi, eccetera; e interventi ortopedici per fratture e lussazioni. Se le condizioni generali del paziente non davano sufficienti garanzie per la sua resistenza al trauma operatorio, gli si praticava, prima dell'intervento, una trasfusione di sangue; queste venivano eseguite anche per combattere anemie secondarie a emorragie gravi da ulcera gastrica o da traumi accidentali. Come datore, si ricorreva a qualche deportato, giunto di recente e ancora in buone condizioni generali; l'offerta del sangue era volontaria e il donatore veniva premiato con quindici giorni di riposo in ospedale, durante i quali riceveva un vitto speciale. Perciò le offerte di sangue erano sempre numerose.

Non ci risulta in alcun modo - e anzi crediamo di poterlo escludere - che nell'ospedale di Monowitz venissero praticate operazioni a scopo di ricerche scientifiche, come venivano eseguite su vasta scala in altri Campi di concentramento. Sappiamo, ad es., che ad Auschwitz un reparto di quell'ospedale era adibito a ricerche sugli effetti della castrazione e del successivo innesto delle ghiandole eterosessuali.

La sala chirurgica era discretamente fornita di strumentario, almeno quanto era sufficiente per gli interventi che vi si eseguivano; le sue pareti erano rivestite di mattonelle bianche lavabili; c'era un lettino chirurgico snodabile, di modello un po' vecchio, ma tuttavia in buono stato e che consentiva di collocare il paziente nelle principali posizioni operatorie; una stufa elettrica per la sterilizzazione dei ferri; e l'illuminazione era data da alcuni riflettori mobili e da un grande lampadario centrale fisso. In una parete, dietro un paravento in legno, erano infissi lavandini ad acqua corrente calda e fredda per la pulizia delle mani dell'operatore e dei suoi assistenti.

In tema di chirurgia asettica, ricordiamo che anche le ernie venivano regolarmente operate su richiesta degli ammalati, almeno fin verso la metà della primavera del 1944; a partire da quest'epoca, tali interventi furono sospesi - se non per casi rarissimi di ernie strozzate - anche se si fosse trattato di ernie voluminose e veramente d'imbarazzo per il lavoro. Questa

decisione fu presa nell'ipotesi che gli ammalati si sottoponevano all'intervento con lo scopo di procurarsi un mese di riposo in ospedale.

Gli interventi più frequenti erano rappresentati dai flemmoni, che venivano operati nell'apposito padiglione della chirurgia settica. I flemmoni costituivano, accanto alla diarrea, uno dei capitoli più importanti della particolare patologia del Campo di concentramento. Essi erano localizzati prevalentemente agli arti inferiori, più rara essendo la sede in qualsiasi altro distretto. Di solito si poteva riconoscere il loro punto di partenza in qualche lesione cutanea dei piedi, provocata dalle calzature; erosioni dapprima superficiali e di estensione limitata, che si infettavano e si ingrandivano con un'infiltrazione periferica e in profondità o che provocavano infiltrazioni metastatiche a una certa distanza. Ma talvolta non si riusciva a individuare il punto di ingresso dei germi patogeni; l'infiltrazione dei tessuti molli si formava senza che fosse possibile rilevare qualche lesione cutanea nelle sue vicinanze o a distanza: si trattava con ogni probabilità di una localizzazione di germi partiti da qualche «focus» e trasportati con la corrente ematica. Gli ammalati venivano precocemente operati con molteplici generose incisioni; ma la evoluzione successiva delle lesioni era sempre molto lunga e le incisioni, anche quando la suppurazione volgeva al termine, non mostravano tendenza alla cicatrizzazione. Le cure postoperatorie consistevano in semplici drenaggi della ferita chirurgica; nessuna terapia era attuata per stimolare le difese organiche. Erano perciò assai facili le ricadute e quindi frequenti gli interventi «in serie» sullo stesso individuo per aprire e drenare le sacche di pus, che si formavano alla periferia delle incisioni precedenti; quando finalmente il processo di [p.540] guarigione mostrava di essere giunto a buon punto, gli ammalati venivano dimessi dall'ospedale, benchè le ferite non fossero ancora completamente saldate, e avviati al lavoro; e le ulteriori medicazioni venivano eseguite ambulatoriamente. E' logico che la maggior parte dei dimessi in simili condizioni dovesse, dopo pochi giorni, rientrare in ospedale o per ricadute locali o per la formazione di nuovi focolai in altre sedi.

Erano anche assai frequenti le otiti acute, che davano con una percentuale singolarmente alta delle complicazioni mastoidee; anche queste venivano regolarmente operate dallo specialista otorinolaringoiatra.

La cura delle infezioni cutanee era fondata sull'uso di quattro pomate, che venivano usate successivamente in modo standardizzato, secondo lo stadio delle lesioni. In un primo tempo, nello stadio dell'infiltrazione, la lesione e la cute circostante venivano ricoperte con una pomata all'ittiolio a scopo risolvente; in seguito, sopravvenuta la fusione e aperto il focolaio, se ne ricopriva il fondo con una pomata al collargolo, a scopo disinfettante; finchè, cessata o grandemente diminuita la suppurazione, si adoperava una pomata al pellidolo come cicatrizzante e infine un'altra all'ossido di zinco, come epitelizzante.

*Malattie da lavoro.* - Dato il particolare impiego della massa in lavori di manovalanza, non risulta che si siano manifestate particolari malattie professionali, se si escludono quelle chirurgiche da infortunio, e cioè contusioni, fratture e lussazioni; ma possiamo riferire su di un caso a nostra conoscenza.

In un certo periodo - agosto 1944 - gli uomini addetti al cosiddetto «Comando Chimico» furono adibiti al riordinamento di un magazzino contenente sacchi di una sostanza di natura fenolica. Già al primo giorno di questo lavoro tale sostanza, in fine polvere, aderì al viso e alle mani dei lavoratori, ivi trattenuta dal sudore; la successiva esposizione al sole provocò in tutti dapprima un'intensa pigmentazione delle parti scoperte, accompagnata da bruciore intenso; indi un'estesa desquamazione a larghe lamelle. Nonostante che lo strato epidermico nuovo, che così veniva esposto all'agente infettante, si presentasse particolarmente sensibile e dolente, il lavoro fu proseguito per venti giorni senza che venisse adottata alcuna misura protettiva. E benchè tutti gli uomini di detto Comando - una cinquantina - fossero stati colpiti da questa dermatite dolorosa, nessuno di essi fu ricoverato in ospedale.

\* \* \*

Passate così in rassegna le malattie più frequenti nel Campo di Monowitz e le loro cause, dobbiamo confessare che non ci è possibile riferire dati precisi in cifre assolute e relative sulla loro frequenza, poichè nessuno di noi due ebbe mai la possibilità di entrare in ospedale se non come ammalato. Quanto abbiamo scritto e quanto ancora diremo è il frutto della osservazione quotidiana e delle notizie che accidentalmente o meno abbiamo appreso, conversando con i

compagni, con i medici e con il personale dell'infermeria, con i quali eravamo in rapporti di conoscenza o di amicizia.

L'ospedale del Campo era stato creato soltanto pochi mesi prima del nostro arrivo a Monowitz, avvenuto verso la fine del febbraio 1944. Prima di quell'epoca, non esisteva alcun servizio sanitario e gli ammalati non avevano alcuna possibilità di curarsi, ma erano costretti a lavorare ugualmente ogni giorno fino a che cadevano esausti sul lavoro. Naturalmente questi casi erano frequentissimi. Avveniva allora che le constatazioni di morte fossero fatte con un sistema singolare: di esse erano incaricati due individui, non medici, che, armati di nervi di bue, dovevano bastonare per alcuni minuti di seguito il caduto. Alla fine, se questi non reagiva con qualche movimento, lo si considerava morto e il suo corpo veniva subito trasportato al crematorio; se invece si muoveva, voleva dire che morto non era e perciò lo si costringeva a riprendere il lavoro interrotto.

In seguito, fu creato il primo nucleo di un servizio medico con l'istituzione di un ambulatorio, dove chiunque poteva presentarsi alla visita se si fosse sentito ammalato; se però qualcuno non fosse stato riconosciuto dai medici, egli veniva immediatamente punito dalle SS. con severe sanzioni corporali. Altrimenti, se l'affezione fosse stata giudicata tale da impedire il lavoro, erano concessi alcuni giorni di riposo. Più tardi ancora, alcuni blocchi furono adibiti a infermeria, che poco per volta andò ingrandendosi con la istituzione di nuovi servizi; cosicchè, durante la nostra permanenza nel Campo, funzionavano regolarmente i seguenti:

- ambulatorio di medicina generale;
- ambulatorio di chirurgia generale;
- ambulatorio di otorinolaringoiatria e oculistica;
- gabinetto odontoiatrico (nel quale si eseguivano anche otturazioni e i più elementari lavori di protesi);
- padiglione di chirurgia asettica, con annessa sezione otorinolaringoiatrica;
- padiglione di chirurgia settica;
- padiglione di medicina generale con una sezione per le malattie nervose e mentali, dotata di un piccolo apparecchio per elettroshock-terapia;
- padiglione per le malattie infettive e per la diarrea;
- padiglione di riposo - «Schonungs-Block» - nel quale erano ricoverati i distrofici, gli edematosi e certi convalescenti;
- gabinetto fisico-terapico, con lampada di quarzo per irradiazioni ultra-violette e lampade per irradiazioni infrarosse;
- gabinetto per ricerche chimiche batteriologiche e sierologiche.

Non esisteva impianto Roentgen e qualora un esame radiologico fosse stato necessario, l'ammalato veniva inviato ad Auschwitz, dove esistevano buoni impianti e donde rientrava con la diagnosi radiologica.

Da questa descrizione si potrebbe ritenere che si trattasse di un ospedale, piccolo sì, ma completo quasi in ogni servizio e ben funzionante; in realtà vi erano molte deficienze, alcune forse insormontabili, come la mancanza di medicinali e la scarsità di materiale da medicazione, data la grave situazione in cui già fin da allora si trovava la Germania, premeva da una parte dall'infrenabile avanzata delle valorose truppe russe e dall'altra quotidianamente bombardata dall'eroica aviazione anglo-americana; ma ad [p.541] altre si sarebbe potuto ovviare con un po' di buona volontà, organizzando meglio i servizi.

La prima e la più importante di queste deficienze era l'insufficienza numerica e di capienza dei locali: mancava, ad esempio, una camera d'aspetto per gli ammalati che si presentavano agli ambulatori, di modo che essi erano costretti a sostare all'aperto, in attesa del loro turno, facendovi interminabili «code» in qualunque stagione e con qualsiasi tempo, quando, già affaticati dalla lunga giornata lavorativa, rientravano in Campo la sera; poichè gli ambulatori funzionavano soltanto dopo il ritorno al Campo di tutti i lavoratori e al termine dell'appello serale. Prima di entrare nell'ambulatorio, tutti dovevano togliersi le scarpe ed erano perciò obbligati a camminare a piedi nudi su pavimenti che, come quello dell'ambulatorio chirurgico, erano molto sudici per la presenza del materiale di medicazione usato gettato per terra in conseguenza imbrattato di sangue e di pus.

Nei padiglioni era molto grave l'insufficienza del numero dei letti: ne derivava la necessità che ogni giaciglio servisse per due persone, qualunque fosse la malattia da cui queste erano affette e la sua gravità; altissima perciò la possibilità dei contagi, tenendo anche conto del

fatto che, per la mancanza di camicie, gli ammalati in ospedale restavano nudi: infatti, all'ingresso in ospedale, ciascun ammalato versava nella camera della disinfezione tutti i suoi indumenti. Le coperte e i sacconi dei giacigli erano addirittura lerci, con macchie di sangue e di pus e spesso di feci, che ammalati in stato preagonico perdevano involontariamente.

Le regole igieniche erano completamente trascurate, se non per quel tanto che serviva a salvare le apparenze. Così, ad esempio, essendovi deficienza di gamelle, i pasti erano serviti in due o più turni e gli ammalati del secondo o del terzo turno erano costretti a mangiare la zuppa in recipienti malamente risciacquati nell'acqua fredda contenuta in un secchio. Nel cosiddetto «Schonungs-Block» mancava un impianto di acqua corrente, come d'altra parte in tutti gli altri padiglioni; ma, mentre i degenti in questi ultimi avevano la possibilità di recarsi in apposito «Wascheraum» per lavarsi ogniqualvolta ne avessero avuto il desiderio, quelli ricoverati nel primo non potevano usufruire di tale possibilità di lavarsi se non una volta al giorno, la mattina, usufruendo in oltre 200 di sei catinelle, nelle quali gli infermieri versavano di volta in volta un litro di acqua, portata dall'esterno in appositi mastelli. In questa stessa sezione il pane veniva trasportato dalla sala di medicazione, dove era deposto la sera precedente, sopra una panca che di giorno serviva gli ammalati come sgabello per appoggiare i piedi durante le medicazioni, alla fine delle quali essa risultava sempre imbrattata di sangue e di pus, da cui veniva rapidamente ripulita con uno straccio imbevuto di acqua fredda.

Per essere ammessi all'ospedale gli ammalati, riconosciuti dai medici dell'ambulatorio come degni di ricovero, dovevano presentarsi un'altra volta la mattina seguente, subito dopo la sveglia, per subirvi un'altra visita, molto sbrigativa, da parte del medico direttore dei servizi sanitari; se questi confermava la necessità del ricovero, essi erano avviati alla sala delle docce. Quivi subivano la rasatura di ogni pelo, poi erano sottoposti alla doccia e infine erano avviati al reparto dell'ospedale cui erano stati destinati. Per raggiungerlo, dovevano uscire all'aperto, ricoperti di un solo mantello, e percorrere in queste condizioni, in qualunque stagione e con qualunque condizione atmosferica e meteorologica da cento a duecento metri di strada.

Nell'interno dei reparti di medicina, il medico-capo, aiutato da uno o due infermieri, passava la visita mattutina senza recarsi personalmente al letto degli ammalati, ma erano questi che dovevano scendere dal letto e recarsi da lui, esclusi soltanto coloro che ne fossero assolutamente impediti da particolari condizioni di gravità. La sera veniva eseguita una rapida controvisita.

Nei padiglioni di chirurgia, le medicazioni venivano eseguite la mattina e, poichè la camerata era divisa in tre corsie e ogni corsia medicata a turno, ne derivava che ogni degente era medicato soltanto ogni terzo giorno. Le medicazioni erano fissate con bende di carta, che nel giro di poche ore si laceravano e si disfacevano; perciò le ferite, asettiche o no, restavano sempre scoperte. Soltanto in rari casi e di particolare importanza, le medicazioni venivano fissate con cerotto, che veniva adoperato con la massima parsimonia in ragione della sua scarsità.

Le cure medicamentose erano ridotte al minimo; mancavano assolutamente molti prodotti, anche i più semplici e di uso corrente, mentre di altri non ne esistevano che quantità esigue: c'era un po' di prontasil (unico rappresentante dei sulfamidici), un po' di bicarbonato, qualche fiala di coramina e qualcuna di caffeina. Mancava l'olio canforato, mancava la stricnina, mancavano l'oppio e tutti i suoi derivati, eccetto piccole quantità di tintura; mancavano la belladonna e l'atropina, l'insulina, gli espettoranti, come pure i sali di bismuto e di magnesia, la pepsina e l'acido cloridrico, mentre i purganti e i lassativi erano rappresentati dalla sola istizina. Invece c'erano discreti quantitativi di exametilentetramina, di carbone medicinale e di tannalbina. Mancavano anche fiale di calcio e qualsiasi preparato ad azione ricostituente. C'era una discreta quantità di evipan sodico per via endovenosa e di fiale di cloruro d'etile per narcosi: quest'ultimo veniva largamente usato anche per interventi di poco conto, come l'incisione di un foruncolo.

Ogni tanto l'armadio farmaceutico era rinsanguato dall'arrivo, al giungere di nuovi convogli di prigionieri, di quantità diverse dei più disparati prodotti e delle più diverse specialità farmaceutiche, molte delle quali inutilizzabili, rinvenute nelle valigie confiscate ai nuovi giunti; ma in complesso il fabbisogno si manteneva sempre di gran lunga superiore alle disponibilità.

Il personale veniva reclutato esclusivamente fra i deportati medesimi. I medici venivano scelti, previo esame, fra coloro che, all'ingresso al Campo, avevano denunciato di possedere la laurea in medicina, con precedenza a coloro che fossero stati padroni della lingua tedesca o

polacca. I loro servizi venivano ricompensati con un miglior trattamento alimentare e con migliori abiti e calzature. Gli assistenti e gli [p.542] infermieri venivano invece scelti senza alcun criterio di precedenti professionali: essi erano per lo più individui dotati di notevole prestanza fisica, che ottenevano la carica - naturalmente assai ambita - grazie alle loro amicizie e relazioni con medici già in funzione o con personale dirigente del Campo. Ne seguiva che, mentre i medici dimostravano in genere una discreta competenza e un certo grado di civiltà, il personale ausiliario si distingueva per la sua ignoranza, o disprezzo, di ogni norma igienica, terapeutica e umanitaria: esso giungeva al punto di commerciare parte della zuppa e del pane destinati agli ammalati in cambio di sigarette, di oggetti di vestiario e d'altro. Gli ammalati venivano spesso percossi per colpe irrisorie; la distribuzione dei viveri non avveniva in modo regolare e a carico di ammalati che si fossero resi colpevoli di più gravi mancanze - ad esempio, furto di pane a qualche compagno - vigeva come punizione il congedo immediato del reo dall'ospedale, ed il suo rientro immediato al lavoro, previa somministrazione di un certo numero di nerbate (per lo più venticinque) sul dorso, somministrate con molta energia con un tubo di tela rivestita di gomma. Altro genere di punizione era l'obbligo di restare per un quarto d'ora sopra uno sgabello piuttosto alto da terra e col sedile strettissimo, sulla punta dei piedi con le gambe flesse sulle coscie e queste sul bacino e con le braccia distese orizzontalmente in avanti all'altezza delle spalle. Di solito, dopo pochi minuti, il paziente perdeva l'equilibrio per la fatica muscolare e per la debolezza del suo organismo e perciò ruzzolava a terra, con grande divertimento degli infermieri che facevano circolo e lo dileggiavano con frizzi e motti. Il caduto doveva rialzarsi e, risalito sullo sgabello, riprendere la posizione per il tempo stabilito; se, per le successive cadute, non era più in grado di farlo, il restante della punizione era liquidato con un certo numero di frustate.

L'affluenza degli ammalati era sempre grandissima e superiore alla capacità dei diversi reparti; perciò, per far posto ai nuovi giunti, un certo numero di ammalati veniva giornalmente dimesso ancorchè incompletamente guariti e sempre in condizioni di grave debolezza generale; ciononostante, essi dovevano riprendere il lavoro il giorno seguente. Coloro poi che erano affetti da malattie croniche o il cui soggiorno in ospedale si prolungava oltre un certo periodo di tempo, che si aggirava sui due mesi, o che ritornavano con troppa frequenza in ospedale per ricadute della loro malattia, erano avviati - come abbiamo già riferito per i tubercolotici, i luetici e i malarici - a Birkenau ed ivi soppressi nelle camere a gas. La medesima sorte subivano coloro che, essendo troppo deperiti, non erano più in grado di lavorare. Ogni tanto - all'incirca una volta al mese - si procedeva nelle varie sezioni dell'ospedale alla cosiddetta «selezione dei mussulmani» (con questo termine pittoresco erano chiamati appunto gli individui estremamente dimagriti), con la quale si sceglievano i più malandati fisicamente per inviarli alle camere a gas. Tali selezioni si svolgevano con grande rapidità ed erano eseguite dal medico direttore dei servizi sanitari, davanti al quale tutti i ricoverati sfilavano nudi; ed egli con uno sguardo superficiale giudicava lo stato generale dei singoli, decidendo immediatamente la loro sorte. Alcuni giorni dopo, i prescelti subivano una seconda visita da parte di un capitano medico delle SS., che era il dirigente generale dei servizi sanitari di tutti i Campi dipendenti da Auschwitz. Per amore di verità, dobbiamo dire che questa visita era più minuziosa dalla precedente ed ogni caso soppesato e discusso; ad ogni modo erano pochi i fortunati che venivano scartati, e riammessi in ospedale per ulteriori cure o rimandati ai lavori considerati leggeri presso altri Comandi; la maggior parte era condannata a morte. Uno di noi fu per ben quattro volte iscritto nella lista dei «mussulmani» ed ogni volta scampò al destino mortale, in grazia soltanto al fatto di essere medico; poichè ai medici - non sappiamo se per una disposizione generale o per iniziativa della direzione del Campo di Monowitz - era risparmiata una simile fine.

Nell'ottobre 1944 la selezione, anzichè restare limitata ai soli padiglioni dell'ospedale, venne estesa a tutti i «blocchi»; ma fu l'ultima, chè, dopo quell'epoca, tale ricerca venne sospesa e le camere a gas di Birkenau furono smantellate. Tuttavia in quella tragica giornata erano state scelte 850 vittime, fra cui 8 Ebrei di cittadinanza Italiana.

Il funzionamento delle camere a gas e dell'annesso crematorio era disimpegnato da un Comando speciale, che lavorava giorno e notte in due turni. I membri di questo Comando vivevano a parte, accuratamente segregati da ogni contatto con altri prigionieri o col mondo esterno. Dai loro abiti emanava un odore nauseabondo; essi erano sempre sporchi e avevano un aspetto assolutamente selvaggio, veramente di bestie feroci. Essi erano scelti fra i peggiori criminali condannati per gravi reati di sangue.

Ci risulta che nel febbraio 1943 furono inaugurati a Birkenau un nuovo forno crematorio e una camera a gas più razionali di quelli che erano stati in funzione fino a quel mese. Essi erano composti di tre parti: la camera di attesa, la «camera delle docce», i forni. Al centro dei forni si ergeva una alta ciminiera, attorno alla quale erano 9 forni, con 4 aperture ciascuno ed ognuna di queste permetteva il passaggio contemporaneo di tre cadaveri. La capacità di ciascun forno era di 2000 cadaveri al giorno.

Le vittime, introdotte nella prima sala, ricevevano l'ordine di spogliarsi completamente, perchè - si diceva loro - dovevano fare il bagno; e, per accreditare maggiormente il turpe inganno, venivano loro consegnati un pezzo di sapone e un asciugamano; dopodichè erano fatte entrare nella «camera della doccia». Era questa un grande camerone, nel quale era sistemato un impianto di docce posticce, sulle pareti del quale spiccavano scritte del seguente tenore: «Lavatevi bene, perchè la pulizia è la salute», «Non fate economia di sapone», «Non dimenticate qui il vostro asciugatoio!»; cosicchè la sala poteva dare l'impressione di essere veramente un grande stabilimento di bagni. Sul soffitto piano della sala c'era una grande apertura, ermeticamente chiusa da tre grandi lastre di lamiera che si aprivano a valvola. Delle rotaie attraversavano la camera in tutta la sua larghezza e portavano da essa ai forni. Entrate [p.543] tutte le persone nella camera a gas, le porte venivano chiuse (esse erano a tenuta d'aria) e veniva lanciata, attraverso le valvole del soffitto, una preparazione chimica in forma di polvere grossolana, di colore grigio-azzurro, contenuta in scatole di latta; queste portavano un'etichetta con la scritta «Zyclon B - Per la distruzione di tutti i parassiti animali» e la marca di una fabbrica di Amburgo. Si trattava di una preparazione di cianuro, che evaporava ad una certa temperatura. Nel giro di pochi minuti, tutti i rinchiusi nella camera a gas morivano; allora porte e finestre venivano spalancate e gli addetti al Comando Speciale, muniti di maschera, entravano in funzione per il trasporto dei cadaveri ai forni crematori.

Prima di introdurre le salme nei forni, appositi incaricati recidevano i capelli a coloro che li avevano ancora, e cioè ai cadaveri di quelle persone che, appena giunte con un trasporto, erano state subito portate al macello, senza entrare nei Campi; ed estraevano i denti d'oro a quelli che ne avevano. Le ceneri, come è noto, venivano poi sparse nei campi e negli orti, come fertilizzanti del terreno.

Verso la fine del 1944 giunse al Campo di Monowitz la disposizione che tutti i medici presenti nel Campo fossero esonerati dai lavori nei Comandi e venissero impiegati nelle diverse Sezioni ospedaliere come medici o, in mancanza di posti disponibili, come infermieri; prima di essere addetti al nuovo lavoro essi dovevano, per la durata di un mese, far pratica nelle diverse Sezioni ospedaliere, mediche e chirurgiche, seguendo un certo turno e contemporaneamente dovevano seguire un corso teorico d'insegnamento sull'organizzazione sanitaria dei Campi di concentramento, sul loro funzionamento, sulla caratteristica patologia dei Campi, sulle cure da praticare agli ammalati. Tali disposizioni vennero regolarmente attuate e il corso fu iniziato nei primi giorni del gennaio 1945; ma verso la metà dello stesso mese, esso fu interrotto, data la travolgente offensiva russa sulla direttiva Cracovia-Kattowitz-Breslavia, di fronte alla quale le Armate tedesche si dettero a precipitosa fuga. Anche il Campo di Monowitz, come tutti gli altri della regione di Auschwitz, fu fatto sgombrare e i tedeschi si trascinarono dietro circa 11.000 prigionieri, che, secondo le notizie ricevute più tardi da qualcuno miracolosamente scampato, vennero quasi tutti trucidati a raffiche di mitragliatrice pochi giorni dopo, allorchè i soldati di scorta si accorsero di essere completamente circondati dalle armate rosse e di non aver quindi più nessuna via aperta alla ritirata. Essi avevano già percorso a piedi una settantina di chilometri, quasi senza fermarsi, sprovvisti di viveri, chè quelli ricevuti prima della partenza dal Campo erano consistiti soltanto in un chilogrammo di pane, 75 grammi di margarina, 90 grammi di salame e 45 di zucchero. In seguito erano stati caricati su diversi treni che, avviati in diverse direzioni, non poterono raggiungere alcuna metà. Avvenne allora la strage dei sopravvissuti a tanta sovraumana fatica; molti - forse tre o quattro mila - che si erano fermati affranti lungo la strada, erano già stati massacrati sul posto a colpi di pistola e col calcio dei fucili dai soldati di scorta.

Nel Campo intanto non era rimasto che un migliaio di prigionieri inabili, ammalati o convalescenti, incapaci di camminare, sotto la sorveglianza di alcune SS., le quali avevano ricevuto l'ordine di fucilarli prima di abbandonarli. Ignoriamo perchè quest'ultima disposizione non sia stata eseguita; ma, qualunque ne sia stata la ragione, a questa sola i sottoscritti devono di essere ancora in vita. Essi erano stati tratti nell'ospedale, l'uno

comandato per l'assistenza medica dei ricoverati, l'altro perchè convalescente. L'ordine di assistere gli ammalati non poteva essere eseguito che moralmente, poichè una assistenza materiale era resa impossibile dal fatto che i tedeschi, prima di abbandonare il Campo, avevano fatto sgombrare l'ospedale di ogni medicinale e di ogni strumento chirurgico: non si trovava più nè una compressa di aspirina, nè una pinza da medicazione, nè una compressa di garza.

Seguirono giorni altamente drammatici; molti ammalati morirono per la mancanza di cure, molti per esaurimento, poichè anche i viveri mancavano. Mancava anche l'acqua, la cui condotta era stata distrutta da un bombardamento aereo avvenuto proprio in quei giorni. Soltanto la fortuita scoperta di un deposito di patate, interrato in un campo adiacente per preservarle dal gelo, permise ai meno deboli di nutrirsi e di resistere fino al giorno in cui i russi, finalmente arrivati, provvidero con larghezza alla distribuzione di viveri.

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