

Auschwitz as University: Primo Levi's Poetry and Fiction Post-Deportation and Return

Auschwitz como universidad: La poesía y la ficción posdeportación y el regreso de Primo Levi

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I have to observe that really my deepest and most lasting loves are the least explicable.¹

Resumen

Primo Levi señaló que su experiencia de un año de duración, desde su deportación en febrero de 1944 hasta su liberación de Auschwitz en enero de 1945, fue el motivo principal de su necesidad de escribir. Levi llegó a decir que su experiencia en el campo de trabajo había sido una especie de universidad para él. Más allá de sus narrativas autobiográficas sobre los campos, principalmente en *Si esto es un hombre* (*Se questo è un uomo*) y *La tregua*, Levi escribió dos novelas, varios cuentos, poemas y ensayos. Estos trabajos demuestran el alcance de lo que el escritor exploró mientras ponía por escrito su relación con el mundo y con la naturaleza humana tras su liberación de Auschwitz. En este artículo, tengo en cuenta qué conocimiento extrajo Levi de los campos, algo que desarrolló durante las cuatro décadas restantes de su vida, al igual que cómo esas apreciaciones se reflejaron en su escritura. En concreto, este análisis se centra en las relaciones en la obra de Levi –entre la gente y en la respuesta de uno mismo frente al mundo– y su conocimiento y observación relativa a la intimidad y al conflicto durante y después de la guerra.

¹ From Primo Levi's 1981 book, *The Search for Roots*. Cited in Levi (2016a: xlix). Originally in "Prefazione" included in *La ricerca delle radici*: "Devo anzi constatare che proprio i miei amori più profondi e durevoli sono i meno giustificati" (Levi, 2016, II: 8).

Palabras clave: Auschwitz; literatura sobre el Holocausto; Primo Levi; poesía; novela; escritura y trauma.

Abstract

Primo Levi noted that his year-long experience, from deportation in February 1944 to release from Auschwitz in January 1945, was at the root of his need to write. He even went as far as saying that his experience in the labor camp had been a sort of university for him. Beyond his autobiographical writing on the camps, notably in *If This Is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*) and *The Truce* (*La tregua*), he wrote two novels, a number of short stories, poems, and essays. These works attest to the range the writer explored as he worked on paper his relationship with the world and with human nature after liberation from Auschwitz. In this paper, I consider what knowledge he took from the camps that he developed over the four remaining decades of his life, and how those insights manifested in his writing. This analysis focuses specifically on relationships in Levi's work—between people and in the self's response to the world—and his knowledge and observation of intimacy and conflict in and after war.

Keywords: Auschwitz; Holocaust literature; Primo Levi; poetry; novel; writing and trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi began to write with urgency after his release from Auschwitz and the labor camp Buna-Monowitz where he worked as a chemist during the last months of the Second World War. He confessed in an interview that his year-long experience, from deportation in February 1944 to release from Auschwitz in January 1945, was at the root of his need to write. He even went as far as saying that his experience in the labor camp had been a sort of university for him. In his 1976 "A Self-Interview" he shares, "[a] friend of mine, who was deported to the women's camp of Ravensbrück, says that the camp was her university. I think I can say the same thing, that is, by living and then writing about and pondering those events, I have learned many things about man and about the world." (Belpoliti and Gordon 2001: 201).¹ However, he continues that only five percent of Italian deportees

¹ According to Italian historian Renzo De Felice in *The Jews in Fascist Italy* (2015: 460-461), the total number of Jewish deportees from Italy to concentration camps in Eastern and Central Europe between 1943 and 1945 was 7,495. Approximately 610 deportees returned from the camps. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum researchers have suggested that the number of deportees may range from nine to ten thousand.

returned to Italy. That he survived and returned unharmed was due chiefly to “good luck” (206) as he expresses it; yet, the sum total of this particular past—which includes deportation, time in the camps, and repatriation—he reports made him “richer and surer” (206). Levi’s view of his experience, how he decided to frame this traumatic period in his life for himself and his reading public, and how this framework structured and influenced his writing career of over forty years after Auschwitz, allows contemporary readers and scholars to understand the body of his work as a response to and an outgrowth of a highly traumatic and formative life experience.

Such a response contributed to a lifetime of writing, primarily, as Levi admits that had he not “lived the Auschwitz experience” he would not likely have written. And, again, in 1979 in an interview with Giuseppe Grassano he offers a sketch of his eclectic work life, referring to himself as a centaur: a liceo student of the humanities, a chemist, and ex-deportee. “Auschwitz was a second university” (qtd. in Belpoliti 2016: 131). (Finally, he layers onto these three diverse and early experiences that of being a writer, which he tells us “comes on top of and is a summation of all the other three and that in its turn could be the source of some other thing” (2016: 131). That *other thing* as he explains it is a trace of the desire to tell stories and to theorize how things get narrated.² Such a desire as he described it was “a narrative impulse that was pathological” (129). Levi expressed these thoughts and ideas just as he was newly retired from his work as a technical and managing director at SIVA, an industrial paint factory. He had managed to write during his professional career at SIVA. Yet, retirement brought him fully into his life as a writer.

His poems, stories, and novels testify to Levi’s accumulating knowledge as a contemplative human being. In some of Levi’s poems, an emotional self speaks. He explores what it means to return, to make a home, to carry loss, to know many lifetimes—human, animal, mineral, to return to origins. In fiction, he renders the vulnerabilities of love, meeting another in strong connection, if only for a moment. That transitory but weighty moment explodes with desire, with the thousand things beings carry within and that illumine a self and those it encounters. What we say matters, but what we don’t say—the way we look, hear, touch, and struggle in relationship to one another and, privately, quietly, within ourselves, constitutes a universe, one that becomes that university. Levi appreciates life and he knows that relationship is rare, precarious, and temporal. Opportunities open and close. Dream and desire impose themselves on forms. Memories interrupt the present. Physicality (as matter) and circumstances dictate outcomes.

² At that time in relationship to composition of a first novel, *The Wrench* (*La chiave a stelle*, 1978).

At Auschwitz he acquired knowledge and insight, forged under conditions of extreme adversity, which would change him over time. This hellish university reflects through his body of writing over four post-war decades. Its places of learning—the disease-ridden barracks, mud pits, and chemical labs at IG Farben—forged Levi’s consciousness as he later faced the events of Jewish genocide and displacement. Just graduated from University of Turin and prepared to work as a chemist, a Jewish man whose family had lived for several centuries in Italy by way of southern France and, earlier, Spain, Levi had experienced a strange internationalism through the process of deportation, internment, and repatriation. His exposure to people from Eastern Europe and Russia, from the Balkans, and from all over Western Europe radically enlarged his consciousness. In the camps, as one of those abducted under a politics of violence, Levi witnessed intimately the means of instituting a universal Aryan Germany. He was also exposed to a diversity of languages, myriad ways of thinking, acting, and responding, primarily as they were presented under duress and within the trauma of deportation and the physical, mental demands of the camp.

In the immediate post-war period, he encountered people from throughout Europe—Poland, Greece, France, and from Russia, both those who were interned and those free.³ This journey would constitute the most dynamic period of Levi’s life. It was on his return home that he witnessed the disarray of post-war Europe and people’s ignorance of the labor and concentration camps and the atrocities that had occurred there. These crimes had been concealed from people’s daily purview and would come to be known, in large part, as the Nazi-perpetrated genocide of the Jewish people, and increasingly through the remainder of the twentieth century, and now into the early twenty-first, in shared social discourse as the Holocaust or the Shoah (שואה).⁴ The first two books—*If This Is a Man*

³ Robert Gordon notes the Holocaust “can never be wholly contained at the ‘national’ level” and that “it is and always was a porous, plurilinguistic, transnational phenomenon, evinced by the migratory reach of pivotal cultural events,” and, I would argue, by the migratory reach of the current historical archive of this period. See *The Holocaust in Italian Culture: 1944-2010*.

⁴ The murder of individuals occurred in labor, concentration, and extermination camps, as well as through pogroms, organized and covert mass executions, prisoner of war camps, jailing and deportation of political activists and partisans, and other forms of internment, torture, deportation, street execution, and abduction. However, the Holocaust refers specifically to the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. *Holocaust* (δολόκαυστος) is a word of Greek origin meaning “sacrifice by fire.” Genocide is defined by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: “The definition of genocide requires that the perpetrator have a specific state of mind: the ‘intent to destroy’ a group In the absence of explicit evidence, intent can be inferred from facts and circumstances that take into account the general context of the crime, such as: preparation of other culpable acts systematically and exclusively directed against the same group;

and *The Truce*⁵—relate the extended narrative of this material and Levi's cognitive and emotional response to his deportation and camp experiences. Engaging Levi's prodigious body of published work that extends from 1946 to 1987, as he wrote just up until his death in April 1987, the reader recognizes that the university—the schooling, the experiential place of deep and often destructive knowledge, transformed from horror into order, inquiry, and, yes, poetry—is a radically unconventional and life-changing university, not only for the writer but for his readers.

2. POETRY'S UNNATURAL NATURE

In his relationship to each genre, Levi reveals his relationship to various events and his need to understand experiences and social phenomenon. Poetry, a form he felt impulsive, even “unnatural” to human beings, answered to a primal need for sound and image. Poems emerged spontaneously. He confessed that some subjects and particular moments demanded poetry.

Levi wrote “After R. M. Rilke” (“Da R. M. Rilke”) in January 1946, a year and two days after his release from Auschwitz. The lines begin with this pattern, as if a lament, a prayer, and an ode all at once: “Lord, it is time. . . .the time. . .Or to go...the time...Or we'll live...We'll spend the hours...Or writing letters...And we'll pace...Restless⁶ (Levi 2016a, III: 1893; ellipsis mine). The lines end-stop with: house, alone, time (l'ore), far away, solitude, down the avenues, while the leaves fall – vino, casa, casa, soli, soli, l'ore, lontano, solitudine, indietro, foglie. It is the passing of time. It is *the* time, the exact moment which seems to call, to have a life after the war. The wine ferments (già fermenta il vino). The time has come to settle (Il tempo è giunto). To have a house (di avere una casa). Or, to be for a time without one (O rimanere a lungo senza casa). This is not a time of action. If without a home, we will remain homeless. If one is alone, she will remain so. The house is denied, we will spend time with books (sopra i libri consumeremo le ore), writing letters from our solitude (scrivere... [ellipsis mine] lunghe lettere dalla solitudine). We will pace up and

scale of atrocities committed; weapons employed; the extent of bodily injury; and/or the repetition of destructive and discriminatory acts. See *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

⁵ *Se questo è un uomo* was first published with a print run of 2,500 copies by De Silva in 1947 and republished by Einaudi, with Levi's with additions and edits, in 1958. *La Tregua (The Truce)* was published in 1963.

⁶ “Signore, è tempo... Il tempo... o rimanere a lungo senza casa... il tempo...Oppure rimarremo... consumeremo le ore... Od a scrivere lettere... Ed andremo... Inquieti” (Levi 2016b, II: 689). The lines vary in comparing an English translation (from *The Complete Works, III, Collected Poems* translated by Jonathan Galassi) of the poem to Levi's original in Italian. In English translation the lines end with: now, house, time, alone, books, far away, solitude, avenues, and fall. In Italian the lines end with: wine, house, along, hours, far, solitude, up and down, and leaves.

down avenues (andremo pei viali avanti e indietro), restless while leaves fall ([i]nquieti, mentre cadono le foglie), while time goes on. Instead, we make as if time does not pass, so we are not too alone. Or, we choose aloneness, a life of the mind, populated with books and writing and letters and solitude and distance and walks and restlessness. Levi's poem is a post-war response to Rilke's original, which reads:

"Day in Autumn"

*After the summer's yield, Lord, it is time
to let your shadow lengthen on the sundials
and in the pastures let the rough winds fly.
As for the final fruits, coax them to roundness.
Direct on them two days of warmer light
to hale them golden toward their term, and harry
the last few drops of sweetness through the wine.*

*Whoever's homeless now, will build no shelter;
who lives alone will live indefinitely so,
waking up to read a little, draft long letters,
and, along the city's avenues,
fitfully wander, when the wild leaves loosen.⁷*

Levi returned to the flat where he was born in October 1945 from nearly two years of deportation and internment in Poland. He was bearded, swollen, and barely recognizable. His mother and sister had returned to the flat from hiding in the mountains of Aosta Valley. They greeted him with joy and relief. As his biographer, Ian Thomson relates, he sat at the kitchen table, silent, eating a bowl of soup (2002: 219). Visitors came and went. The house filled with his presence slowly, slowly, and into this space, also came his new wife, Lucia,⁸ and his daughter, Lisa, born nearly three years after the Rilke poem was made. Yet, the solitary life coexisted with the time of the house. The poem reminds readers that presences crowd our lives, if we are lucky, if there is a house to which to return or a new one to be found.

One could not assume the existence of a house at that newly post-war moment in Europe. "After R. M. Rilke" tells us a time has come not to be alone—the way war wants to force that aloneness on us, wants to separate us, and we refuse that separation in returning to our work and to our houses. The way war will make us turn to ourselves in the quiet pages

⁷ Trans. Mary Kinzie, *Poetry Foundation*. "Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr gross. / Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren, / und auf den Fluren lass die Winde los. / Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein; / gib ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage, / dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage / die letzte Süsse in den schweren Wein. / Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr. / Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben, / wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben / und wird in den Alleen hin und her / unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben (Rilke 2018: 101-102).

⁸ Consult Mesnard (2011: 140-141) for a brief account of this re-encounter.

of books and in writing, to memories of those whom we have met and who live far away. The solitary life calls and one wants to return to the shelter of the self, yet one cannot stay there for long. The movement of walking, restless, alone in the familiar avenues of the brain, of one's city. After Rilke: a day in autumn, a day toward the maturity of life—could that maturity be an ending when all things arrive, a great crashing ending that signals the rest of life to begin, a day or two short of harvest when the poet asks the warm sun to nourish? If one has not established readiness, now is not the time. This is a fullness. Whatever state of readiness or unpreparedness one experiences now is the one; there will be no change.

Levi is returning. His poem is answer, query, pondering. This is a poem of return, of what it means to re-enter and the labor of that process. It is also a remembering of that still moment that he was taken from his country, the seconds of rupture. The poem transmits the feeling of grief carried as loss in the body. It is a strange harvest in his twenty-sixth year, the first winter in Turin full of the memory of Polish cold and mud, his initial moments in speechless return from the camps and the landscapes of war. Perhaps it is the last lines that best describe the poet's interior world. This world will remain with him into his later days. He has been exiled. He has been torn from home and returned as a survivor. There is an aloneness to that survival. Now he finds himself a restless avenue walker.

Levi's poetry allows us to read him differently than his prose. The poems are secretions, if we take them to be as he refers to the poetic impulse in the introduction to his one of two collections of poems, *At an Uncertain Hour* (*Ad Ora Incerta*, 1984). There he tells us that many individuals feel and then yield to the need to express themselves poetically and, so, secrete poetic matter. The word *choice* (*scelta*) recalls a description in his first autobiographical account *If This Is a Man*. In the third paragraph of "Our Nights" ("Le nostre notti"), Levi creates with his language an image of the captive man, newly arrived into Auschwitz, digging himself in, carving a signature of space in the barracks at the far corners of his cramped bunk. Man secretes a shell to protect and build around himself a tenuous barrier of defense. With his habit of adaptation, he strives to shelter himself from the harsh environment.

Now, in Levi's response to poetry-making man secretes poetic matter. Poetry has become a necessary biological function. Poetic expression then is a form irrefutably intrinsic to and arisen of human character and experience. It is not necessarily an aesthetic pleasure as Levi's describes it. "I am a man. And, I, too, at irregular intervals, 'at uncertain hour,' have given in to this urge: it seems to be written into our genetic heritage" (Levi 2016a, III: 1877) – "Uomo sono. Anch'io, ad intervalli irregolari, 'ad ora incerta'" (Levi 2016b, II; not

included in this edition). The poetic is an impulse of a certain form of expression—we might say one conscious of itself as a particular form and syntax. This is a form highly disciplined in its lines, aware of the rhetorical effects of language, into which narrative is poured. As James Longenbach suggests, the demands of sound and story compete. In poetry, the human being displays a desire to be known and to remain forever occluded (Longenbach 2004: 7). Just as poet and reader resist poetry, so, too, does poetry resist. Each line, each word, is a sort of disjunction, an accident imposing itself on what we take to be real narrative experience, or our earnestness to describe a feeling. “Every sentence is a kind of experiment. We begin a sentence not knowing where or how it will end. We release it to the world unable to predict the response it will, fairly or unfairly, elicit” (34). At any moment in the composition or reading process a sentence may surprise and startle us. In that moment, a miniature awakening occurs. Any moment—at random—could be an epiphanic one. To return to Levi’s seeming discomfort with poetry as a form of human expression, it is no wonder he does not relish it. The human being succumbs to poetry, as it is “written into our genetic heritage” (Levi 2016a, III: 1877) – “iscritta nel nostro patrimonio genetico” (Levi 2016b, II; not included in this edition). Poetry draws us into our ancestral and instinctual nature. Levi confessed that at certain moments poetry seemed more appropriate than prose for conveying an idea or image. Poems come in the form of “individual stimuli” that assume poetic form, a form that Levi in his preference for rationality considered almost unnatural, a force that might have been suppressed through civilizational tendencies, but nevertheless refused suppression.

The categorization of forms into those natural and unnatural, rational and irrational: what is the purpose of this judgment? Certainly, the poems were a space of vulnerability and emotion for this writer. Thus, they were irrational and seemingly bothersome. Poems (as love) deliver us to places of unknowing. The inclination to write a poem, determined by the appearance of thought and the topic at-hand, was a demand Levi answered. He admitted that his poems were not necessarily “excellent,” and implied that they secreted themselves. Perhaps he was emotionally exposed in his poems. In prose, he could shelter within long lines, full pages crowded with text, complex workings of plot, and the fullness of characters and their histories. Longenbach provocatively suggests, “Poems show us how it feels to like trouble” (2004: 91). The language of poetry does not resist anxiety.

In 1980 Levi writes “Autobiography” (“Autobiografia”), a poem in which he assumes as many forms as life has taken on the planet: a blind organism of the sea—a fish—dinosaur—toad—a four-legged—insect and reptile—beast of burden—girl—mathematician and scientist. The poem begins with time, the speaker “old like the world”

(Levi 2016a, III: 1935) – “vecchio come il mondo” (Levi 2016b, II: 719) – who speaks of dark origins, and ends with a request for those ancient, wise men to not deride the poet as his old body “is engraved with strange signs” (1936) – “è inciso di strani segni” (719). The poem reads as a story. The speaker has known many forms; he is old and seemingly wise. He wears the mark, the strange sign of the camps on his left arm. Yet, he fears derision and wards it off within the lines of the poem. He contains and speaks from all forms. Accordingly, he will not be limited to one—even if a form (genre, embodiment, lifetime) fails, even if he does not make excellent lines (Levi 2016a, III: 1877; not included in Levi 2016b, II). Marco Belpoliti in *Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo* writes that Levi initially wrote poems to express certain particularly emotional aspects of his Auschwitz experience. Later he composed poems in considering story subjects. When asked in an interview in 1981 about the value of poetry, Levi responded that he came infrequently to poetry. It was not his natural state to make poetry, but every so often this curious infection, like an illness, a rash, erupted (2016: 1588). The idea is to try to obey the “unnatural” instinct.

3. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE READER

In interviews, books, and essays Levi commented that the writer must write for his intended audience. The writer does not write for himself, to please himself. In “About Obscure Writing” (“Dello scrivere oscuro”) he asserts his view against writing from the heart, saying that such writing is not necessarily more worthy or noble than writing from reason. He criticizes the language of the heart as “capricious, adulterated, and as unstable as fashion” (2016a, III, 2062-3) – “capriccioso, adulterato e instabile” (2016b, II, 840) – subject to the whims of fashion, and frequently indecipherable. Thus, language of the heart is unreliable. Rather, the writer’s duty is to write for readers, to make himself understood. Such duty to the reader will anchor the writer and force him to remember himself a man, not a superman. This exposition from *Other People’s Trades* (*L’altrui mestiere*, 1969-1985) on the writer’s task feels firmly rooted in the early experiences of the camp. Levi understood the consequences that resulted of abusing the word, of torturing language, into ideas of racial purity and superiority. He understood that to alienate others was to be entirely alone. To be without audience for the writer then is to not be a writer. To have no listeners is to not exist. Levi’s original work was to make himself understood, to utter his story in a time and place when few would listen.

The success of the initial work, as for most writers, but for Levi with particular acuteness, depended on the willingness of readers to engage his account.⁹ Levi also felt that poetic obscurity had been willfully committed by some writers in order to exclude others. He cites Ezra Pound as a case in point, claiming, “his poetic obscurity had the same roots as his supermanism, which led him first to fascism and subsequently to self-marginalization: both grew out of his contempt for the reader” (Levi 2016a, III: 2064).¹⁰ I would argue that Levi had no such contempt for the reader, but rather felt from his first writings that the existence of his work depended on the reader’s good will, the reader’s willingness to engage his writing in such a way that it might change and awaken consciousness. This is not mere sentimentality on this critic’s part; rather, Levi intended his reader to willfully attend to the content of his writings. This intention appears not only in the poem “Shemà”¹¹ where he demands readers’ immediate attention and curses them if they fail to heed his words (much as Dante in his tour through hell was cursed by the condemned if he failed to heed their sorrowful tales) with which later editions of *the book* begin, but pervades his poetry and prose.¹² His writings concern what is flawed (imperfect), temporary, fleeting, and vulnerable in our human condition. They refuse to omit complexity, always striving for the subtleties of misunderstanding coupled with passion (also a theme in Dante’s *Inferno* and through literature of the twentieth century as it emerged of wars interrupted by periods of uncertain peace). Such misunderstanding and passion may dwell just under the surface of any encounter. To want to be more, to fear not being enough, to be alive to every distinct moment, to have failed, and to find failure as a perfect vulnerability that returns us to our humanness in a recognition and reconciliation with what is real. Such concerns form a basis of his written work.

Levi in these passages, making connections to literature and to the trials of writers both predecessors and contemporaries, suggests that the indecipherability that characterized the work of poets Georg Trakl and Paul Celan was related to the wreckage of their times. That wreckage for Trakl, an Austrian, was the demise of the Habsburg Empire in the wake

⁹ This acuity for Levi resided in Italy’s lack of knowledge of the camps. Levi felt an intense need to educate Italians about the genocide that occurred in Poland, 900 miles from his native soil. See Levi’s *The Periodic Table* about his knowledge of Jewish genocide in the early years of the war, which Robert Gordon recounts came from “Swiss newspapers, clandestine allied radio, the British white paper on German atrocities, Italian soldiers returning from Russia, Croatia, and Greece, who had seen Jews killed and deported; and Jewish refugees from Croatia and Poland” (2012: 43-44).

¹⁰ “sono convinto... del suo supernomismo, che lo ha condotto prima al fascismo e poi all’autoemarginazione: l’una e l’altro germinavano dal suo disprezzo per il lettore” (Levi 2016b, II: 841).

¹¹ This poem title makes reference to the most sacred prayer in Judaism “Shemá, Israel” (Deut 6: 4) – שמע ישראל (דברים 6: 4).

¹² See “Writing As Prosthesis” in Chaffin (2018: 37-49).

of the First World War, and for Celan, a Jew born into a German-speaking family in Romania, the wreckage incurred came of the Second World War. Both of his parents perished in the camps and the writer survived force labor. Levi writes compassionately about the work of these writers, as he navigates the formation of his own complex and layered writer's voice. He writes in comprehension that the poetics of these men reflected the darkness and obscurity of their times. Both men, he notes, ended their lives in suicide—Trakl in a cocaine overdose and Celan in a drowning in the Seine at the age of forty-nine. In describing Celan's *Death Flight* (*Todesfuge*, 1945) he writes that

it is not a communication, it is not a language, or at most it's a dark and truncated language, the language, in fact, of someone about to die and alone, as we are all alone at the point of death. But because we are not alone when we are alive, we should not write as if we were. We have a responsibility, as long as we are alive: we must answer for what we write, word by word, and ensure that every word hits its target. (Levi 2015a, III, 2065)¹³

The words aim for the reader; one writes to and for others; writing is a moral act.

"In the Beginning" ("Nel principio"), a poem of genesis and arisen of the Torah's originating *Book of Genesis* (בראשית), reminds readers that all life forms share a common origin.¹⁴ The poem draws us back to what matters, what is most foundational and primal. The lines remind us that we are one and the same, that our survival contains all things. Thus, in death, worlds disappear—whole histories of love and suns. It contains the elemental experiences absent in *Genesis* and touches upon love as much as it reminds us of heavens—the cosmos—and earth. Levi twines life and ruination, love and the writing, active hand that creates and now turns us to beginnings.

*Everything was born from that one spasm:
The same abyss that embraces us and taunts us,
The same time that gives us life and ruins us,
Everything each of us has thought,
The eyes of every woman we have loved,
Suns by the thousand, too,
And this hand that writes* (Levi 2016a, III, 1913-1914).¹⁵

¹³ "non è una comunicazione, non è un linguaggio, o al più è un linguaggio buio e monco, qual è appunto quello di colui che sta per morire, ed è solo, come tutti lo saremo in punto di morte. Ma poiché noi vivi non siamo soli, non dobbiamo scrivere come se fossimo soli. Abbiamo una responsabilità, finché viviamo: dobbiamo rispondere di quanto scriviamo, parola per parola, e far sì che ogni parola vada a segno" (Levi 2016b, II: 842).

¹⁴ Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" – (בראשית אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ) – (בראשית).

¹⁵ "Da quell'unico spasimo tutto è nato: / Lo stesso abisso che ci avvolge e ci sfida, / Lo stesso tempo che ci partorisce e travolge, / Ogni cosa che ognuno ha pensato, / Gli occhi di ogni donna che abbiamo amato, / E mille e mille soli, e questa / Mano che scrive" (Levi 2016b, II: 704).

Such a poem is an equalizer, a song of consolation to fellow beings, and the sameness we contain and that flows among and between all manifestations of life. In return to Italy, Levi also returns to origins: his Jewish roots and traditions, Pie(d)montese dialect inflected with Yiddish, to those shared things that constitute our humanness, to the now infused with the past.¹⁶ We are born of an abyss—a word that recalls his description of his descent into Auschwitz (in allegory of Dante’s descent into the inferno; recalling, too, Nietzsche’s cautionary note of looking too long and hard into the abyss and, thus, we risk being devoured by it). We have loved and are nourished; all origins arrive into the poet, whose hand so near to us, clearly visible as he writes, as if a hand of God bringing being into form, is here, now. The poet, that god, creator of most unnatural and instinctual forms.

4. THE DEMANDS AND JOYS OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD

In a second novel, written in 1981, *If Not Now, When?* (*Se non ora, quando?*)¹⁷ Levi’s writing issues a sensuality based in an understanding of the human character and condition. His voice is a steady presence that values the human being and understands how complicated is our shared human condition. The narrator explores, at crucial points in the novel, with intimacy and love the relational world and how the joys and demands of the physical world imprint our relations. There are particular moments in the novel in which the writer has created a space suffused with knowledge and curiosity. The narrator conveys a meditated voice under which lies a boundless passion for life coupled with pragmatism in response to physical and situational limits.

Several passages in the novel allow the reader to decipher a sensual, even passionate current that references relations among human beings and their environment. This current establishes a quiet but pervasive theme of difficult intimacy through the narrative. Mendel is a watchmender. He has been without a place to stay or anchor himself since leaving the Red Army in July 1942. (He won’t say he “deserted” [“disertato”]). The Germans killed Jews, one of whom was his wife, and some Christians, in his Russian village, Strelka. He encounters Leonid, a fellow “straggler,” a soldier who had escaped the Lager. Eventually, the men settle in with a group of partisans. He observes Gedaleh, the leader of the partisan group, and slowly feels an uneasy comfort as he releases into a sort of nomadic home with an eclectic band of men and a few women.

¹⁶ Consult Levi’s “Argon” in *The Periodic Table* (2016a, II: 755-769) – *Il sistema periodico* (2016b, I: 861-874); see also Mesnard (2011: 103-243); and Belpoliti (2016: 262).

¹⁷ Late in 1981, Levi began research for *If Not Now, When?* He spent a year in research prior to composition. In April 1982 Einaudi published the second novel, which won the Viareggio Prize in June, and the Campiello Prize in September of that year. See Levi (2016a, I; 2016b, I).

[H]e dealt with the newcomers with brisk efficiency. Name, patronymic, corps for the soldiers, age, profession, registration of identity papers (though few of them had any); then to bed, they'd take care of everything else in the morning. That's right, to bed: inside each barracks there was a stove and a board covered with clean straw, and the air was warm and dry, even though the floor was almost two meters below ground level. Mendel fell asleep in a whirl of tangled impressions: he felt exhausted, out of place, and yet protected, less of a father and more of a child, safer and less free, at home and in a barrack; but sleep came immediately, like a merciful blow to the head. (Levi 2016a, II: 1632)¹⁸

In the above passage, the reader may recall the chapter “Our Nights” in *If This Is a Man*. Levi observes that the prisoners settle into the barracks, making a home of their cramped and filthy spaces. “Man... secretes a shell” (Levi 2016a, I: 53) – “La facoltà umana... di discernere” (Levi 2016b, I: 179) – he recounts in scientific (almost Kafkaesque) language, “the trauma of the transplantation is over (54) – “il trauma del travasamento è superato” (179). The adaptation of Mendel into the partisan group arrives after a long period of dangerous displacement and forced nomadism—the murder of his wife and community, his flight from his village. The subsequent passage also echoes certain moments in the Lager in its reference to delousing. However, the description that follows provides a contrast to the Lager, offering a sensate experience as expressed in Levi’s poetic prose.

What followed was a delousing, or rather an invitation to perform a conscientious personal self-examination, and distribution of linen, rough and not new, but clean. Last of all, an enormous kasha, filling and hot, eaten communally, with real spoons on real aluminum plates, followed by plenty of sweet tea. It promised to be a beautiful day, with singularly mild weather for that season: where the snow was exposed to the sun, it showed signs of melting, which caused some uneasiness. (Levi 2016a, II: 1633)¹⁹

This is not a moment that would have occurred at Auschwitz. There is here invitation, nourishment, real things, and abundant sweetness. There is warm light and a sort of restlessness that arises in this openness, but also a relief and a moment of restoration. The novel continues to work at cross-currents. The most sensual scene lies at the center of the

¹⁸ “Nome, patronimico, corpo di appartenenza per i militari, età, professione, registrazione dei documenti (ma pochi fra loro avevano documenti); poi a letto, il resto all’indomani mattina. A letto, sí: all’interno di ogni baracca c’era una stufa e un tavolato coperto di paglia pulita, e l’aria era asciutta e calda, benché il pavimento fosse a quasi due metri sotto il livello del suolo. Mendel si addormentò in una girandola di impressioni confuse: si sentiva esausto, dislocate e insieme protetto, meno padre e più figlio, più sicuro e meno libero, a casa e in caserma; ma venne subito il sonno, come una caritatevole mazzata sul capo” (Levi 2016b, II: 485).

¹⁹ “Seguí la spidocchiatura, o meglio un invito ad un autocontrollo coscienzioso, e la distribuzione di biancheria, ruvida e non nuova ma pulita. Infine, una portentosa *kaša* sostanziosa e calda, consumata in comune con very cucchiari in vari piatti d’alluminio, e seguita da un tè abbondante e dolce. Si annunciava una giornata tranquilla, con un’aria singolarmente mite per quella stagione: nelle zone esposte al sole la neve accennava a sciogliersi, il che destò una certa inquietudine” (Levi 2016b, II: 485).

book, in a chapter entitled “June-July 1944,” but it is not compassionate or gentle. It is a fraught, rough sensuality, a struggle for power reflective of the harsh environment in which the two partisans—Mendel and Line—exist.

*Mendel undressed and immediately Line clung to him as if to wrestle. Crushed beneath the weight of the male body, Line writhed, a tenacious and resilient adversary, to arouse him and challenge him. It was a language, and even in the red blur of desire, Mendel understood it: I want you but I resist you; I resist you because I want you; I, slim, lie beneath you but am not yours; I am the woman of no one, and by resisting I bind you to me. Mendel felt she was armed though naked, armed like the first time had had glimpsed her. . . . (ellipsis mine) Nobody's and everybody's. . . (ellipsis mine) Mendel perceived this and felt stabbed, as at the last moment he tore himself from her. The effort was so lacerating that Mendel sobbed aloud, in the dark silence of the mill. (Levi 2015a, II, 1712)*²⁰

Here is a language of desire where there will be no ownership. Resistance is born of desire. Separation is born of desire. The reader returns here to the first relationship. To beginnings. Line is an Eve, stubborn, resistant to the wishes of others, insistent in her independence. Mendel is an Adam. He is bound to the woman in her resistance of orders, her will to belong to no one. Line's armament is a psychic one in her ability to need no one, to give when and what she wants to everyone. Mendel suffers a wound in his encounter with her. The wound is a cut, a hole, a tear, a rip. It is as if he undergoes an amputation. The fight creates a wound in Mendel. He is stabbed, nearly murdered. Lacerated. He bleeds but it is a quiet bleeding, internal, suppressed, dangerous. It will dog and haunt him as the partisans move through forests and plains. He will not recover.

The separation of Line from Mendel is also born from a certain demoralization—one tied up with suffering, despair, pleasure, rage, incomprehension, discord, doubt, fear, shame, and confusion. Ultimately, Line leaves Mendel, becoming sexually involved with another partisan. Mendel suffers; he is offended, maliciously content, and hypocritically indignant. His internal monologue in third person, mediated through authorial awareness, reflects myriad complicated and tangled feelings in the midst of lost love and the rage it provokes.

He felt as if he'd escaped a storm at sea as if he'd washed alone on a deserted and unknown land. Not ready, not prepared, empty; tranquil and unwound, the way an unwound watch is tranquil. Tranquil and not happy, a tranquil unhappiness. Swollen with memories. . . . (Ellipsis mine) Crowded with memories. . . . (Ellipsis mine) Perhaps

²⁰ “Mendel si spogliò, e subito Line gli si avvinghiò addosso come per una lotta. Schiacciata sotto il peso del corpo mascolino, Line si torceva, avversario tenace e resiliente, per eccitarlo e sfidarlo. Era un linguaggio, e pur nella nebbia rossa del desiderio Mendel lo intendeva: ti voglio ma ti resisto. Ti resisto perché ti voglio. Io esile ti giaccio sotto ma non sono tua. Io non sono la donna di nessuno, e resistendo ti lego a me. Mendel la sentiva armata anche nuda, armata come la prima volta che l'aveva intravista.... Di nessuno e di tutti... Mendel lo percepì e ne fu trafitto, mentre all'ultimo istante si strappava da lei. Lo sforzo fu così lacerante che Mendel singhiozzò forte, nel silenzio buio del mulino” (Levi 2016b, II: 552).

memory is like a pail; if you try to put more fruit into it than can fit, the fruit gets crushed. (Levi 2016a, II: 1785)²¹

Mendel is swollen with memories, as if memory were a drug, an infusion in the veins, an overdose, an addiction, a disease, a starvation, a poison.

The prerogative of any writer is to begin and end where and how he chooses. He finds a point of time, a decisive event, feeling, or thought at which he enters and story begins. The reader is invited or commanded into the narrative's world. The writer chooses when to leave the reader. The ending is a trail the reader may follow. The ending draws the reader closer, creates desire in her to read more by this writer. The ending might be an invitation to stay in the writer's universe, to enter the authorial university through extended communion with a writer's body of work.

5. THE SPACE OF DREAMS

At the end of Levi's novel about partisans in Eastern Europe and in some of his short stories, there is a moment of human connection. Readers are left with the lingering effects of one character upon another. Here are three concluding passages where the characters connect and then disconnect. First, from *If Not Now, When?*

Sitting next to Line, Mendel looked at her knees sticking out from beneath her skirt. It was the first time he'd seen them: never before, except with the vision in his fingertips, trembling with desire, in the darkness of their pallets, a different one every night, or through the opaque cloth of her trousers. Don't give in. Don't give in to her. Don't start all over again, be sensible, resist. You wouldn't live beside her for a lifetime, she isn't a woman for a lifetime, and you're not even thirty yet. When you're thirty, life can begin again. Like a book, when you've finished the first volume. Start over from where? From here, from today, from this Milanese dawn rising behind the frosted glass . . . No, I wouldn't live a lifetime with Line, but I can't leave her and I don't want to leave her. I'll with me forever, inside me, even if we're separated, the way I was separated from Rivke. (Levi 2015a, II: 1854-1855)²²

²¹ "Si sentiva come sfuggito a un mare in tempesta, e approdato solo su una terra deserta e sconosciuta. Non pronto, non preparato, vuoto; tranquillo e scarico, come è tranquillo un orologio scarico. Tranquillo e non felice, tranquillamente infelice. Gonfio di memorie... Gremio di memorie... Forse la memoria è come un secchio; se ci vuoi mettere più frutti di quanti ce ne stiano; frutti si schiacciano" (Levi 2016b, II: 611-612).

²² "Seduto accanto a Line, Mendel guardava le sue ginocchia che sporgevano dalla gonna. Era la prima volta che le vedeva: mai prima, se non con le dita veggenti, tremule dal desiderio, nell'oscurità dei loro giacigli ogni notte diversi, o attraverso il panno opaco dei pantaloni. Non cedere. Non cederle. Non ricominciare, sii savior, resisti. Non vivresti una vita accanto a lei, non è una donna per la vita, e tu non hai ancora trent'anni. A trent'anni la vita può ricominciare. Come un libro, quando hai finito il primo volume. Ricominciare da dove? Da qui, da oggi, da quest'alba Milanese che sorge dietro i vetri smerigliati: da stamattina. Questo è un buon luogo per cominciare a vivere.... (ellipsis mine) No, non vivrei una vita insieme con Line, ma non posso lasciarla e non voglio lasciarla. Me la porterò dentro sempre, anche se saremo divisi, come sono stato diviso da Rivke" (Levi 2016b, II: 670).

She is temporal, fleeting. She will leave, she will end. Seek a new beginning, Mendel tells himself, begin here at this ending. Death separated Mendel from his wife Rivke. Divergent purposes and needs separate him from Line. Impossible connections are weighted as a bucket of ripe fruit; yet, dwelling in memory and its affects in the place of what is now, of a future, may crush Mendel.

These hauntings continue into the future. In a passage from "Protection" ("Protezione") included in *Flaw of Form* (*Vizio di Forma*, 1971), characters living on a future planet Earth must wear armor to protect themselves from supposedly deadly meteor showers. Two characters, Roberto and Marta who ten years earlier have had an affair, say goodbye to one another at the end of evening with their spouses.

Roberto took off his iron glove to shake Marta's bare hand, and Marta felt a brief but intense pleasure that filled her with a gray sadness, intense but not painful. This sadness stayed with her for a long time, kept her company inside her armor, and helped her to live for many days. (Levi 2015a, I: 585)²³

The sadness also stayed with Levi. He realized one could reach out and touch another's armor, which is never truly immutable and will always be permeated with sadness. The sadness becomes a replacement for loss, the tangible proof for the moments of connection and possibility that once were.

In a story entitled "Brief Dream" ("Breve sogno") included in *Lilith and Other Stories* (*Lilith e altri racconti*, 1975-1981), two characters meet on a train. Riccardo, an Italian man from Turin, works in an advertising agency but dreams of being a writer and of Dante's *Inferno*. A nameless young woman, who turns out to be a foreigner, probably English, joins his solitary train compartment. He examines her while she sleeps, and between sleeping and waking they exchange lines in Italian verse from Dante. Later, they wake again and have a short conversation. She is studying Italian literature and will stay with an aunt in Salerno. Riccardo wants to tell her his little life story, but there is no time. She leaves the compartment to comb her hair and wash her face. He schemes how he might spend a day with her, see her again.

When the train stopped in the station at Naples, he turned and found himself confronting the girl's gaze. It was a firm and gentle gaze, but with an edge of expectation: she seemed to read him clearly, as if in a book. Riccardo asked "Why don't you get out at Naples with me?" The girl shook her head no. He stared at her, smiled, and she, she too, had the air of racking her brains, of searching for a response

²³ "Roberto si sfilò il guanto ferrato per stringere la mano nuda di Marta, e Marta provò un piacere intenso e breve che la riempì di una tristezza grigia, luminosa, non dolorosa: questa tristezza le rimase addosso a lungo, le tenne compagnia dentro la sua corazza, e l'aiuto a vivere per parecchi giorni" (Levi 2016b, I: 664-665).

that she couldn't grasp. She bit one finger, in a childish way; then, waving it solemnly, pronounced, "Quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno." [All worldly pleasure is a brief dream": Petrarch, Sonnet 1.] "It's pronounced son-yo," said Riccardo, and headed into the corridor to get off the train. (Levi 2015a, II: 1545)²⁴

The would-be writer's final (narrative) act is to correct the elusive girl's pronunciation, his desire lingering from a distance that waxes before it wanes. Riccardo's corrective attempt straddles universes of painful passion and purifying logic, as he says goodbye and moves away from the brief, almost dreamlike encounter, into quotidian life again.

Evident in these three passages is a finality that marks the end of relationship, alternately remote, present, deep, and fleeting between characters. There is a moment of intense nearness, of desire and longing for another. It is a tiny sustained moment in which the character feels wholly his or her love for and want of the other's company, mind, presence, body, and companionship. This moment is interrupted by the surrounding reality, a reality out of which the tiny moment is carved, as a guest house (to use Rumi's term) of solace, desire, and beauty. Levi knows, as he expresses it through his characters, the depth and profundity of this moment. It is narrow and deep like a cavern, so much so that it implants itself in the body's memory, a jewel encrusted in the side of a mountainous wall. Then, daily life rushes in again, to overwhelm this tiny precious rare moment of connection. The realities of history assert themselves and the urge of time moves us to the next thing, to the life already here.

Levi understands that we do not forget one another. There are certain encounters and people who come with us through life, even after they have left us. Thus, the writer haunted. One writes, in part, because one is aware of these moments, sensitive to them, sensitive to life in allowing these moments to linger in consciousness over time. Yes, there is an element of suppression as we go on through life. We leave people behind, they leave us, circumstances occur, structures much grander than us are put in place and there is no way except in watching another surreptitiously (as Riccardo does the foreign/distant/unknown woman on the train), observation, dream, memory, a touch, writing to have again another's literal presence. When and if two people do, in fact, come

²⁴ "Quando il treno fu fermo nella stazione di Napoli, si voltò, e si trovò davanti lo sguardo della ragazza. Era uno sguardo fermo e gentile, ma con una connotazione d'attesa: sembrava che lei gli leggesse dentro in chiaro, come in un libro. Riccardo le chiese: – Perché non scende a Napoli con me? – La ragazza fece di no con il capo. Lo guardava fisso, sorrideva, ed anche lei aveva l'aria di almanaccare, di andare inseguendo una risposta che non si lasciava acchiappare. Si rosciava un ditto, in atteggiamento infantile; poi, agitandolo solennemente, scandì: – Quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno. – Si pronuncia 'sogno', – disse Riccardo, e si avviò nel corridoio per discendere dal vagone" (Levi 2016b, II: 412).

together again, it will be a brief moment, a look, a touch that signals only their continuing desire of one another.

The space of incompleteness is the space of dreams. From incompleteness comes all writing. The writer assumes the tale from where it left off. Or, he cuts the tale in the midst of its fruition. Or, he takes a small bit of what could have been more but is not because the flow of life prohibits the development of a particular scenario. It is that imagined situation that compels, so often, the writer to the page, wherein a world of its own might develop. It is the situation that actually does occur, filled with the imaginings of what might occur—the intimations, the mere suggestions—that becomes the space of sensuality. It is the situation that also becomes a potential space of grief, of beginnings that might have evolved, if only war, murder, lacerating violence had not severed one from what one loved.

6. FLAWED FORM AND THE COLLAPSE OF LIFE

In 1971 Einaudi published a second collection of short stories, *Flaw of Form* (*Vizio di forma*) under Levi's name rather than the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila under which he had published a previous collection of stories, *Unnatural Histories* (*Racconti fantascientifici*). In 1987, presenting a new edition to his editor, he suggested the stories an "apocalyptic, pessimistic, and defeatist vision" (Levi 2016a, xlv) – "una visione apocalittica, rinunciataria, disfattista" (Levi 2016b, I: 655) – of the world, as they are linked to a "time that was much sadder than the present" (xlv) – "un tempo più triste dell'attuale" (655). In the 1970s and 1980s Europe experienced a sustained period of economic growth. In the same year of his death, Levi introduced his reissued stories within the climate of economic prosperity and consumerism. The end of the Cold War approached as Central and Eastern Europe broke free of Russian dominance. In the early 1990s, Italy experienced a political crisis that disrupted the political parties that had been in power since just after the Second World War. However much an optimist Levi wanted to be, and despite his pessimism, these stories resonant with strong, fragile, and temporal beauty, with the aberration of the human condition. We are vulnerable to the creation of mistakes, we are zealous, unforgiving, competitive. We do not understand our own creations, which often escape our control and damage us beyond repair.

In this collection of short stories, *Flaw of Form*, an alliterative and poetic, if not gently pessimistic, title symbolizing the entwining of created beauty and inherent error, "With the Best Intentions" ("A fin di bene") details the relationship between two engineers, colleagues and initially enemies, who try to understand and addresses the flaws in a network of telephone connections across Italy and Europe. Through the escalation of the

viruses and the corresponding malfunctions in the system, the engineers mend their split. Together they work to cure the illness. At first the system is good, trying its best to link people with like numbers, searching for commonality in logarithms, and then it is bad, when one of the engineers, Masoero, tells it is misbehaving and threatens punishment. The system acts up with a final ring all over Europe and then collapses and quits. The story begins with this line: “Any who needs to punish himself finds the opportunity everywhere” (Levi 2016a, I: 643) – “Chi ha bisogno di punirsi trova occasioni dappertutto” (Levi 2016b, I: 735) –and ends with a scene in which Masoero determines to make a deal with the system, “We have the right, no? We were the first to understand it. Let’s talk to it and tell it that if [it] doesn’t stop this nonsense it will be punished” (652) – “ne abbiamo il diritto, no? Siamo stati noi I primi a comprenderla. Le parliamo, e le diciamo che se non la smette sarà punita” (743). His counterpart Rostagno says to him, “Do you think. . . (ellipsis in original) it feels pain?” – “Pensi che... possa provare dolore?” To which Masoero replies, “I don’t know anything. I think that essentially it simulates average human behavior, and, if so, it will imitate man also by showing itself responsive to threats” (652) – “Non penso niente: penso che sia sostanzialmente una simulatrice del comportamento umano medio, e se è così, imiterà l’uomo anche nel mostrarsi sensibile alle minacce” (743). In punishing the machine, a reflection of human desires and plans, Masoero punishes himself.²⁵

It is with this intention that Masoero approaches the system and tells it to behave as it was designed, or they—its originators—will attack it. The system does not respond. It pulses and then is quiet. When threatened with punishment, it collapses. It has burned out all internal and external cables. Might the machine, designed by men, have a mind of its own, looking with good will to make relationships, to forge linkages by its own logic?

7. CONCLUSION

The writer is never alone. He writes in response to history, to other lives, to books and the writers that continue to live on in them. He writes because he has loved and lost and suffered, and so have others. He is, finally, responsible to all other beings by virtue of his own being-ness. This responsibility to others is what makes writing ethical. Levi placed

²⁵ The name could signify in Italian, “A mason, I was,” recalling Lorenzo Perrone, the Italian bricklayer and conscripted laborer at Auschwitz to whom Levi attributes saving his life—physically and spiritually—in the final months of his internment at Auschwitz. Lorenzo died of complications due to tuberculosis and alcohol consumption in 1952. In 1998, he was recognized by Yad Vashem (יָד בִּשְׁמ) as one of the Righteous Among Nations. The name also suggests the secret Masonic societies whose members through European history were often persecuted by various regimes, religious and ideological.

the reader at the highest level, much higher than the writer. The writer is beholden to the reader. Or else, he has no one. He has an audience in absentia. He has an imagined but not real audience.

The reader was so crucial to Levi because he lived through Auschwitz. In the camps, he felt utterly alone—he details these moments with clarity and pathos in his first autobiographical account, *If This Is a Man*. The forces that had driven people to the camps sought to impose isolation and aloneness as a methodology of death. Levi sought company. He recognized that his separation from others would kill him. He looked at others, even in his hunger, his injury, his exhaustion and his experience of filth and degradation. He looked and noticed—small details, like the man who gave away his fork to a friend before the selections. He found others a barometer of his own humanness. Other people made him remember and know what it is to be human. He made arguments that one can only be human as he experiences himself in relationship to others. As a writer, Levi wanted to be alone. He enjoyed and needed solitude as does almost every writer. Writing is a time of withdrawal. It is an inner universe into which the writer momentarily retracts. But, he knew that writing was not a permanent state. He had to enter the world again; and, in that world he was responsible to others, not only responsible to others but he *needed* others. Without others we have no writing. Without relationship we are not human.

For Levi, writing was a marvelous vehicle for survival, both in his head at Auschwitz and for later, for those many years he would continue to live once returned—certainly a different man, a marked man, heavy and weighted with his personal past and a collective history that he had to impart to others—to Turin, to Italy. Now, he was home. It began to be that the only door open to re-enter home was story at the most essential level. Even before writing: spoken story and an audience. The dream of the barracks delivered into the trains of Turin and Milan. The talk-story of a man stunned by deportation and the environment of extreme violence and mechanized murder. The story of a man changed by the things he had seen and known and of which he had heard. But, too, the story of a man who had encountered many others from all over Europe, who had a larger sense of being Jewish than when he had forcefully departed Italy. A man whose every word would be informed by the dark knowledge that had come of his experience through the war, as a Jew, as a deportee, a prisoner, and, finally, as one who had made the return journey.

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