Uri S. Cohen

Primo Levi: Between Literature and the World

While teaching at Columbia University in the first decade of the new millennium, I always concluded the introductory course on literature and the humanities with Primo Levi's masterpiece *If This Is a Man* (1947). I felt it was proper to end such a course in Auschwitz, indicating a form of a trajectory as well as the beginning of a new world, beyond a hallowed but hollow tradition.

While there are many reasons to admire Primo Levi, one of them is that his writings stand, like Fascism itself with the kind of education designed by Giovanni Gentile, at the end of the humanistic tradition as the Great Books course conceives it (Sani 2008; Isnenghi 1979). He also stands at the beginning of the new era that comes after Auschwitz not as a Jewish or a European event, but as a world event. Growing up under Fascism, Levi, like other Italian Jews, moved from an assimilated perspective where Judaism was a trivial matter to one where it was all that mattered. In this sense, his formation is bound to the classic tradition, which sees the heart of Europe (and hence the world) growing out of Italy twice, with the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Man in the humanistic tradition is therefore at the very heart of what is no more after Auschwitz, along with the inevitability of both Europe and the world. Staggering out the gate when the Russians arrive, Levi is a bearer of ill news, a *mala novella*. Witness to what the idea of Man has done to Man, he inquires if this is a Man simultaneously about perpetrators and victims, masters and slaves, the drowned and the saved, Odysseus and his perished companions.

Canonical literary texts encompass multiple perspectives and present challenges to readers of many generations. In this sense, no one can deny that the tradition that invented Man and filled him with purpose, liberties and mental spaces, also came with him to Auschwitz.¹ Indeed, at least in some sense oppressors and oppressed shared both a literary heritage and a religious tradition, a literary Gray Zone. Ironically enough, Levi only became aware of his Jewishness as a textual tradition when faced with the racial laws of 1938, when Levi and a group of friends read for the first time texts from the tradition that came to define them (Levi 1984). I would argue that *If this is a Man* engages, not without irony, with both traditions as they end up with him at Auschwitz.

¹ For a discussion that repositions Fanon as a radical humanist see Gilroy 2010.

Levi stands at the end of this tradition as a prisoner. The classic tradition is employed to tell his tale of enslavement as a story of the world, giving both form to narrative and intelligibility to experience. Booted from a train after an unimaginable journey, a quote from Dante becomes the first mediator of the drastic experience. The direct references are present in such a manner that even as minor informants cross his path, Dante's writings continue as the frame for the representation of the experience, so that when the protagonist enters the gate, the gates of the *Inferno* are already invoked:

The journey did not last more than twenty minutes. Then the truck stopped, and we saw a large gate and, above it, a sign, brightly illuminated (the memory still jolts me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, Work makes us free. [...] This is hell [*Inferno*]. Today, in our time, hell must be like this. A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, and there is a tap that drips and the water cannot be drunk, and we wait for something that will certainly be terrible, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen. (Levi 2015, 1:18)

In contrast to the scene in Dante's "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" [In the middle of the journey of our life] (Dante 1996, 26–27) in the first canto of the *Inferno*, Levi's protagonist reads a disheartening message that fills him with a chill that returns to jolt him in his sleep of the returned. It would seem that Levi the author has returned home, to find the camp returning to him. In Canto 3, Dante can see justice, where Levi sees nothing but an empty room where there is no why, as he is soon told. Dante the author remained in exile and never returned to Florence, but Dante the protagonist of the *Divina Commedia* experiences the horrors as intelligible, an expression of God's justice and love for the world:

Through me the way into the suffering city,
through me the way to the eternal pain,
through me the way that runs among the lost.
Justice urged on my high artificer;
my maker was divine authority,
the highest wisdom, and the primal love.
Before me nothing but eternal things
were made, and i endure eternally.
Abandon every hope, who enter here. (Dante 1996, 55)

The words of the *Divina Commedia* oscillate between the old and the new. God is not to be found. Instead, there is a system devised by Man to enslave his fellow Man; work whose scope is death. Yes, the city is suffering but one, unfortunately, cannot abandon hope and the rest just falls away into cynicism. In Levi's semi-

nal book, the sound of Dante's gate collapsing under the weight of a new infernal machination is represented in a manner that is not easily accessible to all readers. In November 1959, in one of his first public interventions after *If this is a Man* was republished by Einaudi in 1958, Levi addressed the matter. Speaking to a public of ex-deportees, like himself, he elaborated on the cynical motto "Arbeit Macht Frei":

As everybody knows, these words could be read above the entrance gate of the Lager at Auschwitz. Their literal meaning is "Work makes you free." Their true meaning is much less clear; it cannot but leave us puzzled, and it lends itself to a number of observations. (Levi 2015, 2: 1134)

Levi begins with the literal translation, identical to the one he had used in his book in the passage quoted above, but something more needs to be said. The urgency is apparent, this being arguably the first matter Levi addresses as an Author – with the authority that came with the recognition following the republication of his book. The essay spells out in plain words what was implied in the literary text through its interaction with Dante:

[...W]e must assume that that sentence—in the mind of whoever dictated it—was not intended to be understood in its basic sense, in other words in its obvious meaning as a proverb-moral. It is more likely that the sentence had an ironic meaning, that it arose from that heavy, arrogant, grim vein of humor to which Germans hold the secret, and that only in German has a name. Translated into explicit language, the sentence, it seems, would sound something like this:

"Work is humiliation and suffering, and it is not suitable for us, Herrenvolk, a nation of gentlemen and heroes, but it is for you, enemies of the Third Reich. The freedom that awaits you is death." (Levi 2015, 2: 1134)

Levi is unusually quick to characterize the sentence "Arbeit Macht Frei" as deeply and perhaps exclusively characteristic of the Germans, underlining that it expresses and is an expression of Germans as he had come to know them. The words are not even a lie but chilly irony, the essence of the "Lager" and in turn the essence of Fascism: the final exposure of every lie Fascism ever told:

So the camps were, in substance, "pilot plants," harbingers of the future assigned to Europe in the Nazi plans. In light of these considerations, sentences like "Work makes you free" at Auschwitz, or like "To each his own" at Buchenwald, take on a precise and sinister meaning. They are portents of the new Tablets of the Law, dictated by the master to the slave, and true only for the latter. (Levi 2015, 2: 1135)

The way Levi approaches the subject of work and its dignity is breathtaking as it treads on the margins of leftist political language (Tesio 1995). Instead of sliding

into rhetoric, he stresses the systematic and all-encompassing nature of the “Lager”, the inevitable product of politics of the lie. Lurking within the frame is a dystopian vision of a Fascist future, built on “Lager” and such verbiage, with new Ten Commandments, a formulation heavy with irony. The invocation of the Hebrew tradition has to do with the biblical presence in the book, a tradition that cannot be renewed thorough the “Lager” (Lang 1999). For Levi, the failure of religion is already implied in the failure of any tradition to prevent the “Lager,” as God and all systems dependent on him have been transcended in the attempt to transcend humanity (Gilroy 2010).²

The “Lager,” we must not forget, was a space that produced an unprecedented transnational gathering, mostly but not only of Jews. Levi speaks of Europe, but he too was a product of Fascist schooling and had no other “World.” Levi ties colonialism to Fascism and Nazism through their common designation of work, real work, to the enslaved. The shared core of Fascism is found for Levi in this disparaging view of work, its “denigration.” I believe it is fair to say that Levi is making a poignant socialist point at a time in which he was probably already working on *The Truce* (1963), the story of his liberation by the Russians and his subsequent Odyssey homecoming.³

To engage with the classics as a prisoner was to engage with them through memory, under duress. Levi is not a literary scholar and thus what he does is not a result of learned inquiry. The classics reached him mainly through the nationalist high school education he was also trying to resist (Genovesi 2009, 79).⁴ This is how he stands at the end of a tradition, replacing the erudite discussion with a more immediate one, broken and incorrect, mixed with cabbage and soup. Levi recalls the tradition, repositioning it in the Inferno of the slaves, where there is no use for scholarship. Nowhere is this more present than the celebrated chapter “The Canto of Ulysses” (Cohen 2012). Levi goes to fetch soup with Pikolo (Jean Samuel), a French inmate and attempts to teach him some Italian by reciting from memory the last *terza rima* of Dante’s magnificent Canto 26 (Samuel 2007). The chapter is a stunning human and artistic engagement with the classics as form that radically challenges and morphs their core meaning.

² Notably, Gilroy’s discussion originates in the Futurist core of Fascism.

³ It seems the first two chapters of *The Truce* were written in the wake of the first publication of *If this is a Man* in 1947. There is also evidence that Levi began working on a version in the mid-fifties, while he was preparing the second edition of *If this is a Man* for Einaudi.

⁴ Nemo Villeggia writes: “At the same time the rhetoric of fascism leaned heavily on a historical political idea in which the concept of *romanitas* and all its correlatives where ‘renewed’ in the fascist regime. The classical high school, more than any other kind of educational institute, represented a sort of conservatorium of that *romanitas*.” (Villeggia 2007, 19)

While writing this chapter in 1946, Levi is at home, or rather at the factory, writing during his lunch break by the end of which a draft of the chapter will be complete (Thomson 2002, 217). He can reach for a copy of Dante, and perhaps he does, but his writing is a drama of omission, the text in tatters, traces of an order that is no more. Yet he conceives of his situation in terms of world literature, with Dante and Shakespeare being main sources of reference. Ulysses is a central figure for Levi and the Odyssey is always within reach, figuring in many key moments of the text. Remembering, in this case is also dismembering, Odysseus turned Ulysses, can turn no more, the slave cannot not be saved by inhabiting the figure, even if it tells a story it is in a disrupted fashion, almost by omission:

I would give today's soup to be able to connect "the highest I had ever seen" to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers—but it's no use, the rest is silence. Other lines dance in my head: "The tearful earth gave forth a wind," no, it's something else. (Levi 2015, 1: 109)

Levi is impeded by the sight of Mount Purgatory, the highest mountain Ulysses had ever seen, but the lofty mountain, the wind coming from it, its message if you will, cannot be connected in the end to drowning, leading to the silence of Hamlet's dying words. This is no prince of Denmark, no revenge need be feared (Cohen 2012). What he would give his daily bread for, life itself, is about connecting the wind that came from that mountain; it is about meaning. Purgatory and its mountain partake in a necessary structure of punishment that makes pain intelligible, offering at least the possibility of redemption.⁵ However, not for the Jews in the "Lager" for them and many others, there is no innocent advancement, only corruption and collaboration within a gray zone of participation in a crime committed against oneself. Again, this is a novelty that is not without that grim irony that Levi finds typically German. It is an insight so dark, Dante has to speak it for him by way of omission. Perhaps this is also an essence of testimony, the way what is lost speaks from it very loss. Ulysses, summoned by Dante and interpreted by Virgil, recounts his last voyage beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Promising his companions virtue and knowledge, they arrive within sight of Mount Purgatory as the lines Levi desires to remember tell us: "Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto, ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque

⁵ Levi makes this difference painfully clear in *If this is a Man*: "In fact, for them the Lager is a punishment, and if they do not die of exhaustion or illness they can expect to return among men; [...] For us, on the contrary, the Lager is not a punishment; for us, no end is foreseen and the Lager is nothing but the kind of existence that has been allotted to us, without time limits, within the German social organism." (Levi 2015, 1: 78)

e percosse del legno il primo canto” [We rejoiced, but it quickly turned to weeping; for from the new land a whirlwind was born and struck the forequarter of the ship] (Dante 1996, 404–405).

The lines Levi tells of not being able to recall speak of what awaits the survivor, even if he is to escape hell, even if he is to return home. What drowns Ulysses is a wind that comes from Purgatory, a future darkness. For Levi and Ulysses alike, there is no entrance. Levi will return, but he will not take revenge as Odysseus did; he will not cleanse a home. The figure of Ulysses breaks down, his ship’s forequarter, *il primo canto* in Italian, is struck. Levi and the reader are immediately referred to the *primo* [first] canto of the *commedia*. Dante, lost in the middle of his life, finds Virgil sent by Beatrice’s love to guide him. It is a parody not without comic genius. Virgil leading Dante past the beasts impeding his path while Levi and Pikolo dawdle towards the soup:

It’s late, it’s late, we’ve reached the kitchen, I have to finish:

*Three times it turned her round with all the waters;
and at the fourth, it lifted up the stern
so that our prow plunged deep, as pleased an Other.*

I hold Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this “as pleased an Other” before it’s too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, and something else, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today. . . (Levi 2015, 1: 109)

The will of God being done in drowning, Ulysses leads Levi to something incredible, gigantic, a flash of intuition that says everything. Levi does not explain, perhaps having no name for it himself, perhaps feigning to tell us. Indeed, Ulysses is not the figure of the survivor; Levi’s tale is no Odyssey even if he has returned. If anything, this intuition has to do with Ulysses as a way of thinking, the will of God superimposed on the urge to explore, an economic system formed by colonialism. A way of thinking that always found it just that there should be slaves, Levi and Pikolo the unnamed slaves rowing the ships of the Herrenvolk brave explorers of what Man can make of Man. The uneasy breaking away of reason from fate, united by Dante, leaves the world prey to the assertion of brute force and its dark consequences:

We are now in the soup line, among the sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers from other Kommandos. Those who have just arrived press against our backs. “*Kraut und Rüben?*” “*Kraut und Rüben.*” The official announcement is made that the soup today is cabbage and turnips: “*Choux et navets.*” “*Kaposzta és répak.*”

Until the sea again closed—over us. (Levi 2015, 1: 109)

Dante and Ulysses mean nothing in the camp, and yet they allow Levi to structure his experience in relation to the frame provided by the *Divina Commedia*. What was perhaps imagined as a universal – the classic tradition – is uncommunicable. It might have imagined a world, but when the world meets the camp, Dante is buried under the weight of soup. The soup and its contents are repeated four times: as a question, as information and in two other languages. Dante's voice is muffled under the stark realism of cabbage and turnips, disrupted by the multilingual reality of a globalized prison.⁶ Perhaps the multiplicity of languages is there to remind us of what remains unsaid, the “why” of their imprisonment.

Ulysses is seeking knowledge of the world, to experience what is behind the sun in the world without “*gente*”. Perhaps the reason is one that is relevant to many, the Jews having ventured out of the walls of separation to begin with. Jews and Gentiles alike ventured beyond the walls and the very notion that allowed them to do so, the nation, now imprisoned them. They are indeed experiencing what is behind the sun, a world not without bio-people, but without God to uphold their humanity in the face of overwhelming force. It is therefore incomplete, the voyage undertaken without foundation without blessing, and is doomed to drown. What lifted Man from dust, from animal to Human being, depended on faith that separated humans amicably, compared to the new order willed by Fascism. War is certainly no novelty, as is slavery, but the value of created life has never been done away with it. The novelty, the innovation that escapes the camps, is that it works. Man can turn Man into a beast of burden, into infestation to be exterminated and it would work. Arguably, this is what leads Levi to the following stark realization:

It becomes clear that we will not return. We traveled here in sealed freight cars; we saw our women and our children depart toward nothingness; we, made slaves, have marched countless times to and from our silent labor, dead in spirit long before our anonymous death. No one must leave here who might carry to the world, together with the mark stamped in his flesh, the evil tidings of what man's audacity made of man in Auschwitz. (Levi 2015, 1: 52)

⁶ This is the stark, endless realism under which intellect collapses in Jean Amery's view (Amery 1986, 15).

And in Italian:

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. (Levi 2016, 1: 178)

I cite the Italian to remember what is inevitably lost in translation; what the “world” will never know and can never know. No one is “*nessuno*” in Italian, literally no one and the name Odysseus gives himself in the Cyclops’ cave. Polyphemos the Cyclops laughs at the Gods and eats his guests, reserving for *Nessuno* (Odysseus) Nobody the privilege of the survivor to be eaten last. The survivor realizes all of this as a novelty of Auschwitz and perhaps this is why no one *must* (“*deve*”) return. The mark stamped in the flesh refers both to the scar of Ulysses as well as the number inked in the flesh. The evil tidings – *la mala novella* – is that Man has devised a fate worse than death for Man (the “Muselman”) and a world where some would be masters, others slaves and others yet, something to be disposed of (Agamben 1998, 59–104). The survivor, the one saved for last, is condemned to witness the fate of his companions, as it becomes the story that will mark the rest of his life. It is not only a tale of suffering but a fracture in the world, in the shape of things, a new kind of evil: “L’Univers concentrationnaire” – The Universe of Concentration Camps – an industrialized complex based on unprecedented control over the body in slavery, serving its own annihilation (Rousset 1946).⁷

The humanism engendered by Homer, Dante and the image of Man collapses, emptied of meaning or function. The writing on the gate is to that tradition what Primo Levi the prisoner is to the idea of Man – a trace. When the Red Army tears down the gates of the concentration camp, he is ashamed, standing at ground zero, where an entire tradition, Europe and its universal idea of a world order based in white male superiority, has come to undo itself. Standing at this end allows Levi a long gaze into a symbolic system emptied of meaning, but not of art. Auschwitz as a world event is the end of Man as an idea and the threshold of a terrifying new world. The survivor is the first citizen, *princeps*, of a future republic built off the body in pain, the protection of it and its perils.⁸ The message *Nessuno* carries in the flesh is exactly that the mark of humanity is failed by all the forms of thought and being that sought to elevate him above

⁷ Within such terms we must agree with Rousset that the differences within that universe, such as the kind of relative improvements in prisoner life expectancy and quality afforded by Buna are only a matter of degree within a self-same system.

⁸ There are many, most visible these days as the Coronavirus plays out. See Farneti 2011.

of his flesh. What the survivor survived is precisely that; being a servant to other's claim to mastery, the absolute devolution of Man to biological function and matter (Ignatieff 2001, 14–17).

Levi's conditional in the title of *If this is a Man* means in part: there cannot be Man without oppression, not in the sense intended by the classic tradition. The poem opening Levi's book is very clear on the kind of consideration we should give the matter:

You who live safe
 In your heated houses
 You who come home at night to find
 Hot food and friendly faces:

 Consider if this is a man,
 Who toils in the mud
 Who knows no peace
 Who fights for half a loaf
 Who dies by a yes or a no.
 Consider if this is a woman,
 With no hair and no name
 With no more strength to remember
 With empty eyes and a womb as cold
 As a frog in winter.

 Ponder that this happened:
 I consign these words to you.
 Carve them into your hearts
 At home or on the street,
 Going to bed or rising:
 Tell them to your children.
 Or may your house fall down,
 May illness make you helpless,
 And your children turn their eyes from you. (Levi 2015, 1: 8)

Levi has seen what is coming for all of us and if we do not listen, if we do not consider his tale, we, or our progeny, will end up there, even if Auschwitz takes on a new face. This is no longer a matter of the West, no longer a question for and of men, but of people (*gente*) in the world. The national perspective, Levi's message for Italy, is not necessarily the core of the matter, even though there is beauty and art in Levi that is only available in the Italian. The death of the tradition carried by the classics as the cultural foundation of a social and political order is no novelty and yet it does not diminish art. The art that remains enclosed in language, in particular contexts, many layers of beauty deep, somewhat justifies philology (Pollock 2009). As "The Canto of Ulysses" demonstrates, a broken violin can still make wondrous music. It can say something

about the limits of Man and what lies beyond them, what he has seen and why we must never again explore those shores; as well as how we will inevitably end up doing just so.

Not unlike Levi, something of the tradition survives, something we can perhaps call with Celan “art as a problem” (Celan 2003, 37–55) Reading Levi remembering Dante and Homer is both the end and the beginning, a radical reading of the classic tradition from its end point, considering both the hero and his rowers are not figures of the survivor but are part of his tale (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 27–28). Levi is no Ulysses, nor is he a slave ennobled by an Odyssey. He is the one carrying in the flesh a terrible message, that if he is a Man then, he is now us.

We the refugees. We the survivors.

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