

## Figural Realism in Witness Literature

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The definitions of theory given by our editors in their call for contributions to this issue of **parallax** would hardly justify the kind of hostility to theory currently abroad in the cultural sciences. Nor even the kind of questions put to theory by our editors. For in their definition, theory is a viewing, a travelling to see, a spectating, a going to consult an oracle, a judging of one thing by another, a contemplation, a consideration, a – well, a looking at something.

Of course, these definitions of theory are anachronistic, consisting as they do of the connotations associated with the ancient Greek noun *theoria* and the verb form *theorizein*, which do have all of the meanings indicated by our editors, but hardly conform to the modern notion of theory against which so much objection is currently being raised.<sup>1</sup> In most of the human and cultural sciences, theory is regarded as tyrannous, reductive, mechanistic. Indeed, it is a commonplace of ideology critique and the study of totalitarian systems that theory and unthinking commitment to it were what created modern totalitarianism in the first place. Theory, it is held, is opposed to ‘practice’ – in the way that abstract speculation is opposed to what is called ‘hands-on’ problem-solving and empirical observation. Theory is airy and insubstantial: it floats above the real, tending to become an end in itself. Instead of illuminating reality, it turns us away from it and directs us to a shadow world of concepts and figures. It has even been suggested that ‘theory’ as such is an ideology, providing a kind of philosophy on the cheap, a surrogate for rigorous thinking, and an excuse for avoiding the kind of ‘hard’ research that history requires.<sup>2</sup>

So, one answer to our editors’ question of how ‘theory envisions itself in a time of crisis,’ might be that an interest in theorizing is precisely an indication of the onset of a crisis in a given domain of investigation. And as for the question of ‘what ways of seeing does theory have,’ it might be observed that theory ‘sees’ seeing itself as a problem, postulates that there are as many different ‘ways of seeing’ (to cite John Berger’s popular book and television series) as there are perspectives on the world, and that in order to mediate among different ways of seeing, we need to think theoretically about seeing, which means, above all, that we must not take the naturalness of seeing for granted.

An interest in theory arises when established disciplines are forced to confront phenomena that do not conform to the generic categories ordinarily used to identify

and classify the matters with which they usually deal. A case in point is the kind of witness literature generated by those experiences of 'extreme situations' peculiar to our time, of which the Holocaust (or, in order to focus attention on the perversity of the perpetrators, the Final Solution) is of course emblematic. I believe that events like the Final Solution had been 'unimaginable' as late as the nineteenth century, when different social arrangements and cultural expectations prevailed. To be sure, cases of genocide were known in the nineteenth century, in the Belgian Congo and in German West Africa, but were not registered in public consciousness with the same degree of shock as the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a different matter. This is why not only witness literature but other kinds of documentation of its occurrence raise so many theoretical as well as practical questions.

There is a sense in which the Final Solution is undeniably 'unique' or at least historically 'novel': not so much in its aim or purpose as in the modernity of the means which the Germans employed to carry it out and the trauma to the social and cultural presuppositions of the West that revelation of it, when it finally came, effected. The genocides of the Belgian Congo and German West Africa were shocking but not 'unbelievable,' 'incredible,' 'unspeakable' – terms commonly used to describe the Holocaust by its victims, historians, and even some of its perpetrators. The question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust is a theoretical question because it implies revision of the kinds of methods and modes of analysis conventionally used to explain or provide comprehension of extreme events. Indeed, the Final Solution implies revision of the very notion of 'historical event' and therewith a revision of the ways we classify and assess the evidence we have for assimilating such kinds of events to 'historical memory'.

Witness literature regarding the Holocaust typically offers itself as a contribution to our knowledge of that event, which means it would normally be thought of as belonging to what is called 'the literature of fact' and be valued for the kind of factual information it provides of that event.<sup>3</sup> But witnesses to the Holocaust have typically testified under the fear that they had to relate facts that were intrinsically 'unbelievable,' that the events which they had endured were so bizarre, so 'unspeakable,' that many despaired of ever finding a voice or manner of writing that could compel belief in the veracity of what they had to say. And indeed so fraught with emotion, suffering, and pain has been the greater part of survivor testimony that some have recommended classifying it as 'traumatic' in nature and consigning it to psychoanalytical and/or anthropological techniques of analysis for its proper understanding. Thus, Holocaust testimony is at once confirmed as an index of the events about which it speaks (like a scar or a bruise) and pathologized as a product of a wounded consciousness which requires not so much understanding as, rather, treatment of a medical or psychological kind. The Nazis tried to cover up their crime by anonymizing, burying and cremating their victims and where possible burning records and destroying physical evidence of their crimes. Consequently, a great deal of witness testimony has been offered less in the interest of documenting 'what happened' in the death camps than in simply asserting, against both common sense and revisionist lie, the occurrence of this unthinkable event.

It is under such pressures as these that we can see labouring one of the truly great writers of Holocaust testimony, Primo Levi (1919–1987), whose desire to maintain a

power of objective observation, a rationality of judgement, and clarity of expression amounted to a kind of obsession—and drove him to engage in the kind of ‘theoretical’ disputes that have wracked history, philosophy, and literary criticism in an age in which totalitarian regimes not only wish to ‘make’ history but determine in advance how history will be construed, studied and written. In his most important works, such as *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) and *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), Levi foregoes any claim to the status of historian. He was not, he says, attempting a historical reconstruction of the camps, based on a reading of the sources and consideration of professional historical accounts of the Nazi period. Nor does he lay claim to writing ‘literature.’ He does lay claim, however, to be writing in something like a ‘scientific’ style or mode and he addresses the question – theoretical in nature – of the proper way for anyone, survivor or interested observer, to write about the Holocaust event. In these remarks, Levi turns the matter of style into an ethical issue. He condemns any writing about the Holocaust marked by ‘obscurity’ or any kind of ‘rhetorical’ excess and indeed views such writing as both evidence of mental illness and morally offensive.

The theoretical disputes that engaged Levi came to centre on the question of the proper style of writing for relating the experiences of the death camps in a clear and objective manner. In his discussion of this problem, Levi revisits the timeworn distinctions that have plagued discourse theory since Plato: such distinctions as those between prose and poetic utterance, literal(ist) and figurative language, real and imaginary events, fact and fiction, conscious beliefs or convictions and unconscious impulses and drives, etc. Levi addresses these issues in terms provided by an older, pre-modernist suspicion of poetic speech, figurative language and ‘rhetorical’ writing. He believed that the kinds of scientific procedures he learned as a student of chemistry (weighing, measuring, breaking compounds down into basic elements and then reassembling them into different combinations) could serve him adequately for observing the events of the camps as they really were and not as either desire or prejudice would wish them to be. And in his writing, Levi tried to develop a mode of exposition equivalent to the kind of quantitative idiom chemists used to record changes and stabilities in chemical compounds.

I find it remarkable and, in the present context, of distinct theoretical interest that Levi’s characterization of the style of writing he wished to cultivate for giving a responsible and rational account of the camp experience – all focused on the ideals of clarity, measure, and exactitude – has been so uncritically accepted by commentators on his work. Much of this commentary presumes that these ideals can be achieved only by cleaving to an impossibly rigorous ideal of literalist expression, a speech voided of figurative usage and a language utterly purged of ‘rhetorical’ tropes. In this wish or desire for what Locke called a ‘historical, plain’ style, Levi puts himself within a philosophical tradition of anti-figuralism that extends from Hobbes, through Locke, Descartes, Kant and Comte, to Russell and early Wittgenstein. This tradition takes the form of an attack upon figurative language as being inherently obfuscating of both meaning and reference, upon rhetoric as the antithesis of philosophy and reason, and of poetic utterance as the stuff of myth and wish-fulfilling delusion.

Now, as far as I am concerned, it can be shown, on the basis of contemporary discourse theory, that Levi’s own writing practices run directly counter to his stated aim as a stylist. His writing is consistently (and brilliantly) figurative throughout and,

far from being void of rhetorical flourishes and adornments, constitutes a model of how a specifically literary mode of writing can heighten both the referential and the semantic valences of a discourse of fact. In what follows I will try to suggest how this is so for Levi's first book, *Se questo è un uomo*.<sup>4</sup>

Here is how Levi captures or grasps in (as against concepts) the experience of the intensely numbing experience of cold in the Polish winter; it opens the chapter entitled 'Ottobre 1944':

With all our strength we struggled so that winter might not come (*non venisse*). We clung to all the warm hours, at every dusk we labored to keep the sun in the sky for a little longer, but it was useless. Yesterday evening the sun went down irrevocably in a confusion of dirty fog, chimney stacks and wires, and this morning it is winter.<sup>5</sup>

Note that although the time spoken about is in the historic past, the passage is put in the present tense, and thus situates the reader in the time of the text. Secondly, note that the subject of the passage is not the individual 'I' but the collective 'we'. Here Levi tropologically shifts the point of view from himself to the generality of the prisoners. Third, the passage presents a surreal effect of men already rendered helpless by the treatment they have endured at the hands of other men, trying to halt the sun in its course by a sheer effort of will—and of course failing in that effort. The diction is poetic and so is the syntax. We could, in fact, by a typographical revision reveal the poeticity of these lines thus:

*Con tutte le nostre forze  
Abbiamo lottato  
Perchè l'inverno non venisse.  
Ci siamo aggrappati  
a tutte le l'ore tepide,  
A ogni tramonto abbiamo cercato  
Di trattenere il sole in cielo ancora un poco,  
Ma tutto è stato inutile.  
Ieri sera il sole si è coricato  
irrevocabilmente  
In un intrico di nebbia sporca,  
Di ciminiere e di fili,  
E stamattina è inverno.*

The entire passage is a tissue of rhetorical figures, conceits and tropes in which nature is anthropomorphized, the human subject diminished and the atmosphere (both physical and spiritual) charged with a malign intention. None of this means that this passage is to be read as fiction or apprehended as an 'imaginary' invention. The passage refers to a real situation which is grasped through images of bodily exertion at grips with an indifferent nature. And this image of a sun indifferent to the pain its winter weakness causes proleptically anticipates what Levi calls the 'meaning' of this particular winter. This winter 'means yet something more' than merely the coming of the cold. Everyone knew that this winter 'means' a massive *Selekcja* (the Polish word for the 'selection' of those prisoners to be sent to the gas chambers and the crematoria)

intended to thin out the overcrowding of the barracks caused by the summer's unplanned-for arrivals. The 'dirty' psychological atmosphere caused by the impending 'selection' fulfills the figure of the 'confusion of dirty fog, chimney stacks and wires' into which the sun had disappeared in the first paragraph of the chapter.

The selection itself is presented as being as unavoidable (*'irrevocabile'*) as the weather. The Germans, who, we are told, take the selection 'very seriously', are as unfeeling and as disinterested in the prisoners as the winter sun is in them. Levi has nothing but contempt for the naïve new arrivals who have no idea what they have been 'selected' for or the pious who look to God for solace and salvation. 'Kuhn thanks God that he was not chosen. Kuhn is stupid.... Doesn't Kuhn know that next time it will be his turn? ... Kuhn does not understand that what happened today is an abomination that no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, nothing at all in the power of man can ever erase? If I were God, I would spit on the ground at Kuhn's prayer.'<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, this kind of language would not be admitted as testimony in a court of law, to be sure, but without the figures, Levi's presentation of the world of the camps would have none of the concreteness, none of the precision and pointedness for which he is rightly celebrated.

It is often noted that Levi likens his journey to Auschwitz to Dante's journey into Hell, that his description of the prisoners and guards he meets there mimics Dante's passage through *Inferno* (just as his story of his journey back from Poland, by way of Russia and through Central Europe to Italy, recounted in *La tregua* (The Truce), resembles Dante's journey through *Purgatorio*). And no doubt Levi draws upon Dante's epic as a model for his plot as any number of poets and novelists have done since the appearance of the original. But Levi's use of Dante as a model for emplotting his story raises an interesting theoretical issue having to do with the extent to which a literary treatment of a real event can lay any claim to realism or historical verisimilitude. The theoretical question has to do with the truth-value of a text which promises in its preface that 'none of the facts has been invented' but whose meaning resides in large measure in the extent to which it copies the plot-structure of a poetic fiction.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary theorists of history debate the semantic function of the plot-structures used by historians to give to an account of real events of the past the form of a story. What is the status of real events presented as describing the plots of the kinds of stories found in folklore, myth, and literature?

In fictional writing the use of the plot-structures of tragedy or comedy poses no problem for the claims to realism made for the events and characters depicted in the story. After all, one of the meanings of a story is the plot-structure that gradually becomes discernable over the course of the story's unfolding. But that a sequence of real events might have or manifest a tragic or comic meaning, this is a mythical way of thinking. For it is arguable that there is no such thing as either tragedy or a comedy in real life, even in things historical—disasters, yes, catastrophes, absolutely, destructions, beyond doubt; but these figures can be used without imputing a moral significance to the events they describe. It is arguable that tragedy and comedy exist only in discourse, literature and myth, and that insofar as a historian casts his account of a given set of events in the form of a tragedy or comedy, he has abandoned

the ground of fact and gone over to mythification. It has even been suggested that narrative discourse is less a container or carrier of ideology than the very paradigm of all ideology, a discursive instrument for transforming real events into consolatory dreams and illusions.

If Levi's journey into and out of Auschwitz is modelled on the *Divine Comedy*, there is nothing 'comic' about Levi's version of what happened, saw and remembered of his experience there. As in Dante, in Levi the term 'comedy' can only refer to the bare bones structure of a story which starts out badly and ends happily. But there is nothing 'tragic' about it either. One of the theses of Levi's argument about the camps is that the Germans had succeeded in destroying any remnants of aspiration or idealism that might have inspired the prisoners to any kind of 'heroic' action. Nonetheless, Levi's memoir is an allegory, and insofar as it is modelled on Dante's *Commedia*, it is doubly allegorical, an allegory of allegory itself – what deconstructionists might call a self-consuming artifact insofar as it shows how even the most rigorously objective and determinedly 'clear' and literal language cannot do justice to the Holocaust without recourse to myth, poetry, and 'literary' writing. In putting to the forefront the relation of his book to Dante's classic text, Levi, whether he willed it consciously or not, succeeds in bringing the entire edifice of Christian providentialism and myths of divine justice under question. Levi gives us a 'Divine Comedy' with the *Paradiso* left out; it is all Hell and, in a perverse way, a kind of monument to German efficiency and singleness of purpose.

One of the most often commented chapters of *Se questo è un uomo* is entitled '*Il canto d'Ulisse*' (The Ulysses Canto). It is made up of a brilliant and utterly compelling account of an effort on Levi's part to recall a passage in Canto 26 of Dante's *Commedia* for the edification of a French friend with whom he is paired for a day of particularly gruelling work cleaning the inside of an underground petrol tank. The tank and the work being done to clean it were no doubt real enough, but the textual function of the image of the tank is to remove us in imagination to the entrance to Hell: '... it was cold and damp. The powder of the rust burnt our eyelids and coated our throats and mouths with a taste almost like blood.'<sup>28</sup>

The poetic fiction of the chapter takes the form of an account of Levi's effort one day to teach a French friend not only the lines of Dante's treatment of the fate of Ulysses, but also how, when correlated allegorically with their experience of the camp, a specific phrase, '*come altrui piacque*' (which Stuart Woolf translates 'as pleased Another'), seemed to have revealed the reason for the cruel fate (*'destino'*) that had been dealt them. In contemplating the passage from Dante that he is trying to recall, Levi suddenly sees a possible answer to 'the why ... of our being here today ....'<sup>29</sup>

Levi does not spell out what he purports to have glimpsed in the phrase '*come altrui piacque*' nor indeed who or what this 'another' might be. He ends the paragraph with a rhetorical figure, an ellipsis, an empty space which draws the reader into the text and invites her to fill out the phrase from the resources of her own imagination. Moreover, the paragraph which follows and ends the chapter heightens the mystery of meaning by radical shifting mood from the sublime to the banality of the soup line. Suddenly:

We are now in the soup line, in the midst of the sordid, ragged crowd of soup – carriers from other Kommandos. Those just arrived press against our backs. —*Kraut und Rüben?* – *Kraut und Rüben* –. It is announced officially that today the soup is of cavoli *e rape*: – *Choux et navets*. – *Káposzta és répak*.

And then a reversion to a fragment of Dante’s rendition of Ulysses’s last words, figuring the descent into the Hell of ordinary camp life suggested by the repetition of the soup of the day in four languages: “*Káposzta és répak ...Infin che ‘l mar fu sopra noi rinchiuso*.”<sup>10</sup>

The change of register, mood, and tone is not called for by any rule of realistic representation of a literalist or objective kind. The change is in the interest of effects precisely more ‘literary’ or ‘poetic’, rather than stenographic or photo-realistic. And yet this change has the effect of actually producing the referent rather than merely pointing to it – and much more vividly than any kind of impersonal registration of the ‘facts’ could ever have done.

I have argued elsewhere that literary writing has its place in historical and other kinds of scientific writing by virtue of its power of figuration. And, following Erich Auerbach, I have called this power ‘figural realism’. The most vivid scenes of the horrors of life in the camps produced by Levi consist less of the delineation of ‘facts’ as conventionally conceived than of the sequences of figures he creates by which to endow the facts with passion, his own feelings about and the value he therefore attaches to them.

The other passage which I would cite – and if I had time, analyze more fully from a stylistic standpoint – is the chapter entitled *The Drowned and the Saved*, a phrase Levi will use as the title of his last book. In this chapter Levi uses what he obviously thought of as his scientifically trained eye to describe and characterize (or classify) four types of camp prisoners who seemed to him to have had no inborn talent for survival but managed with only animal cunning and/or a diabolical wit still to survive. These descriptions of the four types of survivor are presented as being purely disinterested and rigorously empirical. Indeed, Levi purports in this chapter to consider the Lager as ‘a giant biological and social experiment’ operating according to the (Darwinian?) principle of natural selection and adaptation and/or extinction.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter of Levi’s book worth raises the theoretical question of the proper way to read witness texts. Since they present themselves as bearing witness to ‘what actually happened’ in the camps, such texts typically offer themselves as belonging to the discourse of truth and of fact, and therefore as possible contributions to the historical record. Does this mean that they are to be read only literally—for the information they give us about life in the camps? This is a theoretical question because the answer to it must be responsible to various theories of reading which, not accidentally, I would argue, have sprung up in the wake of modernism and the difficulty of representing and interpreting events of the order of novelty of the Holocaust.

In the chapter entitled ‘*The Drowned and the Saved*,’ readers are witnesses to an act of witnessing unfolded under the aegis of an objectivity purportedly scientific in kind or

at least an objectivity of the kind that historians as a matter of course wish to attain to. But the work of typification, classification, or categorization in which Levi indulges himself in this chapter cries out for a decodation more figurative than literalist in kind. In other words, it calls out for a reading of the text's latent content, the kind and depth of feeling which the figurative language of the text reveals. Although Levi purports to be simply giving us to a list of the attributes of four kinds of individuals who managed to survive Auschwitz, it is easily seen that he is engaging in an activity which art and literary critics call *ekphrasis* (this term, Greek for 'description,' has a technical meaning in poetics and stylistics – it designates the description of a work of art or a natural scene by poetic or figurative statement).

'We will show in how many ways it was possible to achieve salvation ... by telling the stories (*raccontando le storie*) of Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias, and Henri.'<sup>12</sup> The four persons named will stand as 'types' of survivor, which means that they are to be taken as representative of a certain practice rather than as individuals. It is interesting to observe that in one of the characterizations, that of Henri, the notion of the 'type' is explicitly used to indicate a certain technique of seduction or subversion. Henri survives due to his talent for recognizing people as 'types.' In the passage in question, Levi shows an equally sharp talent for thinking typologically.

The theory of typology presumes that a type of person, place, event, etc. can be represented in a single example (as against a class of things, which may be thought as an array of a number of individuals sharing what Wittgenstein called 'family resemblances').<sup>13</sup> And indeed in the passage under consideration individuals are presented as types rather than as representatives of classes of phenomena. This means that Levi will be committed to a kind of 'thinking in figures' rather than to the kind of conceptual thinking that he believes to be proper to the scientist's mode of proceeding.<sup>14</sup> But thinking in figures always reveals as much about the writer as it does about a referent. Indeed, a cluster of figures such as they one we will briefly consider here constitutes a stress-point of a text, where the conflicting emotions of the writer come to surface and reveal much more than they were consciously intended to do.

Of the four types of survivor sketched by Levi, that of 'Henri' is the most emotionally laden. Henri is an attractive, intelligent, and seemingly gregarious and civilized young man (Levi thinks he is twenty-two, but he was actually only eighteen), possessed of an 'excellent scientific and classical culture.' But this is all surface show; Henri is presented as being deeply evil, not only cold and even vicious in manner but doubly corrupt in the way he hides his evil nature behind a façade of seeming goodwill and affection. Henri, as described or rather figured by Levi, is revealed as the consummate 'seducer' of both the guards and his fellow prisoners. Henri, indeed, 'possesses a complete and organic theory of the ways to survive in the Lager.' It is this theory that allows Henri to 'penetrate' the defenses of those whose 'protection' he desires.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Henri is something of the Don Juan of the camp – the consummate 'seducer' who, in his way, differs not at all from the Serpent in the Garden of Eden. Not surprisingly, Levi's figurative description of Henri reveals that not least among Henri's conquests was Primo Levi himself.

First, Henri is said to possess 'the delicate and subtly perverse body and face of Sodoma's San Sebastian' which, to Levi, means that 'his eyes are black and deep, he

does not yet have a beard, moves with a natural languid elegance (yet when needed, he can run and leap like a cat, and has a stomach the capacity of which might not be inferior to that of Elias [famous in the camp for his voracity]).<sup>16</sup> But at the same time, according to Primo Levi, Henri bears a horrifying resemblance to a wasp-like insect, the '*ichneumon*' which 'paralyzes the great hairy caterpillar, wounding it [by a sting] in its only vulnerable ganglion, ...' Not only wounding it, but also, as my encyclopedia informs me, by planting its eggs in its host, condemns it to death as its larvae eats their way out of the host's body. It is the precision of the figure that gives its force as a description: Henri is not likened to a bug of just any kind, but to a specific kind an insect which kills its prey by rape. And like the ichneumon, Henri is apt at identifying who is vulnerable and who is not. Thus, when Henri is on the hunt, Levi says, he 'at a glance sizes up the subject, *son type*, speaks to them briefly, to each with the appropriate language, and the 'type' is conquered...'

Levi suggests that he himself has been seduced by Henri, for he asserts that he finds it 'very pleasant to talk to Henri in moments of rest.' Indeed, Levi tells us:

To speak with Henri is useful and pleasant: one sometimes also feels him warm and near; communication, even affection seems possible. One seems to glimpse, behind his uncommon personality, a human soul, sorrowful and aware of itself. But the next moment his sad smile freezes into a cold grimace which seems studied at the mirror; Henri politely excuses himself, ...and here he is again, enclosed in armour, the enemy of all, inhumanly cunning and incomprehensible like the Serpent in Genesis.

And then, in a turn away from the 'objective' (scientific) and impersonal ('one sometimes...one seems to glimpse') to a confessional mode of address:

I always came away from all my talks with Henri, even the most cordial, with a slight feeling of defeat; with the confused suspicion of having been, I myself, in some inadvertent way, not a man to him, but only an instrument in his hands. I know that Henri is living today. I would give much to know his life as a free man, but I do not want to see him again.<sup>17</sup>

The description moves from one figure taken from the domain of art to another taken from nature to yet another taken from Scripture. There is no 'theory' or 'logic' governing transitions from one of these figures to another. But in the process, Henri is successively 'reduced,' first, by being likened to the painting of (the homosexually encoded) 'San Sebastiano' by the (notoriously homosexual) sixteenth-century painter 'Sodoma' (Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, d.1549); and then figured as a rapist-insect which kills its prey by 'penetrating' and planting its eggs inside them; and then, finally, defined as the kind of diabolical seducer represented by the snake in the Garden of Eden.

One could hardly imagine a passage more rhetorical in its structure. The figurative nature of the passage is confirmed by the allusion to Sodoma's painting of San Sebastiano – an image few readers would be likely to have in memory, but the purpose

of which is intended less to provide an iconic image of Henri than to summon up the figure of the homosexual as the substance of his person.<sup>18</sup> Is this description to be read as a literal characterization of the person 'Henri' or is it to be read figuratively – that is, as telling us as much about the writer of it as it does about the person it purports merely to describe?

I know of two commentaries on this scene of description which opt for a literalist reading of the text and an assessment of its truthfulness and accuracy as a description in factual terms. And both spend some time analyzing 'Henri's' response to Levi's characterization of him in his own memoir of Auschwitz, published in 1996 under the title *Chroniques d'ailleurs* by Paul Steinberg.<sup>19</sup> They want to know whether Levi was accurate and fair in his characterization of Henri as a cold manipulator of others for purposes of survival, whether Henri is supposed to be considered as having used his youth and beauty to gain favour in the camps, whether he was 'really' a homosexual, as the passage on the most literal reading suggests, and so on and so forth. But while these characterizations may be more or less true in a factual sense, surely it is less their factuality than their function in revealing something about their author, whose emotional investment in his subject is manifested in the excessiveness of the imagery he uses to depict him.

As far as I am concerned, this passage by Levi tells us less about survival in the camp than about the irrepressible desire that the writer felt for the object of his desire. On one level, it could be said that of course it stands to reason that young, attractive men and women were objects of sexual interest of both a hetero- and a homo-sexual kind. And that, as the testimony of many women survivors confirms, the use of sex for *protekcja* in the camps was common. But Levi does not say directly that Henri used his youth and beauty to sexually seduce potential protectors. He merely suggests that Henri was a homosexual by his allusions to the painting of San Sebastian by Sodoma, the habits of the ichneumon, and the use of the image of the Serpent in Genesis to characterize him. The first figure captures Levi's impression of Henri's physical and sexual aspect; the second characterizes his habits and practices; and the third endows the whole with a moral or (to use the language of allegory) anagogical weight.

This is not to say that this description of a real person whom Levi knew at a specific time and place in the past is to be written off as a subjective and imprecise characterization. On the contrary, this sequence of figurations is fully and explicitly referential; it is a means of referring to a real person at a real time and place. Moreover, in the extent to which it expresses the moral charge which inspires its form, it can be said to be even more "objective" than any attempt at a literal description would be. Why did Levi never want to see Henri again? Levi does not tell us. He leaves us, rather, with an ellipsis, an uncompleted thought, which is all the more eloquent for not having been uttered.

The ideology of modern realism has it that an artistic, poetic, or literary treatment of real events constitutes a kind of category mistake. Real events of the past are properly treated by history, which eschews any interest in the imaginary, invented, or fantastical events of literature. The artistic treatment of the events of the Holocaust is supposed to 'aestheticize' them or intrude the techniques of the poet or artist between

the witness and the things about which she speaks. Poetic language itself is seen as inherently obfuscating. Primo Levi vehemently criticized Paul Celan for writing ‘obscure’ and therefore obscurantist poetry about the Holocaust experience. Levi thought that modernist literature was ‘surrealistic,’ the product of the kind of fuzzy thinking that had led to the Holocaust in the first place; and he actually thought that the suicides of writers like Trakl and Celan confirmed the sickness of the way they wrote. Adorno’s famous remark about the impossibility of writing poetry ‘after Auschwitz’ was directed of course against a certain kind of romantic, sentimental and schmaltzy kind of lyricism that used horrified comment on horrifying events as proof of the sensitivity of the commentator. (Adorno subsequently emended and qualified his statement, in part as a result of a reading of Celan’s work.)

It is a matter of theoretical interest that when Levi speaks as a theorist of Holocaust literature, he comes through as a victim of a banal conception of poetry which his own practice as a writer belies. For Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*, generally recognized as a classic of Holocaust testimony, derives its power as testimony, less from the scientific and positivistic registration of the ‘facts’ of Auschwitz, than from its enactment in poetic utterance of what it felt like to have had to endure such ‘facts.’ Levi believed that his was a style more scientific than artistic, and indeed he encouraged the idea that the famous ‘clarity’ and ‘perspicuity’ of his prose had been a result of his training as a chemist. In a number of places, he suggests that his testimony is marked by a ‘scientific’ attention to the facts and a rigorous attention to conceptual clarity that he finds absent in the work of many other witnesses. It is evident, however, that this attention to the facts and to conceptual clarity are presented in figures and tropes which give them their concreteness and their power to convince us of the sincerity of the author.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Wlad Godzich points out in his Introduction to Paul de Man’s *Resistance to Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), in ancient times, *theoria* was contrasted, not so much with *praxis* as, rather, with *aesthesis* or feeling (especially, a feeling of pleasantness). Thus, *theoria* was a kind of practice of ‘consideration,’ an arduous or at least difficult practice, occasioned by a sense of crisis of the kind indicated by our editors when they suggest that ‘to theorize’ meant, among other things, going to consult an oracle or judging one thing in terms of another.

<sup>2</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Vogler remarks that witness literature is ‘of all literary kinds most bound up with notions of authenticity and referentiality, a poetry that puts us in touch with raw facts of existence rather than effects produced by rhetorical technique.’ In Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, eds., *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p.174.

<sup>4</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, (Turin: De Silva, 1947), trans. Stuart Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, (Orion Press, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.110., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.123. I have altered Stuart Woolf’s excellent translation a bit in order to capture the ‘mood’ of Levi’s original. In the first sentence, Levi uses the subjunctive mood in the phrase ‘*perché l’inverno non venisse*.’ Woolf ignores the subjunctivity of the phrase and puts the first sentence in the declarative mood: ‘We fought with all our strength to prevent the arrival of winter.’ This phrasing suggests an activity that is not suggested in the subjunctive, which refers us to the desire informing the action reported, its imaginary aspect. The result is that an important referent is missed, in this case the ‘feeling’ of this effort to keep winter from coming on. It is a small point and has to do with theory of translation, which we are not considering here, but it is important for grasping what is original and perspicuous in the way that Levi renders his memory of events in the camps.

<sup>6</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.116., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.130.

<sup>7</sup> In the Preface to *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi states 'It seems superfluous to add that none of the facts is invented' (*Mi pare superfluo aggiungere che nessuno dei fatti è inventato*).

<sup>8</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.98., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.109.

<sup>9</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.103., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.119.

<sup>10</sup> In this quotation from Levi's text, I have changed Woolf's translation by adhering to the punctuation marks in the original and leaving the last line, from Dante, in the original Italian. I make these changes in order to make a point about the rhetoric of the original. Woolf captures the literal meaning of the original but not the rhetorical grace notes with their semantic connotations signalled by the punctuation. Without criticizing Woolf, I would say that these changes mark the difference between a historian's reading of a text and a literary scholar's reading of it. The point is that the style, which extends to matters of punctuation (as Coleridge is fond of reminding his readers), has a semantic dimension quite as pertinent and specifiable as the diction and grammar of a text. Moreover, Woolf's rendering of the line from Dante makes no sense. He has it as: 'And over our heads the hollow seas closed up.' (Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.115) The Sinclair version of the *Commedia* gives: 'until the seas closed over us again.' Sinclair's rendering allows the repetition of the name of the soup of the day to be assimilated to the figure of drowning that is one of the dominant metaphors of Levi's book.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.79., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.87. I find especially interesting that here Levi specifically eschews moral and other honorific categories ('the good and the bad, the smart and the stupid, the cowardly and the courageous, the fortunate and unfortunate') in favour of a purely pragmatic and seemingly 'objective' categorization: the survivor and the casualties. 'Here,' he says, 'the law of survival is without remission,' but he immediately supplements this law with another, taken from the Gospels, specifically the Gospel according to St. Matthew, which states: 'To he who has it shall be given, and to he who has not, it shall be taken away even that which he has.' Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.80., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.88.

<sup>12</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.84.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp.37–38.

<sup>14</sup> See Franco Rella, *Pensare per figure: Freud, Platone, Kafka* (Bologna: Pendragon, 1999), which is a history of the conflict between logic and poetic (or figural) speech.

<sup>15</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.99.

<sup>16</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.89., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.99.

<sup>17</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.90., Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p.100.

<sup>18</sup> Sodoma's pederasty was legendary, as the nickname itself indicates, while his painting of San Sebastiano has been characterized as the very type of homoerotic male beauty since the time of its appearance. Also, San Sebastiano is legendarily characterized as the saint of homosexuals.

<sup>19</sup> Steinberg's memoir was published in English translation under the title: *Speak You Also: A Survivor's Reckoning*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (New York: Metropolitan, 2000). The English version carries on its cover a photograph of Paul Steinberg at the age of 17, the year he was picked up and transported to Auschwitz. When Levi knew him, he was 18 (not 22, as Levi says), so it would be legitimate, if one wished to take Levi literally, to compare the photo of Steinberg at seventeen with the Sodoma picture of San Sebastiano which Levi invokes as a 'figure' of Henri. I compared the two and, in my estimation, the only thing that Henri and Sodoma's San Sebastiano have in common is the fact that they are both manifestly young and beardless. I suppose that one could see a certain resemblance in the eyes, 'deep and dark,' as Levi has it. But obviously this characterization of Henri tells us more about Levi than it does about the young man Steinberg. In his own memoir, Steinberg professes to having no memory Levi at the time they supposedly worked together in the Buna chemical labs. Nor does he pick up on the suggestion by Levi that he, Steinberg, was a homosexual or used his boyish charms to 'seduce' his guards and other prisoners. The two students of Levi who spent their time trying to decide if what Levi had literally said about Henri could be established as fact or not utterly overlook the manifest significance of the passage, which is given in its figurative not its literal level of articulation.

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