

ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES



PRIMO LEVI
AND HUMANISM
AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Posthumanist Reflections

JONATHAN DRUKER



Italian and Italian American Studies

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**Primo Levi and Humanism
after Auschwitz
Posthumanist Reflections**

Jonathan Druker

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PRIMO LEVI AND HUMANISM AFTER AUSCHWITZ

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For Lisa

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Introduction

The abstract, ahistorical self posited by the Enlightenment as an ideal of humanity entails in its converse appearance the implication that historical difference (and all the more, an historical definition of identity) will be suspect; the principle of universal reason or judgment implies that the grounds on which such distinctions are based may be—should be—challenged: not only can everyone be judged by one criterion, but the consequences of being included or excluded by it are, in terms of the principle of universalizability, without limits. The “difference” of the Jews was judged by the Nazis to be fundamental—and with this decision, there was nothing to inhibit the decision subsequently made about what followed from that judgment; there was no “reason” *not* to destroy the difference.

—Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (194–95)

No one has written about the Nazi concentration camps with more acuity, moral clarity, and understated eloquence than Primo Levi (1919–87), the Italian chemist and author who survived nearly a year in Auschwitz. Possessed of a rare intelligence and a resilient temperament, which made him well suited to deal with this grim subject matter, his task of interpreting and representing the Holocaust was nevertheless fraught with difficulty. To our occluded view of the black hole of Auschwitz, Levi has been said to bring “reason and light.”¹ However, it has become apparent over time that the tools he had at his disposal, the scientific method, the accumulated wisdom of European culture, and Kantian ethics, were not wholly adequate to the exceptional challenge he faced, having been impaired and compromised by the events of the Holocaust or even before. It is sorely troubling that these bulwarks of Enlightenment humanism lacked the strength to stop the Nazi genocide before it started. Even more disconcerting is the distinct possibility that the Enlightenment itself created some of the conditions that enabled the Holocaust. As much as we may wish to live in a world governed by it, reason, with its dispassionate, automated rigidity, is not always accompanied by light.

An industrial chemist and the author of indispensable books such as *Survival in Auschwitz*, his concentration camp memoir, and *The Drowned*

and the Saved, a collection of essays, Levi is one of the most authoritative and most cited Holocaust witnesses.² To date, nearly all Levi scholarship approaches this major literary and ethical figure within the terms of his own discourse, naturalizing the humanism that undergirds his texts and sharing his faith, battered but intact, in the West's grand narrative of progress through rationality. For the most part, Levi represents the so-called Final Solution as a barbaric counterattack on Enlightenment values and human rights; he invokes Dante and Darwin in the defense of his secular humanism; and he deploys both the literary canon and scientific discourse as tools of resistance against corrosive Nazi and Italian Fascist ideologies that abused science, stained language, and perverted the virtue of work. Although he writes to repair the ruins the Holocaust left in its wake, Levi's books are not wholly recuperative: even as he defends a particular pre-Holocaust idea of the human, his texts involuntarily chart its demise. This ending points, uncertainly, toward a new beginning, perhaps toward a post-Enlightenment not in thrall to instrumental reason, or a posthumanism not founded on the nobility of Man but on an ethical obligation to the other man.

Drawing on continental philosophy, trauma theory, and the techniques of literary studies, this book reassesses Levi's Holocaust memoirs and essays in light of the posthumanist theories of Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, each of whom critiques humanist notions of subjectivity, ethics, culture, history, and science. It is my contention that Levi positions himself as an exemplary subject of Western modernity who experiences and interprets Auschwitz through the lens of the Enlightenment and secular humanism. Even as he speaks in good faith for the victims, his texts provide evidence that Holocaust writing framed by humanist assumptions risks complicity with the murderous master narratives of Nazism that it seeks to overturn. My study explores the consequences of this possible complicity for the future of Man, the universal human subject whom Levi defends so eloquently.

For the posthumanist thinkers named above, the long germination of the Holocaust in the heart of Europe raises grave doubts about the benevolence of the Enlightenment project, despite its apparent commitment to social progress. They assert that fascism was not only a bitter enemy but also a logical result of the Enlightenment; that the social and political structures of domination serving totalitarian regimes are implicit in Enlightenment thought; and that the principle of universality, while purporting to emancipate the individual, crushes cultural and ethnic difference of every kind while revitalizing forms of intolerance like antisemitism. If true, these claims demand a rethinking of the origins and meanings of the Holocaust

and, in addition, a rereading of Holocaust literary texts like Levi's that are framed by humanist assumptions.

The Holocaust was a complex event that resulted from a multitude of causes. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that universally applied reason legitimated ahistorical and essentialized notions of national identity that were exploited by the Nazis and the Italian Fascists. As Berel Lang explains in the epigraph above, Enlightenment thought insists that "everyone be judged by one criterion."³ Just as the Kantian categorical imperative holds that our every action ought to obey a universal law without reference to the historical moment, so, too, we ought to judge every person by an eternal standard admitting no shades of gray.⁴ Consequently, you either are or are not a citizen; you either are or are not a German; you either are or are not a human. The essential self conceived by the Enlightenment—the universal Man—is both inclusive and exclusive. All men might be created equal, but the early United States—the first state founded on Enlightenment principles—devoted itself as much to profiting from slavery and to exterminating Native Americans in the search of *Lebensraum* as it did to protecting the rights of its citizens.⁵ As Lang puts it, "What starts out then as a commitment to tolerance turns out to be, not acceptance of diversity in its own terms, but a tolerance of difference within the margins fixed by a stipulated conception of reason. For anyone outside those margins, questions of degree—how far they are outside—hardly matter: what is crucial is that the person or group has been excluded."⁶ In other words, Enlightenment universality—the idea that all humans worthy of the name are essentially the same and ought to be accorded the same rights and freedoms—is committed to sameness and is intolerant of any diversity it deems truly significant. While rational thought excels in the creation of distinctions and categories, this apparently benign mental game has proved to be hazardous to the disempowered. As Lang observes, when they concluded that Jews were too different to be joined to the whole and were unable to fit into the social order, the Nazis found "no 'reason' *not* to destroy the difference."⁷

The possible causal links between the Enlightenment and the Holocaust are routinely discussed in histories of the Nazi period, and in works of philosophy and theory, but have seldom been brought to bear on Holocaust literature.⁸ In recognition of that lacuna, this book explores how Levi's autobiographical texts contend with the tyranny of universal reason, with its penchant for sacrificing the particular to the unified whole. If we understand the Nazi genocide and its murderous intolerance of difference as having erupted from utopian longings for a wholly uniform community, we are forced, as Levi was, to confront the dangers inherent in all utopian projects, including the Enlightenment. The analysis undertaken here is based on the premise that both Nazism and Italian Fascism were

nourished by an extreme, utopian formulation of universality that sought to eliminate or otherwise repress ethnic and racial differences, whether real or imagined.

Successive chapters of my study reconsider Levi's humanism in relation to such topics as Judaism, literary culture, Enlightenment historiography, and the putative objectivity of scientific discourse. At the same time, I discuss his books in the context of ongoing debates about whether the Holocaust is best understood as an unexpected deviation from humanity's path of progress or a predictable failure of Western civilization that revealed its inherently destructive character. By frankly engaging the question of how Enlightenment thought may be complicit in the creation of Auschwitz, I aim to move beyond arguments over the Holocaust's uniqueness to broader concerns about the role of genocide in modern discourses of culture, nationalism, and science. In addition, by studying Levi's texts through multiple critical lenses, I am able to locate the common ground among four major posthumanist thinkers whose disparate vocabularies sometimes obscure their shared critique of humanism and its relation to the Holocaust. While the existing monographs on Levi have laid valuable groundwork, they tend toward the descriptive and are understandably reluctant, given the sober subject matter, to probe the hidden contradictions and unsettling implications revealed by deeper readings.⁹ However, the passage of time allows us to depart from the hagiographic position, where Levi's texts are almost sacred and his assumptions are beyond interrogation, and move toward more ambitious and more theorized forms of analysis. An analogous transition is apparent in Holocaust studies in general. In this spirit, I propose to deploy posthumanist theory to directly confront the troubling erasure of difference in both Enlightenment thought and in aspects of Levi's Holocaust texts. At the same time, this study also proceeds in a conventional chronological fashion with the intention of shedding light on Levi's development as a Holocaust writer and, more broadly, on the history of Italian Jewry from emancipation, in the nineteenth century, to the 1938 Racial Laws, and on to the 1980s, the decade of Levi's last publications.¹⁰

Levi's writings deserve this sustained intellectual engagement because they testify powerfully to the victim's experience and speak insightfully about the complex legacies of the Holocaust with respect to ethics, the limits of language and representation, the double-edged sword of technology, and the problems entailed in remembering and memorializing atrocity. While his texts are at the center of this investigation, I have also engaged with other important Holocaust writers who offer different paradigms for thinking through the vexed relationship between Western thought

and genocide. These writers include Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry, and Robert Antelme.

Levi's Humanism

According to the international critical consensus of several decades, Levi responded to the Nazi genocide from the perspective, and in support, of Enlightenment values and secular humanism.¹¹ Joseph Farrell's clearly stated assessment is typical: "The only philosophy or current of thought to which [Levi] owed allegiance is the culture which can be termed, broadly, 'humanist,' or perhaps 'Enlightenment,' in the sense that the eighteenth-century cult of reason represents the highest peak of that vision of the human being as a 'rational animal' which has deep roots in European culture."¹² In this and further remarks, Farrell not only characterizes Levi the writer but also indirectly defines some of the hallmarks of twentieth-century secular humanism that stem from the Enlightenment. "Levi was dedicated to understanding the world around him and implicitly believed the project could be successful. Methodical pessimism, or the age of Dostoevsky, Pirandello, Proust, Musil or Svevo, was not for him. His vision was imbued by an enlightened humanism." "One of the bravest aspects of Levi's work," Farrell later adds, "was that he maintained a trust in man and even an optimism about life after his return from Auschwitz."¹³ While "humanism" has meant a great many things over the centuries, I think Farrell begins to qualify the word appropriately in relation to Levi.¹⁴ In the course of this book, I will develop, in detail, what it means to say that Levi is a secular humanist (or, in various contexts, a scientific or liberal or Enlightenment humanist) and explore the philosophical and ethical implications this label carries after Auschwitz. For the moment, it will suffice to say that Levi's type of humanism positions man, not God, at its center; it rediscovers human genius in centuries of European art and literature while marginalizing the religious content of these works; it subscribes to Enlightenment universality and the rights and dignity of the individual; it has faith in reason and in the capacity of the human mind to understand the material world; it has faith in the ability of language to convey meaning transparently, and, unlike the alienated modernism to which Farrell refers, it remains at least partially optimistic about human nature and the prospects for social progress.

This last article of humanist faith—optimism for the future—may seem surprising after Levi's trip to Auschwitz, a place where dehumanized victims and the inhumane perpetrators together demonstrated the fragility of the Enlightenment idea of Man. Nevertheless, the critical consensus is

that Levi's hopeful humanism persists because he doggedly refuses to part with it. Richard Norman called Levi's Auschwitz memoir "one of the great documents of humanism, a humanism as hard-won as it could possibly be." Levi's is "humanism without illusions," Norman contends—it "is not a naïve faith in the essential goodness of human beings, but on the other hand it is not an attitude of bleak pessimistic despair."¹⁵ Similarly, Robert Gordon suggests that Levi retained much of his pre-Holocaust ideology and ethics despite the severity of the challenge they underwent in the concentration camp: "There is never the post-Holocaust ontological or moral void in Levi, never quite the radical silence conditioned by radical evil that others have evoked, only the terrible responsibility of now incorporating this too, even this, into the contours of the human. His enlightened, liberal ethics survive Auschwitz, shaken at their very roots, dramatically displaced and reshaped by the trauma of the experience, but nevertheless intact."¹⁶ Gordon's observation is sound but it is important to distinguish between Primo Levi, the author, who may have insisted that his world remained intact, and his texts, where largely unintended counternarratives reveal the nervous tension between his pre-Holocaust humanism and the legacy of Auschwitz—that single word that calls the entire Enlightenment project into question. As we shall see, a number of post-Holocaust thinkers suggest that Auschwitz produced a caesura or an abyss—what Gordon names here "the post-Holocaust ontological or moral void." This rupture exposed the practical inefficacy of so many humanist assumptions, such as the inherent dignity and rights of the individual and the positive utility of reason, and it even challenged the ability of language to describe experience. My contention is that while Levi usually ignored or rejected the caesura idea, his texts inadvertently offer much evidence of its existence. The critical consensus that he is a post-Holocaust humanist is not wrong but it neglects a significant point: in trying to represent and interpret Auschwitz, Levi's texts not only recuperate Enlightenment values but also undermine them.

Bryan Cheyette is one of the few critics who remarks on the push and pull in Levi's oeuvre between the pre- and post-Holocaust sensibilities. "Levi kept faith with the values of western humanism—literature, law, science and reason—which provided an essential point of continuity between his time before and after the camps. At the same time, he recognized the extent to which Auschwitz-Birkenau completely corrupted these received values and made them suspect. His writing is a restless negotiation between these two points."¹⁷ I agree strongly that, for the attuned reader, Levi's representation and interpretation of the Holocaust encompasses continuity and rupture, humanism, and a post-Holocaust sensibility. Indeed, my study aims to uncover the tension between these poles by using "after Auschwitz" thought to consider how the Enlightenment's penchant for

homogenizing difference helped to make the Holocaust possible. However, there is not a great deal of evidence to support Cheyette's claim that Levi recognized early on, and purposefully investigated, the historic divide that we can now perceive clearly through the lens of posthumanist theory. To assert as much is to make Levi into a kind of schizophrenic rather than the confident writer he was; it is to assert that he believed strongly in what he knew to be "completely corrupted" and "suspect."

Cheyette's sweeping statement underscores the interpretative problems that arise if we view Levi's oeuvre as monolithic when his ideas actually changed over time. It would be odd if they had not. The meaning and impact of the Holocaust had barely begun to register in 1946 when he wrote *Survival in Auschwitz*. (This alone could account for why his remarkable memoir was initially rejected by the prestigious Einaudi publishing house.¹⁸) By 1986, when he completed his last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, the Holocaust was commonly viewed as a watershed event, marking a kind of historic divide. In this present study, I am chiefly interested in Levi's initial, unfiltered response to his experience and less focused on his later works that were clearly influenced by "after Auschwitz" thought.¹⁹ Cheyette makes no such distinction: first, he implies that Levi knew, in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, that his humanism had been corrupted; then he goes even further to arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that Levi was as much a posthumanist as he was a humanist. "Levi's sceptical humanism was always agnostic and utterly aware of the dangers inherent in a categorizing science and a falsely universalizing European culture."²⁰ While I strongly concur that Levi experienced, to a tragic degree, the negative effects of scientific discourses made to serve Nazi racial policy, and that he was harmed grievously by "falsely universalizing European culture," my study shows that as a sincere humanist, he nearly always affirmed the positive value of modern science and high culture and only rarely critiqued them, especially before the 1980s. This should not be surprising: for Levi to do otherwise would have meant sacrificing his cognitive and cultural frames of reference at just the moment when he urgently needed them to understand and put into words what Auschwitz was. This point is well illustrated by Gian-Paolo Biasin, another scholar who represents the critical consensus that Levi was a tenacious humanist even after the Holocaust. In writing his books, Biasin observes, "Levi clings to this [Western] tradition with all his strength in order to prevail against the onslaught of Nazi evil, of the irrational forces that have so profoundly shaken human values on which civilization is supposed to be based. And his use of traditional paradigms—from Dante to Homer—contributes powerfully to making the Holocaust and its survivors' experience writable for him and understandable for us."²¹ In this redemptive reading, Levi defeats the

danger of rupture with continuity: the values of Enlightenment humanism become his best weapon against fascism's putative irrationalism, and the literary canon provides a stockpile of conceits and turns-of-phrase to help him master the terrors of the camp that threaten to exceed the capabilities of everyday language. Working within Levi's own intellectual framework, the critic elicits the author's intentions but fails to detect the texts' implicit, unbidden critique of humanism and science (which, as I said, Cheyette believes is explicit). Nevertheless, Biasin is right to say that when representing the Holocaust, Levi maintains a cognitive and cultural continuity with the past and draws on a shared idiom that enables him to produce a coherent narrative for his readers and himself.

Among the touchstones in the Western canon that served Levi over the course of many books, none is more important—except, perhaps, *The Divine Comedy*—than the *Odyssey*, whose protagonist journeys through mythic terrors to return home and sleep in his own bed, his identity intact. Ulysses and the notion of odyssey are particularly important in *Survival in Auschwitz*, in *The Reawakening*—a book about Levi's long journey home after the end of World War II—and in his Jewish partisan novel, *If Not Now, When?* The same is true, to a lesser extent in *The Periodic Table*, which describes his life as a chemist, and in the fictional *The Monkey's Wrench*, an odyssey of an Italian iron worker who journeys from India to Alaska to Russia.²² I would go so far as to say that in the role of alter ego, Ulysses is the second most important character in Levi's largely autobiographical oeuvre. A venerable literary prototype of the survivor, his story—in its broad outlines—mirrors Levi's. In his relentless pursuit of knowledge and his assertion of human dignity, Ulysses is the very embodiment of humanist values. Essentially unaltered by all he has experienced, he represents the unified subject who uses reason to dominate the other, before whom he initially fears losing his individual name. In comfort among the Phaeacians, Ulysses narrates his tale of woe, an episode that serves Levi as a model of the autobiographical narrator for whom “‘troubles overcome are good to tell,’” as formulated in a Yiddish proverb that also stands as an epigraph for *The Periodic Table*.²³

Having noted Levi's reliance on Ulysses, a principle task of my study is to investigate the ambiguities that inhabit this important figure in the Western imagination and to consider the multiple and conflicting ways that his story of return sheds light on the complexities of Holocaust survival. For one thing, the survivor often speaks, and speaks again, precisely because his troubles will *not* be overcome. This is surely why Levi compares himself, more than once, to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, a different kind of shipwrecked sailor whose compulsive narration returns him repeatedly to the site of his trauma. And in *Survival in Auschwitz*, the so-called

Muselmanner—the hollow shells of men who made up the vast majority of the inmates in the camp—stand in haunting opposition to Levi’s identification with Ulysses as the embodiment of human nobility and resolute self-preservation. Robbed of their subjectivity and of their very humanity, they risk being excluded from the category called “Man,” which Ulysses epitomizes in humanist culture. As such, they call into question the ethical soundness of Enlightenment universality. To probe deeply into this and other implications of Levi’s humanist response to the Holocaust, I turn, for assistance, to the work of four posthumanist thinkers.

Posthumanist Theory

Much that has been written about the application of postmodern theory to the Holocaust is relevant to the ideas deployed in this study.²⁴ Of the thinkers whose work I invoke here, Levinas, Foucault, and Lyotard are routinely described as postmodernists, and Adorno is called a precursor to the postmodern.²⁵ With the term “posthumanist,” I mean to designate a subset of the postmodern that critiques Enlightenment humanism, especially in relation to the Holocaust.²⁶ This term serves my purposes because Levi’s perspective is decidedly humanist, rather than modernist, and the major themes in his oeuvre engage the pressures at work on the idea of the human before, during, and after Auschwitz. Posthumanism, in its earlier articulations, has also been called antihumanism; while not inaccurate, I avoid this negative term that implies that humanism’s flaws are beyond repair.²⁷ I should note that other thinkers who earn passing mention in my posthumanist readings of Levi—like Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Zygmunt Bauman—might have been more fully employed to good result. I have not undertaken this work but perhaps others will. Giorgio Agamben, well known for his innovative writings on Levi and the Holocaust, presents a special case in that I borrow ideas from his work but also critique its shortcomings, especially with respect to ethics.²⁸

All of these thinkers, whether they are labeled postmodernists or posthumanists, understand the Holocaust as a break in the expected trajectory of European civilization. It is not the case that Auschwitz dramatically changed the course of history; however, its very existence in the center of Europe revealed the dark underside of modernity, prompting a thorough reassessment of the Enlightenment project. In this sense, posthumanism does merely appropriate the Nazi genocide to mount a critique of Western culture and epistemology. Instead, many elements of this critique were developed as an urgently needed response to the deaths of innocent millions. While the thinkers I employ in my study struggle with the ungraspable

and unrepresentable meanings of the Holocaust, they are more confident about its causes. Antisemitism was a necessary condition but insufficient, by itself, to provoke this murderous violence. As a reply to those who say that Nazism was an aberration with no historical antecedents or an irrational reaction to modernity, posthumanists trace the origins of the genocide to inhumane reason used as a basis for organizing social relations and to the scientific regulation of bodies by states—what Foucault calls “biopower.”²⁹ The idea of normalcy and corresponding theories of biological degeneracy legitimated the kind of negative eugenics at the center of Nazi racial policies. The rationally conceived asylums and prisons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were indirect precursors to the Nazi concentration camps. Foucault remarked that “the Enlightenment, which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines.”³⁰

Foucault’s approach to excavating the origins of state racism and the Holocaust—studying the history of institutions and discourses—is complemented by Adorno’s approach, which focuses on the history of thought. “Enlightenment is totalitarian,” he and his coauthor, Max Horkheimer, wrote provocatively, because “it equates thought with mathematics.” Like the scientific method, mathematics uses repeated calculation or sampling to subsume the individual case into the general, the many into the one. In other words, unchecked reason functions like a machine that automatically sacrifices the particular to the universal.³¹ The Holocaust provides an extreme example of this phenomenon. Adorno’s notion that the Enlightenment is totalitarian in its intolerance of difference corresponds to Lyotard’s claim that official histories—he calls them “Grand Narratives”—are totalizing discourses that demand consensus while silencing dissent. More than history or philosophy, language is the focus of Lyotard’s critique of modernity.³² With specific reference to Auschwitz, he shows how the words of the disempowered are deprived of authority by the Hegelian dialectic (i.e., thesis, antithesis, synthesis), a function of universal reason that eliminates marginal voices by subsuming them into a unified authoritarian subject.³³

The impaired ethical relation of the subject to the disempowered other is also central to Levinas’s critique of Western thought from Plato to humanism to the Holocaust. Ontology, or being, is the basis of this philosophy, and self-preservation is the first principle, even to the point of violence against the other. (Ulysses, the humanists’ beacon, is the paradigmatic ontological subject.) To overcome the subject’s violent proclivities, Levinas posits an ethical obligation to the other that precedes even self-preservation. He calls his substitute for the primacy of ontology “ethics as first philosophy.”³⁴ The Holocaust and the many other episodes of genocide in the last one hundred years demand more from us than analysis: they also necessitate the invention of new forms of ethics and politics in the spirit of Levinas.

Posthumanist Theory, Applied

I have already suggested and will offer further evidence that Levi was, by temperament, education, and class, the quasi embodiment of the Enlightenment humanist subject, and that he interpreted the Holocaust through this particular lens. And I surveyed above, and will describe in greater detail, the ideas of posthumanist thinkers who, by reflecting on the Holocaust, have arrived at or found confirmation for their critiques of the Enlightenment, for their claim that violence lurks in universality and instrumental reason. The task of my study is to combine these two elements, to use posthumanist theory to reread Levi's Holocaust texts, and, in turn, to use his texts to find confirmation for the theorists' claims. If they are right, if the dark underside of the Enlightenment helped give birth to and enabled Nazi and Italian Fascist biopolitics, an informed reading of Levi's humanist response to Auschwitz ought to uncover internal contradictions that mirror those in the Enlightenment itself. If, as I have suggested, almost all Levi scholarship is undertheorized because it shares, and does not interrogate, his humanist assumptions, then posthumanist readings ought to yield a fuller account of the tensions between pre-Holocaust ideas and post-Holocaust realities that together structure his texts. Only one scholar, Robert Gordon, has anticipated the possibility of approaching Levi in the way that my study does, of using his oeuvre as an interesting test case that would contribute to the debate over the existence and extent of the Enlightenment's dark side.³⁵ However, Gordon did not undertake this work, which has remained hypothetical until now.

To explain how I went about this task, I will briefly describe the structure and content of the seven chapters that constitute this study. Each chapter employs the work of a posthumanist theorist to consider how one of seven key concepts—Man, culture, language, ethics, history, science, and labor—functions in Levi's Holocaust testimonies and essays. As we will see, posthumanism contests the positive and untroubled connotations of these concepts by uncovering the intolerance of difference, and the traumatizing violence contained within them, that humanist discourse systematically normalizes and forgets. To show how the ideas of the various theorists converge and diverge, I have found it useful, at times, to return to key passages in Levi's oeuvre so that I might analyze them from multiple perspectives.

Concentrating on *Survival in Auschwitz* as a whole, Chapter 1 discusses how Levi's experience of Nazi dehumanization in Auschwitz spurred him to write a spirited defense of both reason and the dignity of Man, the putatively eternal, universal human subject. When I compare Elie Wiesel's religious faith while in Auschwitz to Levi's faith in the Enlightenment, I find that each depends on a theodicy, on a teleological narrative, messianic or secular

utopian, that compels its adherents to find purpose in the suffering of the innocent Holocaust victims. By means of his empirical, closely reasoned testimony, Levi hopes to link the awful knowledge gained in Auschwitz with a progressive history of Man. While he remained true to this project, the Holocaust marks the end of theodicy for both Levinas and Adorno, who agree that to lend transcendental or historical meaning to the victims' torment is to renew in thought the violence they suffered in body. It becomes evident that Man, like the figure of God in Wiesel's *Night*, is powerless in the face of radical evil. With the advent of Auschwitz, the Jews' original covenant with God and the Kantian covenant among enlightened individuals—the promise so central to modern humanism to treat others as ends and not means—are both moribund and need to be reconceptualized.

To discuss the function of culture in Auschwitz, and how this reflects on the workings of culture in general, Chapter 2 rereads a passage in *Survival in Auschwitz* where the heroic figure of Ulysses, as reinvented by Dante, acts as a vessel for the humanist values that promise Levi a means to resist the camp's inhumanity. Like almost all of his commentators, Levi supposes that Nazi barbarism flourishes at the expense of European culture. However, I enlist Adorno's work to show how culture, in the guise of epic poetry like Dante's, nurtured the fascist ideologies that led to Auschwitz. The chapter's principle argument is that the persistence of genocide in our time reveals how nationalist or official culture, while solidifying collective memory, obscures its violent assimilations of the disempowered other. Finally, I recast and broaden Adorno's famous dictum—"to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"—in the light of the perennial linkage between culture and forgotten violence that Adorno himself uncovered.

Chapter 3 deploys Lyotard's concept of "the differend" to explore the unexpected intersection in *Survival in Auschwitz* between Levi's humanism and Hegelian modes of discourse like those of Nazism and Italian Fascism. On one hand, Levi's forthright account of how the most dehumanized victims in Auschwitz were shunned by the other prisoners confirms Lyotard's claim that "in the concentration camp there is no plural subject." On the other, the humanist imperative to turn this negative experience into an object of knowledge compels Levi to adopt Darwinian categories and to speak as a member of an imagined community of scientists—a "we"—that looks into the camp from the outside. The dilemma for the scientific humanist is that Darwin's potent theory, a credit to the acuity of the human mind, actually dethrones humans by conceiving them as animals subject to exploitation and even "selection."

Completing my posthumanist analysis of *Survival in Auschwitz*, Chapter 4 reads Levi's testimony from the perspective of Levinas, who argues that Western philosophy, as continued in modern humanism, privileges

the “Greek” narrative of being—which violently absorbs difference into ontological self-identification—over the “Hebrew” narrative, which embraces ethical responsibility for the other. The dilemma at the heart of Levi’s testimony resides in the simultaneous entwinement of, and opposition between, the “Greek” and “Hebrew” modes that course through the text. The ontological position is repeatedly interrupted by the sight of the *Muselmanner*, the dehumanized victims of Auschwitz whose alterity is beyond assimilation. My reading accounts for Levi’s subtextual ambivalence toward universality as a basis for ethics. I bring the tensions in his testimony into higher relief by comparing it with Robert Antelme’s *The Human Race*, a survivor testimony that unambiguously supports the integrity of the humanist subject.

Chapter 5 employs trauma theory to arrive at a new reading of *The Reawakening*, Levi’s recollection of his months as a “displaced person” wandering through Russia and the East after the liberation of Auschwitz. The book effectively positions the Holocaust as a problem born of modern European history that cannot be addressed either intellectually or psychologically in Russia, which functions here as a site of latency and evasion. My claim is that *The Reawakening* recounts a tale of forgetfulness that is analogous to the repression of traumatic memory in Europe from the end of World War II until the Eichmann trial in 1960. The belated completion and publication of the memoir, which first appeared in print in 1963, even though Levi began to write some of its pages as early as 1946, coincided with a wider return of Holocaust trauma to Europe after a period of latency.

Chapter 6 draws on the work of Foucault in order to reread *The Periodic Table* as a dramatization of the collision between the human subject and the human object that is at the center of all genocides legitimated by science. By mastering matter through chemistry, Levi’s autobiographical narrator constitutes himself as a subject. At the same time, his book describes how he was cruelly objectified as an impure body by scientific discourses serving both the Nazis and the Italian Fascists. *The Periodic Table* proposes to unify science and poetry, words and things; in actuality, it reveals the extent to which modern humans remain a discordant hybrid of spirit and matter. Furthermore, it illustrates the disastrous consequences following from Foucault’s observation that, during the Enlightenment, the discursive subject called Man was first conceived as a conflicted binary, as both the scientist/subject and also the specimen/object of modern scientific investigation.

Focusing on the essays in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Chapter 7 also ranges across Levi’s oeuvre to consider how the work of genocide challenges humanist or liberal notions of the virtue of work and of making.

In *The Periodic Table* and *The Monkey's Wrench*, a fictive dialogue between an ironworker and a chemist who love their respective jobs, Levi conceives of work as the personal refashioning of the world that allows for the freest and fullest expression of the self. However, the integrity of the affirmative vision of work proposed in these two paeans to the virtues and pleasures of a job done well is called into question by Levi's Holocaust writings in which the ethically ambiguous nature of work is so forcefully revealed. While my posthumanist critiques pay tribute to the historical and moral force that animates Levi's writing, they also make explicit the intractable problems he faces in trying to understand and represent Auschwitz. This approach suggests that Levi's humanist discourse not only renews Enlightenment values in the aftermath of the Holocaust, but also quietly recuperates the violence out of which modern Europe has been constructed.

Since I expect that the majority of my readers will be Anglophone, I have decided to quote Levi's original Italian texts in their published English translations. When the quotes are drawn from Levi's major works, I identify the source parenthetically in the text, if there is any possible ambiguity, with the first word of the English title, excluding the definite articles, and the page number. In a few cases, where the translation misses the sense of the original or even legitimately emphasizes a different meaning of a word or phrase than another one that better serves my argument, I bring the Italian text into the discussion and often provide an alternative translation. In such cases, I refer to the authoritative two-volume *Primo Levi: Opere*, edited by Marco Belpoliti.³⁶

Judaism, Enlightenment, and the End of Theodicy

This is pain henceforth meaningful, subordinated in one way or another to the metaphysical finality glimpsed by faith or belief in progress. Beliefs presupposed by theodicy! That is the grand idea necessary to the inner peace of souls in our distressed world. It is called upon to make sufferings . . . comprehensible.

—*Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering" (96)*

The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz, and the visible disaster of the first nature was insignificant in comparison with the second, social one, which defies human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil. Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.

—*Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics (361–62)*

I begin this chapter with a brief description of Primo Levi's intellectual and cultural formation within the assimilated Jewish community of Turin. This milieu contributed much to his faith in reason and Enlightenment universalism and the development of his strong Italian identity. Then, I offer a close reading of *Survival in Auschwitz* to show how these ideals mediate his earliest representation of the camp. While subsequent chapters of this book undertake diverse posthumanist critiques of Levi's survivor testimony and his other texts, the present one is largely taken up with describing how he mapped his humanist assumptions onto Auschwitz. My claim is that Levi testifies to the Holocaust as a citizen and rational human being whose particular ethnicity and religion have almost no bearing in the public sphere. In redressing the crimes of Nazism and Italian Fascism on behalf of the victims and in the name of human rights, Levi wishes to

defend the universal human (Man) rather than the restrictive particular (the Jew). His commitments are especially evident when we contrast his humanist response to Auschwitz with Elie Wiesel's religious response to it in *Night*.¹ While Wiesel's version of the concentration camp threatens the very possibility of faith in God and, therefore, the basis of the Jewish religion and identity, Levi's version of it threatens to refute the Enlightenment's idea of Man. Despite their differences, both memoirists struggle to maintain their respective theodicies in the face of the victims' undeserved suffering. The narrator of *Night* hopes to find his God innocent even in the midst of the destruction of European Jewry. The narrator of *Survival in Auschwitz*, whose faith resides in Enlightenment principles, continues to hope—in the face of contrary evidence he gathers in the camp—that increasing applications of reason to our human existence will bring social progress and ultimately reduce suffering. To conclude the chapter, I propose that the two testimonies, even as they attempt to recuperate their pre-Holocaust ideologies, corroborate the claim made independently by Emmanuel Levinas and Theodor Adorno that every theodicy, whether of the religious or of the atheist humanist variety, has become obsolete after Auschwitz.

At the concentration camp, Levi encountered a world that was as improbable and unbelievable as it was brutal. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, he reports being plagued, while in captivity, by a recurring dream in which he tells “this very story,” the one the reader has in hand, and is not believed by his audience (60). Against his expectations, the opposite has proved true over time: many readers now seem convinced that his lucid, restrained prose captures, in one-to-one correspondence, the objective reality of the concentration camp as if he were not an interpreter of his experience but solely a reliable witness to it. However, while we have no reason to doubt the authenticity of this canonical Holocaust text, written immediately after the war, we need to be alert to the particular cultural lens through which any memoirist views experience. Autobiographical writing is highly selective, hiding as much as it reveals about its author. It does not imitate the world but constructs a personal and approximate version of it subject to the limits of language and ideology. We may be tempted to set aside the principles of critical reading in the case of Holocaust testimonies—to treat them as almost sacred texts that command our supplication and awe. Yet, despite being firsthand accounts of enormous suffering and profound ethical searching, they require the same scrutiny that careful readers accord to other literary texts. Therefore, it is important to recognize the significant extent to which Levi's cultural and ideological frames of reference inform his representation of the camp, giving it shape and contour.

I do not wish to replicate the work of Levi's biographers, who have added much to our understanding of the writer and have given us a sense of what important personal data he leaves out or minimizes in his many autobiographical texts.² The essential historical and biographical facts are these: nineteenth-century Turin was the very center of the Risorgimento, the Enlightenment-inspired movement to unify Italy (realized in 1861). Consequently, the Jews in the city and the surrounding region of Piedmont were freed from the ghettos by the Savoyard monarch in 1848, and ultimately granted equal citizenship in the new nation. They willingly exchanged much of their Jewish particularity for Italian nationalism and the Enlightenment's principle of universality. In 1877, the Jewish community of Turin emphatically demonstrated its support for secularism, equality, and the patriotism by offering the *Mole Antonelliana*, originally planned as a grandiose synagogue, as a home for a new museum of the Risorgimento.³ By conventional wisdom, the emancipation of Italian Jewry was a complete success and antisemitism was rather insignificant until the promulgation of the 1938 Racial Laws by the Fascist government. While new research presents a more complex and troubling picture, Levi's texts largely uphold the established notion that all doors were open to Jews in Turin.⁴

Born into a moderately secular, bourgeois family, Levi grew up in the 1920s and 1930s among Jews and gentiles who, at first, ignored Italian Fascism, then accommodated themselves to it, and finally, reviled it.⁵ As he tells it in *The Periodic Table* and elsewhere, his own life before the Racial Laws demonstrates that by the early twentieth century, Turinese Jews were no less Italian than their Catholic neighbors. With a solid education in the canonical Western texts and a university degree in chemistry, Levi deeply imbibed the values associated with science and humanism that were strongly embraced in Turin. So it is not surprising that he drew on both Darwin and a secularized Dante in writing a survivor memoir in his native Italian. His scientific background is reflected in the detailed descriptions of the concentration camp and in the apparent objectivity of his even-toned narrative voice. His occasional recourse to Biblical language and references are meant to engage the common inheritance of secular European culture rather than to articulate a specifically Jewish discourse. The autobiographical narrator of *Survival in Auschwitz* effectively identifies himself, in order of importance, as a man, an Italian, a Western European, a chemist, and an antifascist partisan.⁶ This book, and nearly all of Levi's books—with the exception of *If Not Now, When?*—give us the impression that his Jewish background was rather insignificant to him.⁷ He seems to have internalized the dubious humanist supposition that Judaism and Enlightenment occupy entirely separate spheres.⁸ Indeed, his texts imply that to write as a Jewish victim would have been a capitulation to Nazi essentializing and an

admission that the Enlightenment had failed to deliver the emancipation and equality it had promised in the nineteenth century to the Jews of Italy and all of Europe.

“On the Jewish Question,” an 1844 essay by Karl Marx, articulates the exemplary Enlightenment attitude toward religious and cultural difference, ideas that shaped Levi’s response to Auschwitz more than a century later. For Marx, particular “religions are merely stages of development in the human mind,” stages that we shed on our way to emancipation for all within a unified society.⁹ Marx’s organizing principle, made clear in the essay’s final paragraph, is that man lives authentically only when he acts as a “species-being,” when he becomes conscious of himself as an individual who is also a member of the human species. Embracing our human sameness is for Marx, and for the Enlightenment at its most optimistic, a homecoming, a return to our deepest humanity freed of the impediments of religion and ethnic particularity. “Every emancipation is a *restoration* of the human world and of human relationships to *man himself*.”¹⁰ This, in essence, is the universality to which Levi subscribes.

Man Under Threat

Levi’s commitments determined the categories that he draws upon when registering his impressions of Auschwitz and representing himself as a survivor. In short, he writes as a humanist who has faith in the efficacy of both secular ethics and the scientific method. Thus, it is self-evident to him that Nazi ideas about race, based on irrational hatred and specious science, are simply false and must be resisted. Even at Auschwitz, where, like all the victims, he underwent an almost unimaginable dehumanization at the hands of other people, his trust in secular humanism and rational thought remained largely intact. Since the West is heir to these same ideas, it is not surprising that Levi’s Enlightenment values often produce undertheorized responses to the memoir. For many readers, his perspective appears natural, neither tendentious nor selective, and therefore beyond critique. Indeed, his book draws enormous strength from unquestioned moral universals and seemingly unassailable propositions: that nothing is more valuable than human life and that every life is of equal worth; that inhumane action can have no rational basis and can never be justified; that differences in race, religion and ethnicity are much less significant than what unites humanity; and that divine powers do not decide human affairs. With the exception of Levi’s atheism, virtually all Westerners endorse these values and confirm how fundamental they are to our idea of civilization. Nevertheless, we should not forget that these values have their own geneal-

ogy and are not neutral. Encoded in them are specific ideas about what it means to be human—ideas that met their greatest challenge during the Holocaust.

Auschwitz, as represented in Levi's memoir, was not only designed to exterminate enemies of the Third Reich but also to contest the validity of humanist concepts that coalesce around the words human and Man (the latter understood by Levi as a genderless abstraction). The memoir's governing idea, at moments obscured by numerous factual details that fulfill an invaluable documentary function, is that Auschwitz obliterated the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressors. "The personages of these pages are not men," Levi writes. "Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offence received or inflicted on someone else" (*Survival* 121). Early chapters carefully explain how the newly arrived death camp prisoner, stripped of community, family, possessions, dignity, and even of his own name, becomes "a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs . . . a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity" (27). For Levi, the creation of Auschwitz expresses "the resolution of others to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards" (51).

The importance of this theme—the fragility of human identity in a death camp designed to expunge it—is brought front and center in the epigraphic poem that evokes powerful images of physical and psychological dehumanization (11). In keeping with Levi's atheist humanism, the poem—elsewhere titled "Shemà," after the fundamental prayer in Judaism (itself drawn from Deut. 6.4–9)—supplants the Jews' commitment to monotheism with a menacing curse on those who fail to acknowledge the humanity of the suffering victims. It is not the God of the Hebrews that is held in awe in this humanist religion, but the face of the paradigmatic man or woman.¹¹ Drawn from a line in the poem, the memoir's original Italian title, *Se questo è un uomo*—best translated as "If This is a Man"—although both hesitant and ambiguous, offers no promises of survival, but foregrounds questions about the definition of the word "Man" and the conclusions or obligations (the "then") that may flow from the "if" statement. Not surprisingly, readers are misled by the book's American title, which markets death camp survival as a kind of redemption. In reality, Auschwitz produced very few survivors, but an inconceivable number of men who, according to Levi, were so completely drained of physical and mental vigor as to be only hollow shells of men. (In the death camp jargon, these prisoners were known as *Muselmann*; Levi uses this term as well as "non-men" and "the drowned.") In large measure, it is the death camp's ferocious assault on humanity-at-large—not just individuals, not just the Jews—that spurs Levi to write his testimony. This assault is hauntingly embodied in

the image of the *Muselmann*, who, for Levi, is the emblematic image of “all the evil of our time” (90).

One cannot exaggerate the importance of the *Muselmann* in Levi’s conception of Auschwitz as a “world of negation” (122) opposed to all that is positive and good. Starting from Man, effectively the memoir’s own starting point, binary pairs emerge in which the first term labels ideas Levi defends against the negative term that figures significantly in his representation of Auschwitz and its functions: man or human versus animal or non-man; mind versus body; rational thought or consciousness versus instinct or madness or absence of thought; science versus myth; the precision of the Italian language versus unintelligible Babel or silence; freedom versus slavery; and ethical obligation to the other person versus Darwinian survival of the fittest. These binary terms incisively contrast Levi’s values with the negative ones privileged in Auschwitz and are linked to several important themes that, together, give form to his conception of the camp.

The contested status of rational thought in Auschwitz is a key topic in the memoir, and it will serve here as an example of how Levi’s humanist assumptions organize his experience of the Holocaust. In broad terms, he represents the death camp as a giant, mind-emptying machine that efficiently produces the unvarying non-man “on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen” (90). The prisoners are “automatons”: “they do not think and they do not desire, they walk” (51). If they think anything, it is of their hunger, and that they have become “hunger, living hunger” (74). Levi’s own encounter with the camp’s crushing assault on thought is pithily summed up by a camp guard who tells the new arrival, “*Hier ist kein warum*’ (there is no why here)” (29). Levi does not take this remark to mean that rational analysis necessarily falters in the face of irrational violence or that Auschwitz is a nihilistic void so profound as to be beyond our comprehension; rather, it is that the camp’s function is to diminish the prisoners’ humanity by denying their capacity for understanding. Indeed, “one loses the habit . . . in the Lager . . . of believing in one’s own reason” (171). For the prisoners, Auschwitz reverses the process of Enlightenment by which, Immanuel Kant wrote, modern men reach maturity when they resolve to think for themselves instead of letting institutions, like the church or the state, think for them.¹² The camp’s brutal regime demands instinctual response, not speculation: two weeks after his arrival, Levi has concluded that “it was better not to think” (37), as it took too much energy and evoked painful memories of all that was already lost to him. Later, in a moment of self-criticism, he accepts that he is “not made of the stuff of those who resist [death],” that he is “too civilized” and “think[s] too much” (103). Thought and civilization are inexorably linked

for him, just as madness is an inherent feature of the barbarous world of Auschwitz (20).

Although Levi eventually includes himself among the senior prisoners who know the wisdom of “not trying to understand” (116), he could not have written so thoughtfully after his liberation from the camp had he not constantly observed and analyzed his surroundings and the behavior of his fellow prisoners in ways that had no immediate utility, except perhaps as an affirmation of his own durable human qualities. Every page of *Survival in Auschwitz* seeks to affirm the value of rational thought and the scientific method, the very habits of mind that Auschwitz almost completely eliminated in its victims. Thus, one can surmise that thinking about the camp, its function, and its meaning was a modest form of resistance to Nazism and also a process for turning negative experience into positive knowledge. “No human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis,” Levi asserts; “fundamental values, even they are not if positive, can be deduced from this particular world we are describing” (87). For Levi, as a scientist, there is always a what and a why, always something to learn. By turning Auschwitz into a complex problem for analysis, he means to resist the system designed to diminish the very abilities, such as rational thought, that, in his view, distinguish humans from animals. Moreover, he refuses to mystify the Holocaust, to relegate it to a realm beyond comprehension.

An important dramatization of the humanizing value of preserving thought and gaining knowledge in the death camp occurs when Levi recites the Ulysses passage in Dante’s *Inferno* to a French friend (112–15). Only now does Levi understand what he memorized as a schoolboy, the lines of Ulysses’ famous speech to his sailors: “. . . you were made men, / to seek after knowledge . . .” (113). When spoken inside the death camp, this humanist creed acquires its most profound meaning for Levi. These several pages of the memoir, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2, lay out a complex scene about cultural memory and the literary canon, language and translation, and teaching. For my present purpose, however, what is significant is the analogy Levi draws between Ulysses, who quests for knowledge, and Levi and his friend, who “dare to reason,” (114) in Auschwitz. The idea that thinking and knowing confer humanness is again put forward when, through his knowledge of organic chemistry, Levi convinces an unsympathetic German chemist that he is not a “something” that is “opportune to suppress” but a man whose individual identity “is impossible to doubt.” He feels a “lucid elation” resulting from the “spontaneous mobilization of all [his] logical faculties.” Indeed, he “seem[s] to grow in stature” as his intellectual prowess is recognized (106).

Another key element in Levi’s humanism finds expression in the memoir’s ethical discourse. The memoir stages a confrontation between Levi’s

secular ethics and the Nazi's murderous social Darwinism. While the basis of Levi's ethics is Judeo-Christian, the commitment to these principles does not originate in a covenant with God; rather, in a Kantian fashion, one is ethically obligated to other persons—friend or foe—because they are rational beings. Levi understands Nazism as having supplanted the ethical obligation to others with Darwinist thinking that renders moral questions irrelevant: whoever survives is fittest, and being fit is the only virtue in this hierarchy of values. (I explore these issues more thoroughly in Chapter 3.)

According to Levi, Auschwitz, as a microcosm of the Nazi realm, is governed by “a pitiless process of natural selection” (89), where “the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone” (88).¹³ With the total breakdown of community among the prisoners, each is compelled to disregard the humanity of the others. The survivors—“the saved”—suppress all compassion for, and even exploit, the non-men, “the drowned.” Indeed, the common trait among four survivors vividly portrayed in the memoir is their loathsome selfishness (92–100). At this point, it becomes clear that Levi has ironically inverted the typical moral terminology: “the drowned” (i.e., the damned) in Auschwitz are innocent and “the saved” (i.e., the survivors) are sinners. No matter what moral shortcomings they possessed, the “non-men” are absolved because they are complete victims, while the survivors of this Darwinian world inevitably appear morally corrupt when judged by the standards of everyday life. However, this ethical clarity is muddied by Levi's simultaneous admiration for those who effectively “organize,” who find ways in the camp—whether or not sanctioned by the authorities—to obtain a little more food, a little easier job, or stay in the camp infirmary without even being ill (54, 75–76, 145–48). Heroic individualism, the kind embodied by a resourceful figure like Ulysses, is not at odds with Levi's humanism. There are moments when the survivors, possessed of some measure of will and courage, seem worthier of life than the “non-men” who, lacking the ability to save themselves, appear unable to make any claim to human status and, therefore, to ethical consideration. Of a *Muselmann*, Levi writes dispassionately, “He is not called anything except that, Zero Eighteen, the last three figures of his entry number, as if everyone was aware that only a man is worthy of a name, and that Null Achtzehn is no longer a man” (42). (In Chapter 4, I discuss, in detail, both the naked aggression and compassion with which Levi speaks of the *Muselmann*.)

If the would-be survivor's ethical obligation to the non-man is not easy to determine, neither is it obvious what made the German government carefully plan and diligently carry out the dehumanization and murder of millions of people. In his effort to understand the psychological conditions that enabled the Holocaust, Levi locates the trouble in tribalism

and the perception of difference. In the book's preface, he remarks that "many people—many nations—can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy.'" In this syllogism, in which the implied second premise is *enemies are a threat and ought to be destroyed*, one quickly arrives at the result that all strangers must be destroyed. "At the end of this chain, there is the Lager. Here is a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion; so long as the conception subsists, the conclusion remains to threaten us" (9). The possible solution to this problem is suggested by the epigraphic poem and by Levi's overall critique of Auschwitz: we need to believe, after Kant, that the abstract "Man" commands our ethical engagement. This essential person may not be our neighbor, or speak like we do, or look like us. (Whether this paradigm includes the *Muselmann* or not remains somewhat ambiguous and variable.) However, in *Survival in Auschwitz*, difference is neither positive nor negative; rather, the privileged value is our sameness, our unified humanity. In our multicultural or postmodern or global moment, characterized in part by its rhetorical embrace of plurality, one may be tempted to find, in Levi's humane voice, affirmations of cultural diversity and hybridity. The Holocaust resulted from a murderous intolerance of difference, we might reason, and difference is worth protecting for its own sake. However, to read Levi's memoir through the lens of these suppositions, by which assimilation might be seen as largely negative, is to fail to grasp the crucial place of Enlightenment universality and national, rather than ethnic, identity in Levi's Holocaust discourse.

Especially in America, the early tendency to read a Jewish consciousness and a Jewish voice into Levi's writing distorted, rather than illuminated, the elements that combine to produce his humanist response to Auschwitz. The single time he visited the United States, in April and May 1985, a few months after the highly successful reception of *The Periodic Table* in this country, he lectured at several universities and took questions from students and general audiences.¹⁴ By his own account, and that of his biographers, the Americans he met tended to view him as a Jewish writer who happened to be Italian even though Levi most often described himself as an Italian writer who happened to be Jewish.¹⁵ The idea that he testified to an authentically Jewish experience of Auschwitz inevitably ran aground when he encountered readers who had actually read his books with care. At Indiana University, where Levi met with students in Alvin Rosenfeld's Holocaust literature course, he was asked why *Survival in Auschwitz* hardly mentions the presence of observant Jews in the camp. This well-founded question seemed to arise from the unmet expectation that Levi would be a Holocaust writer much like the already familiar Elie Wiesel. In his answer—he turned the question toward the survival value of faith in general, whether religious

or political—Levi revealed his characteristic interest in a universal human experience of the camps rather than a particularly Jewish one.¹⁶

At Boston University, his last stop on the trip, Levi gave a lecture titled “Beyond Survival.” It is significant that the text was actually written three years before on the occasion of his visit to the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center—a small piece of America in Italy—for a 1982 conference on International Jewish Writing. The original Italian title, “Itinerario di uno scrittore ebreo” (“A Jewish Writer’s Itinerary”), more accurately describes the essay’s subject, the Jewish content of his collected works. The conference organizers had asked him to reflect on his status as a “Jewish writer.” “I have accepted this definition in good spirit,” he begins, “but not immediately, and not without resistance.”¹⁷ This caveat affirms Levi’s conviction that his writing encompassed something more than a Jewish perspective.

The Particular and the Universal

To more clearly understand Levi’s humanism, it will be useful compare and contrast his response to the rupture the Holocaust left in its wake with Elie Wiesel’s religious response to that rupture in *Night*. Wiesel focuses on the particularity of the victims, European Jewry, and on the damaged covenant between God and the Jewish people. In his memoir, the existence of Auschwitz, in its relentless slaughter of the innocent, suggests that God is evil or weak or simply absent; in any case, the tenants of Judaism are under threat and need to be made whole again. In Levi’s memoir, Auschwitz is understood as a dehumanizing machine that perverts the rational powers of the human mind for the express purpose of undermining the Enlightenment’s exalted idea of humanity. In the act of writing, Levi tries to repair the humanist concept of Man, to reassert the principle of universality against Nazism’s shocking determination that some among us are subhuman.

Of course, each author’s impression of Auschwitz was shaped by his personal circumstances and beliefs, and this reminds us that historical events like the Holocaust have no inherent meanings but only those projected by writers (and readers, too) through the lens of specific cultural, ideological, and biographical perspectives. Levi writes as an atheist-moralist who, after the war, returned to his Italian community and to the very home where he was born, whereas Wiesel writes as a devout Jew from a deeply religious community in Hungary that virtually ceased to exist as a result of the Holocaust. The twenty-four-year-old Levi passed his year in Auschwitz without close family members. Conversely, Wiesel, in captivity at just fifteen years of age, was both supported and burdened by the presence of his father, and then deeply scarred by witnessing his father’s demise. In later

remarks about each other, the two memoirists confirm the impact of these dissimilarities. "I was lucky," Levi said in an interview. "When I returned to Italy, I found my home, I found my family . . . [Wiesel] belonged to a religious family and he lost, along with his family, his faith, or at least endangered it." Of Levi, Wiesel wrote, "We came from different milieus, and even in Auschwitz led different lives."¹⁸

We have already discussed Levi's milieu. What was Wiesel's milieu before the Holocaust? Certainly, Enlightenment ideas made strong inroads among Eastern European Jewry in the decades before World War II, but in Jewish communities like Wiesel's Sighet, the desirability of individual rights did not overshadow the hope for group rights. The first chapter of *Night* shows that his community wished to coexist with its Hungarian neighbors, not so much as Hungarians but as a relatively unassimilated minority with both rights and obligations to the nation. A strong indication of this ethnic separation is that Wiesel originally wrote his Holocaust memoir in Yiddish, not Hungarian, under the title *Un di velt hot geshvign* ("And the World Remained Silent"). His intended audience, at least initially, was exclusively Jewish. While *Survival in Auschwitz* does not represent Jews as a community unto themselves, *Night* consistently does. Wiesel even remarks on the feeling of safety and comfort when the Germans first established ghettos in Sighet. "We should no longer have before our eyes those hostile faces . . . We were living among Jews, among brothers" (*Night* 12). Unlike Wiesel, whose identity as a Jew owed little to the idea of national citizenship, Levi finds nationality and national character useful categories for organizing his perceptions of Auschwitz. For him, nationality even became a valuable form of community and an avenue for survival: he was saved from almost certain death by the generosity of Lorenzo, a non-Jewish Italian civilian worker who risked his life to aid more than one Italian concentration camp inmate (*Survival* 119–22).

If, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Levi's chief concern is the reduced status of the undifferentiated person, a Man, Wiesel's is largely with the precarious fate of the Jews and Judaism. Having encountered their first horrors at Auschwitz, and seeing no possibility for escape, the pious men and boys of Sighet say the Kaddish (the Jewish prayer for the dead) for themselves. As he hears this prayer, a blessing on the name of God, young Eliezer thinks, "Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank him for?" (*Night* 33). The crucial question for Eliezer is whether he should understand the Holocaust as the greatest, in a long list, of catastrophes in Jewish history intended test the Jews' faith or whether the unprecedented evil that unfolds in Auschwitz overturns the very idea of a covenant with a good and powerful God. One of the strengths of *Night* is that it

avoids a premature resolution to this difficult question (although Wiesel's later writings affirm that his faith has survived even this challenge).

Each author's cultural formation and the languages he understood crucially shaped his impression of Auschwitz. This idea is reinforced by the similarities of fact and occasional inconsistencies reported in the two books. Wiesel's account, structured by the Jewish calendar, dwells on aspects of Jewish ritual that went on even in Auschwitz and its subcamps, and on discussions, no doubt in Yiddish and Hebrew, about the theological implications of being abandoned by God (45, 68). Levi, praised by critics for his eye for detail and his thorough descriptions of Auschwitz, does not describe these rituals or discussions, of which he seemed largely unaware and, in any case, could not have easily understood due to the linguistic and cultural barriers that made the secular Italian Jews a distinct minority among the prisoners. Of course, Wiesel and his father suffered unimaginably in the camp, but at least they understood German, Yiddish, and Hungarian, three of the four important languages there in 1944–45 (Polish was the fourth). For Levi, the camp was "a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts orders and threats in languages never heard before, and woe betide whoever fails to grasp the meaning" (*Survival* 38). Levi was fortunate in knowing a bit of German that he had learned in order to study chemistry. Still, he felt linguistically marginalized, remarking that "even the Polish Jews despise the Italian Jews as they do not speak Yiddish" (49).

I have begun by sketching out broad distinctions between two types of Holocaust survivor memoirs—the secular, written from the perspective of the largely assimilated Jews of Western Europe, and the religious, written from the perspective of the observant Jews of Eastern Europe. To ground this contrast more firmly, let us turn to key passages that show how the texts under scrutiny converge and diverge. Compare, for example, Levi's epigraphic poem with Wiesel's prose poem, "Never shall I forget that night" (*Night* 34). The two texts evoke themes central to their respective books, and even occasion their titles (the original one in Levi's case). As I have stated, Levi's ethical agenda is brought to the fore by his verses, which command the reader, surrounded by "friendly faces," to reflect on whether the dehumanized Holocaust victim, "who fights for a scrap of bread," is yet a human being for whom the reader is responsible: "Consider if this is a man" (*Survival* 11). It is not the obligation to God that matters but the Kantian obligation to always treat one's fellow man as an end, not as a means. Wiesel's prose poem purposefully interrupts the narrative progress of his memoir for a moment of reflection. Deploying visceral imagery and drumming repetition, his strongly rhythmical sentences are nothing short of poetry. Like Levi's, Wiesel's poem has a liturgical quality and even parodies biblical rhetoric with its "one long night seven times sealed." However,

Wiesel does not use his poem to make an ethical demand on the reader; rather, he intones it as an oath to eternally memorialize the losses he has suffered at Auschwitz—his innocence (having seen the brutality inflicted on innocent children), his faith, and his God (“murdered,” he writes). Indeed, just three pages later, he describes himself as “a different person. The student of the Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed in the flames” (*Night* 37). In strong contrast to Levi’s habitually detached style, intended to convey objectivity and fidelity to the facts, “Never shall I forget that night” exemplifies the intense spirituality of Wiesel’s adolescent narrator, whose voice modulates between realism and a poetical surrealism, between an uninflected tone and an emotional one.

An even more direct point of comparison arises in the authors’ diverse memories of, and thoughts about, the brutal hangings that both were forced to witness at Auschwitz. “The Last One,” a chapter in *Survival in Auschwitz* that recounts the hanging of a defiant rebel, becomes a meditation on shame (a topic Levi returned to in *The Drowned and the Saved*). The rebel represents an exception: he is the last “man” among the docile prisoners because he resists the camp’s regime of dehumanization rather than waiting to die. But Levi and the other prisoners, “an abject flock” (*Survival* 149), have been deprived of agency and dignity. The more conniving and fortunate of them may be able to satisfy “the daily ragings of hunger” and their other animal needs, but these accomplishments alone do not make them men again. They are “oppressed by shame” in Auschwitz and, if they survive, ashamed forever after. “To destroy a man is difficult,” Levi writes “but you Germans have succeeded” (150). For Levi, Auschwitz does more than kill: it robs people of their essential humanity and it attacks fundamental assumptions about the dignity and worth of human life.

Wiesel describes two hangings. The defiant last words of the first victim, a vigorous boy accused of theft, seem to buoy Eliezer’s spirits (*Night* 62–63). Unlike Levi, he is not ashamed on account of someone else’s manly courage. The second victim, a young boy Wiesel calls “the sad-eyed angel” (64), is punished for sabotage, and his hanging has a dramatically different effect on Eliezer and the other prisoners. At the sight of the boy’s slow and agonizing death, someone asks, “Where is God?” Eliezer thinks, “Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows . . .” (65). This scene, a second reference to Wiesel’s murdered God, powerfully dramatizes a simple, yet crucial, idea: that there can be no God, no force for order and good, in a world where evil rules and blameless children suffer. Both books record similar events at Auschwitz but draw different conclusions from them. Together, the two accounts illustrate the diverse forms of loss engendered by the Holocaust, whether that of basic human dignity, of innocence, or of faith.

Of course, there are a great many shared details in the two narratives as well as some unsurprising discrepancies that do not arise from the sacred-secular dichotomy but from casual circumstance. Both authors suffered an almost unbearable thirst during the deportation as they rode in painfully crowded boxcars to a place, Auschwitz, whose name meant nothing to them (*Night* 23–27; *Survival* 16–18). While Levi describes his arrival in February 1944 as steeped in an eerie silence, punctuated by moments of violence (19–20), Wiesel, arriving in May, recounts the unimaginable sight of burning babies and children (32). His hellish testimony is plausible since, at this time, as the Soviet offensive advanced in the late spring and early summer of 1944, the Schutzstaffel, known as the SS, increased exterminations at Auschwitz far beyond planned capacity.¹⁹ Both men have numbers tattooed on their bodies and, in effect, lose their names (*Night* 42; *Survival* 27–28). Both were lucky enough to be transferred to a smaller satellite work camp known as Auschwitz-Monowitz, also called Buna, where chances for survival were marginally better (*Night* 46–47, *Survival* 25), although they have no recollection of having met there. Both stories end in liberation but the circumstances are different. Levi happened to be ill just before the Russians arrived in January 1945 and was not evacuated, unlike his friend Alberto and thousands of other unlucky prisoners. “Perhaps someone will write their story one day” (155), Levi muses. Wiesel has. He and his father were marched west toward Germany on what is now known as the death march, arriving at Buchenwald after great suffering that, in turn, led to his father’s death. There may be no better dramatization of survivor guilt than Wiesel’s recollection of what he felt about his father’s end (*Night* 104–12).

On the idea that guilt is the price of survival, the two memoirs usefully complement each other. Levi discusses the moral perils of self-preservation in general terms, only occasionally implicating himself. In *Night*, Wiesel’s account of survivor guilt is personal. He is both repelled and partially persuaded by the idea that he should look to his own survival now that his father is beyond help (110–11). But who can survive psychologically intact under the weight of such guilt? “His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered” (112). The last two sentences of the story convey the survivor’s traumatic sensation of being both dead and alive, of having lost so much—not only family and community but also God—yet fated to go on living in an impaired state (115). Meanwhile, Levi’s story ends on a quiet note of optimism about the fate of human dignity and the renewal of ethical obligations after the Holocaust. Now that the Germans have fled the camp and the Darwinian law of Auschwitz has ended, a new sense of community among the victims marks the point at which “we who had not died slowly changed from [prisoners] to men again” (*Survival* 160). At this moment, it seems that the locomotive of

human progress, sidetracked by Auschwitz but not derailed, has resumed its course.²⁰

While Levi's unquestioning faith in humanism weakened somewhat over time, he nevertheless continued to emphasize the threat Auschwitz posed to the universal Man with little reference to the threat it posed to Judaism. In his substantial introduction to the 1973 Italian middle school edition of *Survival in Auschwitz*, a venue where we expect the author to speak clearly and directly to adolescents about why they ought to study the Holocaust, the word *ebreo*, Jew, never appears. There is no specific reference to the fact that 90 percent of the victims in Auschwitz were Jews, and no mention that, apart from the Roma, Jews were the only category of prisoner whose personal actions—military, political, sexual, or criminal—had no bearing on their death sentences. Instead, Levi universalizes the meaning of concentration camps, saying that the Holocaust is a lesson for all time and warning that fascism is not dead. "In almost every country, there are prisons, juvenile detention facilities, psychiatric hospitals in which, like Auschwitz, men lose their names and faces, their dignity and hope." The chief problem, therefore, is not antisemitism but the continuing attack on the integrity of the individual and on the concept of Man. A related lesson for the Italian students is to avoid the dangerous road leading to "the renunciation of reason," a path the Germans took when they acceded to the commission of genocide.²¹ Of course, Levi's concern with the threat Auschwitz posed to Enlightenment values and his tendency to erase of the particular ethnicity of the victims both need to be understood in the Italian context. As we have seen, Italian Jews were, and are, relatively well-assimilated, and they constituted a tiny percentage of the population before the war and after. Moreover, antisemitism in Italy is nearly always described as minimal and insignificant even though this is a debatable claim. It is also relevant that Italy has been slow to address its twenty-year embrace of fascism and its complicity in the Holocaust, an event that the Italian State finally commemorated for the first time only in 2002, fifty-seven years after the events.²²

The End of Theodicy

Narrowly understood, theodicy names the idea that evil and suffering serve a divine purpose and that their existence in no way diminishes God's goodness.²³ Understood in a broader secular sense as well, as it is for Levinas in his essay "Useless Suffering," and for Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, theodicy names the attempt to integrate particular instances of suffering into a narrative of historical progress directed toward the good.²⁴ Proponents of

the Enlightenment rejected theological interpretations of history but still trusted that both nature and history move in a positive direction. In the nineteenth century, Hegel continued this affirmative teleology, arguing that while history staggers through conflict and regression, it ultimately leads to greater human freedom. From this perspective, violence and suffering are necessary occurrences in the long-term process of purification and social renewal.²⁵ However, the events of the Holocaust signal the definitive end of theodicy for both Levinas and Adorno, who agree, for all their divergence in approach and vocabulary, that to find utility in the victims' suffering, or to lend it moral or transcendental or historical meaning, is to wrong the victims yet again. If suffering is intrinsically "useless" and "unassumable," to use Levinas's terms, then the Holocaust, the very paradigm of useless suffering on a massive scale, interrupts both fundamental historical narratives of the West—the messianic and the secular utopian—before they reach fruition. "The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. Its possibility puts into question the multi-millennial traditional faith [i.e., Judaism]." Later, he adds, "but does not this end of theodicy, which imposes itself on the face of this century's inordinate trial, at the same time and in a more general way reveal the unjustifiable character of the suffering in the other, the outrage it would be for me to justify my neighbor's suffering?"²⁶ In this essay, Levinas proposes a solution to the ethical challenge posed by the other's suffering, a topic not directly relevant to this present discussion that I take up in Chapter 4.

Adorno, too, shrinks from Hegelian attempts to subsume this unbounded negative experience into transcendental categories of positive knowledge: "After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim for the positivity of existence as sanctimonious prating, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victim's fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after the events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence." "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed," Adorno concludes, in an adjacent passage that I have chosen as an apposite epigraph for this present chapter, "because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience."²⁷ Even though Auschwitz has been described empirically—dedicated witnesses like Levi have helped historians carry out this work—it has nevertheless undermined the foundational truths that would be necessary to interpret its meaning or sense. Adorno is not suggesting that the concentration camp's incomprehensibility detaches it from history. To the contrary, the events of the Holocaust are, in his view, continuous with, and fulfill, the Enlightenment project, which seeks to destroy

the particular and subsume it in the universal.²⁸ (I discuss Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment, and also how its specific workings are revealed in some of Levi's texts in Chapter 2.)

While both thinkers assert that theodicy no longer functions after Auschwitz, Levinas reminds us that it remains a powerful "temptation" in the West: it is "the grand idea necessary to the inner peace of souls in our distressed world. It is called upon to make sufferings . . . comprehensible." Indeed, one cannot "fail to recognize the profundity of the empire it exerts over humankind."²⁹ The oppositional tension between comforting, conventional ways of understanding the world, and the shocking scale of atrocity during the Holocaust may explain why the firsthand testimonies of Levi and Wiesel resist the end of theodicy and, at the same time, confirm it. While both writers try to use pre-Holocaust cognitive frameworks to impose coherence and meaning on their experiences, both recoil emotionally, as do Levinas and Adorno, from the idea that such suffering can be explained by theology or progressive history. On Rosh Hashanah eve in September of 1944, young Eliezer is outraged to think that the atrocities he has witnessed have been willed by God.

Why, but why should I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar? (*Night* 67)

In recasting the Jews' "chosen people" designation in light of the Holocaust, Wiesel achieves a desperate sarcasm. The sheer horror he describes makes it almost impossible for the believer to keep faith with God. Indeed, to bless him would be obscene, for it would imply that such suffering is not wrong, but right and purposeful, and that Auschwitz and the SS men who run it are divine instruments. At the same time, the angry questions are not intended to be entirely rhetorical because the consequences of accepting the functional death of God, thus marking the end of Jewish history, will be an enormous loss for young Eliezer and his entire community for whom Jewish life would become meaningless. This is why, here and throughout *Night*, having lost his family and his home, he holds fast to a frayed thread of hope that his challenging questions will be answered, and that God is

still good and still honors his covenant with the chosen people, despite the existence of ghettos and concentration camps.

There is only one passage in *Survival in Auschwitz*, found in the chapter titled “October 1944,” where Levi overtly rejects theodicy, both the religious and secular versions. These sentences stand out because much of the memoir focuses on objective descriptions and dispassionate analyses that are intended to extract some kind of useful knowledge from this exceptional experience or, at the very least, “to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind” (*Survival* 9). Implicit in Levi’s book is the idea that, through rational analysis, Auschwitz can be woven into a progressive history, even if only as the most negative exemplar of society. His approach assumes that pre-Holocaust language will be largely adequate to the task of describing the new, terrifying world of the concentration camp. However, in “October 1944,” he comes close to explicitly admitting the depth of the rupture that Levinas and Adorno claim the Holocaust left in its wake. Levi begins the chapter by suggesting that, given time, “a new, harsh language would have been born” in the camps to fully express the prisoners’ suffering. Familiar words, like “hunger” or “winter,” “are different things. They are free words created and used by free men” (123). This observation puts into doubt not only the lexicon but also the syntax by which Auschwitz might be linked to a progressive history of human freedom. It corroborates Adorno’s sense that this extreme experience cannot be reconciled with conventional thought or speech.

The chapter in question describes a day, roughly a month after Wiesel celebrated Rosh Hashanah, on which camp officials carry out a “selection,” a superficial procedure used to identify the weakest prisoners for immediate gassing. It makes no significant difference to the functioning of the camp whether those selected are weak or strong—the goal of making space for newcomers is still achieved. In fact, Levi thinks it possible that he owes his survival to a random error by which his name may have been switched with that of René, a stronger prisoner who deserved to live as much, or more, than Levi (128). This circumstance, which implicitly raises the question of survivor guilt, may explain the unusual rancor Levi directs at old Kuhn, a religious Jew who “is thanking God because he has not been chosen” (129). In effect, Kuhn’s words justify the suffering of those selected for the gas as if it were willed by God. (Elsewhere, Levi reports feeling appalled by the suggestion that his own survival was providential. The absurdity of the idea provoked him to dwell on the opposite, uncomfortable conclusion that he “might be alive in the place of another.”³⁰) Levi describes the praying Kuhn as “swaying backwards and forwards violently.” His choice of the word “violently” is significant, implying that the old man’s prayer amounts

to a sacrifice of those others who perish in his stead. In other words, Kuhn's personal theodicy wrongs his fellow victims yet again:

Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory pray, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? (129–30)

Levi's dismissal of the utility of prayer and expiation of sin is not surprising given that he arrived at the camp as an atheist and that his experience there cemented this view: "There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God."³¹ However, his uncharacteristic anger toward Kuhn, akin to the outrage that Levinas claims is provoked in us by unethical justifications of the other's suffering, spurs Levi to state what he may have been reluctant to admit before: not only does Auschwitz demonstrate that there is no God, it also proves that Enlightenment principles, such as universality and the unambiguous relationship of language to the material world, are unreliable at best. Moreover, it reveals that Man, like the figure of God in *Night*, is powerless in the face of radical evil. In contrast to Kuhn's prayer, Beppo's inaction underscores the inability of thought or words to make sense of this evil. With pessimism atypical in his first book, Levi describes Auschwitz as a stain "which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again"—not religion, not reason, not apology, not forgiveness. In saying this, he anticipates his later tendency, realized nearly two decades after the experience, to represent the Holocaust as a wound that will not heal—as a traumatic history that never reaches its conclusion—in defiance of the teleological expectations that accompany the Enlightenment's philosophy of history. I refer here to Levi's second book, *The Reawakening*, which I take up at length in Chapter 5.

Levi ends the chapter with a one-sentence paragraph: "If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer" (130). The emphatic expression has led readers to think that this is the most important sentence in the episode.³² While this hypothetical statement acts as a dramatic exclamation point to Levi's anger, and implies that prayer might be inoffensive to Levi when it is selfless, the underlying concern of the passage is the humanist's inability to salvage anything of value from Auschwitz. Added to this is the irritation provoked by those like Kuhn who fool themselves into thinking that religion might be able to succeed where reason fails.

To conclude, a crisis of belief is at the center of both *Survival in Auschwitz* and *Night*, one that engages Levi and Wiesel in a shared struggle to sustain their pre-Holocaust worldviews in a traumatic, post-Holocaust world that threatens to render those views obsolete. If the enormous suffering of the Jewish people served no divine purpose, then the efficacy of Wiesel's carefully considered faith in the goodness of God, despite the existence of evil, is called into question. In a sense, *Night* is a day-by-day account of how young Elie reckons with this intractable problem. Even in his atheism, Levi's faith in the power of reason and science to legitimate human rights and guarantee social progress constitutes a kind of theodicy in which humanity's rational faculty is vindicated despite its potential to oppress people. However, Auschwitz calls this faith in Man into question. To be sure, Levi uses reason as a tool of resistance against Nazism's attempt to reduce him to an unthinking "non-man." In his memoir, he tries to comprehend the victims' profound suffering and to understand its purpose in the workings of xenophobia, totalitarianism, and social Darwinism. Yet, Levi must also contend with the fact that in Auschwitz, a facility designed for the rational administration of pain, suffering was not just a means but an end in itself, and, worse still, that this suffering probably had no redeemable purpose and cannot be justified by any coherent system of belief.³³ Despite their differences, the two memoirs courageously face the genuine crisis of faith provoked by the Holocaust, a crisis that affects both religion and secular humanism, and do so without offering perfunctory solutions or altogether surrendering to despair.

In successive chapters, I will show how Levi tries to resist the rupture caused by Auschwitz by deploying the seemingly transparent language of empirical objectivity and discourses of science, and by praising the traditional virtue of work done well. The next chapter is occupied with Levi's engagement with the redemptive possibilities of high culture, especially epic poetry.

The Shadowed Violence of Culture

Culture has evolved under the shadow of the executioner.

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (180)

What was the role of high culture in the brutal lives of the inmates of Auschwitz? Were literature, art, and music effective tools for resisting the camp's dehumanizing function or for resisting the Nazi ideology that held that Jews possessed no true language and no culture worthy of the name? At the same time, was high culture, in some unexpected way, complicit in Nazi violence? In other words, did culture tend to subvert the interests of Nazi power during the Holocaust or serve them? These questions are particularly relevant to our discussion since the Nazis saw Germany as the chief inheritor of the European cultural traditions, on which humanism is based, spanning from the ancients to the Renaissance to the twentieth century. Two authoritative voices on this topic are Levi and Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry (born in Austria as Hans Mayer). When Levi referred to culture, he meant the secular kind associated with modern Italy, Europe, and the humanistic world of science. Améry's personal notion of culture was similar but not quite identical—for him, it was composed primarily of European philosophy and German literature. Treating Levi in depth and Améry succinctly, this chapter will analyze the two writers' divergent points of view on the role of high culture in Auschwitz, especially poetry, and will place their remarks in the context of Theodor Adorno's work on the role played by culture "after Auschwitz," but also in Auschwitz and before.¹

As we have seen, Levi suggests in *Survival in Auschwitz* and elsewhere that thought and language in existence before Auschwitz are at least partially adequate to the task of describing and resisting the Nazi genocide. In contrast to this reliance on the continuity of European civilization, Améry insists that the Holocaust opened a metaphysical rupture, a fundamental

discontinuity, which cannot be bridged by positive philosophical reflection or by traditional forms of artistic expression. In a number of texts occupied with the Holocaust, especially *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cowritten with Max Horkheimer, and *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno offers an even deeper explication of the rupture Améry identifies, and he goes a step further, arguing that one of culture's functions—and its ethical shortcoming—is to facilitate a tranquilizing forgetfulness about the suffering of those who are disempowered in a given society.² In Adorno's boldest formulation of this idea, high culture, especially when designated a national culture, does not merely mask violence but also inflicts it by undermining the subjectivity of the weak while erasing their history. Moreover, the Holocaust serves as the paradigmatic example of the ethical failure of European culture. Of course, Adorno is strongly associated with "after Auschwitz," the concise expression signaling the interruption in our thinking provoked by the Nazi genocide. Less appreciated is the extent to which Adorno understands Auschwitz as continuous with European history and culture, as the extreme consequence of the rise of rationality culminating in the Enlightenment and modernity.³ Rather than marking a complete rupture, my claim is that Adorno's "after Auschwitz" names a new consciousness that has been forced upon us, one that includes a clearer view of what has always been true about the connection between high culture and violence.

To begin this chapter, I borrow Horkheimer and Adorno's radical critique of the Enlightenment to undertake a rereading of a passage in *Survival in Auschwitz*, where the heroic figure of Ulysses, as reinvented by Dante, acts as a vessel for the humane values that promise Levi a means to resist the camp's inhumanity. Levi takes as a given that barbarism flourishes at the expense of culture and that culture, in the figure of Ulysses, perhaps "saved" him. Horkheimer and Adorno compel us to ask whether culture, as Levi deploys it, contains forgotten brutality, and whether, in the form of Dante's terza rima, it nurtured the fascist ideologies that produced Auschwitz. Then, for the sake of comparison, I reflect on Améry's claim, in his essay "At the Mind's Limits," that culture, and especially literature, were impotent in Auschwitz. Pairing the two authors is particularly apt since they were aware of each other's work and Levi wrote at some length about Améry's essay in *The Drowned and the Saved*. At the end of the chapter, I return briefly to Adorno to offer a recasting of his famous dictum—"to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"—in the light of his broader claims linking culture with forgotten violence.

The Figure of Ulysses in *Survival in Auschwitz*

In many critical readings of *Survival in Auschwitz*, the short “The Canto of Ulysses” chapter has proved pivotal.⁴ While most of the book records lucid, unflinching descriptions of death and life in the camp, this chapter, in contrast, focuses on Levi’s struggle to recall, and then recite, Dante’s *Inferno* XXVI to his French friend, Jean (*Survival* 109–15). Without a doubt, the terrain of epic poetry is familiar and uplifting to most readers, even though the menacing landscape of Auschwitz is always present in this narrative framed by an actual quest for food. The two prisoners’ trip to the camp kitchen to fetch a kettle of soup for their *Kommando* provides a rare distraction from the everyday hunger, fatigue, and terror, and a moment when other, less obvious, needs can be nourished: Jean wishes to learn some Italian and Levi needs, almost with the urgency of a fundamental physical need, to remember the verses of Ulysses’ famous speech in Canto XXVI, and explain their beauty and meaning to Jean. The very act of retelling how Dante’s Ulysses affirms his humanity by audaciously challenging irrational and inhuman forces greater than himself—in this case, God—produces a momentary sense of liberation for Levi and Jean who, in their identification with the ancient hero, fleetingly resist the death camp’s dehumanization. The brief journey for soup stages a scene of cultural memory and transmission that, in Levi’s narrative, promises to give meaning to the two prisoners’ pointless suffering. Language, literature, and rational thought are erected here as a putative bulwark against Auschwitz, that is, against all forces antithetical to “the human.” In a modest but unmistakable fashion, the chapter makes heroes of the resolute prisoners and affirms, in the guise of sublime poetry, the still vital redemptive power of culture.

To date, most scholarship forsakes critical distance to read Levi on his own terms, embracing, without question or critique, the humanist assumptions that structures the Ulysses chapter and *Survival in Auschwitz* as a whole. Joseph Farrell nicely sums up the consensus view that Ulysses is an unproblematic standard-bearer for Levi’s humanism. “For Levi, Ulysses is the assertive, unafraid lay spirit, who will undertake his supreme adventure solely because it is an affirmation of the capacities of man. He stands for a dignity which is purely human, he demands the right to know all that is knowable, he refuses to live as a brute. As such, he was the supreme model of the Humanist, and as such, he is the opposite of what Nazi programmes planned to reduce man to.”⁵ As Farrell indicates, Levi presents the Holocaust as an assault on the values associated with the Enlightenment. In defense of humanism and rationality, he draws support from the Western canon, including the Hebrew Bible, Dante, and Darwin. He writes to resist Nazi and Italian fascist ideologies that exploited science, deformed

language, and corrupted the virtue of work. Although he tries to repair the damage wrecked by the Holocaust, this book and his others are not completely redemptive. At moments, they seem to defend the humanist subject and, at others, to record its downfall. Indeed, for thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno, the events of the Holocaust put the Enlightenment project into question despite its apparent benevolence and dedication to improving the lot of humanity. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they argue that fascism was not only an adversary, but also a logical result of the Enlightenment; that fascism's intolerance of difference is embedded in Enlightenment thought; and that barbarism and violence are not antithetical to civilization but merely hidden aspects of it. If these claims are true, then texts informed by humanist assumptions, like Levi's, must be re-examined to see what illumination they shed on the dark side of the Enlightenment.

In trying to answer this question, I borrow Horkheimer and Adorno's radical critique of the Enlightenment to undertake a reading of *Survival in Auschwitz* with particular focus on the Ulysses chapter. This approach entails deconstructing the binaries that, for Levi, distinguish his normal world from the negative world of Auschwitz. The essential matter is whether Levi's humanist account of the death camp is compromised by unacknowledged discourses of domination embedded in his text and in its appropriation of Dante's *Inferno*, the authoritative literary source most frequently invoked in the memoir. At moments, Levi himself suggests that foundational binaries have been unsettled by the Holocaust, but, for the most part, he takes as a given that barbarism flourishes at the expense of culture and that culture, in the figure of Ulysses, is redemptive.⁶ The retrieved poetry, Levi later wrote, "made it possible for me to reestablish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity."⁷ Still, Horkheimer and Adorno compel us to ask whether culture, as Levi deploys it, contains forgotten brutality, and whether, in the form of Dante's terza rima, it nurtured the fascist ideologies that produced Auschwitz.

Two suppositions enable the following analysis: first, that the methods of literary study employed here are consonant with those of Horkheimer and Adorno, who support their philosophical arguments by showing how structures of domination are manifested in the form and content of cultural productions such as Homer's *Odyssey*, a novel by de Sade, and examples from popular culture; second, that Horkheimer and Adorno's description of fascism, largely based on Nazism, can be applied, with some minor adjustments, to Italian Fascism as well.

“Enlightenment is Totalitarian”

Urgently written in the midst of World War II and formally published in 1947, the same year as Levi's memoir, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* attempts to explain why highly civilized nations like Germany sink into barbarism and resort to violence.⁸ The main culprit is instrumental reason, which frees humanity from fearful subservience to nature but also, as it accommodates itself to power, facilitates social repression. The remedy for this failure of the Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is not less rationality but more of it devoted to self-reflection (*Dialectic* xvi). The challenge to critical thought is substantial because a powerful dialectic drives Western civilization toward self-destruction: “myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (xviii). (“The Enlightenment” refers to the historical period; with the term “enlightenment,” Horkheimer and Adorno refer more broadly to the application of reason to any aspect of human society.) Each concept in this linked pair requires some explanation. Instrumental reason, whether applied to science or society, claims sole possession of truth, and is, therefore, an “absolute authority” (18) resembling a force of nature, or even a new myth, that neither justifies nor reflects critically on itself. “Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced” (19). “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (18) in that it brooks no dissent and seeks uniformity at all costs: “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion” (4). This is why in the era of fascism, the cherished principle of universality, the idea that all humans are essentially the same and deserve to be accorded the same rights and freedoms, contributed to a tyrannical social integration, a “repressive *égalité*” (9), that crushed difference of all types—racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, ideological—and fostered antisemitism (9, 22, 138–39). Enlightenment's regression to myth, that point at which thought no longer serves the interests of human freedom, was most complete at Auschwitz, where the Nazis exploited rational means to achieve irrational ends.⁹ Social Darwinism and spurious racial science were enlisted to validate the myths of antisemitism. Enabled by technology and bureaucratic efficiency, the Nazis perpetrated mass murder so that Germany might realize a utopian future harkening back to a mythical past when, supposedly, its pristine racial and cultural qualities had not yet been polluted by enlightenment and its agents, the Jews. When progress serves superstition, as in the case of fascism, it becomes clear that our modern era does not escape from the barbarism and irrationality associated with prehistoric societies. As such, the Holocaust was not an isolated return to

humanity's "heart of darkness," but a paradigmatic instance of the genocidal violence endemic to modernity.¹⁰

Admiration for ancient Greece had been central to German culture since the eighteenth century, and the "cultural fascists" of the 1930s looked there for the archaic roots of Germany's Aryan superiority, and also for images of the reborn world they wished to create, one ruled by naked force and uncorrupted by "liberality and middle-class qualities" (36). Horkheimer and Adorno argue that even though fascism's "most urgent concern is to liquidate enlightenment," the primal force it imagines itself to be is already manipulated by reason (37). What the fascists failed to see is that "myth is already enlightenment," in that even an ancient text like Homer's *Odyssey* narrates the triumph of the enlightened mind, with its creativity and guile, over the witless forces of myth:

The purportedly authentic, archaic principle of blood and sacrifice is already marked by the bad conscience and cunning of domination [i.e., enlightenment], which are characteristic of that current [Nazi] program of national renewal that uses images of the primordial for purposes of self-advertisement. The most primitive myth already contains the element of falsehood that triumphs in the fraudulence of fascism, a deceitfulness that fascism imputes to enlightenment. No work, however, bears more eloquent testimony to the entwinement of enlightenment and myth than the *Odyssey*, the fundamental text of European civilization.¹¹

The progressive and regressive effects of reason that characterize modernity are visible *in ovo* in Ulysses, an ambiguous figure in Western culture who anticipates the Enlightenment's fully realized bourgeois subject. Like the cold bourgeoisie, his chief concern is "self-preservation through adaptation" (8), his character is marked by "unwavering self-assertion" (35), and his strongest tool of domination is the cunning use of language (46–47). He escapes the mythical powers with a combination of uncommon knowledge, divine favor, and ruthlessness. Like an unstoppable force of nature or a new myth, he dominates both his crew and the suitors who besiege his home. Ulysses is an overdetermined figure who embodies the contradictory elements in Western culture, giving shape "to the intertwining of enlightenment and myth" (37). On one hand, in his wisdom and courage, he seems to affirm that thought, understanding, and knowledge define humanity at its best, the very qualities that Auschwitz assaulted; on the other, like his Enlightenment descendents, what he wishes "to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate both it and human beings" (2). Moreover, his drive for self-preservation prefigures "the fascist struggle for power" (71): he is the fittest and survives, and even his death

will result from self-determined actions.¹² Armed with this nuanced view of both Ulysses and the dangerous vagaries of reason, we now turn to *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Homer, Dante, Levi

To begin, I ask the reader to recall how the original Italian title of Levi's memoir, *Se questo è un uomo*, "If This is a Man," evokes the humanist binaries that structure his conception of Auschwitz as a "world of negation" (*Survival* 122), as one opposed to the very idea of Man. In the camp, the prisoners are reduced to "non-men" or beasts, human languages are drowned out by unintelligible Babel, and rational thought is overwhelmed by unreflective, instinctual behavior. The culmination of the idea that thinking and knowing confer humanness is put forward most forcefully in the Ulysses chapter, which hinges on the analogy between Ulysses' audacious voyage and the audacity of Levi and Jean, who "dare to reason" in Auschwitz (114). Unmistakable here is the reference to Immanuel Kant's motto of the Enlightenment, *sapere aude* (dare to know), which characterizes the intellectual maturity of the rational subject who, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, always has the potential to dominate the other.¹³ As an eloquent spokesman for the positive power of reason to debunk myth, Levi insists on the humanizing function of rational thought and contrasts it to the madness or absence of thought typical of the death camp. However, at rare moments, Levi, too, speaks to the dangers posed by reason in the service of myth, asserting that genocide results when irrational fear of the other "becomes the major premise in a syllogism" and is "carried rigorously to its logical conclusion" (*Survival* 9). Even as Auschwitz worked toward irrational ends, it used rational administration to systematically dehumanize the prisoners, as the memoir demonstrates in depressing detail. This observation lends support to Horkheimer and Adorno's contention that instrumental reason (or reified thought) is not only a progressive force but also a tool for domination in the hands of the powerful. As deployed in *Survival in Auschwitz*, Dante's Ulysses seems to affirm his humanity by audaciously pursuing knowledge; however, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the figure of Ulysses in Western culture is ambiguous—he represents the liberation of humanity from myth but also embodies aspects of fascism in that he conceives of knowledge as power, and uses language and reason to further his self-interests.

Before exploring why Dante's medieval text figures so crucially in Levi's memoir, we need to consider Lawrence Langer's assertion that literary citations, far from enriching Holocaust testimony, actually sterilize it, filtering

the reader's "experience of Auschwitz . . . through the purifying vocabulary of an earlier time."¹⁴ Langer holds that the Holocaust ruptured history and culture, rendering old phrases unable to articulate a new poisonous knowledge. Unlike most readers, he considers the Ulysses chapter a dangerous intrusion in Levi's memoir because it introduces high culture's version of hell into the literal hell of the death camp.¹⁵ "For a moment both Levi and Jean, under the compelling sway of Dante's art, forget who and where they are. And this is precisely the point: when literary form, allusion, and style intrude on the surviving victim's account, we risk forgetting where we are and imagine deceptive continuities."¹⁶ Langer's larger claim is that the most effective Holocaust testimony, whether written or videotaped, enables the reader or viewer to share the victim's unmediated experience. I suggest, however, that mediation is unavoidable: all witnesses draw upon their cultural and ideological frames of reference in order to understand and represent experience, just as Levi's rational humanism and strong Italian identity shape his Holocaust narrative. While Langer's primary interest is in effective testimony, even if this emphasis tends to dehistoricize the Holocaust, my interest is in how memoirs like Levi's testify to the structures of thought and culture that made Auschwitz possible and make likely the recurrence of genocide. Langer is justifiably concerned that Dante's verses allow readers to escape from the unbearable, yet indispensable, truths that Levi's memoir provides elsewhere. But focusing too exclusively on the unique horror of Auschwitz opens the possibility of forgetting its cultural and historical genealogy. Langer's interpretation stresses the genuine incongruities between Dante's Ulysses, "a man of action who creates his fate," and the prisoners pushed into an "unwilled voyage to an unchosen destination."¹⁷ However, Horkheimer and Adorno's synthetic critique of Western culture suggests that, despite the differences, there is a significant continuity linking Homer's world to Dante's and to Levi's (that is, Auschwitz), which is governed by the dialectic of enlightenment, by the regression of reason to myth.

The trope that links all three texts is the journey—Ulysses' journey home, or, in the case of Dante, Ulysses' unethical journey to perdition for the sake of knowledge and the prisoners' humble journey to fetch soup, which quickly becomes extraordinary because it promises a revelation whose source is Ulysses' famous speech to his men, which is accurately quoted by Levi:

Considerate la vostra semenza:
Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.

Consider your origin:
 you were not made to live as beasts
 but to seek virtue and knowledge.¹⁸

One hardly exaggerates in saying that Ulysses' lines distill the founding ethos of Western culture. The issues are origins and identities (that is, fathers), culture versus nature, the mind over the body, the power of cognition and knowledge, the superiority of the pure language of poetry over the Babel of camp jargon. The passage, as a whole, reiterates one of the fundamental narratives of Western culture—the utopian striking out for a new world as yet uncorrupted by civilization. Now, spoken inside the death camp, Ulysses' message of human nobility touches Levi more than it ever did in school, where he was required to memorize these lines. Evoking the revelation at Mount Sinai, these verses strike him: “like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am” (113). The Hellenic and the Hebraic strands of secular culture come together in a synergy that allows Levi to transcend his desperate situation and reclaim his humanity. However, by the end of the chapter, the harsh world of Auschwitz reasserts itself.

For Langer, Levi's forgetfulness about who he is and where he is implies “deceptive continuities” between the liberating power of art and the inescapable brutality of Auschwitz. Yet it is precisely to the hidden continuities between culture and violence that Horkheimer and Adorno draw our attention. In its pursuit of unity, enlightenment tends to subsume contradictions to the grand narratives it serves. Collective forgetting assumes the role of memory. However, on closer inspection, the story of Ulysses shows itself to be a palimpsest whose erasure is never complete. The heroic debunker of myths is remembered but the dominator has also left his traces. Even as successive retellings remake the story to serve new agendas, the original meanings bleed through to reveal what has been suppressed. It becomes evident that Homer, Dante, and Levi share not only the continuity of cultural memory but also the constancy of forgetting. In Levi's text, the noble aspirations inherent in all Ulysses stories not only act to resist the camp's dehumanizing function but also obliterate acts of domination carried out by means of reified thought.

Levi and most of his readers accept, without suspicion, the rhetoric of noble human aspirations in Ulysses' famous speech to his men. But Dante's Ulysses, in his evident false modesty, is not one well suited to embody moral worth—he is destined for a region of hell where reason deceives reason, and where relationships are shown to be infinitely open to manipulation. Ulysses' words—“Consider your origin: you were not made to live as beasts but to seek virtue and knowledge”—contain an instrumentalized

or reified view of humanity at large. Indeed, the search for origins, as a pretext for defining the human in opposition to the subhuman, was central to Nazism's racial theories and its eugenic vision of community. These same racist principles were taken up enthusiastically by Mussolini, whose antisemitic Racial Laws effectively denied Levi's Italian identity and his claims on Dante and Italian culture.¹⁹ The pressing question, whose very formulation betrays skepticism about Western civilization's manipulation of the word "human," is whether Ulysses' lesson might have been more useful to the Nazis and Italian fascists than to the death camp prisoners. Current scholarship on the Ulysses chapter endorses the redemptive powers of Levi's heroic narrative and the humanist forces he marshals against Auschwitz. Ulysses' message, and Levi's own, according to Victor Brombert, is "that what defines a human being is the need and ability to pursue higher aims."²⁰ This interpretation mirrors Levi's humanism but ignores that Nazism articulated its own ghastly set of "higher aims" for a subjugated humanity under German leadership.

The influence of Homer's epic on Levi is so pervasive that it distorts how he understands Dante's Ulysses, who is not a hero in the conventional sense but a clever deceiver relegated to the eighth circle of hell. Among the evil counselors who have used their high mental gifts for guile, Ulysses is deeper down than the simonists and thieves. For most critics, Levi's misreading, if it is that, is not relevant—what matters is that he dares to resist a totalitarian discourse whose aim is to silence him and deny his humanity. However, in our search for signs of cultural amnesia, what Levi's interpretation leaves out is instructive. To be sure, Levi's forgetfulness is not his alone: the *Risorgimento*, the nineteenth-century vehicle of the nationalist, Enlightenment project in Italy, secularized Dante and fostered a heroic reading of *Inferno* XXVI that erased Ulysses' sins.²¹ That this profoundly Christian text plays such an important role in the formation of Levi's Italian identity attests to the powerful forces of assimilation that induced Jews to forget painful memories of past discrimination for the promise of equal rights and a place in the bourgeoisie.²²

A less tendentious reading of Dante's text yields very different results. His Ulysses sets off from Ithaca one last time and ends up (by means of a shipwreck willed by God) in Christian hell because, in his hubris, he exceeds human limits. He is the prototype of Faust and Frankenstein, seductive men whose excessive desires for power and knowledge unleash demonic forces.²³ Driven by ego, he rejects the demands of home and kinship. A great storyteller and orator, he uses language to deceive his companions and lead them to catastrophe. In a fine example of Dantesque *contrapasso*, the principle by which the punishment suits the crime, he is embodied as a tongue of fire: indeed, in life, his speech deceived and hurt

those around him. Born before Christ, Dante's Ulysses cannot name the powerful divinity that finally limits the advance of his ship, calling it, simply, "an other." Gian-Paolo Biasin has described this other as both Ulysses' and Levi's encounter with "absolute alterity,"²⁴ but this interpretation forgets that the Jewish prisoners are sentenced to die solely because they have become the paradigmatic sign of alterity for the Nazis—"the antirace, the negative principle" in Horkheimer and Adorno's description (*Dialectic* 137). Indeed, Dante's text suggests a fuller interpretation of this other: it seems to function as the final representative of all the others whom Ulysses has disregarded, his family, and his crew. Levi ends his chapter with Dante's final image of drowning, attempting to firmly link the literary hell to the real hell of Auschwitz. But Ulysses' voyage is willed, Levi's unwilled. Levi can teach Italian to Jean, but what does Ulysses teach?

Ulysses as Fascist Hero

The Ulysses chapter repeats, over and again, scenes of instruction: Ulysses' lesson to his men, but also Levi's schoolboy lesson back in Italy, the lesson he gives Jean in the camp, and even the lesson offered to us, the readers. As he recites Dante's immortal lines, Levi hopes Jean has understood that Ulysses' "has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular, and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with soup poles on our shoulders" (114). There is a priceless, though momentary, sense of liberation as the condemned prisoners audaciously contemplate the exercise of free will embodied by Ulysses. And yet is not Levi also unintentionally transmitting Ulysses' false counsel to the effect that superior men break limits, and dominate nature and the men under their command, in pursuit of fame and individual identity?

The tension between the liberator and the dominator is evident in the contradictory meanings of "virtue" (derived from the Latin *vir*, a man) by which Ulysses seeks to affirm his manliness. Virtue, as in moral excellence, must include compassion for the other, but this definition is at odds with Spinoza's proposition ("preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue"), which, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is called "the true maxim of all Western civilization" (22) and "the true bourgeois virtue" (79). Here, Ulysses' drive for self-preservation and self-interest is affirmed, but not compassion for the other's suffering, which reified thought always forgets.²⁵ Yet, compassion for the other plays an important role in Levi's memoir, starting right from the epigraphic poem, which challenges the reader to "consider" the intrinsic humanity of the dehumanized Holocaust victim:

Consider if this is a man
 Who works in the mud
 Who does not know peace
 Who fights for a scrap of bread
 Who dies because of a yes or a no. (*Survival* 11)

The stark contrast between these lines and Ulysses' "Consider your origin" (and therefore your "being") reveals the irreconcilable difference between two competing notions of virtue that hold sway in Western civilization and cannot be resolved in *Survival in Auschwitz*: the Judeo-Christian "survival of the weakest," which informs Levi's ethical discourse, and the Darwinian "survival of the fittest," which, embodied by Ulysses, serves the dark side of enlightenment so well. While Ulysses models resistance to inhuman forces greater than himself, much of his lesson does not apply to the death camp prisoners but was well studied by Nazis and Italian fascists. Hitler and Mussolini learned that knowledge is power, that power is its own moral justification, and that rousing, but deceitful, oratory is an essential tool for manipulating the masses. Gabriele D'Annunzio, a poet and political figure whose brash, heroic style was later adopted by the Italian fascists, wrote his own Ulysses poem. Inspired by an encounter with the Greek hero, the speaker of the poem concludes:

Man, I have never believed in any virtue
 Save the beating of a powerful heart.
 I was faithful only to myself,
 To my one grand design.²⁶

There is nothing left here of the myth-debunking champion of humanity, only the egotistical dominator. The negative virtue associated with all Ulysses—his self-determination and the will to power—is in harmony with D'Annunzio's superficial interpretation of the Nietzschean superman. These same ideas had an influence on the development of Italian Fascism, which was founded on "the exaltation of conflict, the continuous assertion of man's ability to control and transform reality and impose his will without limits."²⁷ Essentially elitist, Italian Fascism counted on superior individuals to lead a national regeneration that would return Italy to a mythical state of racial and cultural purity. The figure of Ulysses embodied this ideal type for fascist sympathizer Ezra Pound. In his *Cantos*, Ulysses "seeks to break free from the conditions of a corrupt present and return to the purity of human origins, where he can begin to work toward a healthy order."²⁸ Mussolini defined Italy's mission in similar terms, insisting that the cultural and historical basis for its current greatness derived from the

earliest days of ancient Rome. “To found a city,” he stated, “to discover a colony, to found an empire, are the wonders of the human spirit.”²⁹ When criticized by the League of Nations for brutally invading Ethiopia, where Italy eventually used both poisonous gas and concentration camps before the Nazis did, Mussolini argued that Italians were incapable of acting in an uncivilized fashion, having a long, noble history as “poets, artists, heroes, saints, and sailors.”³⁰ Ulysses, as hero, sailor, and prototypical colonizer, was not only a part of the classical heritage that the fascists exploited but also, in his willfulness, a handy embodiment of the “new man” fascism wished to create: like *Il Duce*, the “new man” would be a virile, disciplined warrior who lived for the struggle.³¹ Indeed, Ulysses and Mussolini are linked in Pound’s writing, where “he examines the present historical figure as a possible embodiment of the prototypical fascist hero.”³² In the final analysis, Ulysses is Levi’s role model but also Mussolini’s.

Beautiful Death

“The Canto of Ulysses” chapter is not only about literature as a form of cultural memory but also about forgetting it. While reciting for Jean, Levi agonizes over the gaps in his memory of Canto XXVI, which become “irreparable” by the end of their soup-fetching journey. “I would give up today’s soup,” he writes, “to know how to connect [this verse] to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers—but it is no use, the rest is silence” (*Survival* 114). The silence evokes the painful death memory that precedes the demise of the self. In his extraordinary willingness to sacrifice food in a place where hunger is constant, Levi acknowledges that his mind and spirit, as well as his body, need nourishment if he is to remain a man for a few more days.³³ While his pained, fragmented narrative bears the signs of trauma that are characteristic of Holocaust testimony, it also affirms Levi’s contention that Auschwitz wiped out memory and deadened thought. Less obviously, it gestures toward the grim prospect of Levi’s “unwilled journey” ending in an anonymous death deprived of all meaning, like that of the non-man, emptied of all consciousness, “who dies because of a yes or a no.” Here and now, Levi and Jean can “dare to reason”; however, he writes, “tomorrow he or I might be dead.” Not to be denied any longer, the world of Auschwitz, its “sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers” and their hungry Babel (115), encroaches on Ulysses’ sublime tale, but not before Levi recalls and recites, in Dante’s pure language, the drama of Ulysses’ drowning: “the prow went down, as pleased Another / And over our heads the hollow seas closed up.” Even though he is a sinner in Dante’s text, Ulysses dies the beautiful death

of the self-determined individual. (God is not capricious in ending the hero's life; rather, Ulysses has brought this end on himself.) Such a death is impossible in Auschwitz, where, Adorno asserts, "it was no longer the individual who died, but a specimen" identical to all the others. "Genocide is the absolute integration" because these human beings are wholly unified in "their total nullity."³⁴ In the Holocaust, the Enlightenment's principle of universality reaches its tragic completion. Reason, at its most reified and unreflective, has rendered human beings mere material, and then, nothing at all.³⁵

Levi's courageous and preposterous invocation of great art in the death camp and, especially, the beauty of Ulysses' literary death, lead him to a kind of epiphany, to feeling, at that moment, that he understands "the reason for our fate, for our being here today . . ." (*Survival* 115). The ambiguity of poetical language has opened a space for human freedom that the precision of scientific language cannot accommodate; even here, art is redemptive to some degree. However, it is significant that the thought and the sentence, stopped by an ellipsis, reach no conclusion. Can there be a reason for Auschwitz? Our excursion into the workings of the dialectic of enlightenment begins to answer that question, at least in part. In these last, gripping paragraphs of the Ulysses chapter, a palpable tension arises from the sense of time running short, the time for poetry, and the time for life. A less explicit source of tension stems from the difficult analogy between Ulysses' fate and that of the prisoners, an analogy that, as the ellipsis suggests, falls apart at the moment of its realization. Having challenged God and smashed the limits meant to confine the humanity, Ulysses' beautiful death affirms that his was a self-determined life. Beyond their useless suffering, Holocaust victims contend with the fact that they cannot dictate the reasons for their fate because they cannot reason with the imperatives of fascist myth. In Auschwitz, life was all the more unlivable because death had lost its meaning.

My discussion of Ulysses' contradictions—evoking liberation for the prisoners and domination for the fascists—has not been made in the service of Langer's claim that pre-Holocaust culture sheds little light on Auschwitz. Rather, I have argued that the Ulysses chapter and *Survival in Auschwitz* as a whole are ideal texts for helping us uncover the destructive, unending dialectic of culture and barbarism posited by Horkheimer and Adorno. In resisting the legitimating master narrative of fascism, with its will to power and irrational ends, the enlightened figure of Ulysses, as deployed by Levi, still participates in that narrative. In effect, Levi replaces one hegemonic language, German, with another one, Italian. He rejects the Nazi-assigned role as barbaric other, but, in identifying with Ulysses, positions himself as the subject of Western culture who is still defined in

relation to an other whose suffering is forgotten and subsumed in the creation of culture and myth. Fundamental Western values are transmitted in “The Canto of Ulysses,” but they always contain darkness and light, always affirm, as Horkheimer and Adorno say, that “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (*Dialectic* 4). Their analysis of the figure of Ulysses suggests that the epic tradition renews culture but also silently recuperates the violence out of which culture is constructed. When Levi uses the figure of Ulysses to resist Auschwitz, he also makes evident a peril in Holocaust writing framed by humanist assumptions: entangled in “the indissoluble alliance between reason and atrocity” (*Dialectic* 92), it risks complicity with the murderous discourse of fascism that it seeks to overturn. To arrive at this conclusion is not to say that Levi’s humanism is naïve. On the contrary, only by tracing the historical and moral depth of his testimony to both Auschwitz and the violence of culture can one imagine a new humanism that, with the aid of Horkheimer and Adorno’s self-reflective critical thought, achieves a more genuine human emancipation.

Améry and the Impotence of Culture in Auschwitz

Levi’s use of Dante, as thoughtful and sophisticated as it is, seems to emerge from a cultural and philosophical sensibility that had not yet felt the full force of Auschwitz and had not yet fully comprehended the abyss that the Holocaust opened in art and language, history, and ethics. The possible obsolescence of his response is revealed when compared to Jean Améry’s position on the inefficacy of culture in Auschwitz, as stated in his 1966 essay “At the Mind’s Limits.”³⁶ If remembered verses from the *Inferno* seem to give meaning to Levi’s suffering, affirming the redemptive power of poetry, Améry recalls its utter weakness in the camp. Of an occasion during his incarceration when he recited, aloud, well-known verses, paying close attention to the sound and rhythm of the words, he states, “[I] expected that the emotional and mental response that for years this Hölderlin poem had awakened in me would emerge. But nothing happened. The poem no longer transcended reality. There it was and all that remained was the objective statement: such and such, and the Kapo roars ‘left,’ and the soup was watery, and the flags were clanking in the wind” (7).³⁷ So begins Améry’s testimony to the strong discontinuity between pre-Holocaust culture and the total novelty of Auschwitz. The reality of the camp is too pervasive, and the condition of the soup too urgent, to allow a space for artistic or any other sort of transcendence. When Levi mentions the soup in his literary flight—indeed, fetching it provides the opportunity to recite the Ulysses passage—he suggests the possibility of delaying bodily nourishment in

exchange for spiritual sustenance, a negotiation that Améry claims was not possible in Auschwitz, the place where the spirit died, where humans were no more than material for processing.

Nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real. In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy. Like [Hölderlin's] lyric stanza . . . the philosophic declarations also lost their transcendence and then and there became in part objective observations, in part dull chatter . . . We didn't require any semantic analysis or logical syntax to recognize this. A glance at the watchtowers, a sniff of burnt fat from the crematories sufficed. In the camp the intellect in its totality declared itself to be incompetent . . . The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered. Beauty: that was an illusion. Knowledge: that turned out to be a game with ideas. (19)

While Levi uses Dante to provoke a momentary forgetfulness about where he is and what freedom of choice he has, Améry finds that there is no escaping the camp, no transcendence, either by imagination or abstraction. Culture, whether as poetry or philosophical thought, is impotent here. Moreover, our mental capacities will be stymied if we try to find redemption or purpose in the victims' suffering or try to gain knowledge through this traumatic history. Literary representation fails us and language itself withers under these conditions: "The word always dies where the claim of some reality is total" (20). (Of course, Améry felt more acutely than Levi the damage inflicted on language in Auschwitz because German was his native speech. However, we have already seen that Italian language and literature were appropriated by the fascists to such a degree that Levi, too, had reason to distrust his mother tongue.) What, then, could the intellectual hope to learn in the camp and bring back? Almost nothing. "We did not become wiser in Auschwitz, if by wisdom one understands positive knowledge of the world . . . It goes without saying, I believe, that in Auschwitz we did not become better, more human, more humane, and more mature ethically. We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented—and it was a long time before we were even able to learn the ordinary language of freedom" (19–20).

In Chapter 6 of *The Drowned and the Saved*, "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," Levi responds to "At the Mind's Limits," noting areas of consensus and between himself and Améry, whom he viewed as both "companion and antagonist" (*Drowned* 142). Levi agrees with Améry's statement on the emptiness and moral debasement that inevitably accompanies survival but, as discussed in Chapter 1 and is confirmed here, he disagrees about the worth of the intellect in Auschwitz and the possibility of drawing positive

knowledge from negative experience.³⁸ “The Lager was a university” that taught him, among other useful lessons, “to look around and to measure men” (141). The idea of Auschwitz, conceived and reared in the heart of Europe, did not provoke Levi to abandon his European literary and philosophical education but to deepen it. He maintained that cultural memories, like the Dante passage, “had great value” in the camp. “They convinced me that my mind, although besieged by everyday necessities had not ceased to function. They elevated me in my own eyes and those of my interlocutor . . . They granted me . . . a way to find myself” (139–40).³⁹ If recalling Ulysses’ “beautiful death” inspired Levi to resist dehumanization and retain a sense of self, Améry finds that the harsh reality of Auschwitz quickly stripped away years of education and cultivation that had elevated death, representing it as a final moment of dignified self-fashioning.⁴⁰ Before encountering the terrible pressure exerted by the camp, “the intellectual, and especially the intellectual of German education and culture, [bore] the esthetic view of death.” Now, these ideas collapsed. “For death in its literary, philosophic, or musical form there was no place in Auschwitz. No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*. Every poetic evocation of death became intolerable” (“At the Mind’s Limits,” 16). In concurrence with Adorno’s claim that Auschwitz robbed a man of everything, even his individual, meaningful death, Améry added: “Dying was omnipresent, death vanished from sight” (17).⁴¹

Earlier, I discussed Lawrence Langer’s critique of “The Canto of Ulysses” and his broader assertion that the rift opened by Auschwitz made pre-Holocaust culture suddenly obsolete. Not surprisingly, he finds support for his position in Améry’s “no bridge” aphorism. “Culture was left *unprepared* for such a doom, and Améry in a single instant repudiated the value of years of study of German romantic literature. [Thomas] Mann’s pre-World War I novella, with its vision of the primal destructive energies concealed by art, may have echoed ancestral voices prophesying war, but it did not anticipate gas chambers and the genocide of the European Jewry.”⁴² This is not the place to investigate whether the cultural assumptions shaping *Death in Venice* mask violent assimilations of the other, although one might begin by examining the many motifs drawn classical mythology found in Mann’s story. The relevant point here is that neither Améry nor Langer accepts the possible link between European culture and the Nazi genocide, despite some compelling evidence offered by Horkheimer and Adorno, among others. In fact, in a different essay, Améry strongly defended the Enlightenment and decried its debasement by the likes of Michel Foucault and in works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “What sad aberration has brought us to the point where modern thinkers do not dare to employ concepts such as progress, humanization, and reason except within damning

quotation marks?”⁴³ Apropos of this question, Susan Neiman asked two of her own: “Didn’t Améry himself tell us precisely what happened? Shouldn’t he know better than anyone why no modern thinker feels free to use those ideas in good faith?”⁴⁴ I am compelled to agree with Neiman. The observations made in “At the Mind’s Limits” offer more than a little evidence for the claim that Enlightenment reason and high culture are impotent before the suffering of the Auschwitz victim because they are, to some degree, complicit with the Nazi genocide. Rather than confirming the putative uniqueness and anomaly of the Holocaust, the rupture Améry experiences may result from the abrupt termination of our unconditional faith in the Enlightenment and in modernity, that is, in progress, human emancipation, reason, and the transcendent qualities of art. To consider, once again, why the continuity of culture—before, during, and after the Holocaust—accounts for this massive outbreak of violence more persuasively than does the apparent discontinuity observed by Améry and promoted by Langer, I return briefly to Adorno.

Poetry “After Auschwitz” . . . and Before

Adorno’s most discussed utterance, found in the 1949 essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” is that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁴⁵ The aphorism speaks to the possible inadequacy of language for representing such enormous suffering and also to the fear that aesthetic pleasure could be had, unjustly and unethically, at the victims’ expense.⁴⁶ Indeed, these words have often been read as a prohibition of poetry (unenforceable, however)—and perhaps Adorno initially meant them that way—but they make more sense as a wise maxim that speaks to our new, post-Holocaust consciousness. Read in context, in the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” it is clear that Adorno’s characterization of poetry arises from the same fertile ground that produced *Dialectic of Enlightenment* just five years earlier. In both texts, the absolute authority of instrumental reason is used to objectify or reify both humanity and thought itself. Reified thought no longer thinks independently; instead, it serves, mechanically, the interests of totalizing ideologies with which one cannot reason. In other words, Enlightenment reverts to irrational myth and modern culture, as a commodified or reified object, reverts to barbarism. It is evident at the end of Adorno’s essay that the Holocaust constitutes the most destructive result of a long-running dialectic, one that will not be interrupted until intellectuals probe more deeply into the workings of culture instead of merely applauding it:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.⁴⁷

In the light of Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of the figure of Ulysses and of epic poetry, which was discussed earlier, one could not be blamed for concluding that all cultural manifestations of heroism and nation are barbaric in their disregard for the suffering of the disempowered other. On this basis, Adorno's aphorism might be amended as follows: *to write poetry in support of civilization is barbaric*. My reformulation means to be a corollary to Walter Benjamin's remark that "every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism."⁴⁸ Put another way, enlightened culture has always forgotten the suffering and always repressed the traumas on which societies are built. With his particular emphasis on "after Auschwitz," I take Adorno to mean that culture's complicity with state-endorsed violence should be even more obvious now if not for the amnesia-inducing quality of culture itself, which "corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today [that does not contribute further to the reification of thought]." Since writing poetry never has been nor will be categorically impossible, I have ventured to finish Adorno's sentence in an effort to clarify exactly what kind of poetry is impossible, or nearly so, after Auschwitz. Under the conditions that effectively enlisted high culture to make the Nazi genocide thinkable, Adorno fears, just four years after the end of the war, that the kind of poetry we need is dead or never lived. If it exists, this poetry would always remember the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust. And, being conscious of the effects of culture, it would reflect on the knowledge that the most refined art might also be the most insidiously barbaric. By 1962, Adorno's putative ban on representation became less dire when he accepted that such art did exist, however modest its efficacy. "The abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting . . . [It] demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it."⁴⁹ Far from enforcing a ban on poetry, Adorno arrives at the conclusion that we must have art, the

right kind, which represents Holocaust trauma. I venture to guess that such poetry would be epitomized by Dan Pagis's evanescent "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car."⁵⁰ The wrong kind of poetry is conventional and anesthetizing; the worst of it, the most barbaric, is incised in the marble of empires.

To write poetry in support of civilization is barbaric. I repeat these words to assert, along with Adorno and against Langer, that the Holocaust continues European culture and history even as it produced a caesura in our consciousness. Culture may redeem suffering, as Levi would have us believe, but it is also complicit in suffering. Culture is impotent in the face of real violence, as Améry argues, but it also masks the violence on which societies are built. There is much to support the idea that, in its essence, the Holocaust constitutes an abyss beyond thought and a silence beyond words. Nevertheless, we would do well to balance our recognition of its admittedly unique and incomprehensible aspects with a broader awareness of past and recent ethnic cleansings that, whether large or small, raise the same ethical imperatives. The very persistence of genocide, its continuity over time, demands that we think more deeply about the historical and philosophical roots of the Holocaust and how culture, while solidifying collective memory, also obscures its violent assimilations of the other.

The next chapter continues this close reading of *Survival in Auschwitz* to consider how Hegelian dialectic and the syntax of power, the royal or authoritarian "we," contribute to the silencing and disappearance of the other.

Survivor Testimony and the Hegelian Subject

Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the name “Auschwitz” to signify just how impoverished recent Western History seems from the point of view of the “modern” project of the emancipation of humanity. What kind of thought is capable of “relieving” Auschwitz—relieving (*reliever*) in the sense of *aufheben* [i.e., overcoming]—capable of situating it in a general, empirical, or even speculative process directed towards universal emancipation?

—Jean-François Lyotard, “Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’”¹

This chapter deploys Lyotard’s concept, “the differend,” to explore the unexpected intersection in *Survival in Auschwitz* between Primo Levi’s humanism and Hegelian modes of discourse like those of Nazism and Italian Fascism.² While Levi’s moving descriptions of the mute, dehumanized prisoners confirm Lyotard’s claim that “in the concentration camp there is no plural subject,” that no unified voice that can overcome the camp’s atomization of the victims, the imperative to distill knowledge from his tragic experience nevertheless compels Levi to narrate in the first-person plural. I argue that Levi’s “we” is, at times, positioned within an imagined community of scientists who look into the camp from the outside, objectifying the victims and leaving them without an authentic voice that can testify to the injustice they have suffered. The characteristics of this “we” reveal the tension between Levi’s embrace of the scientific method, as an expression of human dignity, and his encounter with the social Darwinism used by the Nazis to justify the creation of Auschwitz. The dilemma for the rational humanist is that Darwin’s potent theory, a credit to the acuity of the human mind, actually dethrones humans, transforming them into animals subject to exploitation and even natural selection.

For the Nazis, evolutionary theory not only promised mastery over nature but also over humanity. Germany's early successes in warfare and in applying harsh racial policies offered apparent moral justification for the commission of further crimes. These actions, the Nazis contended, merely accelerated the inevitable dominance of a superior people. In this simplistic way of thinking, natural selection and Hegelian synthesis are essentially the same thing: each process creates winners and losers as history moves humanity forward. What emerges in my reading of Levi's testimony is that he took the concentration camps to be a microcosm of Nazi-occupied Europe: both used the same Darwinian rationale to establish hierarchy. As such, to be a Holocaust survivor is to have been forced to confirm the validity of the "survival of the fittest" concept in a fashion that mirrors the role the Nazis cast for themselves. The prisoner who outlasts his peers is conscious of having been an object of domination but also a dominator who instrumentalized fellow prisoners. (He has become an unwilling participant in the morally ambiguous world that Levi calls "The Gray Zone," which I discuss further in Chapter 7.) Although Levi attempts to reconstruct, out of the ruins of Auschwitz, a new collectivity to mediate "the differend," I argue that he instead lays bare the irreconcilable differences between two standards of virtue that hold sway in Western culture: the self-preservationist and the Judeo-Christian (or, as we shall see in Chapter 4, what Emmanuel Levinas calls the "Greek" and the "Hebrew").

Before continuing, I should note that this present discussion refers to Auschwitz, the actual place, but just as often refers to "Auschwitz," the trope or constellation of meanings associated with the very essence of the Holocaust—the abyss at its center. Posthumanist thinkers, including Lyotard, deem a reckoning with the legacy of this latter Auschwitz absolutely indispensable to any coherent narrative of modernity. The Holocaust shifted the ground beneath our feet, putting into question what we can know and understand about the world, and it even undermined our confidence in the words we try to use to talk about what has happened.

"We"

Observations made by Andrew McCann serve as a preface to my discussion of Levi's pressured syntax in *Survival in Auschwitz*, and of his struggle to discover what, after Auschwitz, the expression "we humans" means in either political or philosophical terms. "The Holocaust . . . forces us to ask the most fundamental of questions regarding the human subject supposedly cognizant of an altered sense of possible enactments. What was once an intuitive understanding of the performative 'we' (we rational, compassionate

humans) is no longer to be trusted. Indeed, one of the things Auschwitz has altered is our faith in the very syntax of the sentence that announces our cognizance of it.”³

Levi’s humanist texts offer us material for thinking about this big question, about which aspects of the human are or are not recoverable from Auschwitz. That he intended his first book to be something more than a personal memoir is evident in his copious reliance on a first-person plural narrative. So far, most scholars have viewed Levi’s “we” and “our” as usefully inclusive pronouns that not only evoke a chorus of victims who speak through, and thus authorize, Levi’s narrator, but also facilitate the reader’s participation in the retelling.⁴ In using the plural, they say, Levi refuses “to isolate the survivor’s experience from the rest of humankind.”⁵ Still another scholar notices “stylistic shortcomings” in the “haphazard shifts in person” from “I” to “we.”⁶ These observations, however, stop short of asking whether the various appearances of “we” in Levi’s memoir have different, and even evolving, functions and meanings. Consider two passages from the text—the first describes the excruciating train trip from Italy to Poland: “We suffered from thirst and cold; at every stop we clamored for water, or even a handful of snow, but we were rarely heard” (*Survival* 18). Here, the past-tense plural subject speaks as a credible, authorized chorus conveying a shared experience of physical privation that engages the reader’s sympathy and conscience. In recounting the details of the episode, Levi attempts to give voice to the unheard, and not yet fully dehumanized, “we,” who were deported but never came back.

In roughly the middle of the memoir, the choral voice briefly, but tellingly, gives way to a more authoritative first-person plural whose knowledge exceeds the local boundaries defined by the camp. In contrast to the implicit humane and ethical stance conveyed by the first passage, the second one I have highlighted puts forward a sweeping, yet detached, statement on the value of studying all human experience, including that gained in Auschwitz: “We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world we are describing” (87). Here, the plural subject, now in the present tense, is no longer situated among the victims, but is a disembodied “we,” located in some indeterminate, apparently objective, position outside the camp. Indeed, this royal “we” is stylistically awkward and oddly distanced. Why does Levi use it at all when, clearly, he alone thinks and writes these thoughts? What community is constituted by this “we” and what does it have to do with inferring general principles from the “particular world” under scrutiny here?

In answering these questions, and in raising still others, I will suggest that the construction of this detached “we” and the drive to deduce meaning from Auschwitz are two crucial elements, interdependent and unstable, in Levi’s vexed attempt to understand and make others understand his experience of the Holocaust. The adequacy or inadequacy of particular narrative strategies and conceptual frameworks to the task of salvaging something useful from Auschwitz demands consideration in any analysis of Holocaust representation. Indeed, the stakes could not be higher for Levi himself, who always judged his success or failure on whether he made the tragic world of Auschwitz intelligible to his readers and on whether his extraordinary experience could be shown to have some bearing on ordinary life.

Fully invested in secular humanism and positivism and trained in the scientific method, Levi trusted in the ability of empirical observation and reason to make sense of the world and impart meaning. He relied on rationality to make positive knowledge out of negative experience. At Auschwitz, however, a place, he was told, where “there is no why” (29), had he encountered such profound negativity that no knowledge, no “fundamental values,” could derive from it? Fundamental values, by definition, are universally applicable and those who accept them constitute a community—a “we.” Although both examples I have offered of Levi’s “we” posit solidarity and consensus, he noted, in a late essay, that the concentration camp was essentially “indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the ‘we’ lost its limits.” He adds: “One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle.”⁷ Levi’s initial desire to construct a unified voice for “we, the victims” is subverted by the camp’s inherent structure, which produced radically isolated individuals for whom the concept of community had little or no force. In response to the camp’s atomization of the victims and their collective voice, Levi ultimately adopts two contradictory strategies: on one hand, he acknowledges that survivor-writers cannot truly testify for other victims but only refer to what is unsayable about atrocity; on the other hand, he constructs an apparently objective, scientific “we” that promises an alternate testimony in the form of an authoritative Darwinist account of the individual battle for survival.

In order to analyze the effects of these two strategies, my discussion focuses on the narrating “we” in “The Drowned and the Saved,” a crucial chapter in *Survival in Auschwitz* in which, drawing upon the imperatives of natural selection, Levi argues “that the Lager was pre-eminently a gigantic biological and social experiment” (87). This laboratory, the argument goes,

effectively sorted the prisoners into two distinct groups: “the drowned,” the vast majority who lost their lives to the camp’s brutal conditions, and “the saved,” those few who managed to survive physically but not necessarily morally or spiritually. Some critics mention, in passing, Levi’s formulation of Auschwitz as a “biological and social experiment,” but they ignore that, with these same terms, Nazism invented itself, complete with its racial theories and eugenic vision of community.⁸ As a survivor-writer, the dilemma for Levi is that his positivist account of Auschwitz can never entirely disentangle itself from the logic that created the camp. Indeed, some of the most powerful modes of analysis available to him for interpreting the meaning of his experience had already been appropriated by Nazism’s ghastly experiment in social Darwinism, which, the Nazis claimed, did nothing more than expedite what was historically and biologically inevitable. The ideas behind this kind of social engineering, though never before taken to such extremes, were widespread in Europe, including Italy. At the turn of the century in Levi’s Turin, the pioneering criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso claimed that degenerate biology determined antisocial behavior. Lombroso and his highly influential circle advocated “a socialism that bore heavily on the principles of Darwin’s theory of evolution and on the belief that science, the positivist observation of data in world, and education would usher in a better, fairer world.”⁹

That positivism and Nazi racial policy share some common roots places an additional strain on Levi’s attempt to present his ideas regarding the nature of the concentration camp. My primary purpose here is to explain the pressures at work on both his language and on his drive to deduce meaning from Auschwitz. The initial question is whether his first-personal plural sometimes includes not only victims and readers but also the perspective of the criminal perpetrators. This possibility seems especially likely when Levi offers his Darwinian analysis (i.e., survival of the fittest) of the “human animal” in Auschwitz (87–100). My claim is that when he speaks in the imperial “we” to give his utterances greater force and authority, he inadvertently positions himself within the discourses of Nazi racial science. At the same time, I intend to show how Levi’s acute observations about “the drowned,” the ultimate victims of Nazism, undermine positivist assumptions and confirm Lyotard’s posthumanist analysis of Holocaust representation. Finally, I will suggest that Levi employs irony to form yet another type of “we,” one that attempts to mediate between the two competing and irreconcilable discourses that shape both the chapter and, in a less overt fashion, the memoir as a whole: the Darwinian logic of the perpetrators and the ethical claims of the victims.

The Differend

In his book *The Differend*, and in related articles, Lyotard argues that Auschwitz “is the name for a kind of para-experience, where dialectics would encounter a non-negatable negative [*un négative non niabile*], and would abide in the impossibility of redoubling that negative into a ‘result.’”¹⁰ In effect, Lyotard argues against the validity of Hegelian dialectics in which conflict always produces a progressive outcome in a process known as speculative discourse. According to Hegel, the positive result of confrontation and synthesis is that it produces knowledge useful in future speculations. For Lyotard and other posthumanist theorists, the general indictment of Hegel is as follows:

Hegel’s systematic dialectic of History—in which every immediacy, every experience, every particular is already and automatically swallowed up by the Whole—points up the violent flip side of an Enlightenment master-narrative concerning the universality of Reason at its worst. In its deployment of such a notion of universality, Hegel’s master-narrative of Spirit would seem to entrap and subsume so many different *material* or *historically specific* markers of identity (bodily, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.)—markers which for Hegel gain their apparently singular bearing solely by means of what is universal and absolute (i.e., speculative logic and the activity of thinking) . . . In Hegel’s system, nothing is permitted to resist the grasp of the sovereign concept of reason and its meaning-making abilities.¹¹

However, Lyotard writes, “Auschwitz would designate an ‘experience’ of language that brings speculative discourse to a halt” (*The Differend* 88)—a negative, in other words, that resists the force of Hegelian dialectic. This nonnegatable negative is a dysfunction of language that Lyotard calls “the differend.” It arises in intractable disputes that cannot be settled in “the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be [phrased].”¹² For Lyotard, there can be no genuine experience of “Auschwitz,” which is the paradigmatic “differend,” because the language of the perpetrators and the language of the victims are mutually unintelligible and untranslatable—their “phrases” can never link into a consensual narrative. Thus, Auschwitz can never be resolved into a result; rather, it leads to a silence issuing from the impossibility of linking the two phrases. When Lyotard says, “the two phrase universes have no common application,” he means to counter the claims of Hegel’s speculative discourse in which a “you” and an “I” are mutually obligated by the power that links one phrase to another to form the “we.”¹³ In speculative discourse, Lyotard explains, the first-person plural pronoun

“is the supreme argument of authority . . . the link which is supposed to bind series of prescriptive phrases . . . to their legitimation.” Thus, Lyotard understands Hegelian dialectic as a tool of totalitarianism because it advocates general rules or criteria that subsume or silence marginal voices in a prescriptive, unified “we.” The first-person plural voice of authority imitates consensus but is effectually coercive. The word “Auschwitz” names a significant historical phenomenon because, in its extreme violence and coercion, it renders dysfunctional even the rhetoric of consensus (always expressed as a “we”), revealing the real exercise of power. Is not Auschwitz, Lyotard asks, “the proper name of para-experience, that of the impossibility of forming the we? Is it not further the case that in the concentration camp there is no plural subject?”¹⁴ The same idea is more fully stated in *The Differend*:

If, “after Auschwitz,” the *Resultat* is lacking, it would be for want of determination. “Auschwitz” would have no speculative name because it would be the proper name of a para-experience or even of a destruction of experience. What determination would Auschwitz be lacking so as to turn it into an experience with a *Resultat*? Would it be that of the impossibility of a *we*? In the concentration camps, there would have been no subject in the first-person plural. In the absence of such a subject, there would remain “after Auschwitz” no subject, no *Selbst* which could prevail upon itself to name itself in naming “Auschwitz.” No phrase inflected in this person would be possible: we did this, we felt that, they made us suffer this humiliation . . . : each of us was reduced to solitude and silence. There would be no collective witness.¹⁵

In Lyotard’s formulation, “Auschwitz,” as “a destruction of experience,” negates dialectic in a fashion similar to that described by Adorno. However, Lyotard forges his own path in focusing on how the breakdown of language renders impossible the construction of an ethically inclusive narrative—or history—of the Holocaust. There is no plural subject of testimony, he insists. What remains, then, is the survivor’s first-person voice marked alternately by self-interest and shame. If the totalitarian “we” is intact in the wake of Auschwitz, the “we” of community and solidarity is forever ruptured. For Lyotard, as for the other posthumanist thinkers, Auschwitz is not exceptional, but paradigmatic of modernity: “after Auschwitz,” there is no basis to assert that humanity is one or that “the human condition” is a truly universal experience.

In his description of “the drowned,” the voiceless hordes who are doomed for selection, Levi corroborates the practical uselessness in twentieth-century Europe of the Nazi obsession with “racial purity” and

also the Enlightenment's universal category, "we humans." "The drowned" who "in solitude . . . die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone's memory" (*Survival* 89), are absence itself; they are not men, but "non-men" who cannot be forgotten because there is nothing to remember, seeming to have never lived at all. "All the [*Muselmanner*] who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story" (90). There is no common narrative, no linking of one sentence to the next, that can firmly join the non-man to the rest of us, let alone to the SS men who claimed that history would vindicate them for taking active charge of human evolution. There is no "we" who fully experienced the camp, only the non-man, "a faceless presence . . . on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen" (90). The paradoxical locution—the faceless face on whose face nothing is seen—suggests that something essential of Auschwitz—its "differend"—remains unrepresentable, trapped in a negativity and silence that Levi confronts here: how can one put a human face on the faceless victim? How can one represent a negative, a non-man without thought or feeling, who has "no story," indeed, who has no "history"? (In Italian, *storia* conveys both meanings.)

Over time, Levi proclaimed that, as much as he wished to, he could not testify for the drowned because only they, who lost everything, were "the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance" (*Drowned* 84). The vexing problem for Levi, who, like all survivors, had to make a priority of his personal welfare, is that he cannot speak for the victims. Thus, survivor testimony would seem to have limited significance and authority; at best, it points to the enormous gap between what is told and cannot be told, indicating the silent abyss from which "general significance" (or, for that matter, the "fundamental values" I discussed earlier) will never be recovered. The memoir's Italian title, *Se questo è un uomo* ("If This is a Man") gestures toward the abyss by opening a hypothetical that has no result or whose result is unspeakable, as if to say, "If this man is a non-man, then there exist no words that can complete this sentence."¹⁶ (By contrast, the American title clearly markets redemption and suggests that survival is heroic.) The survivor's inability to narrate the non-man's story indicates that here, too, is a "differend," that "the drowned" and "the saved" inhabit, as Lyotard would say, "two phrase universes [that] have no common application." By the 1980s, Levi, too, recognizes that the survivor-writer can only refer to the other side of the abyss, to "the differend." To come to such a conclusion, asserts Giorgio Agamben, is inevitable. "Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness."¹⁷ (Whether this self-deprecating, almost passive testimony rises to the level of ethical speech is a question I address in Chapter 4.)

Survival of the Fittest

Levi's encounter with the "non-man" confirms Lyotard's claim "that in the concentration camp there is no plural subject."¹⁸ The implication for survivor-writers like Levi, who feel morally obligated to testify to a vast crime, is that there exists no legitimate collective voice of the victims, only the suspect "I," the most self-serving and self-justifying of all narrative voices. Yet, in a contradictory gesture, the ethical imperative to testify to the crime of Auschwitz is precisely what drives Levi to cast about for some kind of positivistic, consensual "we," even if it only speaks from outside the camp, that might offer his readers reasoned conclusions (or "results," in the languages of both Hegelian dialectic and experimental science). With this in mind, I now turn to the question of Levi's Darwinian view of the camp, which, he says, is driven by a "pitiless process of natural selection" (*Survival* 89). Lyotard's analysis is useful in thinking through why, in this autobiographical text, Levi adopts the stilted, distanced royal "we" to present, in the same chapter, ideas at odds with his reflective discussion of the non-man and the limits of survivor testimony. Levi enunciates his "survival of the fittest" thesis in the following passage, some of which I have already cited: "We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthiness of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world we are describing. We would also like to consider that the Lager was pre-eminently a gigantic biological and social experiment . . . more rigorous than any experimenter could have set up to establish what is essential and what is acquired in the behavior of the human animal in the struggle for life" (87).¹⁹

The Darwinian terminology is complete: man is an animal bent on surviving by means of inherited traits and learned behaviors. However, while Darwinism may offer a good empirical description of biological change, the real subject here is social Darwinism at its most malicious (i.e., the vulgar manipulation of Darwin's powerful discourse in the service of nationalism, racism, and the politics of scapegoating), which uses rationality and technology to justify the blatant oppression of any "they" under the control of any "we." What is so striking in the passage above is that in trying to give coherence to the camp, Levi's objectifying, scientific "we" operates within—not to say, endorses—some of the same ideas that animated Nazi racial theories.²⁰ He uses the concept of natural selection as a tool of description and analysis long after it has become thoroughly ideological. He treats the camp as an element of nature (no experimenter set it up), and draws no distinction between natural selection and what might be more accurately called a coordinated Nazi campaign of "artificial selection." Oddly absent from the discussion are the men who conceived and ran the camps:

are they scientists here, or savage animals engaged in their own struggle for life? Is it still “natural” selection if other men are doing the selecting? Speaking in the language of scientific certitude, Levi’s “we” does not allow for these kinds of questions. Similarly, from the Nazi perspective, whether the German people were a force of history or a force of nature amounted to the same thing: in either case, ethical questions were trumped by the racist logic that produced the death camps, a logical conclusion, the Nazis believed, that simply reflected natural law. But what does “the survival of the fittest” discourse that Levi adopts reveal about the prisoners who were coerced to do frightful things to each other? If we wish to know human nature (if such a thing exists), perhaps the most efficacious experiment would track human behavior under complete freedom rather than complete coercion. This is not to say that Levi’s attempts to represent Auschwitz or derive knowledge from it completely fail; rather, it is to recognize the disabling conflict between ethical and objectifying scientific discourses that coexist in his memoir.

On one hand, the Lyotardian approach registers Levi’s careful depiction of the non-man that I discussed earlier. It is an important political (and thus moral) act to testify to the silence, to show that something has occurred even if it cannot be understood, justified, or avenged. “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics, perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.”²¹ For Lyotard, “differends” have always existed and always will; it is a question of recognizing them as a means of empowering those who are under threat by universalist or totalitarian discourses. However, the Lyotardian approach also registers Levi’s Hegelian pursuit of “fundamental values,” or “results,” that one can deduce from Auschwitz. The concept of “the survival of the fittest” is itself a speculative discourse that automatically justifies its conclusions, just as in Hegel’s dialectic. In other words, the historical or natural forces that subsume their opposite (or negative) were destined to do so. This kind of determinist thinking renders irrelevant moral questions. Likewise, whoever survives is fittest, and being fit is the only virtue in Darwin’s system of analysis. While Darwinism may offer a valid description of empirical reality it quickly becomes an ideological practice used to justify racism and genocide as a means to improve society. In this sense, the *Muselmanner* who have no story are simply evolutionary dead-ends.

In her monumental *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt noted that, in Darwin’s scheme, nature constantly develops and progresses—this “means in fact that nature is, as it were, being swept into history, that natural life is considered to be historical.”²² In these terms, the Nazis’ best self-justification for genocide was the fact that they could carry it out, and in so doing fulfill history. Thus, the “result” to be achieved at Auschwitz was

not a casual product of Nazism, but central to its *raison d'être*.²³ “[Totalitarian] terror as the execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind, eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the ‘parts’ for the sake of the ‘whole’ . . . Practically speaking, this means that terror executes on the spot the death sentences which Nature is supposed to have pronounced on races or individuals who are ‘unfit to live.’”²⁴ Even as Levi joins himself to a “we” who called upon the idea of natural selection to interpret the meaning of Auschwitz and reveal something of human nature, his account supports Arendt’s contention that a dangerous form of social Darwinism was instrumental to the camp’s existence, and that the camp, in turn, was instrumental to the mission of the totalitarian state.

As a secular humanist, the double bind for Levi is that he believes in the sovereignty of human rationality over both nature and the divine: what defines “we humans” in this scheme is the ability to reason. But Darwin’s potent theory actually diminishes humans, revealing them to be what Levi calls “the human animal,” who is, like all animals, subject to natural selection and also subject to exploitation at the hands of other people. For the Nazis, Darwinism offers both a justification and a means for dominating not only nature but humanity as well. Heinrich Himmler’s 1943 speech to the SS officer corps adopts, precisely, this rhetoric to conceptualize the German people as a dominant “we”:

We are a product of the law of selection. We have made our choice from a cross-section of our people. This people came into being eons ago, through generations and centuries, by the throw of the dice of fate and of history . . . The law of nature is just this: What is hard is good; what is vigorous is good; whatever wins through in the battle of life, physically, purposefully and spiritually, that is what is good—always taking the long view. Of course sometimes—and this has happened often in history—someone can get to the top by deceit and cheating. That makes no difference to nature, to the fate of the earth, to the fate of the world. Reality, that is, Nature, Fate, removes the impostor after a time—time not reckoned in generations of man but in historical periods. It must be our endeavor never to deceive ourselves, but always to remain genuine; that is what we must continually preach and instill into ourselves, and into every boy and each one of our subordinates.²⁵

If the violence humans unleash on each other is a form of “natural selection,” then human actions are removed from the ethical. To be a Holocaust survivor, to be vigorous and, therefore, “good” within this system, is to be coerced to validate the legitimacy of Nazism’s pathological social Darwinism. The survivor’s identity is as much determined by her or his ability to

dominate as to be a dominated. This is evident in Levi's portraits of four different self-serving survivors, especially with regard to "Henri," one of the prisoners Levi most vigorously loathed and also, although not fully acknowledged in the text, the one whom he most resembled in age, cultural background and intellect.²⁶

Henri, on the other hand, is eminently civilized and sane, and possesses a complete and organic theory on the ways to survive in Lager. He . . . has an excellent scientific and classical culture . . . Henri is perfectly aware of his natural gifts and exploits them with the cold competence of one who uses a scientific instrument . . . There is nothing in the camp that he does not know about and about which he has not reasoned in his close and coherent manner . . . From all my talks with Henri, even the most cordial, I have always left with a slight taste of defeat; of having been, somehow inadvertently, not a man to him, but an instrument in his hands.²⁷

If the brutal life in the camp reveals hidden dimensions of ordinary life, and Levi hopes that it will, one lesson is that educated, civilized people do not pursue knowledge merely for its own sake but use it to advance their self-interests. Henri has thoroughly analyzed the functioning of the camp and knows how to exploit its structure. Like a scientist, Levi explains, he intelligently and coolly manipulates other prisoners as if they are simply tools rather than men to whom one is morally obligated. In fact, everywhere in "The Drowned and the Saved" chapter, scientific knowledge and rationality are explicitly linked to the unethical pursuit of power. "The drowned" cannot be morally corrupt because they die from not understanding the workings of the camp; "the saved" are corrupt because they understand its workings too well. (Levi remarked on the rarity of survival "without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world" [92].) Despite the shared suffering among all of the victims, the structure of Auschwitz produces a "differend," a mutual unintelligibility, between "the drowned" and "the saved," who were compelled to participate in, and even affirm personally, the Darwinian logic of the perpetrators.

Morally compromised and isolated by the exigencies of survival, it is difficult for Holocaust writers who, like Levi, seek a modicum of justice for the victims, to lay claim to the ethical authority required to accuse vast numbers of people of criminal behavior. One strategy Levi had for mediating between his suspect position as a survivor and that of the other prisoners was to use irony to signal his awareness of the disparity between what Auschwitz compelled the would-be survivors to do and the ethical norms of everyday life. As I have previously stated, Levi ironically inverts the moral terminology of Dante's *Inferno*: "the drowned" (i.e., the damned) in

Auschwitz are innocent and “the saved” (i.e., the survivors) are sinners.²⁸ With this intentional irony, he means to create a sense of community (a “we”) between the writer and the ideal reader who is attuned to this inversion of established categories.²⁹ Yet, despite his wish to keep it under control, irony inevitably subverts intention and reveals that language is always subject to multiple interpretations, that the meanings of words are always threatened by reversals and negations. Through irony, Levi attempts to reconstruct, out of the ruins of Auschwitz, a new collectivity to mediate “the differend.” Instead, in raising the vexing questions of who is finally saved and who deserves to be, he reveals the irresolvable conflict in modern Europe between the Darwinian (i.e., “the survival of the fittest”) and the Judeo-Christian (i.e., “the survival of the weakest”), the latter providing the basis for Levi’s secular ethical universalism.

In the discussion above, I have tried to shed light on the implications of Levi’s objectifying analysis of the camp, which he deploys without thinking it through to its logical conclusion. In contrast, fellow survivor Jean Améry, of whom I have written in Chapter 2, understands the intellectually seductive qualities of Hegelianism and the principles of natural selection.

The intellectual . . . who experienced the logic of the SS as a reality that proved itself by the hour, now took a few fateful steps further in his thinking. Were not those who were preparing to destroy him right, owing to the undeniable fact that they were the stronger ones? . . . Yes, the SS could carry on just as it did: there are no natural rights, and moral categories come and go like the fashions. A Germany existed that drove Jews and political opponents to their death, since it believed that only in this way could it become a full reality. And what of it? . . . Countless people had been sacrificed as far back as the light of history reaches, and mankind’s eternal progress was only a naïve belief of the nineteenth century anyhow . . . More than his unintellectual mates the intellectual in the camp was lamed by his historically and sociologically explicable deeper respect for power; in fact, the intellectual always and everywhere has been under the sway of power . . . No matter what his thinking may have been on the outside, in this sense here he became a Hegelian.³⁰

In his essay, “The Intellectual in Auschwitz,” in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi cites the above passage and suggests that, as an Italian, he avoided this “intellectual abdication,” whereas the German intelligentsia, including Améry, “tends to follow in Hegel’s footsteps and deify the State, any State; the sole fact of its existing justifies its existence” (*Drowned* 145). Of course, neither survivor endorses “the logic of the SS,” but Améry is aware of how power and violence have shaped history. However, Levi seems unable, for

the most part, to probe the troubling link between his own objectifying scientific discourses and Hegelian thought.

Conclusion

In the passages under scrutiny in my analysis, Levi's "we" is positioned within an imagined community of scientists who look into the camp from the outside. The scientific method demands that the observer take such a position, although it leaves the victims without an authentic voice of their own. So, too, does "the differend" produced by Auschwitz, which precludes consensus and short-circuits the possibility of a legitimate "we" that speaks from within the camp. It emerges from this reading that Levi is sometimes more of a behaviorist than a moralist, that, as a scientist, he is sometimes more taken up with what is rather than what, in an ethical sense, ought to be. The essential point of my discussion is not, crudely put, that Levi's "we" simply recapitulates a Nazi perspective; rather, my argument is that Levi and the Nazis and all of Europe share the modes of Enlightenment thought that lead not only to common ways of understanding history but also to radical programs that seek to remake societies by destroying them. Levi's dilemma, which applies to all Holocaust writing that depends on language to be fully inclusive and on reason to free humanity from oppression, is that his testimony risks complicity with authoritarian or Hegelian discourses that fully identify the Western subject with power. To say this is not to undermine the remarkable historical and moral force of Levi's writing but to underscore both the tenacity and the vulnerability of the values that animate it.

My analysis of Levi's authoritative, scientific description of life in the camps has implications beyond the passages I have examined here—first, because scholars have tended to ignore similar problems raised by his authorial position in a number of his texts; and second, because Levi's positivism remained with him until the end of his career. By the 1980s, he became aware that his objectifying strategies might be seen as inhumane or insufficiently sympathetic. Still, he remained unapologetic for his "detached" perspective. "From my trade I contracted a habit that can be variously judged and defined at will as human or inhuman—the habit of never remaining indifferent to the individuals that chance brings before me. They are human being but also 'samples,' specimens in a sealed envelope to be identified, analyzed, and weighed. Now, the sample book that Auschwitz had place before me was rich . . . yet in any case food for my curiosity, which some people, then and later, have judged as detached" (*Drowned* 141). The challenge that Levi faced, like other survivor writers,

was to find a way to testify for the victims. As “specimens,” the victims lose individuality and humanity; on the other hand, the circumstances are so unexpected and unprecedented that only scientific rigor satisfies our need to believe we have authentic, truth-telling texts in hand.

In the epigraph I have chosen for this chapter, Lyotard borrows Adorno’s idea that “Auschwitz” is the name for the event that confounds Hegelian history, for a negative so radical that it subverts the dialectical drive of progressive reason “towards universal emancipation.” No positive knowledge can derive from the Holocaust and, even more significantly, the Enlightenment’s faith in progress through rationality has been discredited by it. These ideas, on which Lyotard drew liberally in conceptualizing “the differend,” were previously developed in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*.³¹ That book and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cowritten with Horkheimer, provided the theoretical framework for Chapter 2, where I discussed the complicity of high culture in the Holocaust. Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion that the Enlightenment is “totalitarian” in its intolerance of difference corresponds to Lyotard’s claim that official histories are actually totalizing discourses or “Grand Narratives” that demand consensus while silencing dissent. Caught between secular humanism and our post-Holocaust condition, Levi’s texts serve as a case study that illustrates the claims made by Adorno and Lyotard, while at the same time revealing as well as the common ground on which the two thinkers erect their critiques of modernity and instrumental reason. The next chapter, on ethics, continues to interrogate the role of “self-preservation” in Levi’s memoir and the primacy of ontology (i.e., being) in Western society.

Ethics and Ontology in Auschwitz and After

How was I able to survive Auschwitz? My principle is: I come first, second and third. Then nothing, then again I; and then all the others.

—Ella Lingens-Reiner¹

It is not the concept of “man” which is at the basis of this humanism, it is the other man.

—Emmanuel Levinas²

This chapter borrows Emmanuel Levinas’s critique of Western thought, and also the posthumanist ethics he proposes as a remedy for its deficiencies, to reread *Survival in Auschwitz*. A critical approach of this type is needed to insert Levi’s canonical text into a larger discussion about whether the Holocaust, along with the other genocides that have stained the last century, constitute a watershed in the history of Western culture that marks the end of modernity, the end of blind faith in instrumental rationality, and the end of humanist ethics. In the context of this discussion, ethics are defined as the continuously negotiated relations between the self (or the subject) and the other (that is, the one who is irreducibly not the same as the self), which, at the negative and positive extremes, encompass either inequality and exploitation or mutuality and obligation.

No literary text engages the ethical implications of the Holocaust more searchingly than *Survival in Auschwitz*, which is both a record of what the author personally endured in the death camp and also a testimony to the sufferings of others.³ Levi reports his own physical, intellectual, and moral degradation with notable restraint. He candidly admits to having more or less internalized the corrosive ethics of Auschwitz whereby “a man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means” (*Survival* 13). At the same time, he engages the reader ethically with continual references to the

victims' faces and eyes and also to the dehumanizing stares of the SS guards and Kapos that deny human status to the victims. These descriptions of face-to-face encounters, harsh gazes, and the seeming invisibility of the concentration camp prisoners before their oppressors provoke our reflection on the problematical relationship between self and other that is always at the heart of ethical questioning. As readers of Levi's memoir, we sense that we are summoned to posit and live by an ethical obligation between humans strong enough to prevent further genocides.

As one of the most widely read descriptions of Auschwitz from the prisoners' point of view, Levi's testimony shouldered the heavy responsibility of speaking for victims who did not return and who have no voice of their own. In contrast to the partially misleading American title, the memoir's original Italian title, *Se questo è un uomo* ("If This is a Man"), offers no happy endings but instead promises to interrogate the definition of man, both in Auschwitz and after, and the ethical obligations that may accrue from this unresolved "If" statement. At moments, Levi seems determined to repair the humanist idea of man by reasserting the Enlightenment principle of universality against Nazism's shocking determination that some among us are subhuman. At the same time, and perhaps against Levi's conscious intentions, the memoir also puts in doubt the efficacy of this Kantian universality by refusing to definitively answer the grave ethical question posed by Auschwitz: when a man has lost everything—his name, his language, and his intellectual faculties—what compels us to treat him as a fellow human? In other words, when another is conceived as wholly other, as the Jews were during the Holocaust, humanist ethics might no longer function.

While Levi scholars have usually noted the memoir's humanist agenda, in which reason and culture are largely redemptive, they have seldom taken into account the counternarrative embedded in the text, which corroborates that after Auschwitz, the Enlightenment conception of man, and the ethical guarantees the word implies, have been irreparably damaged. The aim of my discussion is to find, in the work of Levinas, a new interpretive model that can account for the text's ambivalence toward universality as a basis for ethics. To bring the tensions in Levi's account into higher relief, I will conclude this chapter with brief analyses of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, a survivor testimony that unambiguously supports the integrity of the humanist subject, and Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a book attempting to articulate a new, post-Holocaust ethics that claims to draw support from Levi's ideas. Antelme does not directly interrogate the survivor's unresolved ethical relation with peers who never returned, whereas survivor guilt often informs Levi's account, which is, at times, haunted by the image of the thoroughly dehumanized victim who

perhaps deserved to live no less than Levi himself. If the comparison with Antelme helps reveal the complex dynamic between Levi's humanism and his lurking suspicion that these ideas have been undermined by the Holocaust, Agamben's idiosyncratic and mistaken reading of Levi as a bold posthumanist merely reconfirms that liberal humanism and positivism dominate Levi's intellectual framework despite the muted presence of an anti-Enlightenment counternarrative.

In the following discussion, I will often use Levi's term, *Man*, rather than a gender-neutral one. It serves the argument put forward here that the word will strike readers as a false universal incapable of accommodating difference.

Ulysses and Abraham

For philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the logic of Nazism was not at odds with humanist ethics; rather, it revealed definitively the flawed foundations of Western thought whose intolerance of difference legitimated the Nazis' genocidal antisemitism. "Humanism has to be denounced," he concluded, "only because it is not sufficiently human."⁴ In response to the willful destruction of humanity, Levinas rejects the primacy of ontology, with its subject-centered conceptions of universal knowledge and truth, in favor of a system of ethics that posits an obligation to the other that precedes even the subject's own being. This ethical obligation originates in the sight of the other's face—the most naked, vulnerable part of the body. The paradigmatic Levinasian ethical moment is the face-to-face encounter in which the subject accepts the irreducible difference of the other that is beyond knowledge and assimilation.

Levinas writes in opposition to Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, and to the whole of Western thought for which ontology is primary. He argues that philosophy favors reason and epistemology over ethics, and that it privileges the "Greek" language of being, which violently absorbs difference into ontological self-identification, over the "Hebrew" responsibility for the other. (His use of the terms Greek and Hebrew is not primarily historical.) The dissimilar stories of two paradigmatic figures, Ulysses and Abraham, illustrate this sharp contrast. With its "horror of the other," philosophy prefers "the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who throughout his peregrination is only on the way to his native island."⁵ In his drive for knowledge and self-preservation, Ulysses disenchants the strange and infinite world of myth, mapping its new, finite boundaries onto his narrative. However, Levinas promotes an ethics "whose movement into the other is

not recuperated in identification, does not return to its point of departure.” Thus, to Ulysses’ *nostos*, Levinas “oppose[s] the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land.”⁶ This direction of travel, toward the other rather than back to the self, is what makes Abraham’s story instructive not just to Jews but to those “of all nations.” “The heirs of Abraham [are] men to whom their ancestor bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward the other man, which one is never done with, an order in which one is never free.”⁷ This heavy obligation is asymmetrical in that our duty to the other is boundless, and we are commanded to act without expectation of symmetrical treatment that is implicit in Kant’s categorical imperative. Thus, ethics is “a vocation of an existing-for-the-other stronger than the threat of [one’s own] death.”⁸ The ethical opposes Spinoza’s *conatus essendi* (“the right to existence”), the central tenet in Western thought that legitimates violence whenever being appears threatened by the other.

The West’s persistent claim that being is the highest good has had broad social and political implications in that, according to Levinas, “ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.”⁹ While he does not elaborate in detail the relationship between his ideas and the Holocaust, Levinas implies, time and again, that Nazism exemplifies the violence of being.¹⁰ In practice, as the first principle of Nazi racial science, the “survival instinct” promised the mastery of nature over humanity. As a microcosm of Nazi society, the extermination camps operated by the same principle: to be a survivor of Auschwitz is to have been forced to confirm the validity of the “survival of the fittest” concept in a fashion that mirrors the role the Nazis cast for themselves.

In outward form, nearly all survivor testimonies mimic Ulysses’ tale: after hardship, the witness returns altered, to be sure, but also the same person now possessed of new knowledge. The conventions of the genre demand an explanation of how the writer/protagonist escaped peril. Levi’s memoir shares these general qualities and, even more specifically, Dante’s version of Ulysses dominates an entire chapter (as I discussed in Chapter 2). As a narrative compelled to explain how one survived, the inaccurate American title for the memoir is not completely misleading as it conditions the reader to expect an uplifting story of endurance and integrity, initiative and invention. All of those elements can be found in the book. Yet, embedded within the coherent and complete story of return, Levi speaks of the moving, unfinished Holocaust narratives that the prisoners never cease to recount while in the camp. These stories, “all different, all full of a tragic disturbing necessity . . . are simple and incomprehensible like stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?” (*Survival* 65–66). These profound tales with uncertain endings (will the teller

survive?) represent suffering beyond our comprehension and beyond any utility. Indeed, unlike Levi's own story of return, they prompt no Hegelian temptations to synthesize the negative into a positive result, to reduce difference and multiplicity to the same, or to find lessons in the Holocaust. By incorporating these fragmented narratives into his memoir, Levi illustrates the following Levinasian maxim: "Ethical testimony is a revelation which is not a knowledge."¹¹

When *Survival in Auschwitz* functions as a narrative of return and self-preservation, as an odyssey in which the autobiographical subject is constituted in the overcoming of extreme experience, Levi writes himself into being. He speaks as a liberal humanist "convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world we are describing" (87). Thinking about the camp, both its functioning and its meaning, becomes a process for turning negative experience into positive knowledge. Yet, these totalizing claims often give way to ethical testimony that has no other purpose than to register the suffering of those around him. In a Levinasian key, this narrating subject is constituted by the other over which it has no control, perhaps fulfilling the humanism to which Levinas aspires: not one based on the autonomous "I" but on the ethical summons of the other person. The desirability of Levinasian ethics is undeniable in any meditation on the extermination camp, where the exchange of human solidarity for individual survival sadly affirms the validity of Nazism's social Darwinism. After Auschwitz, it is hard not to concur with Levinas's claim that the realm of "ethics is . . . *against nature* because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first."¹²

My claim is that *Survival in Auschwitz* and, to some degree, all Holocaust survivor narratives framed by humanist assumptions negotiate the contested terrain between the *conatus essendi* and the unvoiced suffering of the other person who has not survived. Accordingly, while Levi's memoir is dominated by the "Greek" mode, at times, as illustrated above, it slips into the "Hebrew" mode. The ontological position is repeatedly interrupted by the ethical call of the other, which, in turn, succumbs, once again, to the compelling narrative of being. Much of the rest of this chapter is dedicated to close readings of a few key passages in *Survival in Auschwitz* showing that the dilemma at the heart of Levi's testimony resides in the simultaneous entwinement of, and opposition between, the "Greek" and "Hebrew" modes.

The Face of the Muselmann

The memoir's ethical aspect is brought front and center by the epigraphic poem which, as echoed by the Italian title ("If This is a Man"), commands the "safe" reader, surrounded by "friendly faces," to reflect on whether the dehumanized victim, unable to assert his or her own subjectivity, is yet a human being for whom the reader is responsible.¹³ "Consider if this is a man/Who works in the mud /Who does not know peace/ . . . /Consider if this is a woman/Without hair and without name/ . . . /Her eyes empty and her womb cold" (lines 5–7, 10–11, 13). The poem's imagery is almost entirely visual: the imperative verb "consider" suggests, in its Latin roots, a meditative form of vision—a kind of stargazing suitable for apprehending the transcendent. But here, the human face is the focal point of the poem's gaze as the "friendly faces" of the first stanza give way to the dehumanized victim's blank stare ("her eyes empty"). The poem's directive to reflect on, and remember, the effects of dehumanization—"Meditate that this came about" (line 15)—is strategically positioned before the memoir properly begins so that one is forced to respond even before learning why and how these people are reduced to such a state. No details firmly identify them as Holocaust victims; indeed, apart from their innocence, the specific circumstances under which they suffer seem to have no bearing on our obligation to consider whether they still possess human qualities. From first sight, we find we have already incurred a commitment to these others who are not individuals, but abstract humans with whom we cannot easily identify. Like the memoir as a whole, the poem works to overturn the oppressive gaze that did violence in the camp and to replace it with one that acknowledges the vulnerability and nakedness of the anonymous victims. Indeed, Levi states, in the book's preface, that his testimony is meant to force his readers to confront this inhumanity, "to make 'the rest' participate in it" (*Survival* 9).

As a survivor-writer, Levi takes on the difficult task of using language to mediate between us—the complacent public—and the distant victims who have an ethical claim on us. He puts before us the faces of countless victims who did not survive, who cannot by themselves demand anything of us, who cannot make themselves present or stop us from forgetting them. In this way, Levi not only testifies to the suffering of the other but also, in the language of religion, witnesses the covenant that ethically binds humanity to itself. In fact, the poem imitates, but also alters, biblical passages in Deuteronomy that form the key prayer in Judaism—the "Shemà"—which asserts by another imperative ("Hear, O Israel!") the fundamental principle of monotheism. (Untitled in the memoir, the poem was titled "Shemà" when published in Levi's first poetry collection, privately printed for

friends and family.) “I commend these words to you,/Carve them in your hearts” (lines 16–17). The speaker of the poem is positioned as Moses, who dispenses the law on behalf of an infinite, radically other God. But now, after Auschwitz, the Jews’ commitment to Yahweh has been supplanted by our ethical obligation to the wholly other person who offers us nothing in return.

Both the ideas and vocabulary of the poem’s ethical discourse bring to mind Levinas’s concept of the face.¹⁴ The face of the other, exposed and threatened, incites us to an act of violence against it, while, at the same time, signifying the interdiction against murder. “The face says to me: you shall not kill. In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. The celebrated ‘right to existence’ that Spinoza called the *conatus essendi* and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility is challenged by the relation to the face. My duty to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival.”¹⁵ This other—radically alone and a potential victim of violence—is analogous to the victims evoked in Levi’s poem who, in their utter silence, still command our attention. The command issued by the face, which is at once the weakest and strongest of forces, puts the subject, the “I,” into question. The face of the other demands that ethics precede ontology, necessitating what Levinas calls, in an essay of the same title, “Ethics as First Philosophy.”¹⁶

Surprisingly, in contrast to the rest of the poem, which operates in a “Hebrew” mode, the final stanza renews the idea that one’s humanity exists only in reciprocity. Our failure to confront the dehumanized victims, to recognize the suffering in them, will bring on a curse articulated in the last line. Our children will turn away their faces, will, in effect, deny the human recognition that we, who now mimic the position of the victims, certainly require (line 22). (Again, Levi draws on Deuteronomy, where the blessings offered to those who follow the commandments are balanced with lists of curses that will befall those who do not.) This sudden shift to the self-interested, ontological position illustrates the ethical dilemma at the core of Levi’s poem and the memoir as a whole. On one hand, Levi and his readers have reason to fear that Levinasian ethics are too abstract and demand too much selflessness to command our responsibility. On the other hand, the Nazis’ ability to render their victims inhuman challenges the efficacy of any ethics based on reciprocal obligation among men who must first be recognized as subjects like ourselves. Apart from the last stanza, Levi’s poem effectively conveys the victims’ inability to look at the reader’s face and, therefore, to commit him or her to reciprocal respect for all human subjects. In sum, the Kantian categorical imperative cannot ethically bind us to the totally dehumanized victims of Auschwitz, whose alterity is beyond assimilation.

The dehumanized victims in Levi's poem figure significantly in the memoir itself, although the ethical demand that Levi-as-witness transfers from them to us is now markedly reduced. The so-called *Muselmanner* of Auschwitz are "the men in decay" who "drag themselves along in an opaque solitude and in solitude they die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone's memory" (*Survival* 89). Of course, they are remembered in Levi's testimony, and in many other survivor memoirs, but not as individuals who can narrate themselves into being. Levi writes that "all the [*Muselmanner*] who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story" (90). In their complete emptiness, the *Muselmanner* are unknowable and impervious to the humanizing effects of narration. Slavoj Žižek corroborates this point, stating that "there is no way to 'symbolize' their predicament, to organize it into a meaningful life-narrative." But he hastens to add that to say this is to "inadvertently reproduce and thus attest to the very dehumanization imposed on them by the Nazis."¹⁷ Thus, with some discomfort, we read that the *Muselmanner* are, for Levi, "an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death" (90). While these callous words renew the oppressive gaze of Nazism's violence of being, they are also an honest description of the dehumanizing rituals of Auschwitz that rendered the victims unable to appeal to their victimizers. At, or past, the limit of the human and of the thinkable, the experience of the *Muselmanner* in life, suffering, silence, and death has no meaning in an ontological framework, where the other to whom one owes compassion must be recognizable as another version of the self or where the other must at least be an object of knowledge. If Levi's epigraphic poem implies that, in Levinasian fashion, we are ethically obligated to those who have been robbed of every human vestige, the descriptions of the dehumanized prisoners in the body of the memoir leave the question far from resolved. Without paradigmatic human qualities, the *Muselmanner* is alterity itself, the other who pushes humanist ethics beyond the point at which the categorical imperative falls apart. In the extermination camp, Levi and all the survivors were forced, by circumstances, to turn their faces away from the weakest victims, who constituted the vast majority of the prisoners. Finding almost no space left for ethical behavior, the would-be survivors either had to embrace self-preservation or perish.

Despite the persistence of the survival narrative in the memoir—the retelling of his story of return—Levi's final remarks about the *Muselmanner* suddenly shift into a Levinasian ethical position in which one has no choice but to regard, and never forget, even the most vacant, defenseless faces. "They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if

I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen" (90).¹⁸ The eyes of the *Muselmann*, emptied of thought, refer us back to the empty eyes of the epigraphic poem. The paradoxical locution—the faceless face on whose face nothing is seen—suggests that something essential of Auschwitz remains unspeakable, trapped in a negativity and silence that Levi confronts with difficulty. In hesitation, he resorts to a hypothetical clause ("If I could . . ."). The subject, the self-conscious "I," is put into question by this single image that epitomizes the gratuitous suffering that Nazism worked to produce—a useless suffering that can never be justified by narratives of redemption or martyrdom or Hegelian syntheses. At this moment, Levi's writing is "for-the-other," which, to Levinas, "is the most upright relation to the other—is the most profound adventure of subjectivity." However, this ethical position produces no universal knowledge: it "cannot give itself out as an example, or be narrated in an edifying discourse. It cannot, without becoming perverted, be made into a preachment."¹⁹ The complex interplay between the "Greek" and "Hebrew" modes that shape Levi's discussion of the *Muselmann* also illustrates, in specific terms, how Levinas thinks about the ethical aspect of testimony. It is not "based on knowledge and thematization," the qualities of finite being. Rather, he states, "the concept of testimony I am trying to describe surely implies a mode of revelation, but this revelation *gives* us nothing . . . It is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs."²⁰

Survival and the Narrating Subject

Unlike the *Muselmann*, Levi, as a survivor and author, is able to tell his individual story, to explain the circumstances that allowed him to retain a critical degree of human identity, even as he also records the sensation of being dehumanized, of being an other to exploit and then to eliminate. This dual point of view is especially evident in the "Chemical Examination" chapter, in which he has an exceptional face-to-face encounter with Pannwitz, a German chemist who works for one of the civilian industries that exploits prison laborers provided by the SS. A tremendous amount is at stake for Levi: he knows that passing the examination administered by Pannwitz might give him a job in the factory's laboratory as a "specialist" and that the favorable working conditions might allow him to survive the camp for a few more months. This comes to pass after Levi demonstrates his qualifications, as he spends the coldest months of 1944 working

indoors (*Survival* 136–44). In the paragraphs leading up to the anticipated encounter, Levi and other members of the so-called Chemical Kommando are described as virtual *Muselmanner* on the verge of having no story to tell. With “empty faces” and feeling “no longer alive,” it strikes them as absurd that, with their withered minds, they should be invited to demonstrate their specialized knowledge of chemistry (102–3). At this point, Levi makes a remarkable aside, unlike any other in the memoir, which transports the reader outside of the camp and beyond the past that is narrated to the time of narration, when, in his hometown of Turin, Levi puts into words these events that happened as much as two years before: “Today, at this very moment, as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened” (103). Perhaps, as a writer of survivor testimony who works within the strictures of the genre, Levi lacks complete confidence in his ability to narrate a plausible account of how, through such exceptional circumstances, he escaped peril. More significantly, however, this aside underscores that Levi’s is a narrative of return that promises to domesticate the monstrous world of Auschwitz by incorporating it into his own *Odyssey*. The aside, as if drawing back a curtain, reveals the moment at which the first-person subject writes himself into being, as Levi does in telling the story of his successful chemistry examination.

The description of the encounter between Levi and Pannwitz begins with a few sentences noting the complete dissimilarity between the two individuals and the abyss that separates them. Filthy and “half kaputt,” Levi stands; Pannwitz, “tall, thin, blond,” sits behind his clean, orderly desk. The ethical dimension of the encounter is strongly insinuated by Pannwitz’s hostile gaze at Levi, and then by the look they exchange, which “was not one between two men” (105). In Levinasian terms, the ethical aspect of the face of the other remained invisible in the concentration camp, overwhelmed by the *conatus essendi*. However, if human life really boils down to survival of the fittest, as Nazi ideology purported, then humans are no different from animals, and that is precisely what the camp produces: neither Levi nor Pannwitz are men at this point. As the examination proceeds, Levi imagines the German saying to himself, “‘this something in front of me belongs to a species which is obviously opportune to suppress. In this particular case, one has to first make sure that it does not contain some utilizable element’” (106). Pannwitz, who seems solely concerned with moving his work ahead, dismisses Levi’s humanity altogether. At best, the prisoner is merely an object to be exploited; at worst, a dangerous mutant. In this darkest moment, Levi’s belief that thinking and knowing confer humanness is validated when, through his knowledge of organic chemistry, he convinces Pannwitz that he is a man whose individual identity “is impossible to doubt.” Levi feels a “lucid elation” resulting from

the “spontaneous mobilization of all [his] logical faculties.” Indeed, he “seem[s] to grow in stature” as his intellectual prowess is recognized (106). He begins the interview as a prisoner known only by a number, and ends up as Primo Levi, B.S., University of Turin, as a man whose individual story merits the respect of a fellow chemist. In this moment, we are tempted to resubscribe to the continued efficacy of Kant’s categorical imperative. Having considered whether this filthy prisoner possessed of reason and knowledge is a man, Pannwitz is compelled, at least implicitly, to respond in the affirmative.

Before the examination began, Levi was aware that failure to pass this test of mental agility could mean his death; thus, he felt “like Oedipus before the Sphinx” (105), who must solve the famous riddle (whose answer is “man”) or die. In a sense, Levi’s successful chemical examination is analogous to unraveling the Sphinx’s riddle, to defeating the dangerous forces of myth by means of intelligence and knowledge. When Oedipus outwits the Sphinx, he shows how the rational mind overcomes terrifying figures of myth by seeing them as anthropomorphic, as aspects of the self rather than as embodiments of difference beyond assimilation. Since solving the riddle depends upon conceiving of a single entity that can crawl, walk, and hobble, Oedipus condenses multiplicity to the unity contained wholly within himself—a man. In utilizing the “Greek” language of being to absorb difference into ontological self-identification, Oedipus refers us back to the figure of Ulysses. Both characters are agents of disenchantment who use rationality to reduce the mythical and infinite to a controllable finite. Likewise, in the “Chemical Examination” chapter, and in much of the rest of the memoir, Levi narrates a survival story that explains how, through the power of knowledge and rational thought, he masters the mythical terrors of Auschwitz, ensuring his self-preservation.

Robert Antelme’s Humanism

In negotiating the space between ethics and ontology, Levi reiterates the values of secular humanism even as he stumbles upon the bases of Levinas’s humanism of the other. Hinged on the incomplete hypothetical, “If this is a man, [then] . . .” *Survival in Auschwitz* documents an instance in history where the human being seems to have been deprived of its essential humanity. This event forever calls into question fundamental philosophical categories and undermines suppositions that gave birth to Enlightenment universality. The nuance and complexity of Levi’s response to Auschwitz, in which the idea of the human is revealed to be contingent, diverges from the humanist position taken up by Robert Antelme in his survivor testimony,

The Human Race. Canonized by the likes of Maurice Blanchot, Georges Perec, and Sarah Kofman, Antelme's book, like Levi's, was first issued by a small press in 1947 and reissued by a major one ten years later.²¹ The contrast between these two outwardly similar memoirs, each concerned with the Nazi assault on the self, helps us to see how Levi's text exceeds the limits of the humanism he seemed determined to defend at the outset.

Antelme, who was not Jewish, participated in the resistance in France until he was arrested in 1944 and deported to Buchenwald. He also spent time at a Buchenwald subcamp, Gandersheim, and was later sent to Dachau, where he nearly died after the liberation. The title of his book, *L'Espèce humaine*, in the original French, surely refers to his unrelenting claim—in opposition to Nazism's insistence on the qualitative diversity and hierarchy among humankind—that there is only one human species that cannot be subdivided in any legitimate way: "The calling into question of our quality as men provokes an almost biological claim of belonging to the human race . . . It brings us a clear vision of its indivisible oneness" (*Human* 5). Later, he states, "It's because we are men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It is because they shall have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed" (219). In the face of Nazism's racism and cultural chauvinism, Antelme argues that the essential sameness among humans will eventually force the SS to capitulate, to finally accept that their victims are not objects to be oppressed, but subjects like themselves. This Kantian equivalence and identification is certainly one basis for human rights and equality.²² However, as I have suggested in my discussion of ontology and the enshrinement of self-preservation, a grave ethical shortcoming of "Greek" thought before Levinas is its near inability to place the needs of the other person before those of the self. Indeed, the concept of a unified and uniform humanity championed by Antelme leaves no place for difference—call it nonidentity—and leaves little possibility for the subject to encounter the other without either trying to absorb it into the self or rejecting it as non-human. This is precisely the kind of liberal humanism that Levinas meant to revise by elevating the other over the ontological subject.

"The reign of man, man who acts or invests things with meaning, does not cease. The SS cannot alter our species" (74). With this and other statements, Antelme affirms that we are, first and foremost, subjects who shape and interpret the world, and that this is what defines our humanity. Speaking from within the Western tradition that privileges ontology, he makes a series of observations about the irreducible "being" of the prisoners and proclaims the ultimate futility of the concentration camp's dehumanizing regime, since, it would appear, a man is always a man possessed of his essential dignity regardless of whether he is humiliated or even murdered. "They

wanted to turn us into animals . . . They have been able to take away everything from us *except what we are*. We still exist” (196; emphasis added). Like the *Odyssey*, Antelme’s tale is a narrative of homecoming and, above all, a return to the self.²³ Later, he adds, “there is no ambiguity: we’re still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men. The distance separating us from other species is still intact. It is not historical” (219). The brutality of the camp seems to have convinced Antelme that a man is always a man, that he cannot be made into an animal, and that humanity itself is eternal and unified, nothing like the evanescent historical construct—“a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”—that Michel Foucault posited at the end of *The Order of Things*.²⁴ Against the preponderance of the evidence, Antelme implies that Man shapes history but that history does not shape the very contours of Man.

Although he witnessed much suffering, brutality, and death, it is not certain that Antelme encountered the thoroughly dehumanized victims that Levi and other survivors called *Muselmann*. “I relate here what I lived through,” Antelme writes. “The horror in it is not gigantic. At Gandersheim, there was no gas chamber, no crematorium . . . The motivation underlying our struggle could only have been . . . a furious desire to remain men, down to the very end” (*Human* 5). Levi corroborated the tenacity with which the prisoners attempted to retain their humanity, but he would not have been able to affirm the following remark made in *The Human Race*: “[The hangman] can kill a man, but he can’t change him into something else” (220). In Levi’s account, it is clear that the *Muselmann* was something else or someone else with whom the survivors could not identify and for whom they could speak only indirectly. This figure of radical alterity overturns Antelme’s idea of an indivisible humanity.

It is surprising that Blanchot misread *The Human Race* as a Levinasian text “through which the Other [was] received and brought within human hearing.”²⁵ Ignoring its unwavering ontological discourse, Blanchot takes Antelme’s testimony to say that “the camp no longer holds anything but a tangled, disconnected mass of men, each Another, a jumble of others facing the power of the Self as killer, which represents nothing other than the unwearying power to kill” (67). However, as I have shown, Antelme identified the human exclusively with the subject, refused to acknowledge otherness as a human condition, and rejected, *a priori*, Germany’s attempt to label its imprisoned enemies or any of its European neighbors as others. In arguing that *The Human Race* defends a position contrary to the Levinasian one, Colin Davis confirms my reading of Antelme and his brand of humanism:

The camps certainly do function as a space of otherness, where the self is stranded and threatened by destitution in the face of something which cannot be assimilated and which makes no sense; but in *L'Espèce humaine* otherness appears as a threat to be resisted rather than the opportunity for radical ethical renewal. Antelme's aim is to preserve the self in the face of everything which might reduce it to nothingness . . . This is not a Levinasian humanism of the other man, it is a humanism resting on the joint foundations of the self and the inviolability of the human species. In Antelme's text, staying alive at all costs, eating one's own bread (and even stealing the bread of others) is an act of defiance against forces that aim to fracture the self and the species. In an ethics of alterity on the other hand, there is no moral urgency to the survival of the self.²⁶

Antelme's memoir is remarkable: he has told us a new kind of story in which, unlike bygone literature, the heroes' "last and only claim [is] an ultimate sense of belonging to the human race."²⁷ In testifying to the prisoners' resistance and ingenuity in Auschwitz, Levi has achieved something similar but also something more. Had he not seen the *Muselmanner* or had he otherwise failed to recognize their significance, Levi would have perhaps affirmed completely, rather than partially, the liberal humanism that governs Antelme's world. Instead, he offers a sketchy portrait of a person so radically other—the *Muselmanner*—that we are forced to revise our notion of the human and to consider exchanging our ethics based on identity for those based on difference.

Agamben, Levinas, and the Subject of Testimony

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben persuasively argues that the advent of the *Muselmann* renders obsolete humanist or liberal ethics founded on the notion that every human being is a subject endowed with intrinsic dignity.²⁸ Stripped of paradigmatic human qualities, the *Muselmann* constitutes a nonhuman human or desubjectivized subject whose presence pushes conventional ethics beyond their breaking point. As we have seen, even Levi was tempted to view these individuals as something less than human—"the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death" (*Survival* 90). This position, which unwittingly legitimates the claims of Nazi racial ideology, must be challenged if we are to salvage ethics after Auschwitz. Agamben is certainly right to argue that "no ethics can permit itself to exclude from its province a part of the human" (*Remnants* 64), no matter how debased. The *Muselmann*, at the extreme limit of

human, has now become “the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends” (69).

The concepts of Levinas can be used to critique and complete Agamben’s attempt to articulate post-Holocaust ethics. Agamben’s work merits consideration here because it is insightful, if flawed, and also because Levi’s Holocaust texts are his most important primary source. As I have previously explained, Kantian ethics based on reciprocal identification cannot function after Auschwitz because the *Muselmann* lacks recognizable subjectivity. Under these new circumstances, how can the survivor, who stands in for the rest of us, respond ethically to the *Muselmann*? How can the testimony of the living ever do justice to the non-men who, having never returned from that condition, cannot speak for themselves? To answer these difficult questions, Agamben interrogates and extends on remarks Levi made in his “Shame” essay that I mentioned in passing in the previous chapter: “The complete witnesses [to the Holocaust], the ones whose deposition would have a general significance” are not the survivors, Levi states, but “[the *Muselmanner*] who have not returned to tell about it” (*Drowned* 83–84). Agamben calls this “Levi’s paradox” in that the non-man has experienced total dehumanization but cannot think, let alone speak, while the survivor speaks but cannot truly know the suffering the non-man has experienced. This insight leads Agamben to assert, repeatedly, that authentic survivor testimony conveys virtually no concrete knowledge about atrocity; rather, it can only express the lacuna created by the desubjectivized subject and by all that is unsayable about Auschwitz, the “remnants” to which Agamben’s title refers.²⁹ If, before the Holocaust, the ontological subject was a speaking “I” who asserted her right to exist by testifying to her experience, now, in the aftermath, “*The subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectification*” (*Remnants* 121; emphasis in the original). Agamben later specifies that it is “the *ethical* subject [who] bears witness to desubjectification” (151; emphasis added).

Having uncovered the dysfunctional core of humanist ethics, Agamben attempts to replace it with a nonontological subjectivity conferred by acknowledging the other. From a Levinasian point of view, however, his abstract formulation of desubjectification allows the subject to evade all responsibility for the victims’ suffering, stopping short of where a new ethics might truly begin. In my discussion of *Survival in Auschwitz*, I tried to show that even as Levi bears witness to the *Muselmanner*, a lot of what he says affirms the primacy of ontology and the right that putatively precedes all others—the right to survive. Much of the time, Levi’s memoir follows the same liberal humanist path toward the ontological subject that Antelme takes. This is why the non-man, as described in *Survival in Auschwitz*, does not immediately raise moral questions; rather, he affirms

the continued applicability of Darwinian or Hobbesian truths by means of which his unjust suffering is nevertheless justified. “[H]e will find no one to extend a helping hand; on the contrary, someone will knock him aside, because it is in no one’s interest that there be one more [*Muselmann*] dragging himself to work everyday” (*Survival* 88). Thus, Levi’s account of the terrifying emptiness of the *Muselmann* and the revulsion they produced in the survivors does not by itself amount to an ethical discourse. However, as I have already shown, in those few moments when his testimony foregrounds the suffering of the other and our responsibility for it, such as in the epigraphic poem “Shemà,” Levi approaches Levinasian ethics. Agamben, for all his attentiveness to Levi’s texts, seems unaware of the contradictory ethical positions that course through them.

In the essay “Useless Suffering,” Levinas condemns all attempts to justify suffering or find a purpose in it, and he condemns all theodicies, whether those of faith or those of science, that claim to make suffering comprehensible. The Holocaust, “the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering,” and all of the other disasters of the twentieth century, prove that such afflictions can have no rational use.³⁰ Like Agamben, Levinas reflects on the victim’s experience and our inability to grasp it, and on the inevitable abyss between them and the survivors (or subjects) that “Levi’s paradox” aptly aphorizes. While Agamben’s idea of witnessing strikes me as somewhat passive, as a product of being in the right place at the right time, Levinas insists that all of us, however blameless, however distinct from the events, ought to bridge this abyss by taking responsibility for the victim’s dehumanization, even though we cannot grasp the experience. Indeed, our very subjectivity depends on our achieving this nonontological link to the other, on making her suffering our burden. For Levinas, the only suffering that is useful is “the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other [which] opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human.” “It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties), can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle—the only one impossible to question—shaping the hopes and commanding the practical discipline of vast human groups.”³¹

To bear witness in Levinasian sense, to speak as an ethical subject, is not to assert the authenticity of the ontological self and what one has experienced but to testify to the other’s suffering. Far exceeding the demand Agamben expects of the ethical subject, to testify to a theoretical desubjectification, posthumanist ethics à la Levinas require one to acknowledge a virtually infinite responsibility for the other’s pain. While it may be nearly impossible for us to arrive at a practical application of Levinasian ethics,

to achieve “the level of supreme ethical principle,” this lofty norm would surely prevent future genocides.

“Each Man is His Brother’s Cain”

The aim of this chapter has been to trace the “Greek” and the “Hebrew” modes, two narrative structures in Levi’s memoir that reflect two contrasting positions of the subject in relation to the other. The tension between these two versions of testimony is captured but also hidden in a remark made by a fellow prisoner, Steinlauf, which Levi implicitly endorses: because of this inhumanity, “one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness” (*Survival* 41). The proposition of surviving in order to testify underscores how difficult it was to act ethically in the camps and also to deliver an ethical narrative in the aftermath. If, as this essay’s first epigraph states, the survivor must place himself first, second, and third, what authorizes one to claim to speak ethically about the camp and especially the *Muselmanner*? How can one be for oneself and the other at the same time? Levi understood this problem all too well, especially in relation to Auschwitz, when he stated “that each man is his brother’s Cain” (*Drowned* 81), a formulation that does not emphasize how we ought to keep and care for our brother but how we usurp his place. The double bind for Levi and all survivor writers who seek the ethical high ground is the near impossibility of writing from a position outside of the ontological narrative as exemplified by the *Odyssey*. “If ‘know thyself’ has become the fundamental precept of all Western philosophy,” Levinas asserts, “this is because the West discovers the universe within itself. As with Ulysses, its journey is merely the accident of a return. The *Odyssey*, in this sense, dominates literature.”³² Similarly, while the ontological narrative in *Survival in Auschwitz* is often undermined by the memoir’s ethical narrative, the speaking “I” is never definitively overwhelmed by the other. The “I” dominates this and all survivor narratives.

The problem of escaping being and the violence of being is so intractable that even Levinas struggles against it. In his sympathetic critique of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*, Jacques Derrida argues that Levinas ultimately fails in his attempt to supplant the discourses of totality, and therefore totalitarianism, with that of infinity as represented by an irreducible other. Forced to rely on the ontological language of philosophy to formulate ideas and arguments, Levinas cannot write the “Hebrew” narrative, cannot argue for “ethics as first philosophy,” paradoxically, without first adopting the “Greek” *logos*.³³ But perhaps this critique of Levinas offers us a model for an ethical interpretation of *Survival in Auschwitz*. The salient

quality of Derrida's critique is that it defers the decision between totality and infinity as if to say that Levinas must be encountered in the crux between the two. "We will not choose between the opening and the totality. Therefore we will be incoherent without resigning ourselves to incoherence . . . simply articulating it we have already come close to Levinas's own problematic."³⁴ This stance suggests that an ethical approach to Levi would attend to both the "Greek" and "Hebrew" discourses in the memoir without finally choosing between the subject and the other. Since the Holocaust and the literature it has produced defy ethical closure, I argue here for a reading practice that discovers and embraces the survivor's unresolved ethical relation with the *Muselmanner*.³⁵ As we shall see in Chapter 5, Levi eventually accepted the inconclusive aspect of Holocaust experience, the never-ending trauma that is its history.

Traumatic History

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.

—Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (362–63)

Primo Levi's somewhat neglected second book, *The Reawakening*, describes his liberation from Auschwitz and his nine months as a "displaced person" as he waits and wanders through Russia and Eastern Europe, finally returning home to Italy in October 1945. This memoir has been usually read as a spirited odyssey or as a lively picaresque that affirms the value of community or as the story of Levi's metaphorical "rebirth" after the Holocaust.¹ Gian Paolo Biasin brings nuance to the conversation in saying that the book describes a journey "haunted by the memories of the horrors past . . . which project their long shadow over the whole narration."² I would go even further: the historical trauma of Auschwitz does not merely color Levi's second memoir but dictates its form and, therefore, its meaning. That is to say, the structure of *The Reawakening* closely follows the three stages of trauma posited by Sigmund Freud, which I summarize here. First, there is the initial shock, which is so extreme and unexpected that the subject cannot immediately absorb its impact; then, the latency period, an interval of forgetfulness between the primary exposure and the appearance

of pathological symptoms; and finally, the onset of recurring traumatic memories that may last a lifetime.³

This chapter offers a close reading of *The Reawakening* as a literary representation of latency bracketed in its initial and closing pages by elements of the first and third stages of trauma, specifically, by the last days in Auschwitz and the first days at home. Trauma theory has not been previously used to analyze the structure and content of this book even though its original Italian title, *La tregua* (“the truce”), clearly suggests a hiatus or a dormant period after one battle and before the next. An interpretive strategy alert to the symptoms of trauma not only sheds light on what Levi’s book says but also on how it works in psychological and historical terms.⁴ This critical approach enables us to see that, in the memoir, Russia functions as a geographical, chronological, and cultural site of latency, as the place of forgetfulness and evasion. My claim is that *The Reawakening* effectively positions the Holocaust as a problem born of European history and culture that cannot be addressed either intellectually or psychologically in Russia, a land “on the margins of civilization” (*Reawakening* 192). With its postwar chaos, featureless landscape, and unintelligible language, Russia signifies, here, the antithesis of the Enlightenment and all that is European, including the Germans’ rational and efficient approach to genocide. Levi was captured by the Italian fascists and, as a Jew, handed over to the Germans, who deported him to Auschwitz. Both physically and culturally, Europe is the site of trauma in his texts. As recounted on the last page of *The Reawakening*, the latency ends and the trauma reveals itself only when, by reaching his own corner of Europe in Turin, he becomes a survivor. A qualification is in order: in this highly mediated literary text, the opposite of a raw diary, “Levi-the-survivor” is a narrating persona that cannot simply be equated with some essential self known as Primo Levi. This artful form of autobiography offers no easy path to the author’s unconscious, and the book is certainly not one long suicide note, as some have suggested.⁵ However, the text itself can be interpreted by means of Freudian concepts.

The psychoanalytic reading of *The Reawakening* proposed here differs greatly from nearly all other readings of the text, most of which concentrate on Levi’s remarkable portraits of the individuals encountered during his long odyssey—Russians, Poles, Italians, Germans, and more—and on the friendships Levi develops with unforgettable characters like “the Greek” and Leonardo. These readings are valid, and the idea of friendship—Robert Gordon has called it one of Levi’s “ordinary virtues”—is a central concern in virtually all of the author’s books.⁶ However, in trying to understand *The Reawakening* as a Holocaust text, I find that its structure is even more important than its content. If the book represents latent trauma, then the

engaging characters and their amusing adventures are diversions from the traumatic legacy of Auschwitz, which only reveals itself in the final pages. As such, the picaresque episodes, featuring the good-natured rogue, Cesare, are deployed as much for evasion as for pleasure. Instead of dwelling on characters and details of the plot, my reading is attentive at the macro level, that is, to the three stages of trauma that structure the work, and also at the micro level, which includes the many metaphors secreted in the text that manifest trauma by indirection. The little that Irving Howe had to say about *The Reawakening* is perceptive and lends support to my approach. While not referring to trauma specifically, he noted the opposition between the plot and the affective core of the book. “Outwardly, along the skin of the narrative, *The Reawakening* appears to follow the traditional pattern of picaresque . . . But in basic spirit the book is anti-picaresque. Between the external form of the narrative and its inner vibrations of memory there is a strong nervous tension.”⁷ Explaining the origin and significance of this tension is the purpose of my reading.

Three general points can be made at the outset. First, a traumatic experience is not easily mastered, not easily sequestered in the past, and not easily narrated. It is not just that trauma confounds representation, whether in testimony or other forms of discourse. It is also that the unrepresentable or untranslatable qualities of terrible experiences contribute to traumatization.⁸ Second, Levi’s testimony helps us to see that the traumatized individual, beset by disturbing memories, never really returns from the site of trauma and never brings his troubled history to a close. Rather, as Freud remarks, “he is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience, instead of . . . *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.”⁹ Third, reflecting on unmastered memory in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi notes that a historical trauma perpetually links the perpetrator to the victim: “The memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing. A person who has been wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain; the person who has inflicted the wound pushes the memory down, to be rid of it, to alleviate the feeling of guilt . . . [Both] victim and oppressor . . . are in the same trap.”¹⁰ This victim-perpetrator dynamic—each requires the other—enables us to see that the narrator’s trauma is not his alone since the Holocaust impinges on the historical consciousness of Germany, Italy, and all of Europe. Unable to put the past behind him, the Holocaust survivor embodies the guilty history of the entire continent. Indeed, his ongoing trauma is symptomatic of Europe’s own nightmare: the repressed fear that its civilization produces as much darkness as light, as much violence and destruction as creation.

Wstawać

The Reawakening opens with a brief, two-stanza epigraphic poem whose rather obscure meaning is made clearer on the final page of the book in which Levi describes the pleasures of his homecoming and “the liberating joy of recounting [his] story.” However, the reader also learns that bearing witness does not free “Levi the survivor” from his traumatic memories: there is no talking cure. In these concluding paragraphs, written in late 1962, seventeen years after his return, he states that he is still plagued by a recurring “dream full of horror,” “a dream within a dream,” or, rather, a peaceful dream about normal life among family and friends that is shattered by an anguished nightmare. “I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing,” Levi narrates, “and, I *know* what this thing means . . . I am in the Lager once more and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream” (193, emphasis in original). The former inmate’s irrational fear, which periodically escapes from his unconscious, is that his waking life is a dream, and that his nightmare—that he was never liberated from the camp—is reality. His experience corresponds with Theodor Adorno’s generalized portrait of the survivor “plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all,” which serves as the fitting epigraph for this chapter. In Levi’s case, the recurring incubus always ends, as does the book we have been reading, with “a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, “*Wstawać*” (194). The word is Polish, the second most important administrative language in Auschwitz after German. Levi reports that the German word, *Aufstehen*, was used as well.¹¹

This persistent nightmare that comes unbidden, unfolding “each time in a different way” (193), shows that the survivor has not mastered his terrible experience. Instead, the concluding passage of the book reveals that a deep psychic wound remains open after all of these years. The behaviors described here are recognizable symptoms of what we now call “post-traumatic stress disorder,” a condition commonly known as “shell shock” when Freud wrote the following about traumatized World War I combatants: “Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright.”¹² Levi-the-survivor, who awakes once again in fear, even though he is safe at home, clearly presents the symptoms of trauma. He is haunted by an experience that he can neither forget nor assimilate. The story does not end in liberation because the return from Auschwitz is never fully incorporated into the psyche. Cathy Caruth notes that “the traumatized carry an impossible history

within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”¹³ Despite external appearances, it is not possible to return unimpaired from a death camp. This is surely what survivor Charlotte Delbo meant when she wrote, “I died in Auschwitz and nobody knows it.”¹⁴

Having read the last page of *The Reawakening*, it is not difficult to interpret the book’s untitled epigraphic poem, actually titled “Alzarsi” in Levi’s collected poems (perhaps best translated, in this case, as the imperative, “get up!”) and called “Reveille” in Feldman and Swann’s translation in *Collected Poems*.¹⁵ The poem was written in early 1946, less than three months after he returned from his long ordeal. The first stanza concisely articulates, in verse, ideas expressed in more detail in the “Our Nights” chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz* (59–64). Since the poem and Levi’s first book were written contemporaneously, the consistency is not surprising. Both texts describe how the prisoners are transported beyond the barbed wire by incessant and urgent dreams of food, of home, and of telling their terrible Holocaust tales. However, the overwhelming presence of Auschwitz impinges on the illusory escape promised by sleep. The inmates’ dreams are always interrupted by the soft but peremptory wake-up call—*Wstawać*—that returns them to the brutal reality of the camp. In both the poem and Levi’s first book, the reveille provokes quiet dread: “[F]or the whole duration of the night, cutting across the alternating sleep, waking and nightmares, the expectancy and terror of the moment of the reveille keeps watch . . . Very few sleep on till the *Wstawać*: it is a moment of too acute pain for even the deepest sleep not to dissolve as it approaches. The night guard knows it, and for this reason does not utter it in a tone of command, but with [a] quiet and subdued voice” (63). The brief respite from the daily suffering that sleep affords makes the return to consciousness all the more agonizing.

While the poem’s first stanza is set in Auschwitz, it is evident that the second stanza is a concise formulation of the homecoming described in the last two paragraphs of *The Reawakening*: “Now we have found our homes again,/ Our hunger is quenched,/ All the stories have been told./ It is time. Soon we shall hear again/ The alien command: *Wstawać*” (*Reawakening* xi). The notable uniformity here in thought and language between the verses written just weeks after his homecoming and the prose penned many years later suggests that Levi’s trauma has not diminished much over time. Initially, the dreams of the first stanza seemed to have been realized: he is home and fed and has told his incredible tale, but this deception ends with the forceful three-word sentence, “it is time”—time once again for the command that compels obedience, for the reveille that signals the onset of a trauma that resists narrative closure.¹⁶

Why does Levi choose “Alzarsi,” written so many years earlier, as the epigraph for *The Reawakening* when the book deals only briefly with Auschwitz in the beginning and spends only four pages at the end describing his return to Italy? It can be argued that these bookends, Auschwitz and Turin, are essential to understanding the significance of his nine-month parenthesis. In a sense, the story unfolds in the gap between the two stanzas, that is, in the period between his stay in the camp and his homecoming. The gap on the page is thus equivalent to the latency represented by Russia in the book itself. Put another way, the poem can be read as a miniature account of the three stages of trauma, from the initial experience, to a period of forgetfulness—expressed by the blank space between the two stanzas—to the onset of the recurring nightmare. If the prominently placed poem announces the trauma of Auschwitz as the book’s main theme, then, at same time, this epigraph suggests that most of what the book narrates, the months in Russia, is digressive. To be more precise, the gap in the poem indicates a necessary blankness—itsself an apt metaphor for the unconscious—between two distinct struggles: the event from which the trauma originates and the aftereffects.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the word *Wstawać* in Levi’s literary representations of Holocaust trauma. “[T]he foreign command,” issued in a language familiar and unfamiliar at once, is positioned emphatically as the last word of the poem and of *The Reawakening* and is mentioned numerous times in *Survival in Auschwitz*. While Levi makes the literal meaning clear—“get up!”—it is evident that aspects of the word remain beyond the lexicon of ordinary experience. The trauma *Wstawać* represents cannot be named by an Italian word because its sound—more than its definition—is what summons Levi the survivor to Auschwitz again. That is to say, *Wstawać* represents trauma by means of its untranslatability. In this, Levi has found an effective literary strategy for overcoming the difficulty of rendering trauma in language. Moreover, the historical specificity of the word—its unambiguous link to a specific place and time—brings to mind the useful distinction that Dominick LaCapra draws between “structural trauma” and “historical trauma” (a difference that does not seem to have interested Freud very much). The former results from the “transhistorical absence” that unavoidably accompanies life in general, such as “the separation from the (m)other” or “the entry into language.” This condition should not be conflated with traumas whose origins are historically specific and beyond our universal human condition. The distinction between the two helps us avoid “the indiscriminate generalization of historical trauma into the idea of a wound culture or the notion that everyone is somehow a victim (or, for that matter, a survivor).” Thus, LaCapra warns against a too facile identification or empathy that usurps “the victim’s voice or subject

position.”¹⁷ Likewise, we are reminded by the word *Wstawać* not to lose sight of the fact that the scars left by Auschwitz are specific and have had lasting consequences, not only for the victims but also for the perpetrators, and, to a lesser degree, for all of the citizens of Europe who still live on that tainted ground and with that tainted history.

The Scars of Auschwitz

The beginning of *The Reawakening* continues where *Survival in Auschwitz* leaves off, with the liberation of the concentration camp by the Red Army on January 27, 1945. At the arrival of four horsebacked Russian soldiers, the survivors feel a mixture of joy and shame (*Reawakening* 2). They have been dehumanized and suffered unimaginable indignities that will isolate them for all time from ordinary people as represented here by the soldiers, who, Levi asserts, as witnesses, undoubtedly feel some measure of shame that such a crime against humanity occurred, “that it should have been irrevocably introduced into the world.” Here, Levi’s use of words like “irrevocable” and of metaphors of staining and scarring can be read as representations of trauma. “We [survivors] should have liked to wash our consciences and our memories clean from the foulness that lay upon them,” Levi writes, “[but] we felt that this should never happen, that now nothing could ever happen good and pure enough to rub out our past, and that the scars of that outrage would remain within us forever, and in the memories of those who saw it, and in the places where it occurred and in the stories we should tell of it” (2). The Holocaust permanently wounds the participants, the land, and even the language used to describe it.

The traumatized state of the victims, but also of the perpetrators and bystanders, is further revealed by means of metaphors of infection that suggest an incubation period between the exposure to the disease and a clear manifestation of its symptoms. “[T]his is the awful privilege of our generation,” Levi writes, “no one better than us has ever been able to grasp the incurable nature of the offence that spreads like a contagion. It is foolish to think that human justice can eradicate it . . . [I]t returns as ignominy upon the oppressors, it perpetuates itself as hatred among the survivors, and swarms around in a thousand ways, against the very will of all, as a thirst for revenge, as a moral capitulation, as denial, as weariness, as renunciation. These things, at that time blurred, and felt by most as no more than an unexpected attack of mortal fatigue, accompanied the joy of liberation for us” (2–3). At the end of this passage, Levi suggests that his full understanding and articulation of the traumatic legacy of Auschwitz is possible only after a period of reflection, but not at the liberation, not when his

views were still “blurred.” The inability to process a shocking experience in its immediate aftermath is consistent with the first stage of trauma. As Caruth puts it, “the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it.”¹⁸ Only after reaching the third stage of trauma, having passed through the latency period of this contagion, can Levi represent the first stage; only in retrospect can he describe in its inchoate form the disturbing event that will later possess him.¹⁹

It is ironic that after descriptions of the permanent stains left by Auschwitz, the Russians subject Levi to the second of three baths that marked important transitions in his unwilling journey. The Nazis provided the first one, a “bath of humiliation” that welcomed Levi to the concentrationary universe; the third, “functional, antiseptic, highly automatized [sic],” was provided months later by the Americans. Consistent with his other descriptions of the benign and primitive Russians, Levi describes this second bath, at the hand of two robust Soviet nurses, as “extemporaneous and crude” but also humane. In all three of the baths, Levi remarked, “it was easy to perceive behind the concrete and literal aspect a great symbolic shadow, the unconscious desire of the new authorities, who absorbed us within their own sphere, to strip us of the vestiges of our former life, to make us new men, consistent with their own models” (8). This second bath marks Levi’s transition from a concentration camp inmate—categorized by the Germans as a subhuman slated for extermination—to a displaced Italian under Russian control. In the following pages, Levi will mention, several times, that the Russians had no interest in making fine distinctions among the various sorts of Italians under their care. Their treatment was the same whether they were ex-soldiers, ex-forced laborers, ex-inmates of Auschwitz, Communists, monarchists, Fascists, or Jews (126). The Russians make Levi a “new man,” however superficially, whose previous life and sufferings are supposed to have been washed away by the cleansing waters of the bath, enabling a forgetful state in which the trauma of Auschwitz temporarily recedes into the unconscious as he makes his way eastward.

Russia as the Site of Latency

As narrated at the start of the third chapter, “The Greek,” Levi leaves Auschwitz after a month of convalesce, and it is at this point that the concept of latency becomes wholly applicable. The closed space of the camp, so insistently ordered and categorized by the Germans, gives way to the vast open spaces of Eastern Europe and Russia. The realm of European culture, along with its murderous rationality, is supplanted by a powerful historical

force that resembles nature, a metaphorical “high wind,” “un vento alto” in Italian, bringing chaos and flux to the damaged humanity that wanders the war-ravaged landscape. “In those days and in those parts,” Levi writes, “soon after the front had passed by, a high wind was blowing over the face of the earth; the world around us seemed to have returned to primeval Chaos, and was swarming with scalene [that is, imbalanced], defective, abnormal human specimens; each of them bestirred himself, with blind or deliberate movements, in anxious search of his own place, of his own sphere, as the particles of the four elements are described as doing in the verse-cosmogonies of the ancients” (*Reawakening* 22). The wind suggests a cleansing force that, like the great flood, enables a recreation of the world, a new universe. However, such an optimistic interpretation is at odds with the scars of Auschwitz mentioned in the book’s first chapter and in the intractable dream within a dream at the end of the story.

Perhaps Levi initially conceived his book as a positive cosmogony, a rebirth enabled by the Red Army, which spread over the land like a force of nature. The memoir was titled *Vento alto* in the prepublication contract with the Einaudi publishing house, and at least one version, a handwritten manuscript, lacked the final chapters in which Levi confronts the indifference of the Germans and the trials of his homecoming.²⁰ In its final version, however, the book ends with the nightmare and is retitled *La tregua*, a bleak expression that in no way justifies the American publisher’s upbeat choice. (The United Kingdom edition is accurately titled *The Truce*.) In the end, Levi seems to have decided that *The Reawakening* should be structurally and thematically continuous with *Survival in Auschwitz* because his nine-month odyssey was decisively framed by Auschwitz, first as a real place and then as a nightmare. This framing alters the significance of the long, middle section set in Russia and Russian-occupied Poland. What might have been a narrative of rebirth instead becomes one of latent trauma marked by forgetfulness and evasion. As Levi tells it, time seems to stand still in the vast Russian landscape so unlike home. “In no . . . part of Europe, I think, can you walk for ten hours, and always remain in the same place, as if in a nightmare: always with the same straight road in front of you, stretching to the horizon, always the same steppe and forests on both sides, and behind your back yet more road stretching to the other horizon, like a ship’s wake” (*Reawakening* 115). Space is a common analogy for memory; the empty horizons of Russia represent a featureless amnesia. For the displaced Italians, Russia is the blank space of waiting, a place outside of history, neither here nor there, a “regime in limbo” (142), a land of dreams (91) and of “the sleep of reason” (159).

Drawing on a long, unscientific tradition, Levi represents Russia as Europe’s other and opposite. Europe is the land of the Enlightenment;

Russia is unenlightened and even primitive.²¹ The most extreme version of this idea was put forward by the Nazis, who saw the Slavs as *Untermenschen*. In *The Reawakening*, and in his other books, too, Levi describes the Russians with affection, as if they are erratic, but possibly loveable, children.²² However, their supposed lack of orderliness and rationality, so unlike the Germans, leaves more space for humane acts. The Russian bureaucracy that governs the displaced Italians is not ill intentioned, just stupid and negligent. “The Russians, in contrast to the Germans, possess little talent for fine distinctions and classifications” (103). Later, Levi adds, “we had already noticed that the Western religion (German in particular) of differential prohibitions has no deep roots in Russia” (108). And again: “The Germans, in analogous circumstances, would have covered the walls with bi-lingual placards, beautifully printed . . . and threatening the death penalty. The Russians, in contrast, allowed the ordinance to spread by itself, and the march to the other camp to organize itself” (114). In all of these comparisons, the Russian mind differs from the rational, Western one, which Levi associates with the Nazis but also, implicitly, with the Italians and himself. At one point, the displaced Italians write and perform an allegorical play, *The Shipwreck of the Spiritless*, in which the Russians are figured as primitive cannibals intent on devouring the marooned Italians, who only want to go home (160).²³ However, the implied violence of this barbarism is clearly meant to be much more benign than the methodical, civilized violence unleashed by the Nazis.

The need for Russia to function as the geographical, chronological, and cultural site of latency, and not as a site of trauma, may explain Levi’s silence on two points. First, although he did not personally observe traces of this violence, he does not even mention in passing that much of the Holocaust took place in the lands far to the east of Auschwitz, through which he traveled on his long journey home. Second, he suppresses or forgets the staggering war crimes of Stalin and the Russian Army, which would certainly have been known to him by time he completed the book.²⁴ In conversation with Philip Roth, Levi indicates that his presentation of Russia (i.e., as benign and backward) is “objective.” He adds that a thaw in the cold war allowed him, in 1961, to broach the topic “without being called a philo-Communist by the right wing and a disruptive reactionary by the powerful Italian Communist Party.”²⁵

Davide Ferrario and Marco Belpoliti’s 2006 film, *La strada di Primo Levi*, adapts *The Reawakening* in a far more successful way than Francesco Rosi did in 1997.²⁶ I will not offer an analysis of the film here, but only wish to point out how faithful Ferrario and Belpoliti are to Levi’s experience of the East, even though the film is set in the post-Soviet world of 2005 instead of the Soviet one of 1945. In neither Levi’s book nor the film is the

East a site of Holocaust trauma. In both works, the East is Europe's other: a place of neglect rather than action, a land where horses are still an important means of transport. In 2005, global capitalism has made superficial incursions—evidenced by T-shirt logos and the like—but it is only when the film crew reaches Budapest, bright with neon, that the Western viewer experiences a familiar setting. As we shall see below, Levi had exactly the same sensation in 1945.

Europe, Our Home

In a short story dating from the 1970s, Levi describes an apparently tranquil star that explodes in a supernova. The star was not serene after all but merely latent. Unlike its peers, who “quietly burn the hydrogen that they are made of, generously giving energy to the void, until they are reduced to a dignified thinness and end their career as modest white dwarfs,” this star “maybe contained in its heart an imbalance or an infection, as happens to some of us.” Finally, “the illness that must have been gnawing at it from within reached a crisis.”²⁷ Personification is one of Levi's favored literary devices. Here, it is evident that the star resembles a troubled individual, such as a Holocaust survivor afflicted by the contagion of Auschwitz. The star's changing state, from the initial burning, to the quiet latency of the white dwarf, to the explosion, offers an apt analogy for the stages of trauma. The astronomer who observes the star from a great distance and over lapsed time is akin to the reader of *The Reawakening*, who remains uncertain about the ultimate fate of the refugees that Levi twice describes as “spent stars.” The star metaphor is first employed in reference to the ten-day hiatus between the departure of the SS and the arrival of the Red Army in January 1945, the period Levi designates “the nothing full of death in which we had wandered like spent stars” (*Reawakening* 2). Now, in September 1945, the displaced Italians learn that they will finally be repatriated, that they will return to history from the realm outside of time and place: “[A]fter the senseless journeys which made us feel condemned to orbit for eternity in Russian space, like useless spent stars, after the idleness and bitter nostalgia . . . we were rising once more, traveling upwards, on the journey home. Time, after two years of paralysis, had regained vigour and value” (168). There is a definite excitement and optimism in this departure for home, which also marks the end of the latent period and the beginning of the possibility of the onset of trauma, or, to continue the star analogy, of a supernova.

After days of uncomfortable train travel, Levi arrives in Romania, where the familiar Latinate names are “a delicate philological pleasure,” and finally,

in Hungary, where, he remarks without irony, although it would certainly be appropriate in the case of the Holocaust victims, “we now felt ourselves in Europe, protected by a civilization which was ours” (183). At first, this sense of feeling at home as Europeans is conveyed simply when, for example, Levi notes, “[t]he suburbs of Vienna were ugly and casual like those we knew at Milan and Turin” (186). But the homeward journey darkens at the sight of “Vienna undone and the Germans broken,” producing in Levi and his companions “[an] anguish, which was mixed up with [their] misery, with the heavy, threatening sensation of an irreparable and definitive evil which was present everywhere, nestling like gangrene in the guts of Europe and the world, the seed of future harm” (187–88). This is a strong image of the infection that quietly lurks, of the latent traumatic memories of the war and certainly of the Nazi genocide that will return to poison Europe. The traces of the Holocaust, which are found all over the continent and in the survivors themselves, are inescapable reminders of this toxic history.²⁸

The final chapter of the book, “The Awakening,” takes place in Italy and, before that, in Germany, a nation in close geographical proximity to Levi’s home and not so very foreign to a Northern Italian. Now in Munich, on German soil, the question of what the Holocaust will mean to the present, since it is now of the past, is very much on Levi’s mind. “Did [the Germans] know about Auschwitz, about the silent daily massacre, a step away from their doors? . . . If they did not, they ought, as a sacred duty, to listen, to learn everything, immediately, from us, from me; I felt the tattooed number on my arm burning like a wound . . . I felt that everyone should interrogate us, read in our faces who we were, and listen to our tale in humility. But no one looked us in the eyes, no one accepted the challenge; they were deaf, dumb, and blind . . . still prisoners of their old tangle of pride and guilt” (190–91).²⁹ The metaphorical burning on Levi’s tattooed arm is an apt representation of his psychological trauma, which, the reader is made to feel, would have been relieved if these anonymous Germans had listened and apologized; instead, it is exacerbated and turned inward when no acknowledgement is made. The force of this renunciation, of this unwillingness to own a traumatic history, is subverted in Francesco Rosi’s 1997 cinematic treatment of *The Reawakening*. At just this moment in the narrative, in Munich, Rosi introduces a scene of atonement in which a German prisoner of war, on seeing Levi’s stripped jacket and yellow star, drops to his knees and places his hand on his heart.³⁰ This stiff and preachy film is successful in some respects, but it fails, in this instance, to convey faithfully the survivor’s decades-long isolation resulting from the belated and partial acknowledgement among Germans that the Holocaust was a great crime committed on their behalf. Rosi’s gesture is anachronistic but not altogether mistaken. Even the perpetrators and enablers of traumatic violence eventually pass out of the latent period. Now, more than sixty

years after the events, the memory of the Holocaust seems to be permanently woven into Germany's national narrative.

Crossing the Brenner Pass into Italy in October 1945, Levi notes that his "less tired companions celebrated"—he means the forced laborers and ex-soldiers who had not passed through the extermination camps—while he and his fellow Holocaust survivor, Leonardo, "remained lost in a silence crowded by memories." Reckoning the past and calculating their losses was difficult to do in Russia, so far from home, but this is no longer the case.

Of 650, our number when we had left [as deportees to Auschwitz], three of us were returning. And how much had we lost, in those twenty months? What should we find at home? How much of ourselves had been eroded, extinguished? Were we returning richer or poorer, stronger or emptier? We did not know; but we knew that on the thresholds of our homes, for good or ill, a trial awaited us, and we anticipated it with fear. We felt in our veins the poison of Auschwitz . . . Soon, tomorrow, we should have to give battle, against enemies still unknown, outside ourselves and inside. (192)

These few words are a highly effective statement of what the Holocaust bequeaths to each survivor: a catalog of loved ones lost, a diminished sense of self and dignity—but also the unending challenge, the "trial," of living with trauma, of struggling with the poison inside that will not be purged.

It is not surprising that the challenges of the homecoming make Levi regret the end of his purposeless roaming in the East: "The months just past, although hard, of wandering on the margins of civilization now seemed to us like a truce, a parenthesis of unlimited availability, a providential but unrepeatable gift of fate" (192).³¹ It is significant that he views his experience of the colorful characters and their picaresque adventures as "a truce" or "a parenthesis," as a kind of latent period that has now finished. The larger story, whose impact cannot have been felt until this moment of homecoming, is his condition as a traumatized survivor. I have already explained how the opening chapter of *The Reawakening*, describing Levi's "blurred" perception of the legacy of Auschwitz, represents the first stage of the post-traumatic stress disorder, in which the traumatic event is not yet assimilated; and how the nightmare that closes the book represents the third, and final, stage, in which the trauma is truly experienced for the first time. It is unusual in a memoir that its final page should bring the entire story into focus and determine its meaning, but this is case for *The Reawakening*. The obscure crisis presented in the epigraphic poem has arrived and is now unambiguous. "For those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic," says Caruth, adding "*survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis.*"³² The structure of trauma is such that only *after* surviving a life-threatening

experience, and only *after* forgetting it, does the memory return with its full psychic force. In this sense, Levi's homecoming is not only a return but also a departure toward a new, difficult life conditioned by his own near-death experience and the deaths of hundreds of his fellow deportees.

The Ancient Mariner

To extend on ideas discussed so far, I wish to comment on two other occasions where trauma finds expression in Levi's writing. In *The Periodic Table*, published more than a decade after *The Reawakening*, he describes, in further detail, his desperate state as a new returnee. "I had returned from captivity three months before and was living badly. The things I had seen and suffered were burning inside me . . . I felt like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who waylays on the street the wedding guests going to the feast, inflicting on them the story of his misfortune. I was writing concise and bloody poems, and telling the story at breakneck speed, either by talking to people or by writing it down, so much so that gradually a book was later born: by writing I found peace for a while and felt myself become a man again."³³ That nascent story is *Survival in Auschwitz*, of course, and "Reveille" is certainly one of the "bloody" poems to which Levi refers.³⁴ His qualified claim about the liberating power of testimony—he finds "peace for awhile"—corresponds with his self-identification with the Ancient Mariner. This singular literary character, who compulsively repeats his tale of woe to unsuspecting passersby without ever reaching a final catharsis, behaves as a traumatized survivor suffering from "the compulsion to repeat" described by Freud.³⁵ Later, Levi borrowed the same four verses from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to use as epigraphs for two key texts from the 1980s, *The Drowned and the Saved*, which I discuss further in Chapter 7, and a poem titled "The Survivor": "Since then, at an uncertain hour/ that agony returns,/ And till my ghastly tale is told/ This heart within me burns."³⁶ Harrowing memories beset the mariner at unpredictable moments, just as they do Levi, whose own nightmare returns "at sometimes frequent, sometimes longer, intervals" (*The Reawakening* 193). Although bearing witness brings temporary relief to the mariner, it is the content of his "ghastly tale" and a guilty conscience that give rise to his recurring trauma—he brought misfortune to his whole crew by shooting an albatross, who was the benevolent spirit of those waters. He is an agent of suffering, not merely a victim. (It is significant that Levi titled his collected poems *Ad ora incerta* ["at an uncertain hour"]. This suggests that his inspiration for poetry came at unpredictable moments, of course, but

also that much of his verse was written under the shadow of trauma: “at an uncertain hour/ that agony returns.”)

The link between survivor guilt and trauma, merely implicit at the end of *The Reawakening*, is explicit in “The Survivor.” In a dream-like state, the ex-inmate returns, yet again, to the extermination camp at dawn, but this time he is menaced by the image of his former prison companions, none of them survivors, who suffer in their fitful sleep until they rise like ghosts from their bunks. Then, the survivor speaks with urgency: “Stand back, leave me alone, submerged people,/ Go away. I haven’t dispossessed anyone/ Haven’t usurped anyone’s bread./ No one died in my place. No one.”³⁷ The poem reworks the imagery and setting of “Reveille” to represent, again, the psychic force emanating from Auschwitz that profoundly disturbs the survivor’s dreams. Now he no longer doubts that he has survived, at least physically. Rather, his nocturnal return to the camp signifies the lasting effects of the survivor guilt that inevitably accompany his traumatic memories. The speaker of the poem protests too much: his vigorous disavowals betray an anxious sense that he is not merely a victim of Nazism but also one of its unwilling perpetrators. Levi plumbed these same troubled waters in his essay on shame in *The Drowned and the Saved*, saying that the survivor could not avoid thinking of himself as a usurper, that he lived in the rightful place of “a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, worthier of living than [him]” (*Drowned* 81). The tension between the right to live and the challenge of living, or perhaps dying ethically, is present in nearly everything Levi wrote about the Holocaust. In case of *The Reawakening*, this tension can only be understood as an aspect of traumatic experience.

In the epigraph for this present chapter, Adorno is explicit about the stark clash between the historical trauma called Auschwitz and the West’s unquestioned belief in the right of self-preservation, a principle exploited by the Nazis to legitimate their murderous racial policies. “[The survivor’s] mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared.” With this remark, drawn from *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno develops an idea he and Horkheimer first articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where, it is shown, manly virtue is opposed to all forms of compassion, where the Enlightenment’s instrumental reason demands a “bourgeois coldness” before the suffering of the other.³⁸ As we saw in Chapter 2, Ulysses is the paradigmatic figure of self-preservation and the embodiment of instrumental rationality. This is relevant here because, at first glance, *The Reawakening* appears to be modeled on the *Odyssey*, albeit a contemporary version where true heroes no longer exist, but only survivors. Levi, too, journeys at length through an exotic world—he calls

it “our greater Odyssey” (168)—before finally reaching home where, like Ulysses, he is not immediately recognized by his family. He, too, recounts his story in apparent comfort, just as Ulysses did for the hospitable Phaeacians. Yet, if Levi appears determined to construct a totalizing narrative that will make sense of his wrenching experience, or domesticate it, he ends up telling his reader an unending story about the impossibility of returning from trauma. In this sense, *The Reawakening* cycles between the figures of Ulysses and the Ancient Mariner, between the survivor’s homecoming and his perpetual exile from the rest of society, between his right to live and his guilty conscience. For Levi, survival seems inextricably linked with traumatic returns, with a history of suffering and a legacy of guilt that never reach their conclusion.

More than Levi himself, the character in the book who most embodies Ulysses is Mordo Nahum, a Salonica Jew known as “the Greek,” who is described by the narrator as “a strong and cold man, solitary and logical.” Looking doggedly toward his self-preservation no matter the consequences, he exhibits the wily resourcefulness of his ancient Greek precursor. Even after the war ends and he is liberated from Auschwitz, he still sees the world as a Hobbesian battleground where each one fights for himself. “There is always war,” is his motto (38). Even if he does not embrace Nahum’s pessimistic, individualistic perspective, Levi does not deny its possible validity. He could not deny it after his imprisonment in Auschwitz. Still, a different perspective dominates the book’s “affective core,” to adopt Irving Howe’s term: it is the voice that speaks from within a recurring nightmare, the troubled story of traveler more akin to the Ancient Mariner than to Ulysses. Although not strictly Levi’s intention, his book might be called an inadvertent postmodern or posthumanist odyssey because its traumatic narrative circles back on itself, undermining positivist notions of progress, historical closure, and stable human identity.

The Periodization of Holocaust Memory

The Reawakening recounts a tale of erring and forgetfulness that resembles the generalized repression of Holocaust memory in Europe from the end of World War II until, roughly, the Eichmann trial in the early 1960s. In Western Europe, for example, in Italy and France, postwar governments memorialized their resistance movements rather than recalled the extent to which their nations had collaborated with the Nazis. In Germany, the suffering of the non-Jewish population dominated public discourse. “At that time and for some years to come,” Tony Judt argues, “it was Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, not Auschwitz, which stood for the horror of Nazism; the

emphasis on *political* deportees rather than racial ones conformed better to reassuring postwar accounts of wartime national resistance.³⁹ This studied avoidance of Europe's traumatic history relating to the Nazi genocide, this evident period of latency, might account for the delayed recognition in Italy of Levi's first book, *Survival in Auschwitz*. The belated completion and publication of *The Reawakening*, which first appeared in print in 1963, even though Levi began to write some of its pages as early as 1946, coincided with a new and not wholly untroubled fascination with the Holocaust decades after it occurred. Even today, the place of the Holocaust in the history of World War II and, more broadly, in twentieth century German and European history continues to evolve.

Of course, remembering the Holocaust survivor has always been problematic. She or he is a threat to society's integrity, to its self-perception and its cognitive framework. This is certainly true of the character called Moishe in Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and also of Jozs, the returnee in Giorgio Bassani's story, "A Plaque in via Mazzini." "The survivor . . . is a disturber of the peace," wrote Terrence Des Pres.⁴⁰ This is true, in part, because the survivor is a subject of trauma who obsessively remembers the otherwise forgotten violence on which cultures are founded and through which national histories lurch forward. This is why the memory of the Holocaust cannot be wholly suppressed or contained: the repressed does indeed return. *The Reawakening* shows how Levi-the-survivor's personal history is tightly connected with awful events that traumatized victims of the Holocaust but also, in varying degrees, perpetrators, bystanders, and, ultimately, entire nations. His memoir of return illustrates Caruth's claim that history and trauma are inexorably linked. "History, like trauma, is never simply one's own," she writes, "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."⁴¹ The next chapter explores how Levi's personal history, as an Italian Jew and as a chemist, was entwined with the scientific and political discourses of race that unleashed genocidal violence in twentieth-century Europe.

The Art of Separation from Chemistry to Racial Science

My chemical trade in its primordial form, the *Scheidekunst*, [is] precisely the art of separating metal from gangue.

—Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (137)

What in fact is [state] racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out groups that exist within a population.

—Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended" (254–55)

Primo Levi stresses and even exaggerates the importance of hybridity in his works and in his authorial persona.¹ He tells his readers more than once that he was both an Italian and a Jew, both a chemist and a man of letters who was formed intellectually by scientific texts and humanistic ones, too. Examples of both kinds of writing share the pages of *The Search for Roots*, his personal anthology of favorite passages by favorite authors.² Thinly veiled as the narrator of *The Monkey's Wrench*, Levi describes himself as a sort of Tiresias, the male seer who, according to Greek mythology, also lived many years as a female. Like Tiresias, Levi had experienced the world from opposite sides, in his case, as both a chemist and a writer.³ However, he thought the split between them was only provisional and not essential. Indeed, in an effort that strikes me as more nostalgic than forward-thinking, Levi frequently hoped to reconnect the so-called two cultures, the sciences and the arts, to enable a return to a time when knowledge

formed a homogenous whole, when words corresponded completely with the things that they named, and, implicitly, to a time before the Holocaust shattered our world.⁴

As a device for bridging the “two cultures”—for Levi, the split between them was “an unnatural schism”—hybridity suggests a bringing together of opposites with the goal of forming a unity more fundamental than the differences between the parts.⁵ Although this undertheorized concept has been much used to describe his hyphenated authorial position—Italian-Jew and chemist-writer—this chapter is chiefly interested in how one of Levi’s books problematizes hybridity, how it explores the unstable binaries that define the human condition, and how it stages the Holocaust as an encounter in which historical forces undermined hybrid forms of human identity and tore them apart.⁶ I draw on the work of Michel Foucault to support my claim that *The Periodic Table*, Levi’s memoir about his life as a chemist, dramatizes the violent separation of two aspects of the human hybrid that took place during the Holocaust: the human as subject and object, or, in other terms, as mind and body, as spirit and matter.⁷

Early in the book, Levi’s autobiographical narrator recalls thinking, as a young man, that to master matter through chemistry is to make intellectual order out of natural chaos while gaining a deeper knowledge of our material essence. “[T]he nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, lay in making himself the conqueror of matter,” he states. “Conquering matter is to understand it and understanding it is necessary to understanding the universe and ourselves” (*Periodic* 41). However, this youthful optimism is tempered as the memoir also describes how Levi was cruelly objectified as impure matter—that is, as an impure body—by scientific discourses promoting racial hierarchy and racial purity that were made to serve the political aims of both Nazism and the Italian Fascism. While the Nazis concluded that Jews were not truly human, the Italian Fascists formulated the milder, but still harmful, accusation that the Italian Jews were not truly Italian and, indeed, were not Europeans at all.⁸ These ideas, which had grave consequences for Levi, have a genealogy, and it is necessary to account for their origins in order to understand the cross-currents running through *The Periodic Table*, whose contents I will briefly summarize.

Published in 1975, the volume is mostly made up of descriptions of school and university days studying chemistry, recollections of thorny problems that Levi confronted at various times in his professional career, and fictional pieces in which chemistry and the elements play an important role, both concretely and metaphorically. Levi writes in an engaging style as his tone shifts from serious to wryly humorous to ironic. Despite its fragmentary quality—a number of the stories had been previously published

in a variety of venues over a period of years—the coherent nucleus of *The Periodic Table* chronologically narrates Levi's personal Holocaust story in its “before,” “during,” and “after” phases. From the first chapter, “Argon,” with its nostalgic view of Levi's Jewish-Piedmontese ancestors, the time frame shifts to the late 1930s and early 1940s, to the era of the Racial Laws that not only alienated Levi from his countrymen but also made it difficult for him to complete his university degree and to find employment (as recounted in the chapters “Zinc,” “Iron,” “Potassium,” “Nickel,” and “Phosphorus”); then, from Levi's capture by the Fascists in late 1943, when he was a hapless partisan, to an audacious and successful survival ploy in Auschwitz (in “Gold” and “Cerium”); and finally, from his difficulties adjusting to normal life following his return home, to an encounter some twenty years after the war with a German civilian chemist who had worked with Levi in a laboratory at Auschwitz (in “Chromium” and “Vanadium”). Excluding the five chapters of fiction integrated into this memoir, ten of the sixteen remaining chapters are Holocaust-related.

To unite the disparate material of his life into a coherent narrative, Levi combines two man-made organizing grids: a standard chronology of the major historical events of mid-twentieth-century Europe and Mendeleev's periodic table. Just as Mendeleev's schema is an effort to organize and rationalize material reality, and is known to be imperfect even by novice students of chemistry, *The Periodic Table* is Levi's attempt to see himself clearly through the lens of his work. Beyond its autobiographical aspects, he would have the reader believe that the book's purpose is to show that chemistry has the capacity to bridge the gap between “the world of words and the world of things” (42), and is therefore the link between mind and matter. However, in opposition to this harmonious meeting of the two cultures, there is also a counternarrative embedded in *The Periodic Table* that suggests that twentieth-century human beings were not truly liberated in the nexus of art and science, but instead trapped in the inherent fissure between mind and matter.⁹ Moreover, this gap was never more evident than during the Holocaust, a traumatic event that profoundly interrupted the relationship between words and things, between language and experience. Auschwitz created an abyss remarked upon in nearly all Holocaust memoirs, including Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, in which he says, “our language lacks the words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.”¹⁰

My main claim here is that *The Periodic Table* testifies to the dialectic of separation and integration that not only characterizes the discourses of chemistry and science but also the history of modern Europe from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust. This fluctuation between multiplicity and unity, the different and the same, is the process that creates but also destabilizes the binaries that structure Levi's thought. He delights in

Mendeleev's periodic table because it makes order out of chaos; however, as a device for categorizing and normalizing material, it is also consonant with the mentality exhibited by social engineers like the Nazis who tried to perfect and purify peoples through education, medicine, and psychology, but also with biology, medicine and eugenics.

From "Tables of Knowledge" to Biopower

In *The Order of Things* (titled *Les Mots et les choses*—"words and things"—in French), Foucault describes the complex intellectual transition from the pre-classical age of science to modern science, that is, the shift from the epistemologies of the late Renaissance to those of the Enlightenment and on up to the twentieth century.¹¹ In classical science, Man and nature were held to be completely separate. The Cartesian cogito ("I think, therefore I am") epitomizes this attitude because it defines the mind as our whole being without reference to our bodily existence. In this period, scientific knowledge was represented by taxonomies, like the one devised by Linnaeus with reference to natural history, and by other classifications rendered in "great tables of knowledge developed according to the forms of identity, of difference, and of order." "The sciences always carry within themselves the project, however remote it may be, of an exhaustive ordering of the world; they are always directed, too, towards the discovery of simple elements and their progressive combination; and at their centre they form a table on which knowledge is displayed in a system contemporary with itself. The centre of knowledge, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is the *table*."¹² While Foucault makes no specific mention of Mendeleev's periodic table, a nineteenth-century invention based on earlier precursors, it fits neatly into this Enlightenment-era scientific paradigm of the table whose purpose is to collate "the order of things."

In the classical age, the scientific disciplines had not yet developed, so the whole of human knowledge could still be grasped by the educated individual. There was only one culture, not two, and there was no perceived gap between our mental concepts of the material world, as rendered in language, and the world itself. Then, according to Foucault, the rise of the modern human sciences, biology, and psychology, but also linguistics and economics, affected Man's view of himself: now, as both mind and body, as the possessor of both transcendental qualities and empirical ones, he not only gazes reflectively on nature but also understands himself to be a part of it, to be embodied. For Foucault, "modernity begins when the human being begins to exist within his organism." Now, man occupies "the ambiguous position as the object of knowledge and the subject that knows."¹³

Modernity constitutes, for the first time, an unstable hybrid of human subject and human object, unstable because the two collapse into each other, because the opposition of man to matter is no longer sustainable. From a Foucaultian perspective, humanism engages in an impossible attempt “to recuperate the primacy and autonomy of the thinking subject and master all that is other to it.”¹⁴ However, the mind is lodged within a body conditioned by preexisting historical and biological forces that the mind cannot determine. Moreover, language has now lost its capacity to represent the world wholly and transparently. No longer the privileged domain of the knowing subject, it, too, becomes an object of study whose historical accretions and murky imprecision are discovered by disciplines like philology.

The political implications of the modern perception that man is inescapably a product of nature and history are worked out in Foucault’s essay “Right of Death and Power over Life.”¹⁵ In the past, the sovereign had the right, by law, to put any person to death for the purpose of protecting the state, but modern governments legitimate their power by means of scientific discourses like social Darwinism that give them the obligation to manage their populations: they have “power over life.” “For the first time,” Foucault asserts, “biological existence [is] reflected in political existence.” The state legitimates violence by claiming to be engaged in a positive campaign to protect “the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life.” “Yet,” Foucault writes, “wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century . . . never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations . . . It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed.”¹⁶ Foucault enables us to see that science’s claim on objective truth is precisely what gives it political power. Once biology, medicine, and racial science gain acceptance as tools for improving the life and health of nations—what Foucault calls “biopower” and “biopolitics”—the path is cleared for state-sponsored genocides aimed at protecting the national collective body from pollution by inferior races. As a humanist, Levi defends chemistry and physics as sources of truth, “clear and distinct and verifiable at every step,” and as an “antidote” to Fascist lies (*Periodic* 42). He conceives of science as a “pure,” truth-seeking practice that counters the impure stench of fascist ideology. Yet, after more than two centuries of scientific racism and scientific sexism, it clear to Foucault that the discourses of science are inherently political and value-laden despite the indisputable truths revealed by legitimate research. Of course, it is a commonplace to say that “knowledge is power,” but he goes further in that, for him, “the goals of power and the goals of knowledge cannot be separated: in knowing we control and in controlling we know.”¹⁷

Although there is no space here for a coherent account of the work of Giorgio Agamben, nor to see what light it might shed on *The Periodic Table*, his ideas deserve a passing mention. Agamben's analysis of the concept of "bare life," a condition under ancient Roman law that left individuals completely outside of the polity and without rights, leans heavily on Foucault's account of "biopolitics." Moreover, Agamben carries Foucault's analysis to its logical conclusion when he calls the concentration camp "the fundamental bio-political paradigm of the West."¹⁸

Purity and Impurity

In effect, two kinds of scientific knowledge operate in *The Periodic Table*—the science of laws and the science of norms—and the conflict between them not only comprises the central drama of Levi's personal history, and that of his generation, but also sheds light on the troubling role played by science in the unfolding of the Holocaust. In the first instance, Levi's humanist subject constitutes itself by uncovering the universal scientific laws that matter must obey. By the time he was sixteen, as described in the "Hydrogen" chapter, Levi had endured years of the Italian Fascist school curriculum, which, in its Crocean idealism, held that philosophy (the study of the spirit) was formative, while science (the study of matter) was merely informative. Enervated by "[school] lectures on the problem of being and knowing," Levi instead looked to chemistry as an alternative path to knowledge. Chemistry was verifiable and based on laws as eternal as the Ten Commandments, a testament like no other to the power of words: "Like Moses [on Sinai], from that [chemical] cloud, I expected my law, the principle of order in me, around me, and in the world . . . [the] key to the highest truths" (23). However, the shadow looming over Levi's youthful idealism is the Fascist state, which eventually constituted itself on the basis of biological norms, as Nazism had done five years earlier. In 1938, the government sought to protect the "Italian race" against "crosses and bastardizations" by prohibiting marriages between non-Jewish Italians and Italian Jews (and non-Italian Jews, too).¹⁹ This biological racism, not merely a form of xenophobia, drew on eugenics, a reputable science in the first half of the twentieth century that not only identified the degenerate genetic characteristics of individuals, but also developed a hierarchy of peoples that justified European imperialism and colonial expansion, including Italy's. In modernity's privileging of the norm over the law, the material over the abstract, science becomes implicated in the Holocaust.²⁰ The humanist's passion for laws that are always and everywhere true, in a Kantian fashion, has been overwhelmed by the state's clever application

of the always-contingent norm. Levi tries to position science in a positive opposition to Italian Fascism; however, the regime, though less extreme than the Nazis, was finally more invested in the material body than in the spirit. No one had to prove that Italian Jews were not good Fascists in order to ostracize them; it was simply a biological question.

How do Foucault's ideas help us account for the "biopolitics" of Fascist Italy that loom so large in *The Periodic Table*? The fact that Italy had no history of significant antisemitism and no political party with an antisemitic platform underscores how the Race Laws were shrewd policies created at the top of the government hierarchy. Recently, Giorgio Fabre has attempted to show that Mussolini was a deeply committed antisemite²¹—perhaps; but this would not have been a condition necessary to the promulgation of anti-Jewish policies. It is sufficient to surmise that what Mussolini saw when he visited Berlin in 1937 was the mobilizing power of racist discourse. Or, as Foucault puts it in his collected lectures, "*Society Must Be Defended*," (a deliberately ironic title that contrasts productively with Levi's assertion, in *Survival in Auschwitz* and elsewhere, that the idea of the individual human must be defended in the wake of Holocaust), states do not obtain power so they can be racist; rather, it is the frightening scenarios drawn from theories of racial degeneration that legitimate the exercise of power, even to the point of authorizing genocide.²² "Racism justifies the death-function in the economy of bio-power," Foucault states, "by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population, insofar as one is an element in a unitary living plurality."²³ And, of course, both Nazism and Italian Fascism conceived of the nation as a single body, and both represented the Jew as a dangerous pathogen within that body.

While its principles were contradictory, Italian Fascism's consistent program was national regeneration, a return to Roman greatness that would only be achieved after Italy ridded itself of non-Latin elements. Levi lived through a time when Mussolini's government misused biology to contend that all true Italians were the descendents of the ancient Romans, and that the threat of miscegenation with Jews and the newly colonized Africans legitimated severe measures to protect that purity. Levi's experience of being categorized as a Jew capable of polluting the Italian race prompts him to remark, in the chapter titled "Zinc," "Fascism does not want them [i.e., dissension and diversity], forbids them, and that is why you are not a Fascist; it wants everyone to be the same and you are not" (*Periodic* 34). This is the autumn of 1938, when the government-supported antisemitic magazine, *The Defense of the Race*, began publication. Levi remarks that during this period, "there was much talk about purity." When he adds, with evident irony, "I had begun to proud of being impure," I do not believe that

he actually accepts that difference as imposed on him by Italian Fascism is a positive value. Indeed, before the promulgation of the Racial Laws, he states, “it had not meant much to me that I was a Jew” (35). While it is an anti-Fascist position to be proud of one’s “impure” status, this stance is largely rhetorical. The salient point is that Levi is forced to contend with a world governed by norms even though he places his own hope in the Kantian categorical imperative that would apply laws equally without respect to contingent definitions of normality.

Considered in this Kantian context, what “hybridity” comes to mean in Levi’s texts, or “impurity” in this particular case, is that difference among people exists, but the deeper our understanding, the less importance we give to it in the overall scheme of things. For example, in his Auschwitz memoir, Levi fully acknowledges that he experienced the camp as an assimilated Jew, as an Italian, as a male, and as a chemist. However, the apparent lesson learned there, and offered by Levi to his readers, is that all the differences among the victims, and even between the victims and the perpetrators, fall away to reveal a universal concept of the person that must be defended. Thus, the memoir’s original title challenges the reader to consider “if this is a man,” in which, I would add, the word “man” is a false universal that does not accommodate difference—it is meant to include woman as well. Levi’s philosophical assumptions are humanist, so his praise of impurity in “Zinc” is not a postmodern embrace of difference for its own sake, as has been sometimes implied.²⁴

Subjects and Objects, or Words and Things

It is at the chemistry lab at Auschwitz, as recounted in the “Vanadium” chapter, where the unstable hybrid of Man as subject ennobled by science and man as the miserable object of science is most eloquently expressed. That such a place should exist near the death camp, a lab staffed by disposable slave laborers, says a lot about the perils of using the principles of science to fight fascism. Of course, Levi’s readers know that he worked in this very lab in late 1944. The occasion for recalling it twenty years after the Holocaust stems from a business dispute between Levi’s employer, a varnish manufacturer, and a German resin manufacturer that had spun off from IG-Farben, the same industrial conglomerate that exploited slave laborers like Levi during the war. By an implausible coincidence, the contact for the German company, a certain Müller, turns out to be same civilian chemist who worked at the Auschwitz lab. (Actually, the chapter does not read like authentic autobiography, and Levi admitted elsewhere to having faked much it.²⁵ We might surmise that he has an urgent message to

deliver about Auschwitz, nevermind the details, and he wants his words to have the authenticity associated with lived experience.) Reflecting on that pitiable time, Levi confesses that his greatest desire is to have a face-to-face reckoning with “[those] who had disposed of us, who had not looked into our eyes, as though we didn’t have eyes.” Delving deeper into what the perpetrators might have thought about the dehumanized prisoners, Levi guesses that, in the lab, Müller saw him as a “strange hybrid of colleague and instrument” (*Periodic* 215), that is, as both a peer and a mere body subject to biological or medical classification. This description of Levi’s troubled hybrid condition, the central concern of the book, is emblematic of modernity, of that time when man is understood to be both subject and object, when the opposition of man to matter is no longer sustainable. The greatest point of tension in *The Periodic Table* is here: two notions of the human are in grave conflict, and the same may be said of the two notions of science that shaped Levi’s life—science as truth and science as power, with the forces of modernity favoring the latter.²⁶

The vexed connection between words and things, between mind and matter, is a thread that runs all the way to the end of the book, and it reaches a tentative resolution there. The final chapter describes the “life” of a carbon atom as it passes through various animate and inanimate objects, including, finally, the brain and the hand of the unspecified writer who tells the atom’s story. To begin, the narrator conceives of carbon as the universal signifier in that it says “everything to everyone” (*Periodic* 225). If any element can link the two cultures, literature and science, can unify our minds and our materiality, carbon, the very stuff of life, is the one. And yet, the narrator also insists on the inadequacy of language to this task, saying that “the trade of clothing facts in words is bound by its very nature to fail” (232). Moreover, he repeatedly mentions, quite rightly, the arbitrary and capricious quality of the story. “Every verbal description [of photosynthesis] must be inadequate, and one will be as good as the next” (227), he asserts. Surprisingly, this largely autobiographical book concludes with the most impersonal of all its chapters, such that the chemist’s noble pursuit of battling and conquering matter gives way to what the narrator calls a “literary dream” (225). Indeed, carbon, inky black, is the element most strongly associated with words and writing, and the literary craft in this story, especially at the end, is nearly sublime. Here, the subject is not formed by mastering all that is other to it; rather, this subject writes and is written, and this language, as Foucault says of modern literature, “is folded back upon the enigma of its own origin and exist[s] wholly in reference to the pure act of writing.” In literature, language becomes “a silent, cautious deposition of the word upon the whiteness of a piece of paper, where it can possess neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but

itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being."²⁷ Here are the final two luminous sentences of Levi's book, bright in their being:

The cell belongs to a brain, and it is my brain, the brain of me who is writing; and the cell in question, and within it the atom in question, is in charge of my writing, in a gigantic minuscule game which nobody has yet described. It is that which at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run along a certain path on the paper, mark it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on the paper this dot, here, this one. (233, emphasis in Rosenthal's translation but not in the original Italian)

By this time, the reader expects that the book's final lines will bring together the knowledge of the chemist and the writer's conscious shaping of this knowledge on paper. Words and things will be joined again; the instability of modern man, who is both subject and object at once, will be overcome; the spirit will be manifested in material, in the paper and ink, in the shapes of letters and in the precise meanings of the words those letters form. On a second reading, however, what emerges is that this "literary dream" is less concerned with representing chemical knowledge, and thus in serving scientific discourses, whether malignant or benign, but in performing its own beautiful autonomy. This final chapter of *The Periodic Table* is not so much about carbon as it is about how the universality and impersonality of carbon serves as a metaphor for the self-sufficiency of the word, of literature, and of writing. This "me who is writing" is not Levi, but a *me* that is just as arbitrary as the carbon atom of the story. By universalizing the narrating self, art and literature would seem to offer us our one chance to escape from history and the troubled binary of subject/object. In this sense, Levi's final chapter might be said to endorse the claim that, after Auschwitz, literature has more emancipatory potential than science, and that, of the two cultures, literature, if it wishes, can be even more disinterested than science and less subject to the effects of power.

The effacement of the subject in this compelling finale is unexpected since the rest of the book describes chemistry and science in general as noble means of self-assertion by which Man engages in a productive struggle with the material world. It might be explained by Levi's great admiration for Italo Calvino, a postmodern writer who persistently deconstructed the humanist self that is so central to Levi's Holocaust writing. It is very likely that Levi found a model for his closing words in the conclusion of Calvino's 1957 novel, *The Baron in the Trees*, a playful homage to the Enlightenment from a post-Enlightenment perspective. The brilliant final

paragraph of the book describes endlessly flowing ink that seems to escape the first-person narrator's control, creating a forest of autonomous language that conveys both sense and nonsense, both the necessary materiality of writing and the unbounded qualities of the imagination. Perhaps the novel's fanciful world in the trees was "embroidered on nothing, like this thread of ink which I have let run on for page after page, swarming with cancellations, corrections, doodles, blots, and gaps, bursting at times into clear big berries, coagulating at others into piles of tiny starry seeds, then twisting away, forking off, surrounding buds of phrases with frameworks of leaves and clouds, then interweaving again, and so running on and on until it splutters and bursts into a last senseless cluster of words, ideas, dreams, and so it ends."²⁸ If the conclusion of "Carbon" enunciates one of the most notable departures from Levi's humanism in his entire oeuvre, it may be the result of skillful imitation rather than the indication of an ideological sea change.

Conclusion

In minutely describing the development of the two discourses of science in modern European societies, knowledge as truth and knowledge as power, Foucault's analysis of modernity and the genealogy of the humanist subject point us toward a profounder, more historical reading of *The Periodic Table*. He argues, persuasively, that modernity is characterized by the transformation, completed by the late nineteenth century, of diverse scientific practices, each devoted to ascertaining particular, localized and competing truths, into a unitary, institutionalized scientific discourse that allows states to control their populations and individual human bodies.²⁹ In Foucault's terms, Levi's version of chemistry is a marginal, local discourse with little political power. Indeed, Levi describes his memoir as a "micro-history" of chemistry, one that focuses on the individual chemist in pursuit of scientific truth rather than the grand, triumphant chemistry of colossal institutions (*Periodic* 224). Moreover, in its alchemical roots, Levi's chemistry refers back to a time when human beings had not yet become the objects of scientific study, before the link between words and things broke apart.

In effect, *The Periodic Table* dramatizes the collision between the human subject and the human object that necessarily accompanies the technologically sophisticated genocides so characteristic of modernity. In describing the human condition as centaur-like, that is, as an unharmonious "tangle of flesh and mind, divine inspiration and dust" (9), Levi confirms, intentionally or not, Foucault's assertion that during the Enlightenment the discursive subject called Man was first conceived as a conflicted binary,

as both the scientist/subject and also the specimen/object of modern scientific investigation. While Foucault's analysis of the social and political consequences of institutionalized science helps us to historically situate *The Periodic Table*, Levi's memoir, in turn, validates an idea relatively new to Holocaust studies: that the Foucaultian genealogy of the humanist subject explains how state racism and the genocides that they foster are not antithetical to modernity but coherent parts of it.

Foucault's innovative analysis integrates well with the posthumanist critiques of Levinas, and especially Adorno, that are the guiding lights of this book. Indeed, Adorno scholar J. M. Bernstein suggests that biopower, as a modern expression of the ancient fear of the other, may be understood as an elaboration of the dialectic of enlightenment: "Even if it is true that from the perspective of political sovereignty, the administration of living is a departure from pre-modern forms of sovereignty, as Foucault and Agamben suppose, this state of affairs is a natural continuation of the overall inner developmental trajectory of Western reason and rationality; biopower is nothing but the political form of the suppression of animal life that enlightened reason has been aiming at all along: biopower is mythical fear radicalized."³⁰

As we have seen, *The Order of Things* reflects on the development of discourses pertaining to biology and language; its third area of focus is on changing ideas about economics and work, the latter of these being the central theme in the next and final chapter of this book.

The Work of Genocide

Still marked so much by the concentration camps of labor and death, this post-Holocaust world deserves an entry sign. Let it read *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Shall those words provoke the good work that justly sets people free, or will they merely mock us all?

—Richard Rubenstein and John Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*¹

Primo Levi had a remarkable work ethic: between 1946 and 1976, when he was a full-time, industrial chemist, eventually becoming his company's director, he also wrote five books, as well as essays, short stories, and poems. Aside from his personal need and love for work, the centrality of it in his moral universe may be attributed to several factors. He was reared and lived almost his entire life in Turin, a city with a long tradition of industry and prosperity. His family was firmly lodged in the bourgeoisie, as were the majority of the Jewish families in Turin. As an engineer, his father was a successful professional, and so were most of Levi's male relatives. In short, he was reared in a social class which had internalized Enlightenment ideals that defined work as a positive force for re-shaping the world while solidifying one's identity. This may explain the impetus behind some of his occasional journalism, like the essay he wrote after spending a day observing the work on a cable-laying ship in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. In his fulsome praise of the skilled crew—he compares them to Ulysses—Levi implies that work is an appropriate subject for the highest forms of literature:

In this unusual and colossal undertaking [the sailors] have again discovered the ancient virtues of competence put to the test and of work well done. I hope that they will not be surprised nor shocked if their accounts seemed poetic to me. In fact, in their controlled, educated, precise, and unrhetoical words, I have recognized the echo of the voice of another navigator and storyteller whose remote adventures are today eternal poetry: the navigator

who journeyed for ten years across strange sea and whose prime virtues, much more than courage, which he had in abundance, were patience and multifarious ingenuity.²

We have explored Levi's deep appreciation of Ulysses earlier in this study. In the present case, Levi represents him as a model worker whose courage is less important than his persistence and creativity. While I do not wish to make too much of this cameo appearance of the ancient Greek hero in a minor text, it is worth noting the link Levi forges between this icon of humanism and the virtues of work. Previous chapters of my book have uncovered the hidden violence that lurks in the figure of Ulysses as the embodiment of unchecked rationality and subjectivity. Certainly, the same danger is present in work: it can be an agent of progress and emancipation that ennobles humanity; it can also be harnessed to pillage nature or suppress the other. What is genocide if not an example of work gone awry?

In the successive periods of his writing career, Levi's texts often engage the question of whether work serves positive or negative purposes.³ In *Survival in Auschwitz*, he views the camp as an upside-down realm in which work ceases to be a means of living and becomes, perversely, a means of dying. In *The Reawakening*, he suggests that after the liberation of Auschwitz, work began to regain its virtue and joy (although one important character in this memoir, "the Greek," still insists that work is merely an instrument in the everyday struggle for survival). In two books from the 1970s, *The Periodic Table* and *The Monkey's Wrench*, a fictive dialogue between a chemist (a thinly veiled Levi) and an ironworker, who love their respective jobs, Levi conceives of work as the personal refashioning of the material world, which allows for the fullest expression of the self. However, in the Holocaust essays of *The Drowned and the Saved*, published in the 1980s, he articulates a darker, more nuanced view of the nature of work in our "after Auschwitz" world.⁴ Although work is one of the central themes that define Levi's oeuvre as an organic whole—he thought it was an essential human activity—the meaning and character he gives to it is not static from book to book.⁵ It is my contention that the affirmative vision of work he proposes in his non-Holocaust texts can only be fully evaluated in light of his Holocaust writings where the ethically ambiguous nature of work is so forcefully revealed.

This chapter explores the terrain delimited by two passages about work and freedom in Levi's writing. One is found in *The Monkey's Wrench*, and it speaks to the thematic core of that book: "The noun 'freedom' has notoriously many meanings, but perhaps the most accessible form of freedom, the most subjectively enjoyed and the most useful to human society consists of being good at your job and therefore taking pleasure in doing it"

(*Monkey's* 139). The other is found in *Survival in Auschwitz*, in which Levi recalls passing through the main portal of Auschwitz for the first time: "We saw a large door, and above it a sign, brightly illuminated (its memory still strikes me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, work gives freedom" (*Survival* 22). More than the gate itself, it is the image of the slogan embedded there that continues, even after Levi's liberation, to force its way into his traumatized consciousness. These three words shining in the darkness, signaling a metaphysical return to "the gate to slavery" (*Reawakening* 7), seem to evoke the horror of his experience and, especially, its unintelligibility. What did the slogan, so central to Nazi ideas about work, mean for the victims of Nazism, and what legacy has it left us? The question posed above by Rubenstein and Roth about the future of work after Auschwitz is but a universalized formulation of Levi's personal dilemma. From now on, it is imaginable that human ingenuity and blindly obedient workers can calmly carry out genocide, and that the victims can be alternately coerced with privileges and forced with threats of violence to bear the burden of managing their own demise. We cannot be sure whether the Holocaust, the consummate example of the work of genocide, will serve as an unforgettable warning or germinate yet more affliction and death. We cannot be sure whether Auschwitz, and the work that went on there, was an anomaly that has no connection to our everyday world or whether, in its extreme violence, it lays bare a destructive urge in Western civilization that impels the empowered to work diligently and creatively to cleanse their world of an apparently threatening other. These uncertainties condition our encounter with Levi's writing about work. How does the slavery evoked in *Survival in Auschwitz*, where it masquerades as freedom, contextualize or compromise the freedom defined in *The Monkey's Wrench* as a job well done? Might the optimism about work espoused in the novel constitute an attempt to overcome the pessimism expressed in the memoir? Might the later text aspire to finally defeat Nazism by proposing a better world where the slogan "work liberates" is no longer ironic and derisive but true?

Philip Roth begins his well-known interview with Levi by addressing this very topic: "Work would seem to be your obsessive subject, even in your book about your incarceration at Auschwitz. *Arbeit Macht Frei*—Work Makes Freedom—are the words inscribed by the Nazis over the Auschwitz gate. But work in Auschwitz is a horrifying parody of work, useless and senseless—labor as punishment leading to agonizing death. It's possible to view your entire literary labor as dedicated to restoring to work its humane meaning, reclaiming the word *Arbeit* from the derisory cynicism with which your Auschwitz employers had disfigured it."⁶ In response, Levi neither accepts nor rejects the idea that he has written his books to redeem work after it was perverted by the Nazis; still, I think

Roth's perception is partially valid. For the purposes of this study, an investigation of the viability of humanism after Auschwitz, the important question is whether Levi's humane vision of work amounts to a return to a time before the Holocaust, that is, to a nostalgic evocation of a world of work that perhaps never existed; or whether, informed by "after Auschwitz" knowledge, he manages to reconceive work in such a way as to reclaim its virtue or perhaps to posit an ethics of work that might deter a renewal of the work of genocide.

In pursuit of possible answers, this chapter considers Levi's representation of work in the camp from the perspective of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. I begin by summarizing these issues in relation to *Survival in Auschwitz* but devote most of the discussion to *The Drowned and the Saved*, offering, along the way, an original reading of his "Gray Zone" essay as a commentary on the ethics of work. In my study of how Enlightenment humanism contributed to the conditions that enabled the Holocaust, Levi's last book is an exception. For the most part, I do not interpret these essays as further examples of unexamined humanism; instead, I find that by the mid-1980s, Levi has internalized aspects of Adorno and Foucault's critique of progress. Consequently, Levi himself offers some acute observations on the dangers that ensue when we too readily accept that work ennobles humanity or that work done well must therefore be both virtuous and liberating.

"A Corpse Factory"

Beginning with its title and right through to the end of the memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz* constitutes a sustained meditation on the status, physical but also ethical and philosophical, of the dehumanized person in Auschwitz. The reader learns that during the Holocaust, Jews and other victims lost their subjectivity and became inanimate objects, or mere material. They were completely "reified" in the sense of the word used by Lukács and later adopted by Horkheimer and Adorno. They were reduced to commodities that had miniscule "exchange-value" in the sophisticated system of production set up by the SS. In the memoir's first chapter, Levi reports that he and 650 others destined to be deported from Italy are not people to the German soldiers, but "pieces" to manage (*Survival* 16), or just so much "cheap merchandise" (17). To the victims' amazement, they can be violently hit but without anger precisely because they are no longer human (16), and because, as we will see repeatedly, the soldiers have a cold, professional attitude toward the work of genocide. Thus, we read, "with a single blow they knocked [Renzo] to the ground. It was their everyday duty" (19).

Later in his story, in Auschwitz itself, Levi remarks upon the double sense of the expression “extermination camp” (27): it destroys the spirit first, and then the body. The camp’s final product is, exactly, nothing.

There are many references in the memoir to the work the prisoners are forced to perform. Levi’s point, made several times, is that their real job is to avoid as much of this work as is possible without being caught and punished since the labor conditions are atrocious and, much of the time, the assigned tasks are pointless. (In an essay included in *The Drowned and the Saved*—“Useless Violence”—Levi argues that precisely because the Nazis and Italian Fascists respect work, the regimes’ enemies must be denied any sense of satisfaction or professionalism in the labor they are forced to perform.⁷) There is almost nothing the prisoners can do to resist the camp’s killing work, but they can, in marginal ways, refuse to accept the ideology implicit in it. As a survivor who has retained an individual identity, Levi knows his case is exceptional, for the SS members have carefully designed the camps to efficiently process their victims, reducing them to a uniform material. The prisoners “are ten thousand and they are a single grey machine; they are exactly determined; they do not think and they do not desire, they walk” (*Survival* 51). The extermination camp’s penultimate goal is to produce *Muselmanner*, the non-men “on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen” (90). Finally, emptied of spirit and thought, the human becomes an animal or a machine or even less—merely a body to dispose of.⁸ For the majority of the deported victims, the awful train trip was sufficient to rob them of their humanity; then, they were ready to walk into the unknown of the gas chambers. Since Levi ended up in a labor subcamp, and lived to tell about it, he is able to report on some of the distinct stages in the victims’ dehumanization. For example, he went through the terror of “selections,” the point at which the laborer, having been consumed by work, was inevitably scheduled for disposal. The machinery of genocide functions so well because “the Germans apply themselves to these things with great skill and diligence” (125). It becomes evident that a good work ethic does not necessarily produce ethical work.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt confirms and amplifies what Levi describes in his memoir, although she is able to identify a negative utility, an abhorrent usefulness to the work of genocide that Levi fails to detect: “The uselessness of the camps, their cynically admitted anti-utility, is only apparent. In reality, they are more essential to the preservation of the regime’s power than any of its other institutions.” Auschwitz and the other camps, she contends, are efficiently managed “corpse factories” whose real product is domination, which is an essential element in the realization of the total state. When the system functions as intended,

the wholly reified victim is no longer human but simply another element of nature to be conquered and reduced to nothing. "Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men," Arendt asserts, "but toward a system in which men are superfluous."⁹

Zygmunt Bauman extends upon Arendt's observations to argue that the hallmarks of modern civilization, such as technology, rationality, and the efficient division of labor, while not the cause of the Holocaust, are necessary conditions to it; without them, "the Holocaust would be unthinkable." Therefore, Auschwitz must be understood as "the technological achievement of an industrial society but also the organizational achievement of a bureaucratic society." Moreover, the Holocaust ought to disabuse us of the notion that modern societies are free of violence; rather, it is that violence is out of view or in the hands of professionals like armies or police.¹⁰ The division of labor so characteristic of modern societies also applies to state-sponsored violence. In this sense, the Holocaust is not an odd parenthesis in Western civilization's narrative of emancipation and progress; rather, it reveals the suppressed or forgotten violence that inhabits our thoughts and actions, our rationality and our work. *Survival in Auschwitz* offers much evidence in support of this claim. After Auschwitz, the challenge for Levi, and for all of us, is to conceive an ethical vision of work within the impersonal productive structures of modern societies.

The Gray Zone

In essays of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi sets out to discredit simplifications and stereotypes about the inhabitants of Auschwitz. The SS men were not the inhuman monsters of the popular imagination but, Levi insists, disturbingly human and "made of the same cloth as we" (*Drowned* 202). Newcomers to the camps did not find a clear distinction between friends and enemies. Rather, they encountered what Levi called "the Gray Zone," a morally ambiguous world where "the 'we' had lost its limits" (38), where privileged prisoners, having been drawn into a web of complicity with the SS, were the chief victimizers. In a broader sense, the "Gray Zone" essay (36–69) is a meditation on the workings of power and privilege in all human societies as well as a treatise on the ethics of work in extreme situations. If Auschwitz lays bare general truths that are normally buried, then Levi's analysis of the moral ambiguity of life and work in the camps is relevant to every era.

Levi's "Gray Zone" spans along an axis of increasing power and guilt, from the *Muselmanner* to the SS Men who have voluntarily chosen to perform the work of genocide. In between, but in some cases floating on

account of Levi's judicious indecision, are the *Sonderkommandos* and the Kapos. Once we grasp the morally ambiguous nature of the "Gray Zone," where the simple binary victim/perpetrator breaks down, we are tempted to elide the actions of all of the participants and think that no clear moral or legal distinctions can be drawn among them. However, Levi makes evident the black boundary in the "Gray Zone" that separated various types of victims from various types of perpetrators. When film director Liliana Cavani asserts, "we are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily," Levi responds acidly "that to confuse [murderers] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth" (48–49). Just because the SS men and the prisoners shared a common humanity means neither that deep inside we are all murderers nor that victims choose their suffering. In a sense, the perpetrators occupy their own "Gray Zone." The German industrialists and their employees who exploited slave labor provided by the camps are not murderers but they are nonetheless on the wrong side of a clear line of responsibility.

In keeping with his penchant making precise distinctions, as the chemist does using the periodic table, Levi assesses the relative complicity and guilt associated with the jobs held by various types of prisoners. Readers find that he would "lightheartedly absolve . . . prisoners without rank [and] low-ranking functionaries" because they were not violent. He asserts, however, that judging the higher-ranking prisoners is more difficult. For one thing, "the greatest responsibility lies in the system" (44), and it encouraged depravity. Kapos had unlimited power to do violence to their charges; in fact, they were "deposed if they did not prove to be sufficiently harsh" (46). In regard to the *Sonderkommandos*, the Special Squads that ran the crematoria and maintained order among the new arrivals selected for the gas, Levi wisely abstains from offering judgment on those who themselves suffered so much: "I ask that we meditate on the story of 'the crematorium ravens' with pity and rigor, but that judgment of them be suspended" (60). The SS had developed a clever, if temporary, strategy for absolving themselves of the worst crimes: they did not push the victims into the gas chambers. It is clear, nevertheless, that the *Sonderkommandos* were victims themselves, and not executioners. This, indeed, was the most horrible job of all, for it shifted the burden of guilt from the perpetrators to the victims themselves, "so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence" (53). Here, work is not only the means to self-destruction, but, perversely, to self-loathing as well.

Levi arrives at a similar inability to offer a definitive judgment, what he terms *impotentia iudicandi*, in the case of Chaim Rumkowski, the president

of Lodz ghetto, who unwittingly collaborated with the Nazis: His “story is so eloquent on the fundamental theme of human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression” (60–61). That his moral compass failed in the face of Nazi subjugation and seduction should interest us, Levi suggests, because “we are mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours” (69). In short, Levi succeeds in persuading his reader that to judge the work of the victim/collaborator during the Holocaust, in either moral or legal terms, is far from simple. “How would each of us behave,” he asks, “if driven by necessity and at the same time lured by seduction?” (68).

Turning his lens on the perpetrators, Levi analyzes the Nazi work ethic and attempts to explain how it motivated individuals to perform the work of genocide with unconditioned obedience and servile devotion. His enterprise resembles those of scholars like Christopher Browning and Gitty Sereny.¹¹ Neither of these authors gives a definitive answer as to why ordinary people performed the work of genocide, but both of them return to the importance of the work ethic, sense of duty, and blind ambition. Levi, too, understands the pathology of Nazism as a perversion of human labor in all sectors of an advanced society. “Love for a job well done is a deeply ambiguous virtue,” he concludes. “It animated Michelangelo through his last days . . . Rudolf Höss, the Auschwitz commander, boasts of the same virtue when he describes the creative travail that led to his invention of the gas chambers” (*Drowned* 123). In conceding that the highest and lowest moments of any civilization might draw equally on human reserves of diligence and creativity, Levi illustrates the return of enlightened civilization to barbarism posited by Adorno and Horkheimer.¹² This troubling disjunction between the Nazi work ethic and ordinary, liberal morality is perhaps the Holocaust’s most significant legacy with respect to work. Perpetrating genocide is now a career option.

Levi asserts that all Germans share a measure of collective guilt for the Holocaust (*Drowned* 15, 203), but he is more interested in personal ethics, pausing to reflect on the actions of men like Höss, Adolph Eichmann, and Albert Speer. While he recognizes the coercive power of institutions, his interpretation of the events consistently focuses on the failure of individual moral responsibility (29). He defends this position in a furious reply to one of his postwar German correspondents who suggested that the Germans were betrayed and victimized by Hitler: “I might remind you that nothing obliged German industrialists to hire famished slaves if not for their profit; that no one forced the Topf Company (flourishing today in Wiesbaden) to build the enormous multiple crematoria in the Lagers; that perhaps the SS did receive orders to kill the Jews, but enrollment in the SS was voluntary (179).” Of course, Levi was himself a slave laborer at a synthetic rubber factory owned by the huge industrial conglomerate IG-Farben, so his

interest here is personal as well as historical. Elsewhere, he stresses that SS men were not generally sadists but “average human beings, averagely intelligent, averagely wicked,” some of whom were “fanatically convinced of the Nazi doctrine,” others merely “desirous of a good career” (202). No great force of evil was necessary for the Holocaust to occur, merely a large number of diligent, ambitious, and unquestioning workers and businessmen. However, whether one’s devotion to the work of genocide was serious or cynical, Levi remains an unyielding judge, stating unequivocally that “one must answer personally for sins and errors; otherwise all trace of civilization would vanish from the face of the earth, as in fact it had vanished from the Third Reich” (178). Criminal acts cannot be excused, even if authorized by a state, nor can soldiers justify following immoral orders. Individual responsibility, Levi implies, is the last and most important deterrent to future genocides.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt draws a different lesson from the Holocaust. She, too, saw the SS men as ordinary, but she credited the Nazi state with a greater ability to impair individual identity and responsibility: “The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.” For Arendt, the “the fearsome, word-and-thought defying banality of evil” lies precisely in the fact that state-mandated (i.e., legal), bureaucratic functions undertaken by thousands of normal people made the Holocaust possible.¹³ In modern societies, the fragmentation of labor allows individuals to perform their part in mass murder without feeling accountable. For Arendt, the prevention of future genocides is less about individual responsibility than the creation a system of international law that prohibits and punishes crimes against humanity perpetrated by states.

Not surprisingly, Levi and Arendt paint different pictures of the SS functionary Adolph Eichmann, although there are still some shared impressions. He was only moderately antisemitic, Arendt reports, and believed that facilitating the extermination of the Jews, while not always pleasant, was simply a job to be done to the best of his ability. Moreover, “[Eichmann] claimed with great pride that he had always ‘done his duty.’” She goes on to say that though his work with the local Jewish communities throughout Europe was essential to the success of “The Final Solution,” Eichmann had, in fact, little power in the SS hierarchy: he was just another cog in the machine. His position did not require violence nor did he have a violent nature. These facts caused the Israeli prosecutor some difficulty since “[he] wanted to try the most abnormal monster the world had ever seen.”¹⁴ Eichmann’s ambition seems more damning than the depravity of his character, Arendt concludes. “Except for an extraordinary diligence in

looking out for his personal advancement, [Eichmann] had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal . . . He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*.” Arendt is sympathetic to the idea that a totalitarian ethos weakened the already meager ability of Nazi bureaucrats to make moral decisions: “The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.”¹⁵ When an entire society has succumbed to evil, she reasons, individual guilt is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. In effect, if everyone is guilty, no one is guilty.

Where Arendt is detached and analytical, Levi is angry and emotional in his poem “For Adolph Eichmann,” written in July 1960, shortly after Eichmann was brought to Israel to be tried for crimes against humanity.¹⁶ The poem’s first stanza evokes a world where men and women toil over the land and are rewarded by its fruitfulness. This positive formulation of work is overturned in the second stanza, which begins with an ellipsis indicating an abyss between the bucolic world and the horrific realm of Eichmann, where work is neither creative nor procreative but destructive. The poet wonders, his rage apparent, if the SS bureaucrat will seek forgiveness or, instead, lament that he did not have sufficient time to complete the task to which he dedicated his life—the extermination of all of the Jews: “Or will you at the end, like the industrious man/ Whose life was too brief for his long art,/ Lament your sorry work unfinished,/ The thirteen million still alive?”¹⁷ Levi questions whether Eichmann’s motivation for carrying out the work of genocide arises from his character as “the industrious man.” If so, he allowed the virtue of hard work to be perverted by a racist ideology for the sake of his career ambitions. Otherwise, Eichmann is insincere, and Levi finds it reprehensible that the SS man bases his defense on his devotion to work for its own sake.¹⁸ As just punishment, the poem’s third and final stanza utters a great curse on Eichmann: that he should live forever, receiving, each sleepless night, the suffering soul of a different Holocaust victim.

Returning to *The Drowned and the Saved*, we find Levi is more analytical in the 1980s than he was in 1960, but he still the views the SS men as opportunists whose claims of being devoted to doing a good job are merely a convenient shield from responsibility. Implicit in Levi’s judgment of the Germans is the distinction between two levels of guilt, active and passive. For the SS members, devotion to their work led them to the active commission of criminal acts: their guilt lies in what they did. For the typical Germans, however, their guilt lies in what they did not do. Devotion to work did not lead the ordinary people to violence; rather, they chose to use work to insulate themselves from the violence that should have concerned

them—they meekly adhered to the responsibilities delimited by their jobs, even as it was clear that greater ethical responsibilities were being shunned. In other words, Levi came to understand Nazism as a perversion of human labor throughout the society, not just inside the barbed wire.

Conclusion

Levi's deep appreciation of work helps him to articulate an incisive critique of the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their hollow claims of devotion to career. He recognizes the coercion within totalitarian states; nevertheless, he holds that even in Nazi Germany one had the ability to choose, albeit in a limited fashion. His focus on individual conscience and personal responsibility as the last and most important deterrents to future genocides is consistent with his humanism. However, the pessimism about work expressed in his last book—"love for a job well done is a deeply ambiguous virtue"—certainly raises questions about the future of the West's grand narrative of progress through rational labor.

The reader will recall a passage from *The Monkey's Wrench* cited at the beginning of this chapter, which links freedom with professional competence and a good work ethic, a formulation that seems to challenge the *Arbeit Macht Frei* of Auschwitz. However, in light of the corruption of labor that enabled the Nazi genocide, as represented in Levi's first book and in his last one, we cannot conclude that the positive conception of work described in his mid-career novel successfully addresses the troubling link between work and domination that was revealed by the Holocaust. The ironrigger protagonist, Faussonne, is a craftsman, a throwback to a time before the Holocaust, before industrialization and bureaucracy made it possible for workers to do their small part without considering the ethical implications of the entire process. This willed ignorance, central to what Arendt famously called "the banality of evil," made "The Final Solution" possible. Rather than overcoming the work of genocide, I suspect that *The Monkey's Wrench* is haunted by it. For example, the chapter titled "Cloistered," suggestive of Levi's captivity, opens *in media res* with Faussonne saying, "Well, it's unbelievable. I can understand how you wanted to write about it. Yes, I knew something myself; my father was in Germany, too, in a different situation . . . One of these days I'll tell you about my father, the story of how he was a prisoner of war; but it's not like yours, it's more something to laugh at." Clearly, the passage refers to Levi himself and the memoir he wrote, but the crucial details of his account are off the page, forming a silent background. Faussonne then segues into a story of a job that was "worse than prison" (14). He was building a distillation tower that,

he says, resembled the human body. When technical problems arose and the tower did not function correctly, Faussonne describes it as “a person in pain, who can’t talk” (23), an image which brings to mind the *Muselmann*, another silent figure that lurks just off the page. Faussonne goes on in this manner here and throughout the novel, consistently personifying his metal creations as if to compensate on Levi’s behalf for the way Auschwitz reduced people to material and machines. In this way, Faussonne’s stories about jobs occurring long after the war and far from the sites of the camps nevertheless engage the ethical dangers inherent in work. The character cannot help but do so, it seems, because Auschwitz has contaminated his creator’s world; nor can he, as Levi’s proxy, articulate a vision of work that would effectively preempt future genocides.

Conclusion

A New Humanism?

This book will meet with resistance. While I join the chorus of those who esteem Levi's oeuvre as one of the most significant in the international literature of the Holocaust, I have argued here that the acute blindness of his humanism reveals nearly as much about the origins and meanings of Auschwitz as do his penetrating insights. His near inability to see the dangers within universality and instrumental reason, especially in his early texts, would not be important if this blindness were his alone. However, his humanism is also ours. This is especially evident, as I have argued in several chapters of this book, in the conventional ways he draws on the figure Ulysses and in his readers' uncritical reception of these appropriations. In confirming Levi's deep identification with Ulysses up to the end of his life, biographer Ian Thomson assumes, with good reason, that we secular Westerners also identify with the ancient traveler who fought to reach home and with the modern one, too, who returned from Auschwitz after great suffering. "Levi had said that he wanted as his epitaph the Greek words Homer used of his voyager Ulysses, *'pollà plankte'*. They mean 'much erring', or 'driven to wander far and wide'; in his homesick exile, separated from his friends and home, the long-enduring Ulysses was a kind of Everyman. And so was Primo Levi, which is why he still feels so close to us in the twenty-first century."¹

Akin to Ulysses the literary character, Levi suffered our human fate to the fullest degree. Although his life was shaped by titanic forces that he could not control, he used his reason and physical vigor, like the "man skilled in all ways of contending," to ride the waves of his own destiny and survive his metaphorical shipwreck.² As Thomson states above, there is something of the Everyman in the figure of Ulysses and a great deal of it in Primo Levi, too. However, it is my contention that their stories are so compelling to a wide readership because, as exceptional survivors of disaster, they not only regained their distinctive individuality but purified and hardened it in the hot fires of experience. I have argued that Levi and his readers sometimes overstate the hybrid, centaur-like aspect of his authorial persona and

writing. My position is confirmed by his strong identification so late in life with Ulysses, an emblematic representation of the individual over the many, that is, of the West's unified subject who comes home to the self by outwitting a multiplicity of others, whether in the form of mythical beasts or as the colonized underclass. It is no coincidence that the Italian Fascists and Nazis linked themselves to Ulysses and Ancient Greece to legitimate the claim that their peoples were superior to those of other nations.

The idea of self-return—call it survival—may account for the special resonance Levi found in Ulysses's escape from the Cyclops, as described in the famous passage in Book IX of the *Odyssey*. Levi includes it in *The Search for Roots*, his personal anthology of thirty texts that he cherished or held to be significant in his development as a writer. He introduces the passage by praising the *Odyssey* for its "human dimension" and its implicit message of "peace through justice," forgetting that Ulysses is above all a warrior who reestablishes order by unleashing violence against the suitors of Penelope. This common but myopic reading of Homer illustrates, again, my claim that culture serves to mask the other's suffering. In his prefatory remarks, Levi also expresses his appreciation for Ulysses's cunning and courage in defeating the Cyclops—the mythic other—and for his audacious reassertion of individual identity after having pretended to be named "nobody."³ In this and other moments in the *Odyssey*, the hero as storyteller narrates himself into being. Indeed, the figure of Ulysses that crisscrosses Levi's oeuvre represents the paradigmatic humanist subject from Athens to Auschwitz and beyond. The core of Ulysses's narrative, and Levi's, too, suggest the following informal definition: *to be human is to be a survivor*. Like Ulysses, the experienced Auschwitz returnee has an unusual acquaintance of the underworld that confers authority but also a burden that cannot be shed. Levi's texts constantly interrogate the implications of this condition and, in the process, offer us a test case for thinking about the viability of the humanist subject after Auschwitz.

As I have argued in this book, Levi's Holocaust texts struggle with at least two linked complications that undermine the untroubled integrity of the survivor/human. The first is ethical and pertains to the *Muselmann*, the wholly other who is sacrificed to the subject's putative right of self-preservation. The second is psychological and pertains to the survivor's traumatization, which renders him, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, unable to realize his homecoming in the fullest sense. Cathy Caruth has written that "the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and the impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life. It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living."⁴ If trauma is

a permanent, unsettling aspect of survival, so, too, is the survivor's guilt, which arises from the unwelcomed knowledge that he or she lives in the place of another person, perhaps a better one whose first principle was not self-preservation. In laying bare the depth of this problem and the ways in which he is implicated in it, Levi is certainly a great moralist. It is the noble failure of his humanist ethics, their inability to justify the ontological subject—what I have called the survivor/human—that makes us seriously consider the radical alternative proposed by Emmanuel Levinas. “I think that *the Human* consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other,” he stated, “in being preoccupied with his or her death.”⁵

In positing an obligation to the other that is prior to whatever obligation we owe ourselves, Levinas proposes nothing less than a new humanism, one that more fully honors the best ideals animating Levi's. Similarly, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer propose a renewed Enlightenment that overcomes the impediments preventing reason from achieving its emancipatory potential: “We have no doubt—and herein lies our *petitio principii*—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking.” Adorno and his coauthor are not opposed to the application of reason to society and politics; to the contrary, their unrestrained critique of it “is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination.” To be sure, the Enlightenment is an unfinished project. The Holocaust not only revealed its weakness, Adorno and Horkheimer assert, but also the means by which it might be brought to fruition: “Only the liberation of thought from power, the abolition of violence, could realize the idea unrealized until now: that the Jew is a human being. This would be a step away from the anti-Semitic society, which drives both Jews and others into sickness, and toward a *human* one. Such a step would fulfill the fascist lie by contradicting it: the Jewish question would indeed prove the turning-point in history.”⁶

Of course, Levi knew all this and more. He knew that the objectification of humans was crucial to the mentality that led to the Holocaust. Furthermore, he lived his Kantianism sincerely and thought it contributed to his survival in Auschwitz: “I was also helped by the determination, which I stubbornly preserved, to recognize always, even in the darkest days, in my companions and in myself, men, not things, and thus to avoid total humiliation and demoralization which led so many to spiritual shipwreck.”⁷ Levi may have been successful in a personal sense—it is a complicated question—but his principled stance cannot fully exonerate his humanism. Indeed, the precise aim of this book has been to read Levi's remarkable testimonies in the context of the collapsed distinction between men and things that the Enlightenment fostered, as Foucault demonstrated in ample detail. Of

course, the reader will decide for him- or herself whether this approach has born any fruit.

This book has reached its conclusion, but there will be more to say about the status of Man after Auschwitz as represented in the works of Primo Levi. While I preferred to focus on the major works, Levi's short stories and his Jewish Partisan novel—*If Not Now, When?*—could have been brought into my discussion.⁸ Furthermore, although Levi may have disowned his science fiction writing, which I did not discuss in this study, it contains interesting conjectures about the future of humanity—dark speculations that do not find their way, not explicitly at least, into his Holocaust texts.⁹ Some interesting scholarship has been done on these minor works but the links between them and the main body of Levi's oeuvre ought to be more fully explored.¹⁰

Notes

Introduction

1. I refer to the first anthology of Levi scholarship published in English, *Reason and Light: Essays on Primo Levi*, ed. Susan Tarrow (Ithaca, NY: Center for International Studies, Cornell University, 1990).
2. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); *Se questo è un uomo*, rev. ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1958); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989); *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986). On the importance of Levi in American intellectual life, see Michael Rothberg and Jonathan Druker, “A Secular Alternative: Primo Levi’s Place in American Holocaust Discourse,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28, no. 1 (forthcoming).
3. Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 195. In the chapter titled “Genocide and Kant’s Enlightenment,” Lang offers a careful, measured, and detailed assessment of the “affiliation” between Enlightenment ideas and the inner logic of Nazism (165–206). He takes possible objections to his thesis seriously, admitting that so many Nazi proclamations and policies claimed to be in sharp opposition to Enlightenment principles. However, he states, these objections “argue past rather than against the thesis posed here, which is based on the internal structure of ideas, not on what is said about them” (194).
4. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, ed. H. J. Patton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). The categorical imperative states the following: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (30).
5. Vincent P. Pecora, “Habermas, Enlightenment, and Antisemitism,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 155–70; especially 163.
6. Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, 186. He adds: “For once the Jews were formally excluded from the body politic—on the grounds that *by their nature* they did not qualify for the rights of citizenship—there were no limits in principle to what steps might be initiated against them, even if in point of fact it required five or six years before the most extreme of those steps, that of genocide, was taken” (188).

7. Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, 195. See also Zygmunt Bauman, “Allo-Semitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern,” in *Modernity, Culture and “the Jew,”* ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 143–56. Before the Enlightenment, intolerance of Jews in Europe led to ghettoization, forced conversion, expulsion, or even unsystematic murder, but not to carefully planned genocide. According to Bauman, modernity, with “its obsessive preoccupation with ordering,” marked a transition to an “Age of Gardening.” “When *society* is turned into a garden, then the idea of *unwertes Leben* [‘worthless life’] is bound to occupy in every blueprint of a better society as great a place as the need to fight weeds and parasites occupies in every good gardening handbook” (153).
8. As early as 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre noted the link between a deification of the human and fascism: “We have no right to believe that humanity is something to which we could set up a cult, after the manner of Auguste Comte. The cult of humanity ends in Comtian humanism, shut-in upon itself, and—this must be said—in Fascism. We do not want a humanism like that.” Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Meridien, 1956), 368.
9. In English, see Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); Fredric D. Homer, *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Massimo Giuliani, *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi’s Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003). In Italian, see Massimo Dini and Stefano Jesurum, *Primo Levi: Le opere e i giorni* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1992); Franco Baldasso, *Il cerchio di gesso: Primo Levi narratore e testimone* (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 2007).
10. Although not discussed in my study, many other Italian Holocaust writers had to navigate these same transitions. See Risa Sodi, *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Writing (1944–1994)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
11. See Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980). In some of the earliest Levi criticism in America, Rosenfeld wrote that *Survival in Auschwitz* was “influenced by the traditions of Western humanistic learning” (56). See David Denby, “The Humanist and the Holocaust: The Poised Art of Primo Levi,” *The New Republic*, July 28, 1986, 27–33. Denby wrote that as a “humanist after Auschwitz,” Levi “not only violates our sense of what a survivor should be, he violates our sense of what a modern writer should be. He lacks fierceness, anguish, a taste for extremity” (28). See Michael André Bernstein, “A Yes or a No,” Review of *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* by Myriam Anissimov, *The New Republic*, September 27, 1999, 35–41. Bernstein wrote of Levi: “His writing embodies perhaps the last great testament to the Enlightenment’s trust in the adequacy of reason to comprehend the world and to shape a fitting place for us in it” (36). An Italian anthology on Levi organized by key topics

- includes an entire essay on Levi and the Enlightenment; see Daniela Amsalem, “Illuminista,” in *Riga 13: Primo Levi*, ed. Marco Belpoliti (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1997), 361–71. See also François Rastier, *Ulysse à Auschwitz: Primo Levi, le survivant* (Paris: Cerf, 2005). Rastier wrote: “Héritier des ingénieurs de la Renaissance, Levi reste un écrivain des Lumières: son ami Calvino . . . le compare à des encyclopédistes due XVIIIe siècle . . .” (188).
12. Joseph Farrell, “Introduction,” in *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist*, ed. Joseph Farrell (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 9.
 13. Farrell, “Introduction,” 9, 15.
 14. Some of its confusing variety is cataloged in Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50. “In the seventeenth century, there was a humanism that presented itself as a critique of Christianity or of religion in general . . . In the nineteenth century, there was a suspicious humanism, hostile and critical toward science, and another that, to the contrary, placed its hope in that same science. Marxism has been a humanism . . . there was a time when people supported the humanistic values represented by National Socialism; and when the Stalinists themselves said they were humanists” (44).
 15. Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 20, 23, 24.
 16. Robert S. C. Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.
 17. Bryan Cheyette, “Appropriating Primo Levi,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 71.
 18. The episode has often been discussed in Levi scholarship. See, for example, Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 228–30.
 19. The later works show that Levi was an avid student of the Holocaust and of the broader questions it raised. At one point in *The Drowned and the Saved*, for example, he shows his acceptance of criticisms directed at the Enlightenment—in this case, that it is naïve about the psychology of the perpetrators of genocide (26). Nothing similar to this can be found in the first three decades of Levi’s writing after the war.
 20. Cheyette, “Appropriating Primo Levi,” 82.
 21. Gian-Paolo Biasin, “The Haunted Journey of Primo Levi,” in *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, ed. Roberta S. Kremer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 11.
 22. Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf, with afterword, “The Author’s Answers to His Readers’ Questions,” trans. by Ruth Feldman (New York: Macmillan, 1987); Primo Levi, *La tregua* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963); Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?* trans. William Weaver, intro. Irving Howe (New York: Summit Books, 1985); Primo Levi, *Se non ora, quando?* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982); Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984); Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975); Primo Levi, *The Monkey’s Wrench*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit Books, 1986); Primo Levi, *La chiave a stella* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978).

23. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 149.
24. See Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, eds., *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). The best broad overview is found in Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, eds., *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
25. See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991).
26. According to Stuart Sim, posthumanism is “the state many theorists claim we are now in, where humanist values are no longer taken to be the norm and are even openly contested. A post-humanist society regards humanist ideals with scepticism, and is prone to see their negative side only (for example, the Holocaust as a logical extension of the humanist desire to find rational ‘solutions’ to all perceived social and political ‘problems’).” Stuart Sim, *Lyotard and the Inhuman* (Cambridge, UK: Icon Books, 2001), 78.
27. See Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).
28. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordam University Press, 2005); Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
29. See Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 239–64.
30. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 222.
31. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18.
32. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
33. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
34. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand, trans. Séan Hand and Michael Temple (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 75–87.
35. “[Levi was] almost an epitome of the educated (but not ‘intellectual’), secular, modern subject, with many of the liberal, progressive, bourgeois values out of which modern Europe had grown in various stages, places, and times, from the Reformation and the Enlightenment onwards. It is a sweeping but nevertheless fascinating generalization, making Levi a test-case in that long-standing historical debate over

what part of Nazism and the Final Solution was irrationalist mythology, jumbled ideology, and power-crazed idiocy, an aberrant form of progress as conceived by the Enlightenment and its successors; and what part of it a perverse by-product of the hidden autocratic and inhumane assumptions of these very progressive movements.” Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues*, 16.

36. *Primo Levi: Opere*, 2 vols., ed. Marco Belpoliti, intro. Daniele del Giudice (Turin: Einaudi, 1997).

Chapter 1

1. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel, with a new preface by Elie Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).
2. Three biographies are Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* (New York: Overlook, 1999); Carole Angier, *The Double Bond, Primo Levi: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002); and Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002).
3. David Ward, “Primo Levi’s Turin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.
4. See, for example, the first chapter in Enzo Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei: Le leggi razziali in Italia* (Rome: Laterza, 2003).
5. See, for example, Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life*. Levi’s father “was not anti-Fascist, or even a mild dissenter. At most, he dismissed Mussolini (in private) as a *mamzer*, ‘bastard’ in Hebrew” (27). I should add that many Turinese Jews were members of the Italian establishment in the decades before the Fascists came to power, and several were prominent Fascists until the 1938 Racial Laws made them second-class citizens. See Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families under Fascism* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).
6. On the opening page of the memoir, Levi explains that he was arrested as an antifascist partisan, albeit a hapless one, and deported as a Jew (*Survival* 13). In this sense, he was not simply a passive victim but also an Italian political prisoner. After the war, he joined ANED, the National Association of Ex-Deportees, a group that makes no marked distinction between Jewish prisoners and non-Jewish forced laborers and political prisoners. The group’s symbol is the red triangle, not the yellow star.
7. However, there is good reason to think that Levi represented both his family history and his childhood as more integrated and less Jewish than it actually was. His biographers have found that antisemitism played a role in his grandfather’s suicide, an event that Levi never wrote about. For a thorough discussion of this question, see Nancy Harrowitz, “Primo Levi’s Jewish Identity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–31.
8. Their deeply entangled history is explored in Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

9. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 5.
10. Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 31, emphasis in original.
11. See Harrowitz, "Primo Levi's Jewish Identity," 27–29, for another interpretation of the poem that emphasizes its function as a specifically Jewish text.
12. "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* 'Have courage to use your own understanding!'—that is the motto of enlightenment." Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" *Philosophy on the EServer.Org*, no first publication date, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/what-is-enlightenment.txt>, January 15, 2009.
13. The importance of Levi's friendship with Alberto, another Italian prisoner, might seem to qualify this statement. However, it is significant that Levi increased Alberto's presence quite a lot in the second edition of *Survival in Auschwitz*, published in 1958. (The particulars are detailed in Marco Belpoliti's notes on the text included in *Primo Levi: Opere*, vol. I, ed. Marco Belpoliti, intro. Daniele del Giudice [Turin: Einaudi, 1997], 1399–1400.) With fewer instances of friendship, the first edition is bleaker but also perhaps more authentic.
14. The three biographies (see note 2) contain much information about Levi's trip to America: Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, 376–81; Angier, *The Double Bond*, *Primo Levi: A Biography*, 644–46; and Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life*, 433–43.
15. "In Italy, it is quite difficult to apply a label such as 'Jewish writer' or 'non-Jewish writer,'" Levi said in an interview given after the trip. "In my case, it was the Americans, not the Italians, who first used it. In Italy, I'm known as a writer who is occasionally Jewish. Not in America . . . [I]n 1985, it was as if they had pinned the Magen David on me again! Nonetheless, I don't mind. As far as I am concerned, it's fairly easy to define me as a Jew because almost all of my books deal with Judaism in one way or another and also because I had the adventure of Auschwitz by dint of being a Jew." In the same interview, Levi remarked, with wonder, at how much he had been made into a Jewish writer for Jewish readers in the United States: "I began to wonder if any goyim lived in America. I didn't come across a single one of them! It becomes almost comical. My editor is Jewish, and all his collaborators are Jewish. He introduced me exclusively to illustrious American Jews. I spoke to Jewish audiences. And not just in New York, but everywhere I went. My wife and I began to wonder, where are the others?" See Risa Sodi, "An Interview with Primo Levi," *Partisan Review* 54, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 355, 360.
16. Anon., "Primo Levi: Questions and Answers at Indiana University," *Midstream: A Monthly Jewish Review* 34, no. 4 (April 1986): 26.

17. Primo Levi, "Beyond Survival," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 4, no. 1 (January 1984): 9. Primo Levi, "Itinerario d'uno scrittore ebreo," *Opere* II, 1213.
18. Anthony Rudolf, "Primo Levi in London (1986)," interview, in *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961–1987*, ed. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, trans. Robert Gordon (New York: The New Press, 2001), 27; Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 82.
19. In the new preface to the new English translation of *Night* (see note 1), Wiesel discusses this surreal event, which caused him to doubt his sanity; however, he notes that the episode was confirmed by historians and the Nuremberg Chief Counsel, Telford Taylor (xiii–xiv).
20. In 1984, Levi narrated another example of the return of Kantian norms toward the end of the war in "L'ultimo natale di guerra." A young German woman who worked with him in the chemistry lab at the Buna asked him a favor for which she would repay him. "Aveva stipolato con me una sorta di contratto, e un contratto si fa tra uguali" ("She had made a contract with me, and contracts are made among equals" [my translation]) (Levi, *Opere* II, 1260, 1257). This event offered Levi further proof that the Third Reich was "moribund."
21. My translation of the following: "Esitono, quasi in ogni paese, carceri, istituti minorili, ospedali psichiatrici, in cui, come ad Auschwitz, l'uomo perde il suo nome e il suo volto, la dignità e la speranza." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo (Lecture per la scuola media)*, with introduction and notes by Primo Levi (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), 6–7.
22. See Claudio Fogu, "Italiani Brava Gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 147–76.
23. For a concise discussion of the term "theodicy," coined by G. W. Leibniz in the early eighteenth century, see Michael Murray, "Leibniz and the Problem of Evil," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published January 4, 1998; substantive revision, March 16, 2005. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-evil/>, January 15, 2009.
24. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91–101; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973). In his essay, Levinas is chiefly interested in the divine but he notes that "[Theodicy] has been, at least up to the trials of the twentieth century, a component of the self-consciousness of European humanity. It persisted in watered-down form at the core of atheist progressivism, which was confident of the efficacy of the Good that is immanent in being . . ." (96).
25. "Hegel was well aware of the terrible cost exacted by the march of civilization," A. Dirk Moses writes. "Yet, precisely because the 'History of the World is not the theatre of human happiness,' as he put it rather coyly, Hegel felt compelled to develop a philosophy of history that invested cosmic meaning in what otherwise

- would be an intolerable spectacle of pointless carnage. He was thereby proposing a secular ‘theodicy,’ a term coined by the German philosopher G. W. Leibniz in 1710 to mean ‘justification of God.’” A. Dirk Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century’: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 7.
26. Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *Entre Nous*, 97, 98. In addition, see Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue on Thinking of the Other,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, 201–6. Here Levinas resolves for himself the question of Judaism’s future without a covenant and without the guarantee of messianic deliverance. “Auschwitz was a profound crisis. It concerns the very relationship of man to God; the very problem of the promise is posed. Is one loyal to the Torah because one counts on the promise? Must I not remain faithful to its teachings, even if there is no promise? One must want to be a Jew without the promise made to Israel being the reason for this faithfulness. Judaism is valid not because of the ‘happy end’ of its history, but because the faithfulness of this history to the teachings of Torah” (206).
 27. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 361.
 28. One the best accounts of how Adorno links universal reason to the Holocaust is found in J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. chap. 8, 371–414.
 29. Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *Entre Nous*, 96.
 30. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 82.
 31. Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press), 68.
 32. See John K. Roth, “Kuhn’s Prayer and the Masters of Death,” in *Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust*, ed. David Patterson and John K. Roth. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 243–58, especially 252.
 33. While I cannot prove it, I think is likely that Levi was aware of Levinas’s “Useless Suffering” essay when he wrote a chapter titled “Useless Violence” included in *The Drowned and the Saved*, 105–26. (The Levinas essay was first published in an Italian journal in 1982, three or four years before Levi wrote his chapter.) Levi argues here that Nazism could have carried out the genocide of the Jews more efficiently had it not engaged in gratuitous violence against its victims. Consequently, Nazism was even more inhumane than it needed to be to achieve its perverse goals. However, Levi undermines his point by conceding that all of the preliminary humiliations made it easier for the SS to murder their apparently subhuman victims (*Drowned*, 125). In this way, he offers confirmation for Bauman’s analysis on the role of suffering in a Hegelian world unencumbered by ethics, whether humanist or Levinasian. “Modernity . . . did not declare war on suffering: it only swore extinction to a *purposeless*, functionless suffering. Pain unplanned and unsolicited was now an abomination, and unforgivable; but if it served a purpose, if it was ‘a necessary step’ towards

the future, pain could be—should be—had to be—inflicted.” Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 225.

Chapter 2

1. For an excellent overview on this topic, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York: Columbia, 1997), especially chapter 4, “Language and Culture after the Holocaust,” 99–140.
2. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); hereafter cited in the text as *Dialectic* or simply with parenthetical page numbers when the source is clear. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973).
3. See Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). He writes that “the specificity of Nazi barbarism does not rupture, but continues, the dangerous blend of instrumentally rational means and irrational ends that the Frankfurt School understands as the primary legacy of modernity” (36). Rothberg’s chapter on Adorno and post-Holocaust culture (25–58) offers the most thorough and coherent discussion of the general questions that animate my chapter on Levi and culture.
4. The selected studies listed here, in chronological order, agree on the importance of the Ulysses passage in *Survival in Auschwitz*. Lynn M. Gunzberg, “‘Nuotando altrimenti che nel Serchio’: Dante as Vademecum for Primo Levi,” in *Reason and Light: Essays on Primo Levi*, ed. Susan Tarrow (Ithaca, NY: Center for International Studies, Cornell University, 1990), 82–99; Risa Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Zvi Jagendorf, “Primo Levi Goes for Soup and Remembers Dante,” *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 12, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 31–51; Nicholas Patrino, “Primo Levi, Dante, and the Canto of Ulysses,” in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 33–40; Isabella Bertolotti, “Primo Levi’s Odyssey: The Drowned and the Saved,” in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, 105–18. A number of other studies, which I cannot cite here for lack of space, discuss Levi’s use of Dante’s Ulysses.
5. Joseph Farrell, “Introduction,” in *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist*, ed. Joseph Farrell (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 14. Wiley Feinstein is a notable exception to the consensus. In reading “The Canto of Ulysses,” he gives a detailed account of Levi’s vexed attempt to use Dante to cling to Italian culture and maintain his Italian identity when the Fascists had already appropriated the author for their own antisemitic purposes. Wiley Feinstein, *The Civilization of the Holocaust in Italy: Poets, Artists, Saints, Anti-Semites* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 336–67.

6. “Culture was useful to me. Not always, at times perhaps by subterranean and unforeseen paths, but it served me and perhaps it saved me. After forty years I am reading in *Survival in Auschwitz* the chapter entitled ‘The Canto of Ulysses.’ It is one of the few episodes whose authenticity I have been able to verify . . . because my interlocutor of that time, Jean Samuel, is one of the book’s few surviving characters . . . [H]is memories jibe with mine.” Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 139.
7. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 139.
8. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* began as a critique of late capitalism, but the changes made in the 1947 edition to the little-circulated 1944 edition indicate that Horkheimer and Adorno were rapidly moving away from a thoroughly Marxian position. Even as early as 1940, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer: “It seems to me that what we were used to seeing in terms of the proletariat, has today shifted with terrible intensity to the Jews. I ask myself, though it is not completely consistent with the project, if the things which we actually want to say should not be said in connection with the Jews, who represent the counterpoint to power.” Cited in Anson Rabinbach, “‘Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?’: The Place of Antisemitism in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 139.
9. Auschwitz is not yet a formal concept in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but Adorno later makes this argument explicitly in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 34; and in *Negative Dialectics*, 361–68. Ultimately, Auschwitz becomes the name for the failure of the Enlightenment and not just for a place in Poland. As we will see in the next chapter, Lyotard uses the word in the sense articulated by Adorno, sometimes adding quotation marks to signal this metonymic function.
10. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
11. Horkheimer and Adorno, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment” (chapter 2, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *New German Critique* 56 (Spring-Summer 1992): 111 (my interpolations). This translation is more coherent than that found in Jephcott (*Dialectic* 37). For the sake of consistency throughout this book, I have adopted the Romanized Ulysses (akin to Levi’s Italian usage, *Ulisse*) rather than Odysseus, the Greek name that Horkheimer and Adorno use in their discussion.
12. “In society as it is, despite feeble, moralistic attempts to propagate humanity as the most rational means, self-preservation remains unencumbered by a utopia denounced as myth. For those at the top, shrewd self-preservation means the fascist struggle for power, and for individuals, it means adaptation to injustice at any price” (*Dialectic* 71).
13. “The system which enlightenment aims for is the form of knowledge which most ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature . . . [Its] principles are those of self-preservation. Immaturity amounts

- to the inability to survive. The bourgeois, in the successive forms of the slave-owner, the free entrepreneur, and the administrator, is the logical subject of enlightenment” (*Dialectic* 65).
14. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 44.
 15. See, for example, Lynn Gunzberg, “Down Among the Dead Men: Levi and Dante in Hell,” *Modern Language Studies* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 10–28. “[Levi’s] assimilation of Dante’s text informed his perception of reality by providing him with a conceptual grid through which to examine and make sense of the details of the incomprehensible world into which he had been so cruelly cast” (27). See also Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), which states that the passage shows “the capacity of the victim to transcend, through art, the agony of physical and spiritual degradation” (18).
 16. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 45.
 17. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 46.
 18. Primo Levi, *Opere* I, ed. Marco Belpoliti, intro. Daniele del Giudice (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 109; *Survival*, 118. I have altered the translation of these verses as rendered in *Survival in Auschwitz*, exchanging poetic language for word for word accuracy.
 19. Among many sources available on the Racial Laws, see Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 36–46.
 20. Victor Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature, 1830–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 117.
 21. See Piero Boitani, *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth*, trans. Anita Weston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). At one point, Boitani claims, unpersuasively, that the approach Levi takes to Ulysses’ speech “goes beyond the ‘Romantic’ reading” (159). At another point, he suggests that Levi’s embraces the conventional humanist values conveyed by Ulysses: “The ‘liberating and differential’ function accorded literature and culture, a ‘fleeting but not foolish respite,’ in *I sommersi e i salvati* is basically part of the same humanistic learning that the ‘fatti non foste a viver come brutti’ already contains in *Se questo è un uomo*” (161).
 22. “The enlightened self-control with which adapted [i.e., assimilated] Jews effaced within themselves the painful scars of domination by others, a kind of second circumcision, made them forsake their own dilapidated community and wholeheartedly embrace the life of the modern bourgeoisie” (*Dialectic* 138; my interpolation). All ethnic groups and religious minorities are compelled to forget past violence as they are integrated into a new collectivity, into the nation state and the guarantees of citizenship. In the case of European Jews, the second circumcision is a remarkably apt metaphor for being cut off from one’s past.
 23. At a crucial moment of self-fashioning, Shelley has Frankenstein deliver a speech to his shipmates modeled on that of Dante’s Ulysses. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818 Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 182–83.

24. Gian-Paolo Biasin, *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 141.
25. Reflecting on how surgical anesthetics make us forget our pain, Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that the price of progress made possible by technology is the inability to remember the other's suffering. "For cognition, the space separating us from others would mean the same thing as the time between us and the suffering of our own past: an insurmountable barrier. But the perennial domination over nature, medical and nonmedical technology, derives its strength from such blindness; it would be made possible only by oblivion. Loss of memory as a transcendental condition of science. All reification is forgetting" (*Dialectic* 191). Levi himself confirms our desire to forget suffering: "When we say 'I will never forget that,' referring to some event which has profoundly wounded us but has not left in us or around us a material trace or a permanent void, we are foolhardy: in 'civilian' life we gladly forget the details of a serious illness from which we have recovered, or those of a successful surgical operation" (*Drowned* 33).
26. My translation of the following lines from "L'incontro di Ulisse": "Uomo, io non credetti ad altra/ virtù se non a quella/ inesorabile d'un cuore/ possente. E ame solo fedele/ io fui, al mio solo disegno" (lines 99–103). Gabriele D'Annunzio, "L'incontro di Ulisse," *Maia* IV, in *Versi d'amore e di gloria*, ed. A. Andreoli and N. Lorenzini (Milano: Mondadori, 1984), 33.
27. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1997), 14.
28. Stephen Sicari, "Reading Pound's Politics: Ulysses as Fascist Hero," *Paideuma: A Journal Devoted to Ezra Pound Scholarship* 17, no. 2–3 (Fall-Winter 1988): 146.
29. Cited in Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 39.
30. Cited in Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 172.
31. For a discussion of how the Fascists used myth and the tropes of religion to try to create a "new man" and, from him, a new kind of state, see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
32. Sicari, "Reading Pound's Politics," 160.
33. He later confirmed the accuracy of his recollection and the legitimacy of the gesture: "Where I wrote 'I would give today's soup to know how to join, 'I had none whatever' to the ending,' I had neither lied nor exaggerated. I would really have given bread and soup, that is, blood to save from nothingness those memories . . . Then and there they had great value" (*Drowned* 139).
34. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362. Here is a fuller citation of the passage: "The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals' empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer the individual who died, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those

who escaped the administrative measure. Genocide is the absolute integration” (362). Lyotard concurs, stating “‘Auschwitz’ is the forbiddance of the beautiful death.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 100. A source for both thinkers might be found in the work of Arendt: “The Western world has hitherto, even in its darkest periods, granted the slain enemy the right to be remembered as a self-evident acknowledgement of the fact that we are all men (and *only* men) . . . The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous . . . robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual’s own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed.” Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), 452.

35. “Genocide is the absolute integration,” writes Adorno (*Negative Dialectics*, 362)—integration here indicating the project of liberal humanism—and needless to say the anti-humanism evident in much of his writing, the constant linking of liberal humanist subjectivity to the possibility of Auschwitz, is conducive to at least one version of what it might mean to talk about a post-Auschwitz consciousness.” Andrew McCann, “Humanism after Auschwitz: Reflections on Jean Améry’s *freitod*,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (December 2001): 172.
36. Jean Améry, “At the Mind’s Limits,” in *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). Hereafter cited in the text.
37. Améry refers to the last three lines of Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Hälfte des Lebens” (“Life’s Middle”): “The walls stand speechless and cold, the flags clank in the wind.” The poem’s theme—about aging and the end of beauty as figured by the onset of winter—would seem to be appropriate to the situation. Améry goes on to remark that the verses might still have had some power had there been a comrade to share them with. Although Levi had this in the figure of Jean the Pikolo, both Levi and Améry agree that such encounters were rare; more typically, the potential interlocutor “was so alienated by his own isolation from all things intellectual that he no longer reacted.” “Was it because his senses had become blunted?” Améry asks the reader in reference to a philosopher from the Sorbonne he knew in Auschwitz. No, Améry answers, “he simply no longer believed in the reality of the world of the mind.” Améry, “At the Mind’s Limits,” 7–8.
38. This particular point of agreement on survival is not specifically found in Levi’s essay but is clearly stated in Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 1–2, and elsewhere. Levi misses the main thrust of Améry’s essay (that Auschwitz constituted a historical and cultural rupture) or, at least, he prefers to appropriate the essay for his own purposes. Améry, he contends, was devoted to pursuing this question: “Was being an intellectual

in Auschwitz an advantage or a disadvantage?” (*Drowned* 131). Levi offers his own answer by discussing the survival value of education, of chemistry in particular, and the additional challenge faced by professionals and intellectuals who had no previous experience of physical labor. This focus may explain why he reads Améry’s definition of the intellectual in earnest when it is clear that Améry means to be ironic since all of the usual accomplishments and education of the typical intellectual were of no value in the camp. In keeping with his faith in the value of thought in Auschwitz, although he acknowledges that it was severely challenged, Levi offers his own sincere definition of the intellectual as one possessed of both humanistic and scientific knowledge (131–32). Again, Levi misreads his peer when he states that Améry, too, found survival advantages in culture and experienced moments of transcendence through art while in the camp (138–39). In fact, Améry concludes the passage in question by saying that such moments “were thoroughly false and poor proof of the value of the spirit” (Améry, “At the Mind’s Limits,” 10–11).

39. Despite this claim and also the way the Dante’s passage serves Levi as a cognitive tool in *Survival in Auschwitz*, he seems to find some of Améry’s analysis so compelling that, just a few pages later, he shifts his position quite a lot without noting the change: “[Culture] definitely was not useful in orienting oneself and understanding: on this score my experience as a foreigner is identical to that of the German Améry. Reason, art, and poetry are no help in deciphering a place from which are banded. In the daily life ‘down there,’ made up of boredom and interwoven with horror, it was salutary to forget them” (*Drowned* 142). And yet he insisted earlier that he would have given up his soup to remember Dante’s verses more fully (139).
40. As in the previous note, I wish to indicate a shift in Levi’s later thinking, due perhaps to having read Améry, on the cultural valence of death in the Lager: “Death in Auschwitz was a trivial, bureaucratic, and an everyday affair. It was not commented on, it was not ‘comforted by tears.’ In the face of death, the frontier between culture and lack of culture disappeared” (*Drowned* 148).
41. See, especially, the section titled “Dying Today” in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 368–73; it includes many utterances like this one: “Since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death” (371).
42. Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 55; emphases in the original. I find Michael André Bernstein’s interpretation of the passage much more compelling: “Améry’s dictum, for all its dark brilliance, needs to be carefully questioned, not merely recited; it may perhaps open, rather than shut off, a whole series of questions on the relationship between pre-Nazi culture and the Holocaust. Améry seems to indict Mann’s novella, and metonymically culture as a whole, for the absence of such a bridge. But would not a culture that provided this ‘bridge’ be much more alarming? What if, in other words, there were not a chasm, but rather, as has been argued by many people, a *continuity* between the Nazi atrocities and the highest forms of German creativity?” Michael

- André Bernstein, “Victims-in-Waiting: Backshadowing and the Representation of European Jewry,” *New Literary History* 29, no. 4 (1998), 638.
43. Jean Améry, “Enlightenment as Philosophia Perennis,” *Radical Humanism: Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 135. See pages 138–39 for his critique of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
 44. Susan Neiman, “October 1978: Jean Améry Takes His Own Life,” in *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture 1096–1996*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Jack Zipes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 780.
 45. Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
 46. The point was made in clear in 1962: “The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 88.
 47. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” 34.
 48. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 256.
 49. Adorno, “Commitment,” 88.
 50. Dan Pagis, “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car,” *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 29.

Chapter 3

1. Jean-François Lyotard, “Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-,’” in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982–1985*, ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, trans. Don Barry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 78.
2. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). With “the differend,” Lyotard tries to explain how language, or, more broadly, discourse or narrative, fails the weaker party in a dispute or judgment—legal, historical, or political. The paradigmatic case is the inability of the gassed Holocaust victim, or even the survivor who was never inside the gas chamber, to credibly testify to the existence of the chambers to a standard that would discredit the Holocaust denier (3–4). “This is what a wrong [*tort*] would be: a damage [*dommage*] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life . . . or simply of the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase [i.e., the sentence as the basic unit of meaning] is itself deprived of authority . . . In all these cases, to the privation constituted by the damage there is added the

impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others, and particular to the knowledge of the tribunal” (5). The victim’s “phrases” are deemed invalid and, therefore, cannot be incorporated into the communal history or judgment. “A case of differend between two parties takes place when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (9). The suppression of the victim’s voice has broad implications: it means that modern history has not progressed through inclusive synthesis but by the intolerance of difference. Moreover, Auschwitz, the most extreme site of intolerance, gave rise to the paradigmatic differend (89).

3. Andrew McCann, “Humanism after Auschwitz: Reflections on Jean Améry’s *freitod*,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (2001): 171.
4. See, for example, Dalya M. Sachs, “The Language of Judgement: Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*,” *MLN: Modern Language Notes* 110 (1995): 760.
5. Michael André Bernstein, “A Yes or a No,” Review of *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* by Myriam Anissimov, *The New Republic*, September 27, 1999, 37; see also Gail Gilliland, “Self and Other: Christa Wolf’s *Patterns of Childhood* and Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* as Dialogic Texts,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 29, no. 2 (1992): 183–209.
6. Risa Sodi, “A New Harsh Language: Primo Levi’s Holocaust Rhetoric,” *Italian Culture* 14 (1996): 275.
7. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 38. Even in Auschwitz, Levi sometimes felt himself to be part of the tiny community of Italian prisoners. In contrast, fellow survivor Jean Améry felt utterly isolated long before he reached the camp. As a proud Austrian who loved all aspects of German culture, he lost his sense of community and even his individual identity with the application of the Nuremberg Laws in Austria in 1938: “I was no longer an I and did not live within a We. I had no passport, and no past, and no money, and no history.” Jean Améry, “At the Mind’s Limits,” in *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 43–44.
8. See Gian-Paolo Biasin, “Till My Ghastly Tale is Told: Levi’s Moral Discourse from *Se questo è un uomo* to *I sommersi e i salvati*,” in *Reason and Light: Essays on Primo Levi*, ed. Susan Tarrow (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 131. See also Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, “Lingua e scrittura in Levi,” in *Primo Levi: Un’antologia della critica*, ed. Ernesto Ferrero (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 240.
9. David Ward, “Primo Levi’s Turin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, Robert S. C. Gordon, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6. See also Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), 122–43.
10. Jean-François Lyotard, “Discussions, or Phrasing ‘after Auschwitz,’” *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 363.

11. Paul Eisenstein, *Traumatic Encounters: Holocaust Representation and the Hegelian Subject* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 20–21 (emphasis in original). Eisenstein lays out this summary indictment in preparation for a *defense* of Hegel. He is less interested in whether Hegelian dialect laid the ground for Auschwitz than in how it might be used to overcome the trauma associated with the Nazi genocide: “My claim is simply this: that memory work in fact depends on our willingness to occupy a ‘totalizing position’—not as a means for replicating totalitarian violence against particularity, but rather as the point at which we, as human subjects, fully engage the unsymbolizable trauma of the Holocaust. To recover this position for progressive memory work is to recover the name synonymous with it: Hegel. Rather than see Hegel in the way dominant liberal and poststructuralist thinkers have—as someone directly or indirectly responsible for this whole mess in the first place, as wanton totalizer who eliminates all difference—we must see Hegel’s insistence on totality as in fact an insistence that we bear witness to the unsymbolizable dimension of history, the stuff of history that escapes meaning” (12).
12. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 88, 13.
13. Lyotard, “Discussions,” 375, 370. Reflecting on the inability of marginal voices to be heeded, most notably those of Holocaust victims, Lyotard contends that universalist discourses such as institutional science arrive at enforced consensus by subsuming dissent dialectically: “Science, in a Hegelian sense . . . encloses the *dialektikè* within its own genre, speculative discourse. In this genre, the *two* of *dialektikè*, which is what provides material for paralogsms and aporias, is put into the service of the didactic end, the one. There is no true discussion” (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 86).
14. Lyotard, “Discussions,” 373.
15. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 97.
16. Valerio Ferme, “Translating the Babel of Horror: Primo Levi’s Catharsis through Language in the Holocaust Memoir *Se questo è un uomo*,” *Italica* 78, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 57.
17. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 34.
18. Lyotard, “Discussions,” 375. Nevertheless, Ferme, in “Translating the Babel of Horror,” “see[s] the ‘we’ as also including those who did not survive” (69).
19. I have retranslated the italicized portions of the last sentence of the passage for greater accuracy and to convey Levi’s Darwinian terminology. Levi wrote: “è quanto di più rigoroso uno sperimentatore avrebbe potuto istituire per stabilire che cosa sia essenziale e che cosa acquisito nel comportamento dell’animale-uomo di fronte alla lotta per la vita” (*Opere* I, 83). Stuart Woolf translated this as: “which is more rigorous than any experimenter could have set up to establish what is essential and *what adventitious to the conduct* of the human animal in the struggle for life” (*Survival* 87, my emphasis).
20. I am not persuaded by Bryan Cheyette’s claim that Levi’s confident appraisal of the camp as “a gigantic biological and social experiment” signals his “ethical

- uncertainty.” Nor do I think that Levi “understood from the very beginning, that even he, in his memoirs, is forced to work within the categories which decide who is, and it not, human.” Hegelian discourses of history and biology *do* force Levi to use Darwinian categories, but I see no clear evidence in the memoir that he understands the ethical implications of his position. See Bryan Cheyette, “Appropriating Primo Levi,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 82.
21. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13.
 22. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), 463.
 23. In Arendt’s view, “the concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified.” She adds: “for, unlikely as it may sound, these camps are the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power.” Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437, 438
 24. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 465–66.
 25. “Speech of the Reichsfuehrer-SS Heinrich Himmler at a Meeting of the SS Major-Generals at Posen, October 4, 1943,” *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. 4 (Washington: USGPO, 1946), 616–34, 628.
 26. “Levi feels a substantial affinity for [Henri] . . .” Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1995), 17.
 27. Paul Steinberg (Henri’s real name) wrote a memoir that largely confirms Levi’s position on the nature of survival, although he judges his actions less harshly than Levi did. See Paul Steinberg, *Speak You Also: A Survivor’s Reckoning*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).
 28. See Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* XX, 1–3; VI, 13–15; IV, 62–63.
 29. Gordon argues that Levi “creates community through irony and uses community to create irony” (340). See Robert S. C. Gordon, “Per Mia Fortuna . . . : Irony and Ethics in Primo Levi’s Writing,” *Modern Language Review* 92, no. 2 (1997): 337–47.
 30. Jean Améry, “At the Mind’s Limits,” 11–12.
 31. For his discussion of Adorno, see Lyotard, *The Differend*, 87–90, and Lyotard, “Discussions,” 361–66.

Chapter 4

1. Cited in Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 79.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 98.
3. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); *Se questo è un uomo*, rev. ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1958).

4. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 128.
5. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 346.
6. Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 348.
7. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 99. See also Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” where the meaning of this unselfish outward journey without end is reiterated in the figure of Moses. “The one-way action is possible only in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering the promised land” (349).
8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), xii.
9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 46.
10. Robert Eaglestone devotes an entire chapter in his book to making explicit Levinas’s preoccupation with the Holocaust. See *The Holocaust and the Post-modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 249–78.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 108.
12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 24; emphasis in original.
13. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 11. It is also plausible, although less relevant to my argument, that the “ecce homo” reference contained in the phrase “this is a man” offers a challenge to the ethical claims of Christian Europe. In referring to the martyrdom of Jesus in the context of Auschwitz, Levi may wish to call attention to the long history of church sanctioned antisemitism.
14. Other early poems use similar imagery of the face. “Buna,” the first one Levi wrote on returning home in December 1945, combines descriptions of the survivor’s mental state with references to the *Muselmanner* (“Empty companion who no longer has a name”). The poem ends with a question pertaining to ethics and intersubjectivity after the Holocaust: “If we were to meet again/ . . . /With what kind of face will we confront each other?” Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 5.
15. Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 24.
16. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand, trans. Séan Hand and Michael Temple (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 75–87.
17. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions on the (Mis) use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 76–77.
18. Even without reference to Levinasian imagery, one can see that two distinct and conflicting impulses are at work in this stunning passage: one is to fulfill a

moral obligation to these countless silent victims by telling their untold story; the other is to define the *Muselmanner* in such a way as to strengthen the author's differentiation from them, to free himself from those phantoms that threateningly "crowd" his free man's memory. His desire to "enclose" this evil arises from the same two impulses: such an enshrinement of the *Muselmanner* would fill their suffering and their deaths (and Levi's witnessing of their suffering) with useful meaning; at the same time, the wish to "enclose" evil should be seen as an attempt to neutralize its threat, to give it a tangible form isolated and separated from his still-intact self.

19. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 99.
20. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 107, 109; emphasis in original.
21. Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Editions de le Cité universelle, 1947; reissued by Gallimard in 1957). Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, preceded by an homage to Robert Antelme by Edgar Morin; trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 1992); hereafter cited in the text as *Human* or simply with parenthetical page numbers when the source is clear.
22. In a later essay, Antelme affirms his Kantianism: "Against every form of tyranny the best defense lies not in the proliferation of military institutions but in a truly free society in which each man exists as a man for every other man, exists as an end in himself." Robert Antelme, "Man as the Basis of Right," in *On Robert Antelme's the Human Race: Essays and Commentary*, ed. Daniel Dobels, trans. Jeffrey Haight (Evanston, Illinois: The Marlboro Press/Northwestern University Press, 2003), 29.
23. At this point in *The Human Race*, Antelme recalls a comrade's recitation of Du Bellay's "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse," a sixteenth-century sonnet memorized by generations of French students, which suggests that, far from feeling alienated by what he has seen or by the awful knowledge he has acquired, the well-traveled man is happy to return to his home (196). The sonnet begins, "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage,/Ou comme cestuy-là qui conquit la toison,/Et puis est retourné, plein d'usage et raison,/Vivre entre ses parents le reste de son âge!" as cited in Joachim Du Bellay and David R. Slavitt, *The Regrets: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 76. I translate those verses as follows: "Happy like Ulysses,/ who made a good voyage, or like him who stole the fleece,/ and then returned full of worldliness and reason/ to live the rest of his long life with his family!" Levi wrote a poem on the same theme, "Landing," but with disquieting elements suggesting that to return from Auschwitz, to be in possession of such knowledge, is difficult, indeed. "Happy the man who has made harbor/ . . . / Whose dreams are dead or never born/ Happy the man like an extinguished flame,/ . . . / He fears nothing, hopes for nothing, expects nothing,/ But stares fixedly at the setting sun" (Levi, *Collected Poems*, 25).
24. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 387.

25. Maurice Blanchot, “The Human Race,” in *On Robert Antelme’s the Human Race*, 66.
26. Colin Davis, “Antelme, Renoir, Levinas and the Shock of the Other,” *French Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2003), 49–50.
27. “Of the heroes we know about, from history or from literature, whether it was love they cried forth, or solitude, or vengeance, or the anguish of being or of non-being, whether it was humiliation they rose against, or injustice—of those heroes we do not believe that they were ever brought to the point of expressing as their last and only claim an ultimate sense of belonging to the human race” (Antelme, *The Human Race*, 5).
28. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999); hereafter cited in the text as *Remnants* or simply with parenthetical page numbers when the source is clear. The question of dignity is particularly important in Agamben’s critique of two earlier theorists of concentration camp survival, Bruno Bettelheim and Terrence Des Pres, both of whom argue that the heroic victim is he who retains his human dignity to the end (*Remnants* 92–94).
29. Agamben, *Remnants*, 13, 33–34, 39, 54, 82. While not the central concern of my discussion, I tend to agree with many of Agamben’s critics who think that he reads too literally Levi’s remark about who can testify authoritatively to the Holocaust. Levi “did not seek to invalidate the witness accounts of those who survived,” states Geoffrey Hartman in “Testimony and Authenticity,” *Yale Review* 90, no. 4 (October 2000), 8. Dominick LaCapra, in *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), writes, “For Levi as survivor to say that not he but the *Muselmann* is the true witness is, I think, an acceptable hyperbole. For Agamben to identify with Levi and hence speak for (or in the stead of) Levi and hence for the *Muselmann* (as he believes Levi does) may be hyperbolic in an objectionable sense” (185). J. M. Bernstein, in “Intact and Fragmented Bodies: Versions of Ethics ‘after Auschwitz,’” *New German Critique* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 31–52, thinks that Levi speaks as he does out of guilt; only this explains “the exorbitant epistemic-ethical worth ascribed to the drowned” (34).
30. Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 97.
31. Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 94.
32. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 10.
33. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153.
34. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 84.
35. See also Robert S. C. Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 39–54. Gordon sketches out a convincing Levinasian reading of parts of *Survival in Auschwitz*. My contribution to this approach has been to move beyond the ethics and imagery of

the face, which is Gordon's focus, to how the ethics of narrative modes and the nexus between Western philosophy and the Holocaust function in Levi's memoir.

Chapter 5

1. Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf, with afterword, "The Author's Answers to His Readers' Questions," trans. Ruth Feldman (New York: Macmillan, 1987). See, for example, Isabella Bertolotti, "Primo Levi's Odyssey: The Drowned and the Saved," in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 105–18. "The infernal sorrows of the Lager are replaced in *La tregua* by a mood of exuberance" (112), Bertolotti states. On the picaresque aspects see JoAnn Cannon, "Storytelling and the Picaresque in Levi's *La tregua*," *Modern Language Studies* 31, no. 2 (2001): 1–10. Chiampi's reading is atypical, arguing that the second book rejoins Levi's Italian and Jewish identities. James T. Chiampi, "Rewriting Race Law: Primo Levi's *La tregua*," *MLN: Modern Language Notes* 122 (2007): 80–100.
2. Gian-Paolo Biasin, "The Haunted Journey of Primo Levi," in *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, ed. Roberta S. Kremer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 10.
3. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 84.
4. "The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. If repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness—the space of the unconscious—is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality. For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence." Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 7–8.
5. See Alexander Stille, "The Biographical Fallacy," in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 209–20. In support of the idea that Auschwitz killed Levi forty years after the liberation, writes Stille, "even Levi's son, Renzo, was quoted as saying: 'Read the conclusion of *The Truce* and you will understand'" (209). My essay in the same volume argues against reading suicide into any of Levi's texts after the fact. See

- Jonathan Druker, “On the Danger of Reading Suicide into the Works of Primo Levi,” *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislaw Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 221–31.
6. See Robert S. C. Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), particularly the chapter on friendship, 219–36.
 7. Irving Howe, “Introduction,” in Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?* trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit Books, 1985), 12. Philip Roth, another one of Levi’s illustrious readers, sees *The Reawakening* (or *The Truce*) as a story about “gestation,” but one of exuberance, despite the hardship, rather than one of anxious tension. In his well-known interview with Levi, he remarked: “There is a legendary dimension to that tortuous journey, especially to the story of your long gestation period in the Soviet Union, waiting to be repatriated. What’s surprising about *The Truce*, which might understandably have been marked by a mood of mourning and inconsolable despair, is its exuberance.” In his reply, Levi hints at the tripartite structure of the book: “I relegated to the first and last pages the mood, as you put it, ‘of mourning and inconsolable despair.’” Philip Roth, “A Conversation with Primo Levi,” in *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1986), 182, 183.
 8. “The difficulty many (but not all) survivors of the Holocaust have in expressing their experiences can be explained by the fact that the nature of the events that happened to them is in no way covered by the terms, positions, and frames of reference that the symbolic order offers to them. In short, the problem which causes trauma is not the nature of the event by itself, or any intrinsic limitation of representation per se, but the split between the *living* of an event and the availability of forms of representation through which the event can be *experienced*.” Ernst van Alphen, “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 27 no. 2 (2006): 482, emphasis in original.
 9. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle (excerpt)*, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 602; emphasis in original.
 10. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 24.
 11. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 63.
 12. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 598. Later, he added: “We may assume, rather, that dreams [i.e. traumatic ones] are here helping to carry out another task, which must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin. These dreams are endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis . . . This would seem to be the place, then, at which to admit for the first time an exception to the proposition that dreams are fulfillments of wishes” (609).

13. Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 5.
14. The statement most frequently quoted from *Auschwitz and After* is made by Mado (Madeleine Doiret), who concludes her testimony with these words. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont, intro. Lawrence L. Langer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 267.
15. Primo Levi, "Reveille," in *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 10.
16. A digression: what does this recurring anguish embodied in the dream tell us about the workings of testimony and trauma? Two opposing possibilities might explain the apparent failure of testimony to liberate Levi from the trauma he experienced. The first is that the process of telling one's story actually renews the traumatic experience rather than helping one work through it. The other is suggested by Aharon Appelfeld, who noted that "[Testimonies] are actually repressions . . . neither introspections nor anything resembling introspection, but rather the careful weaving together of external facts in order to veil inner truth." Cited in Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 154–55. In other words, the traumatic sensations can be temporarily repressed in some kind of testimonial narratives that hew closer to fact than to feeling, to what can be said clearly than to what can only be hinted at only by misdirection. In Levi's case, I would guess that the second scenario is more pertinent than the first. *Survival in Auschwitz* is so readable and informative because it avoids delving deeply into horrors, instead offering facts and intellectually rich analysis. In the first years after the war, Levi seemed to reserve his most intense feelings for his poetry, and this suggests the following generalization: trauma is represented more easily in poetry, with its syntactical flexibility, than in consecutive narrative.
17. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 77, 78. Ironically, this precise danger is made evident by Levi's comment in the notes to the Italian scholastic edition of *La tregua* (Turin: edizioni scholastiche Einaudi, 1965), in which he compares the *Wstawać*, the peremptory dawn command of Auschwitz, with the inevitability of death: "La stessa vita umana è una tregua, un proroga; ma sono intervalli brevi, e presto interrotti dal 'commando dell'alba' temuto ma non inatteso, dalla voce straniera . . . che pure tutti intendono e obbediscono. Questa voce comanda, anzi invita, alla morta, ed è sommessa perché la morta è iscritta nella vita, è implicita nel destino umano, inevitabile, irresistibile" (269–70). ["Human life itself is a truce, a postponement; but these intervals are brief, soon interrupted by the feared but anticipated 'dawn command,' by the foreign voice that everyone understands nevertheless and obeys. The voice commands or really beckons us toward death, and it is subdued because death is inscribed in life; it is implicit in human destiny, it is inevitable, irresistible" (my translation).] In effect, Levi transforms the specific meaning of the poem and the book as a whole into something rather banal that will seem relevant to all students' lives. The looming horror of *Wstawać* is no longer the specific

- historical trauma suffered by the Holocaust victim but the structural trauma induced by the universal human condition of mortality.
18. Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 4–5; emphasis in the original.
 19. There is further confirmation of the unassimilated nature of Levi’s experience in Auschwitz, for it is only when the immediate danger to his life passes that he can begin to recognize painful feelings that he had not been able to confront: “In the very hour in which every threat vanished, in which a hope of a return to life ceased to be crazy, I was overcome—as if a dyke had crumbled—by a new and greater pain, previously buried and relegated to the margins by my consciousness: the pain of exile, of my distant home, of loneliness, of friends lost, of youth lost and of the host of corpses around me. In my year at Buna I had seen four-fifths of my companions disappear, but I had never faced the concrete presence, the blockage, of death, its sordid breath a step away, outside the window, in the bunk next to me, in my own veins” (*Reawakening*, 5–6).
 20. Marco Belpoliti, *Primo Levi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 186; and *Primo Levi: Opere*, I, 1420–21. (Nicholas Patruno has shown me a photocopy of a cover letter to Levi from the Einaudi Press, dated December 11, 1962, regarding contracts for a book titled, curiously, “Vento caldo,” “hot wind.”) The wind metaphor was already present in Levi’s first book. As the Russians approach Auschwitz, he remarks, “the memory of Biblical salvations passed like a wind through all of our minds.” Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 158.
 21. Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
 22. Levi could have also mentioned that the Russians were prescient and competent enough to commission him and his fellow survivor, physician Leonardo De Benedetti, to write a report about hygienic and health conditions at Auschwitz, which is now available in English. See Primo Levi, with Leonardo De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon, trans. Judith Woolf (London: Verso, 2006). “The Russians’ motives [for commissioning the report]—notwithstanding their chaotic but essentially humane portrait in Levi’s second memoir, ‘The Truce’—were not entirely altruistic: They wished to document the unspeakable crimes of the Nazi regime not just for posterity but also for propaganda purposes.” Stanislaw Pugliese, “Primo Levi’s First Draft of History,” review of *Auschwitz Report*, in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, December 8, 2007, <http://www.forward.com/articles/9817/>, January 15, 2009.
 23. It is also significant that the leader of the cannibals uses a clock not for telling time but for divination (*Reawakening* 160). The Russian space of latency and superstition exists in isolation from Europe’s carefully measured, progressive, historical narrative.
 24. See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 171. Dawidowicz reports that in 1941–42, the *Einsatzgruppen* were active in places that Levi passed through on his journey home, including eastern Poland, Ukraine, and Byelorussia, all of which were parts of

- the USSR at the time. Around 2 million victims were killed by the *Einsatzgruppen* and other police units.
25. Philip Roth, "A Conversation with Primo Levi," in *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, 183. See also the late essay published less than three months before his untimely death where Levi designates the gulags a far lesser evil than the Nazi camps. Primo Levi, "The Dispute among German Historians," *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 163–66. Practically no one escaped "the black holes" of Treblinka and Chelmno, Levi reminds us in this essay, whereas mortality was a criminal "byproduct" but never the primary purpose of the gulags (164–65).
 26. Davide Ferrario, adapt. and dir., Marco Belpoliti, Primo Levi, and Davide Ferrario, screenplay, *La strada di Levi* (Rome: Rossofuoco Productions, 2006). For an excellent discussion of how and why Ferrario and Belpoliti adapt Levi's book to the screen, see Lina Insana, "In Levi's Wake: Adaptation, Simulacrum, Postmemory," *Italica* 85, no. 4 (2008): forthcoming.
 27. Primo Levi, "A Tranquil Star," in *A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories*, trans. Ann Goldenstein and Alessandra Bastagli (New York: Norton, 2007), 158–59.
 28. I wish to digress briefly to note the consonance between Levi's representation of Europe immediately following the war and that of Tadeusz Borowski, a rather nihilistic writer usually not associated with Levi. See Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin Books, 1976). Around the time that Levi returned to an anguished Europe in the fall of 1945, Borowski and his friends felt the urge to flee it. "At that time, we longed to emigrate, and all four of us dreamed of nothing else but to escape as soon as possible from the ghetto of Europe . . ." (166). He adds, "Europe will be lost. We are living here day after day, separated only by a fragile dyke from the deluge rising around us; when it breaks through it will tear away man's freedom like a suit of clothing. But who knows what the man who will choose to defend himself may be capable of. The fire on the crematorium has been extinguished, but the smoke has not yet settled" (169).
 29. The case can be made for using the word "wound" rather than "sore," as Stuart Woolf does, to translate the Italian, *piaga* (*Primo Levi: Opere* I, 392).
 30. "Rosi added several scenes that betray the mood of the book. Most disturbing is the addition of an atonement scene . . . Rosi appropriated this act of atonement from German chancellor Willy Brandt's kneeling before the Warsaw ghetto monument in 1970." Marla Stone, "Primo Levi, Roberto Benigni, and the Politics of Holocaust Representation," in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 141.
 31. Later, Levi qualified that statement as follows: "In its historical reality, my Russian 'truce' turned to a 'gift' only many years later, when I purified it by rethinking it and by writing about it." Philip Roth, "A Conversation with Primo Levi," in *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, 183.
 32. Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 9, emphasis in original.

33. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 151.
34. Other black poems in this group include “Buna,” “Singing,” “The Crow’s Song,” and “Monday,” among others. See Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*, 5–11.
35. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 605.
36. Primo Levi, “The Survivor,” *Collected Poems*, 64; “Il superstite,” *Opere* II, 576. In his poem, Levi actually changes Coleridge’s “And till my ghastly tale is told” to “E se non trova chi lo ascolti” (which I translate as follows: “And if he does not find someone to listen to him”). Levi suggests, here, that having a true listener (an ideal one?) would bring this compulsion to an end. Feldman leaves this alteration out of her translation.
37. Levi, “The Survivor,” *Collected Poems*, 64, lines 9–12.
38. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 363. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 79–81. See also J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In his commentary on the section of *Negative Dialectics* from which my epigraph is drawn, Jay Bernstein states the following. “To ask the *question* whether one has a right to survive is to ask after the basis of one’s survival: on what can it be erected? And in the same way one cannot erect affirmative meaning out of extermination, then the ground of continuing existence can be nothing affirmative either. Rather, what enables one to survive is, on one hand, nothing but the drive for self-preservation, and the coldness and indifference, structural in both institutions and personal comportment, intrinsic to instrumental rationality as the rational form of the drive to self-preservation, and, on the other, unmerited good fortune—unmerited simply because a matter of luck only” (397).
39. Tony Judt, “The ‘Problem of Evil’ in Postwar Europe,” *New York Review of Books* 55, no. 2 (February 14, 2008), 33.
40. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 1–10. Giorgio Bassani, “A Plaque in via Mazzini,” in *Five stories of Ferrara*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971). Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 210.
41. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 24.

Chapter 6

1. Of Levi’s short story published in the early 1960s, “Quaestio de Centauris” (*Opere* I 505–16), Ian Thomson writes: “This equine whimsy marks the beginning of an enduring, even obsessive attempt on Levi’s part to present himself as two halves or twin poles. Levi was not the only Italian literary figure engaged in two careers, but he alone tried to create a grand personal mythology out of

- this cloven state.” Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 298.
2. Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots*, trans. Peter Forbes (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).
 3. “I really did feel a bit like Tiresias . . . being a chemist in the world’s eyes, and feeling, on the contrary, a writer’s blood in my veins, I felt as if I had two souls in my body, and that is too many.” Primo Levi, *The Monkey’s Wrench*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 52.
 4. In the late 1950s, C. P. Snow’s influential essay “The Two Cultures” pointed out the growing cultural gap between the arts and sciences, expressed great concern at the consequences, but offered no solutions. The idea that scientific and literary cultures are inherently different and distinct began to be discussed in earnest around the turn of the twentieth century, especially in England. In polemic with T. H. Huxley, Matthew Arnold maintained the superiority of the humane letters while asserting that science provides us with knowledge that has no relation to beauty or morality. Arnold’s ideas are in harmony with the Crocean idealism that informed Italian Fascism and the educational system in place in Levi’s youth. Knowledge and goodness are attained through the spirit, Croce argued, while scientific concepts derived from the properties of base material are unable to point the way to genuine knowledge.
 5. Primo Levi, *Other People’s Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 10.
 6. As an example of scholarship claiming that hybridity is a key aspect of Levi’s oeuvre, see Jonathan Wilson, “Primo Levi’s Hybrid Texts,” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 48 (Winter 1999): 67–72, and also Natasha V. Chang, “Chemical Contaminations: Allegory and Alterity in Primo Levi’s *Il sistema periodico*,” *Italica* 83, no. 3–4 (Fall and Winter 2006): 543–62.
 7. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).
 8. See, for example, the 1938 “Manifesto of the Racial Scientists,” a document produced by a group of young scientists serving as the government’s mouthpiece. “The Jews represent the only population that has never assimilated in Italy because they are constituted from non-European social elements, absolutely different from the elements from which Italians originated.” Cited in Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 28.
 9. Without employing the theoretical framework I adopt here, other scholarship has discussed how Levi’s texts navigate, often unwittingly, the gap between the ideals of science and its actual history as a tool for oppression. See, for example, Nancy Harrowitz, “From Mt. Sinai to the Holocaust: Primo Levi and the Crisis of Science in *The Periodic Table*,” in *Celebrating Elie Wiesel: Stories, Essays, Reflections*, ed. Alan Rosen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 19–39.
 10. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 26.

11. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).
12. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 71, 74–75, emphasis in original.
13. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 318, 312.
14. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 42. Best and Kellner admirably clarify the three principle binaries that fracture Man, as discussed in chapter 9 of *The Order of Things*, and how humanism tries to paper them over. “Foucault describes how modern philosophy constructs ‘Man’—both object and subject of knowledge—within a series of unstable ‘doublets’: the cogito/unthought doublet whereby Man is determined by external forces yet aware of this determination and able to free himself from it; the retreat-and-return-of-the-origin doublet whereby history precedes Man but is the phenomenological source from which history unfolds; and the transcendental/empirical doublet whereby Man constitutes and is constituted by the external world, finding secure foundations for knowledge through a priori categories (Kant) . . . In each of these doublets, humanist thought attempts to recuperate the primacy and autonomy of the thinking subject and master all that is other to it” (42).
15. Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 133–59.
16. Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” 136–37.
17. Gary Gutting, “Michel Foucault,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published April 2, 2003; substantive revision September 17, 2008, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/#3.3/>, January 15, 2009.
18. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.
19. Michele Sarfatti, *La Shoah in Italia: La persecuzione degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 134.
20. For Foucault, “the entry of medicine, psychiatry, and some social sciences into legal deliberations in the nineteenth century led . . . [to] an increasing appeal to statistical measures and judgments about what is normal and what is not in a given population rather than adherence to absolute measures of right and wrong [i.e., the Law].” Paul Rabinow, “Introduction,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Pantheon: New York, 1984), 21.
21. Giorgio Fabre, *Mussolini razzista. Dal socialismo al fascismo: la formazione di un antisemita* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005).
22. Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 256.
23. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 258.
24. See, for example, Wilson, “Primo Levi’s Hybrid Texts,” 67–72; and Chang, “Chemical Contaminations: Allegory and Alterity in Primo Levi’s *Il sistema periodico*,” 548–51.

25. Primo Levi, *Dialogo*, ed. Tullio Regge, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), xv.
26. See also Elizabeth Scheiber, “The Failure of Memory and Literature in Primo Levi’s *Il sistema periodico*,” *MLN: Modern Language Notes* 121 (2006): 225–39. Scheiber takes Levi’s remark in “Vanadium” about the instability of varnish to refer by analogy to the instability of memory, especially Levi’s traumatic memories of Holocaust (230).
27. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 300. Furthermore, just when language became an object of knowledge, it was also remaking itself in “the pure act of writing.” By the twentieth century, literature “becomes merely a manifestation of a language which has no other law than that of affirming . . . its own precipitous existence . . . it addresses itself to itself as a writing subjectivity, or seeks to re-apprehend the essence of all literature in the movement that brought it into being; and thus all its threads converge upon the finest of points—singular, instantaneous, and yet absolutely universal—upon the simple act of writing” (300).
28. Italo Calvino, *The Baron in the Trees*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (New York: Random House, 1977), 217.
29. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 179–85.
30. J. M. Bernstein, “Intact and Fragmented Bodies: Versions of Ethics ‘after Auschwitz,’” *New German Critique* 97, Vol. 33, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 40.

Chapter 7

1. Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 253.
2. Primo Levi, “Thirty Hours on the *Castoro Sei*,” *Other People’s Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 203–4.
3. For a general orientation on Levi and the topic of work, see Max Strata, “Primo Levi: un uomo al lavoro,” *Critica letteraria* 75 (1992): 369–84 and Pierpaolo Antonello, “Primo Levi and ‘Man as Maker,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89–104.
4. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf, with afterword, “The Author’s Answers to His Readers’ Questions,” trans. by Ruth Feldman (New York: Macmillan, 1987); Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984); Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975); Primo Levi, *The Monkey’s Wrench*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit Books, 1986); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989).
5. “I am persuaded that normal human beings are biologically built for an activity that is aimed toward a goal, and that idleness, or aimless work (like Auschwitz’s *Arbeit*) gives rise to suffering and to atrophy.” Philip Roth, “A

- Conversation with Primo Levi,” in *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1986), 179.
6. Philip Roth, “A Conversation with Primo Levi,” 178.
 7. Primo Levi, “Useless Violence,” *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 121.
 8. Levi conveys what it feels like to be looked upon as workable material in the unforgettable description of the chemistry examination he undergoes before Pannwitz, a fellow chemist who works for one of the many German industries that contracted with the SS to use Holocaust victims as slave laborers until the harsh conditions of the camp killed them. As the examination proceeds, he imagines the German saying to himself, “‘this something in front of me belongs to a species which is obviously opportune to suppress. In this particular case, one has to first make sure that it does not contain some utilizable element’” (106). Even in this face-to-face encounter with a would-be professional colleague, Levi feels that he not treated as a human but as only a thing of little or no value. Meanwhile, Pannwitz, who is more than a bystander but perhaps less than a perpetrator, does his job with diligence.
 9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), 456–57.
 10. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 13, 96.
 11. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Gitty Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with the Truth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).
 12. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
 13. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963), 289, 252.
 14. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 92, 276.
 15. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287, emphasis in original; 289.
 16. For a discussion of the ramifications of the Eichmann trial in Italy at the time, see Manuela Consonni, “The Impact of the ‘Eichmann Event’ in Italy, 1961,” in *After Eichmann: Collective Memory and the Holocaust since 1961*, ed. David Cesarani (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 91–99.
 17. Primo Levi, “For Adolph Eichmann,” *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 24, lines 10–13.
 18. In 1985, Levi wrote “A giudizio” (“At Trial”), a poem with a similar theme. The speaker of the poem puts on trial a certain Alex Zink, a German industrialist who apparently made use of the hair of Holocaust victims in his products. He defends himself saying: “Sono stato operoso, o giusto giudice./ Pietra su pietra, marco dopo marco./ Ho fondato un’industria modello” (*Opere* II, 621). “I was industrious, oh just judge./ Stone by stone, Deustch Mark by Deustch Mark./ I founded a model industry” (my translation).

Conclusion

1. Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 502. In a private communication to me, Robert Gurval suggested that *polla planchthē* is a better English transliteration of Homer's ancient Greek than *pollà plankte*.
2. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage, 1990), 1.
3. Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots*, trans. Peter Forbes (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 22.
4. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 62.
5. Cited in R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 32, emphasis in original.
6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvi, xviii, 165, emphasis added.
7. Primo Levi, "Afterword: The Author's Answers to His Readers' Questions," trans. Ruth Feldman, in *The Reawakening* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 217.
8. I mean especially the stories collected in *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (New York: Summit Books, 1986); Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?* trans. William Weaver, intro. Irving Howe (New York: Summit Books, 1985).
9. "In later years, he virtually disowned his science fiction." Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life*, 327. I refer to the science fiction stories collected in *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1989) and *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1990).
10. See Roberto Farneti, "Of Humans and Other Portentous Beings: On Primo Levi's *Storie naturali*," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006): 724–40; Charlotte Ross, "Primo Levi's Science Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 105–18.

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