



The limits of literary testimony: understanding Levi's paradox

Os limites do testemunho literário: compreendendo o paradoxo de Levi

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Abstract: Auschwitz has often been thought of as an indescribable event that is beyond all possible linguistic means of representation. Italian author Primo Levi (1919-1987) attempted to address this problem by revealing the aporetic (and paradoxical) nature of the process of elaborating a literary testimony: impossible, but necessary. This article aims to analyse some of the ethical and epistemological issues that testimony of a traumatic event can raise for literature. The hypothesis is that the testimony, as Levi elaborated it, contains a lacuna or a void, which is in fact what constitutes it: while witnesses present the limit-experience out of obligation, they cease to convey others due to inability or incapacity. The argument here is that what makes a testimony on a traumatic event possible is its incomplete nature, which gives strength to the process of communicating limit-experiences.

Keywords: Testimony. Primo Levi. Limit-Experience.

Resumo: Auschwitz, muitas vezes, foi pensado como evento irrepresentável, que transcende as possibilidades linguísticas disponíveis de representação. O escritor italiano Primo Levi (1919-1987) tentou enfrentar tal problemática, revelando o chão aporético sobre o qual pode se desenvolver o trabalho do testemunho literário: impossível, mas necessário. Este artigo pretende analisar alguns dos problemas éticos e epistemológicos que o testemunho de eventos traumáticos poderia suscitar para a literatura. A hipótese é de que a construção do testemunho, do modo como foi elaborado por Levi, contém em si uma lacuna, ou uma falta que o constitui: ao mesmo tempo em que transmite, por imperativo, uma experiência-limite, deixa de comunicar, por inabilidade ou incapacidade, outras experiências. O argumento central é de que a condição de possibilidade do testemunho é justamente sua característica lacunar, algo que confere potência ao processo de transmissão de experiências.

Palavras-chave: Testemunho. Primo Levi. Experiência-Limite.

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Introduction

In Nazi extermination camps (*Lager*), prisoners lived in “incommunicability in a more radical manner”, according to Primo Levi.¹ This impediment to reporting on the experience was due mainly to the witnesses' inability to distance themselves from the events they wanted to communicate. That explains the difficulty – or even certain impossibility, as some authors have already affirmed survivors had in conveying the experience of the camps to the world, despite their obvious feelings of obligation.² In the attempts to represent the “unspeakable”,³ one can find ruptures in the language, especially in literary expression.⁴ This fact also reveals the insufficiency of language to express trauma⁵ and social suffering.⁶

Based on this concern, this article aims to establish the types of problems that testimonies on a traumatic event can pose for literature as one possible mechanism for representing the past. The hypothesis is that the accounts of the violence, as elaborated by Primo Levi in some of his works (especially in *Se questo è un uomo* and *I sommersi e i salvati*), contain a lacuna, a hiatus and that this void is what constitutes the narrative: out of necessity, the narrator presents a radical personal and social experience, but ceases to communicate several others because of his own inability or incapacity. In view of the absurdity of the event that cost the lives of so many people, the experience cannot be fully narrated. Following this logic, I argue that what makes a testimony possible is precisely this gap, which gives the process of communicating limit-experiences its moral strength.

However, it is necessary to note that in addition to the lacunas in the testimony, there is the risk of an overvaluation of an experience by an individual narrator – that is, one who is isolated and separated from the exercise of otherness and collective legitimisation.⁷ How did Primo Levi deal with this? Responding to this question could throw light on the underlying ethics of the literary narrative of this consecrated Italian writer. Therefore, I will examine some of the aporias inherent in Levi's testimony, but also the strategies elaborated by the author in his narratives to overcome some of the problems related to the representation, legitimisation and communication of his limit-experience.

¹ LEVI, 1997b, p. 722.

² AGAMBEN, 1998; DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2003; LAUB, 1995; SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2008.

³ BARENGHI, 2005; LANG, 2005; TODOROV, 1995.

⁴ CHATTI, 2004; MARINO, 2012.

⁵ CARUTH, 1995; LA CAPRA, 2008.

⁶ KLEINMAN, DAS and LOCK, 1997; ARANTES, 2011; RENAULT, 2008.

⁷ CRANE, 1996; DI CASTRO, 2008.



The argument I will address here is that these strategies allowed him to avoid the tendency to confer a kind of excessive aestheticism to the social limit-experience, on one hand, and to simply reproduce the experience of an isolated individual, on the other. Taking his writing as an x-ray of the experience in concentration camps, the objective of this paper is to reflect further, but not exhaustively, on the ethical and epistemological tone of his narrative works based on the issues raised by the author himself.

1 Literature as a moral response to a traumatic event

Considering that “uncomfortable truths travel with difficulty”,⁸ the testimony of the Italian Jewish author on Auschwitz, which was the result of over forty years of disciplined intellectual work, sought to overcome the powerful barriers of incomprehension, silence and revisionisms. Before he wrote, Levi had the almost neurotic habit of telling and retelling his experiences in the *Lager* to anyone who crossed his path – on the train, in the street, at work, at home – as he constantly searched for someone who was minimally interested in listening.

Telling my experiences is a necessity, and it takes strength to not write about them, to not mention them. In my books, in the first ones but also in the most recent, *I sommersi e i salvati*, I needed to reorder this chaotic world, to explain it to myself and also to others. [...] Writing is a way of ordering.⁹

This is why in his texts, interviews, presentations or public interventions, writing never appeared as a gift of divine grace, but rather as a psychological need and moral obligation. Later, in the final section of *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), it was already very clear for him what it meant to be a witness of Auschwitz. He says: “I do not believe that the life of a man necessarily has a purpose; if I think of my own life, and the aims which I have set for myself up to now, I recognize that only one of them is well defined and self-evident, and it is precisely this: to bear witness”.¹⁰ It was necessary, then, to write to give his testimony, understand the past and communicate memories of some moral and collective importance for future generations in order to “never forget that [Auschwitz] has happened”.¹¹

Already in the preface of his first work, *Se questo è un uomo*, when the writer reveals that he was driven to write his first book primarily by the will to bear witness, he revealed the moral character of his literary work. His goal was to represent the inhumane with human words, or to describe the kingdom of death in proportions within the reach of common men.

⁸ LEVI, 1997b, p. 783.

⁹ LEVI, 1997a, p. 203.

¹⁰ LEVI, 1997b, p. 796.

¹¹ LEVI, 1997b, p. 1.



It is a cathartic requirement, at one time a poetic and cognitive catharsis, which aspires to give form to the malformed, to explain the inexplicable. *Nec flere, Nec indignari, sed intelligere*. Hence, it is necessary to embrace the *whole* realm of death, which comes to life in his work, so much so that for the first time we really begin *to know*, and not just to intuit, what actually has occurred. The reconnaissance probe then returns to the surface bringing to everyone a compact and homogeneous world that, like ours, has its own politics, psychology, morality and economics: contrary to ours, it is true, but even so, no less precise and objective, not less pregnant with an infernal lucidity, as a negative utopia.¹²

Thus, one can say that Levi became a writer mainly to tell others about everything he had been through in a language that is accessible to all: "I had only one idea in my mind, and it was very precise one, that I was not supposed to write a literary work, but to bear witness".¹³ He added, "For some unknown reason, an anomaly has occurred, almost an unconscious preparation to witness".¹⁴ Narrating, then, is revealed as a fundamental need and clearly one way of reorganising, understanding and explaining the limit-experience he had had in the chaotic universe of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The maxim referred to by Cesare Cases in the excerpt cited above – "*Humanas res nec flere nec indignari, sed intelligere*" ("Strive not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, nor to hate them, but to understand them") – is by Dutch philosopher of Sephardi origin Baruch Spinoza. Levi's account runs along the same lines, as it seeks to comprehend the "kingdom of death" that was produced politically and culturally. He used to say he had "no definite literary intentions", and that the literary model he followed was that of the brief "weekly report"¹⁵ commonly distributed in factories and the scientific world, whose style was concise, precise and comprehensible to everyone because it was written in a very accessible language. His scientific detachment from the literary form reveals the importance he gave to writing as a process of understanding and acquiring knowledge.

In addition to the difficulty of basing one's decision to bear witness on the pain suffered and, consequently, placing oneself in the role of the narrator of the violence and the memory of the savagery, what one observes in passages such as this one is the pressing desire to present the experience of the *Lager*. Communicating it in the

¹² CASES, 1948.

¹³ LEVI, 1997a, p. 213.

¹⁴ LEVI, 1997a, p. 220.

¹⁵ LEVI, 1997a, p. 88.



most clear and direct way possible, which is characteristic of the nearly obsessive style of the chemist-writer, was the factor that weighed the most in his decision to become a witness¹⁶. This desire to bear witness to the horror of the camps is present in the works of several ex-prisoners who wrote about their experiences afterwards,¹⁷ such as Jean Amery, Paul Celan, Hermann Langbein, Viktor Klemperer, Ruth Klüger, Jorge Semprún, Robert Antelme, Charlotte Delbo, David Rousset, Imre Kertész, Gitta Sereny, Bruno Bettelheim, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski and many others. Thus, this was not an isolated thing or the product of a writer's mind, but rather something that appears constantly in the works of former concentration camp prisoners who became writers and later felt compelled to write their own stories.

Primo Levi attributes his testimony of the Holocaust a central cause, which does not exclude luck or some decisive material circumstances. As he confesses in an interview with Philip Roth for *La Stampa* on 26 and 27 November 1986, now in the "Appendix" to *Il Sistema periodico*, he survived the genocide thanks to random measures:

It was my fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944, after the German Government had decided, owing to the growing scarcity of labour, to lengthen the average life span of the prisoners destined for elimination; it conceded noticeable improvements in the camp routine and temporarily suspended killings at the whim of individuals.¹⁸

The cause that permeates his narrative is precisely the will (which is somewhat tragic) to share his memories and the history of the camps, the useless violence, the "grey zone", the *Muselmänner*, Hurbinek – in sum, the "Auschwitz experience"¹⁹ – while affording it some level of intelligibility and relating his personal experience to the broader scenario.²⁰ Yet, the will to give testimony was strengthened even further by the moral imperative to understand the dynamics of human relationships in extreme situations; and precisely because "to return from Auschwitz was no small

¹⁶ Some authors highlight Levi's life story, but do not examine his motives for entering the literary field. Perhaps the most important works on the writer's life, although not entirely accurate on certain aspects, are: Massimo Dini and Stefano Jesurum (1992), Carole Angier (2002), Roberta Kremer (2001), Myriam Anissimov (1999), Marco Belpoliti (2010), Ernesto Ferrero (2007) and Ian Thomson (2002). A more recent biography based on unpublished documents was written by Philippe Mesnard (2011), a professor at the Haute École de Bruxelles.

¹⁷ ZUIN, 2006.

¹⁸ LEVI, 1997b, p. 3.

¹⁹ OLIVEIRA, 2014; 2016.

²⁰ BALDASSO, 2013.



fortune".²¹ As the author himself recalls, each one of the survivors "is in many ways an exception, something that we, in order to exorcise the past, tend to forget;²² that is why testimony is an ethical and historical necessity".²³

The archives of the *Lager* were burned in the final stages of the war. This was an irreparable loss, as the number of victims and affected persons is still being discussed today:

Before the Nazis used the gigantic and multiple crematorium furnaces, the countless corpses of the victims, deliberately murdered or destroyed by disease and suffering, could be evidence and thus should be eliminated in some way. The first solution, so macabre that it is difficult to speak of it, was to simply pile up the bodies, hundreds of thousands of bodies, into large common graves, which was done particularly in Treblinka, in other smaller *Lager*, and on the Russian rear flank. It was a temporary solution, taken with a bestial neglect while German armies triumphed on all fronts and the final victory seemed certain: later one would see what to do about that, for the winner also owns the truth, and can manipulate it as he wishes. The common graves would be justified, or eliminated, or even attributed to the Soviets (who, moreover, demonstrated in Katyn not to be far behind). However, after the turn of events in Stalingrad, they reconsidered: it is better to delete everything at once. The prisoners themselves were obliged then to unearth those poor remains and to burn them up in open fires, as if such an operation, so unusual, could pass unobserved.²⁴

The critical circumstances involved in the communication of extreme experiences such as these are especially due to the fact that the witness was not distant from what happened. Narrating a traumatic event presupposes certain proximity with the situations being narrated. It is because of this that the traumatic and shocking experience of genocide affects the relationship between remembering and forgetting. It also disrupts the order in which the testimony is given, as it creates obstacles for its narration and its constitution as history.

²¹ LEVI, 1997b, p. 47.

²² LEVI, 1997b, p. 734.

²³ Todorov perceived in Levi's testimony "an effort that is unparalleled in modern literature because of both the variety of issues raised and the quality of the reflection itself" (TODOROV, 1995, p. 285) is always present. In his testimony, then, there is an observation that is always based on some moral foundation (CALVINO, 1985).

²⁴ LEVI, 1997b, p. 654-655.



In the camps, prisoners were deprived of the human condition (dignity, rights, citizenship, community, family, religion, profession, values) and exposed to a policy of neglect, dehumanisation, and the degradation of life and death.²⁵ Furthermore, they were exhausted by hunger, the cold, and slave labour and from being subjected to an empty existence on a daily basis.²⁶ In light of the inhumane conditions imposed on them, one of the reasons many continued to bear the daily violence was in order to become – although, at first, not so determinedly – a potential witness on Auschwitz and especially to re-establish themselves as moral beings.²⁷

The fear of not being heard arose from possible disbelief in the absurdity of the violence. According to the Italian author, the news about the camps began to spread only in 1942. The stories were vague, but they more or less converged. They spoke of such extreme brutality, of a massacre of such incredible proportions and with such intricate motives that people far away might refuse to believe them precisely because they were so absurd.²⁸ As a result, the nearly pathological urge to bear witness became something natural and reasonable among camp survivors due to the fear of being forgotten – that is, the fear that even in freedom and normal circumstances, outside the concentration and extermination camps, no one would want to hear about that remote and dreadful past.

The testimony of Ruth Klüger, another survivor of the Nazi *Lager*, corroborated the fear of a narrative that is impotent or that was prevented from being given. For the author, people are not willing to hear or to be the bearers of terrible news, or they would do so "only in a certain pose or attitude – not as a conversational partner but rather as those who must submit to an unpleasant task with a kind of reverence that easily turns into disgust, two feelings that complement each other".²⁹

This rejection leads us to an issue raised in the writer's testimony: would the prophecy of a SS soldier on possible public disbelief be true?

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties because we will destroy the evidence

²⁵ BAUMAN, 1989; GARCIA, 2015; ZUIN, 2006.

²⁶ OLIVEIRA, 2014; 2016.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud (1985) explained that being prepared or not, even if only on the emotional and individual level, can be one determining factor in defining an individual's post-trauma success or breakdown – and, as a result, if he will attempt to preserve or transmit the memory of the traumatic event.

²⁸ BASEVI, 2013; BIDUSSA, 2009.

²⁹ KLÜGER, 2005, p. 102.



together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed; and they will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate this history of the *Lager*.³⁰

The *Häftlinge* (prisoners) were afflicted by the fear that the Nazis would be victorious and, because of this, would dictate the "truth" about the *Lager*. After all, the version of history told is always "the history of the winners", as Walter Benjamin³¹ would say. Primo Levi realised that the further the events that marked the massacre fade into the past, the more the "construction of the convenient truth" grows and is perfected. In this "truth", everything is denied: the photographs of the piles of bodies, the statistics on the millions of deaths, the deportations and the gas chambers.

Anyone who has enough experience of human affairs knows that the distinction (the opposition, a linguist would say) good faith/bad faith is optimistic and enlightened. It is so much more, and much more so when applied to men like those newly appointed. It presupposes a mental clarity that few possess and that even those few lose immediately when, for any reason, past or present reality within them cause anxiety or malaise. In these conditions, there are those who lie consciously, by falsifying coldly reality itself, but there are numerous who lift the anchors, move away, temporarily or forever, from genuine memories, and fabricate a convenient reality. The past is their weight; they feel repugnance for things done or suffered, and tend to replace them with others. The replacement can begin in full awareness, with a scenario invented, deceitful, restored, but less painful than the real one; by repeating its description to others, but also to themselves, the distinction between true and false progressively loses its contours, and the man ends up fully believing the narrative created, pruning and retouching here and there the less credible details, or inconsistencies, or yet incompatible elements with the framework of the acquired events [...]. The silent transition from falsehood to self-deception is useful: those who lie in good faith lie more effectively, serve better their role, convince more easily believed the judge, the historian, the reader, the wife, children.³²

³⁰ LEVI, 1997b, p. 653.

³¹ BENJAMIN, 1996.

³² LEVI, 1997b, p. 666.



Things did not turn out the way the Nazis had hoped. The chemist-writer from Turin recalls that, even if the Nazi state wanted to erase the traces left behind and dictate the "truth" about the period of exception (that is, to be the one to narrate the story of what happened) by blowing up Auschwitz's gas chambers and cremation ovens, burning the archives and murdering the people they referred to as the "bearers of secrets",³³ the fact is that they would still exist and their ruins would remain. Therefore, the most important fact to be considered here is that even though the survivors' testimony is often influenced by want, doubt, fear and suspicion, it was born out of the moral need to remember and to build records that render the horrors committed public. This would be done through a set of narratives – whose original purpose was "inner liberation", but later took on another moral significance – "which could be interpreted as a universal witness of what man dares to do to another man".³⁴ Testimony became, then, the living memory of the barbarism, a monument erected for the dead. For Primo Levi, to write the history of the savagery in the form of literary testimony is to remember the death of the others.

Walter Benjamin had noted a few years earlier that the memory is one of the most extraordinary human virtues – "the most epic of all the faculties".³⁵ In the very act of narration, it allows for a singular appropriation of history and its potential transmission. This means that Levi could be the engaged narrator that Benjamin admired: the one who, committed to the past, always keeps a keen eye on the clock, as "death has its place either at the front of the procession or as a miserable latecomer".

Levi used to say that his books did not add anything to the history of the camps, nor did they guarantee commitment to the exercise of writing. His intention was never to do the work of a historian or a sociologist or to exhaustively examine his sources. He sought to limit himself to the Nazi camps for ethical reasons: "I had direct experience only of these; I also have had copious indirect experience of them, through books read, stories listened to, and encounters with the readers of my first two books".³⁶ His books are above all documents on the annihilation of man by man itself, denunciations that could later serve as "documentation for a 'calm' study of some aspects of the human soul".³⁷ Referring to the writing of *Se questo è un uomo*, the author added:

Its origins go back, not indeed in practice, but as an idea, an intention, to the days in the *Lager*. The need to tell our story to

³³ LANGBEIN, 2004.

³⁴ LEVI, 1997a, p. 77.

³⁵ BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 210.

³⁶ LEVI, 1997b, p. 661-662.

³⁷ LEVI, 1997b, p. 3.



“the rest”, to make “the rest” participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs. The book has been written then to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation. Hence its fragmentary character: the chapters have been written not in logical succession, but in order of urgency. [...] And it seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented.³⁸

Victims could surely choose between silence and giving testimony, but they were often bound by the need to transmit knowledge and information because, as Levi said, “to refuse to communicate is a failing”.³⁹ In fact, he believed that all those who:

[...] have experienced the incarceration (and, much more generally, all individuals who have suffered severely) fall into two distinct categories, with few intermediate gradations: those who are silent and those who speak. Both obey valid reasons: those who have experienced more deeply an uneasiness that, to put it simply, I called “shame”, are silent, that is, those who do not feel at peace with themselves or whose wounds still hurt.⁴⁰

Thus, to avoid remembering and to renounce to giving an account on the violence is, even if only on an unconscious level, to make a pact with the ignominy. On this, said, “therefore, one must force oneself to talk and to write, as Primo Levi did, who began his manuscript in the laboratory in Auschwitz, using pieces of paper that he was ready to destroy in an instant”.⁴¹ On one hand, the writer referred to the tension between memory and post-trauma amnesia while citing the moral need to write that began in the camp and, on the other hand, he affirmed that all memories marked by violence are a burden that all survivors must bear. “The pain of remembering, the old ferocious pain of feeling like a man, which instantly assails me like a dog, always manifests itself; [...] and then, I take the pencil and the notebook and I write what I would not dare tell anyone”.⁴²

Levi lays a certain amount of blame on the German people for not denouncing what was going on before their eyes: concentration camps, mass deportations, bans and the systematic stigmatisation of Jews, gypsies and other social groups. “The real, collective, and general guilt, from almost all Germans then, was that they did not

³⁸ LEVI, 1997b, p. 3-4.

³⁹ LEVI, 1997b, p. 721.

⁴⁰ LEVI, 1997b, p. 774.

⁴¹ GAGNEBIN, 1994, p. 125.

⁴² LEVI, 1997b, p. 774.



have the courage to speak".⁴³ The collective guilt was carried by all those who, during Hitler's twelve years in power, lived with the illusion that "not seeing meant not knowing, and that not knowing would somehow set them free from their quota of complicity or connivance".⁴⁴ On the issue of collective guilt,⁴⁵ which I will not explore in depth, Levi added the following account in the preface of *I sommersi e i salvati*:

[...] since we could not assume that most Germans accepted lightly the massacre, it is certain that the lack of dissemination of the truth about the camps constitutes one of the largest examples of collective guilt of the German people, and the open demonstration of cowardice to which Hitler terror had reduced: a vileness as routine and so profound as to restrain husbands from telling their wives, parents to their children; without which the excesses would not have occurred and Europe and the world today would be different.⁴⁶

Furthermore, through his testimony, Levi sought to deconstruct the theory that affirms that it is not possible to talk about certain traumatic events due to their monstrosity, the need to forget them and the "unspeakable horror"⁴⁷ to which Hannah Arendt once referred.⁴⁸ He did so to deconsecrate the role of the witness, while recognising his problematic constitution: "I realize that it is very difficult to turn my experience into words. I have sought to do so, and perhaps in part I have succeeded, but with the frequent feeling of producing an almost impossible piece of

⁴³ LEVI, 1997b, p. 803.

⁴⁴ LEVI, 1997b, p. 718.

⁴⁵ ANDERS, 2001; ARENDT, 2003.

⁴⁶ LEVI, 1997b, p. 656.

⁴⁷ SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2006; TRAVERSO, 2004.

⁴⁸ Updating Arendt's work (1963) in a context where violence is inflicted upon the defenceless, vulnerable and unprotected peoples of the so-called "humanitarian wars", "urban cleansing" and other ongoing massacres, Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2007), whose theoretical work is also very close to that of Judith Butler (2009), developed a new term to address this nearly unspeakable terror and the banalisation of evil in the world today: "horrorism". In: *Horrorismo ovvero della violenza sull'inerte*, the neologism applies to the circumstances in which atrocities and torture are currently carried out in a range of contexts. The suffix "ism" denotes a systematic practice that is part of the common mindset that the media helps to create by using spectacular representations that present suffering as banal and "humanitarian" (MESNARD, 2004) and perceiving and judging acts of extreme violence and horror as something natural, thereby contributing to their normalisation.



literary work".⁴⁹ We cannot help but to notice that this statement reminds us of the famous statement of Elie Wiesel: "To be silent is impossible, to speak is forbidden".⁵⁰

2 The limits of representation and the representation of the limits

The writings on the trauma contain a lacuna: while certain experiences are presented, others cease to be communicated, as due to the traumatic event's singularity – or the "excess of reality" – it cannot be narrated and transmitted in its entirety. For Giorgio Agamben,⁵¹ what is left of Auschwitz is precisely this gap, or the impossibility of bearing witness on it – a task that legitimately belongs to the dead and the drowned. I will not explore here the limits of Agamben's theory, as it has been debated elsewhere.⁵² What interests me, for now, is that Primo Levi mentioned this idea on a few occasions, namely in relation to his motive for writing, the singularities of his work and the difficulties and aporias of witnesses. These issues are concentrated notably in chapters 17 of *Se questo è un uomo*, 3 and 8 of *I sommersi e i salvati*, and in a large part of the texts found in the work edited by Marco Belpoliti, which contains interviews and conversations with the author between 1963 and 1987.

Levi reveals to us the risky and paradoxical grounds upon which the work of the witness is developed: it is impossible, but, at the same time, absolutely necessary.

We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less knowledge, to recount not only our destiny but also that of the others, the drowned, as it were. But it was a discourse "on behalf of third parties", the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the completed job, was not narrated by anyone, and no one ever returned to tell about his own death. The drowned, even if they had paper and pen, would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy.⁵³

This is the aporia that the witness of Auschwitz faces: the need to speak out and, at the same time, the impossibility of doing so completely. Agamben called this aporia the "Levi's paradox",⁵⁴ according to which the witness who narrates is not a complete

⁴⁹ LEVI, 1997a, p. 214.

⁵⁰ WIESEL, 1995, p. 89.

⁵¹ AGAMBEN, (1998).

⁵² DELLA TORRE, 2000; MESNARD, KAHAN, 2001; NORRIS, 2005; PLANINC, 2015; POWER, 2010; SCHÜTZ, 2008.

⁵³ LEVI, 1997b, p. 716-717.

⁵⁴ AGAMBEN, 1998.



witness, but rather one who bears witness of the impossibility of bearing witness. Thus, it is up to the survivors – that is, those who did not touch the bottom – to speak for the others, as they "know they are witnesses of a process of global and secular dimensions".⁵⁵ Levi adds that the history of the *Lager* has been written "almost exclusively by those who, like myself, do not reach the bottom. Those who did so never come back, or his capacity of observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension".⁵⁶ As such, to give testimony on a limit-experience is to talk about an experience that one did not live fully; it is a possibility based on an impossibility. Therefore, the impossibility of giving a full testimony on the traumatic event is part of the structure of the testimony that is possible.

This is why one must also listen to the silence, the ruins and the remains of the testimony. Interpreted through this logical prism, a large part of Levi's works can be seen not as a narration of a static "objective truth", but rather the intentional veracity of the narration of the facts. Or, as Penna puts it, the truth about what happened in the past does not lie in the exact historical reconstitution of the facts, but rather in the "interval that unites and separates the survivor from what he experienced".⁵⁷

For Didi-Huberman (2003), what is of interest in a testimony such as Levi's is the "hiatus" established in the language of the one elaborating the witness account, which allows the story based on a possible representation of the traumatic event to be singled out. This is where a fundamental division in the testimony can be found: between the inability of some to speak and the possible testimony, albeit to a second degree, of others: the survivors. It is clear, then, that an essential part of the testimony on Auschwitz – whether in the form of testimonial or fictional writing, images or oral memory – is this lacuna. In other words, it is the space that remains between the figure of the complete witness (true, but impossible) and the material witness (the fragmented, aporetic, incomplete, but possible one that remains).

To take this one step further, the testimony of the survivor is only true and has a purpose if it integrates into its core the accounts of the ones who could not bear witness of their own experience – of the ones who could not be their own historians. Its existence is validated if it includes the anonymous accounts of those who were unable to leave Auschwitz and if it serves in public as a second-degree testimony or as a testimony in which a possible witness bears witness. It appears to me, then, that giving the floor to anonymous people, being the spokesperson for a delegation of the drowned or speaking based on one's proximity to those whose voice was lost is a role that Levi assumes in his autobiographical narratives:

⁵⁵ LEVI, 1997b, p. 774.

⁵⁶ LEVI, 1997b, p. 658-659.

⁵⁷ PENNA, 2006.



I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become convinced little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims," the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.⁵⁸

Epistemologically speaking the possible work on Auschwitz involved the mediation of a third-party embodied in the figure of the *Muselmann*. Lombardi comments that:

[...] at the end of the Dante's twenty-sixth chant, Ulysses describes his wild adventure, conscious of that fact that he will meet his death because of his defiance of both the Pagan gods and the Christian god. He narrates an episode that ends with the divine punishment for his defiance, which is, him telling the story of his own death. Ulysses is, ahead of time, the complete witness in the sense of the term, as defined by Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Although a fictional character reinterpreted by Dante Alighieri, Ulysses is, in fact, the only witness who is able to describe his own death. He is both the third-party distanced from the episode (as the narrator of the episode) and the survivor involved. He is the only complete witness.⁵⁹

The ethics of his testimony is sustained by the voice that replaces the silence of the ones who touched "bottom" and saw the Gorgon.⁶⁰ In other words, occupying the impossible place of the declaration of the person who died, Levi's literary testimony takes upon itself the task of making the absent or the drowned present. The impossibility of giving a more complete account of the trauma would thus be exactly what makes it increasingly necessary. Only those who are conscious of the inherent problems of the representability of extreme situations and of the paradoxes and traps that the act of narrating imply are, in fact, able to elaborate a discourse on genocide that has historical and moral significance.

⁵⁸ LEVI, 1997b, p. 716.

⁵⁹ LOMBARDI, 2007, p. 44.

⁶⁰ ZUIN, 2013.



Primo Levi was aware of these limits and paradoxes. He believed that the one who narrates, bears witness and writes on the brutality to make it public knowledge reclaims silence in respect for the deceased. The impossibility of testimony consists of its possibility of "being founded on the account that is missing, of the one who essentially does not speak, the one who is absent and whom the testimony seeks to make present by proxy".⁶¹ While testimony engenders individuality, the ability to say "I" or a de facto identity, there is a collectivity implicit in its ethical base.⁶² The experiences that serve as the basis for constituting the testimonies and their core are related to the issue of individual and collective identity, as they presuppose that there is a link between the one who narrates and the ones to whom the testimony refers.

Levi's literary works are, each in its own way, as he himself stated, "political books", "moral books": they serve as a sort of "public service"⁶³ that is categorically "imbued with memories"⁶⁴ and functions out of a "moral obligation to the ones who were silenced".⁶⁵ As such, the collective status of his texts embraces the collectivity implicit in the testimonial narrative, which is made up of all those who did not return from the camps to bear witness. Through this mechanism of radical representation, one can perceive the interrelation between Levi's memoirs and an implicit and anonymous collectivity, since the legitimacy of his testimony derives from this radical otherness or the power he has to speak by proxy in the name of others.

Like a knot that ties together the components of a complex network, Levi's writing links the memories of the people who perished. Also, as an archetype for illustrating the "cases" of those who experienced the trauma of the Nazi massacre and bore the indelible scars left by the *Lager*, even after liberation, as well as of those who did not survive to tell their stories, Levi has succeeded in giving meaning to collective suffering. Thus, the Jewish writer combined his memory of the Holocaust and the unavoidable incompleteness of the testimony of that trauma to be a possible narrator on Auschwitz and communicate his experience – and that of other anonymous voices silenced in the confines of the *Lager* – to the rest of the world. Moreover, it is important to say that by doing so, he did not lean towards presenting a pathologically traumatic memory, or to a memory that is presented merely as an obligation. He was careful to elaborate his autobiography to give intelligibility to the *Lager* phenomenon, despite the obstacles and the subjective and objective difficulties

⁶¹ PENNA, 2006, p. 156.

⁶² OLIVEIRA, 2013.

⁶³ LEVI, 1997a, p. 40.

⁶⁴ LEVI, 1997b, p. 671.

⁶⁵ LEVI, 1997b, p. 717.



mentioned earlier. His attempt, then, was to constitute a kind of "mosaic of memories",⁶⁶ capable of helping people learn about the experiences seen and lived.

One point to be highlighted here is that the witness's memory occupies the place of a group – of the dead and the mute, the drowned and the survivors – represented by the figure of the *Muselmann* – or of Hurbinek, a child of death, the child of Auschwitz.⁶⁷ According to Penna⁶⁸ and Ginzburg,⁶⁹ what is at play in testimony on the extreme violence and collective atrocities is precisely the relationship with the community of the dead, revealed and symbolised by the one who announces and tries to represent them. It is the relationship with *what is not there* that defines the collective and political status of Levi's memoirs: a collectivity made up of remnants, which unites the one bearing witness with the one who is absent or the group of anonymous individuals. The testimony is not only a testimony on oneself, but above all a testimony on the radical alterity, of the collective impossible, but necessary *other*. This mechanism allows him to narrate the traumatic event while politicising his writing, which is one way the author found to recover the story of those who had succumbed or had survived without a voice.

It is possible to say, then, that testimonial writing needs others to survive or someone to be the bearer of its message – even if only part of it – since the "complete" testimony cannot be given. The witness's writing transcends his own voice to give voice to the others. By doing so, it serves as the mediator that allows the memory of the trauma to take shape. Roberto Vecchi believes that, in virtue of the aporias and the constituting gap in the testimony on the traumatic event, between the "infinity of the massacre" and the "finite writing on the massacre", there will always be a piece of remains that resists being represented and does not allow itself to be seized as a form".⁷⁰ One of the intentions of the witness would be, then, to capture the vestiges and the traces,⁷¹ and talk about the unrepresentable so as to elaborate a "minimum of language that allows for survival"⁷² – in sum, to work on the remaining element that can be found in the conflicting gap between the speakable and the unspeakable.⁷³ Violent and paradoxical at the same time, Levi's writing is a lucid shield or an

⁶⁶ LEVI, 1997b, p. 726.

⁶⁷ LUCREZI, 2005.

⁶⁸ PENNA, 2006.

⁶⁹ GINBURG, 2011.

⁷⁰ VECCHI, 2012.

⁷¹ DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2003.

⁷² LEVI, 1997a, p. 215.

⁷³ CAROLL, 1999.



armour that "allows one to face Medusa's gaze, the infinite of the horror, and avoid turning to stone when facing the massacre".⁷⁴

Primo Levi comes close to what Walter Benjamin defined as the objective of a narrative.⁷⁵ The German thinker showed that the purpose of a historical narrative is not merely to accumulate memories. It must aim to be more than just a pious conservation of the past, the "monumentalisation of history" or its preservation: it has to patiently collect the remnants to put together a possible totality of the historical process in question. Totality does not mean recuperating the general, unique, real nature of the event. It refers more to a disjunction of the remaining pieces or, in other words, the separation of what remains of the past, its fragments and original context.⁷⁶ By bringing together the vestiges of Auschwitz, the witness carries out "the silent and autonomous, yet fundamental task of the authentic narrator that, even today, is still possible: the task, the work of *apokatastasis*, this patient and complete reuniting of all of the souls in paradise, even the most humble and rejected".⁷⁷

Therefore, we can also say that Levi's testimony is an effort to communicate the Auschwitz experience without "monumentalising" the past – that is, without seeking to merely preserve his testimony so it ends up as an archive on the event in question that is dead and done with. The time in the memories the Italian author recovered is not linear, chronological or measureable. Instead, it is the living time of the active memories in which the experience of the past resurges in the present through the effort to reconstruct, re-elaborate and transmit the possible remains – and not to repeat, ritualise and "monumentalise" the event itself.

If someone accesses the memories of their personal experiences, they may eventually come across such traces or fragments of history. However, when they are turned into sources of testimony, they become documents of the past. And according to Jacques Le Goff, the documents are not innocuous;⁷⁸ they are elements that remain or traces that endure over time and space. They are also the result of the recollection of people who go back into the past to tell a story based on vestiges that have often been forgotten or silenced. The remains of the past or the traces of other stories remain,

⁷⁴ VECCHI, 2012, p. 252.

⁷⁵ BENJAMIN, 1996.

⁷⁶ Benjamin (1999) believed that knowledge on history should possess two complementary parts represented by the image of a scale in equilibrium, "one tray which is weighted with what has been and the other with knowledge of what is present. Whereas on the first the facts assembled can never be too humble or too numerous, on the second there can be only a few heavy, massive weights" (*The Arcades Project* 468 [N6,5]).

⁷⁷ GAGNEBIN, 2006, p. 118.

⁷⁸ LE GOFF, 2003.



and they may have something to tell us, even if they are always close to being assumed as an impossible totality.⁷⁹

Final remarks

In this article, I have tried to delineate some possible approaches to the ethical and epistemological issues that testimony on Auschwitz, as Primo Levi elaborated it, can raise for literature. To understand the brutality of the *Lager*, it is not a question of knowing it in its entirety, but rather acquiring new perceptions of what it means to not know in order to comprehend the ways in which the hiatus that is also part of history works. In the end, Levi's testimony is an attempt to give meaning to the secret words of individuals who did not return from the camps or who returned mute and incapable of conveying their experience. In both cases, the only thing left is the testimony voiced by the survivors. It is, therefore, a second-degree testimony – that is, a witness's effort to bear witness in the place of others.

Levi did not get overly involved in the controversy over the unrepresentability or the "unspeakability" of the horror, even though he did approach the act of bearing witness with constant ambivalency or lacunas. It is this ambivalency that I have sought to examine in this essay. The major difficulties in giving an account of the facts and narrating the experiences often outweigh the need to do so and become commonplace in the life of the survivors. The writer highlights the fractures, hiatuses and paradoxical issues that emerge when the language comes across a trauma and when survivors decide to become a witness in spite of the guilt and shame that inevitably haunts them. The fact is that there is apparently no language capable of describing the violence in the *Lager*, at least not without betraying the suffering of the victims, the drowned and the survivors, or banalising or embellishing their experiences.

Writer and survivor of the camps Elie Wiesel once said that the experience at Auschwitz – this industrialised and modern cruelty that will perhaps remain forever as the ultimate expression of human depravation – did not lend itself to being told and it could be treated as something that is impossible to convey and represent in its

⁷⁹ As one of the most important French novelists of the post-World War II era, Georges Perec, said about recollecting remains in order to elaborate a testimony, "I will always find, in my own ruminations, only the last reflection of a voice absent from writing, the scandal of their silence and of mine: I am not writing to say that I shall say nothing. I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say. I write because we lived together, because I was one among them, a shadow among their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life" (PEREC, 1995, p. 54).



entirety.⁸⁰ There are those who believe that the catastrophe cannot be represented because the only thing a survivor can do in regards to the trauma he suffered is "write down in his own text the conditions of the catastrophe as an impossible event, or, in sum, record his own failure, record the failure to represent".⁸¹

However, Levi avoided turning the memory into an ornament for the dead, as among the testimonies, read or heard, there are also those that are unconsciously stylized, in which convention prevails over memory. His fragmented and sometimes paradoxical testimony aims to "lose nothing of the hardness and of the violence imprinted on language".⁸² I believe that in his work, the lacunas and hiatuses that collide with the desire and need for comprehension never appear as a normative or epistemological impossibility. On the contrary, they appear as the moral limit that the need for historical understanding imposes. Seligmann-Silva noted that testimony on the trauma emerges "marked by its simultaneous need and impossibility", that is, bearing witness on the absurd excess of reality and, at the same time, the very gap that constitutes it: "the schism between language and the event, the impossibility of covering what was lived (or 'real') through verbal [expression]".⁸³

Therefore, the option of becoming a witness on Auschwitz, even if an incomplete one, so as to conduct a moral assessment of history through memorialistic narration suggests that reporting on what took place in the Nazi death camps is also a form of moral and political resistance to the barbarity. It allows one, concomitantly, to establish a more accurate connection between the past and the present, prevent the traumatic event from being forgotten and strengthen both the identity of the witness – the one who narrates his personal experience – and the collective experience of those without a voice and who succumbed – the drowned.

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⁸⁰ WIESEL, 1970.

⁸¹ NICHANIAN, 2012, p. 25.

⁸² LEVI, 1997b, p. 795.

⁸³ SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2003, p. 46-47.



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