

Paper delivered at a Conference “Life Writing and Human Rights: Genres of Testimony” at Kingston University, Center for Life Narratives, Kingston, England, July 11-13, 2011.

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### Narrative and Primo Levi

Primo Levi died more than twenty years ago. Shortly after his death I was asked to write an essay on his work. I read nearly five thousand pages of Levi’s work, lived, through his experience and distillations of the Lager. I focused largely on his conflicts as a witness and his growing sense of himself as a writer, capable of telling stories that could be invented or embellished by the imagination. With the stimulus of this conference on narration and human rights, I returned to Levi with that focus. The legacy to be found in Levi’s work has only deepened with time. The range of his questions and solutions, his willingness to be objective illuminates a far greater range of human issues than I realized years ago. The way he implicates us, not all of us in the Holocaust, but in our present conditions, us in our comfortable lives, was the most startling new perception.

His witnessing was not a destiny but a choice and a choice to act. The oath of the writer and the oath of the witness shifted in the proportions with which he called on memory in literal ways as he moved forward from his first account in *If This is a Man*. But the oath remained one of searching for knowledge, rather than blame, in spite of its personal costs. As a witness and writer, he saw dialogue as a key.

The chapters in his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, address how one tells the untellable, how one judges it, and how one narrates, by suggestion, elements that are central to understanding the Holocaust’s complexity. Levi’s categories in *Drowned and the Saved*, asymmetrical divisions to be considered in trying to establish boundaries for telling and truth include the following: The Memory of the Offense, The Grey Zone, Shame, Communicating, Useless Violence, The Intellectual in Auschwitz, Stereotypes, Letters from the Germans and Conclusion. These categories can help anyone in the field

of human rights to understand better the issues of narrating. Kofi Annan in his address to the General Assembly when delivering a report on the fourth International Tribunal for the prosecution of persons responsible for serious violations in the former Yugoslavia since 1991 concludes with Levi's observations on the power of witnessing and how regimes practicing genocide fear it.

In my initial reading of Levi, I had picked up his sensitivity to the phenomenon of survivor guilt, long after the huge wave of terror and sadism and injustice had passed. At the time I had nearly rejected it as a level of scrupulousness that gave me pain in his regard. A vast literature on the guilt of victims exists in psychology. Yet Levi insists that the capacity to recognize and feel guilt even on the part of prisoners is part of the reckoning and, in some way, a sign that their humanity has not been extinguished. He puts it forward in his long and utterly serious belief in dialogue and truth.

I had reported previously how Levi told a story in which his perpetual thirst, a common situation in the camps, made him hide a source of a couple of cups of water dripping from a pipe. He shared the water with his friend Alberto, who also put out his tongue to gather the drops. But he did not tell another friend, Daniele. When some months later Daniele told Levi that he had seen the two of them drinking, the inhuman choices involved in survival tugged at Levi. He recounts and explores shame: how he and all others had been diminished in an absolute sense by the conscious acts of survival generated by fear, self preservation, the impossibility of action. This exploration is not morbid indulgence. It is part of the violence that was done to all people living in the Lager. "I do not know, and it does not interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer." Yet shame persists in some measure linked to fear and not taking bold action.

Since Levi identifies the ability to feel shame in relation to inactions, even if it is entirely different in degree, it is a mark of his humanity that sets up a challenge for us. He would not want us to interpret it as a burden too great for him to bear. Rather he would ask us to scale it and find examples in our own lives. Feeling guilt, even if it is completely comprehensible to explain why or how one has no direct responsibility for terrible acts, is something useful to link to ideas of action and how to change things.

Re reading Levi now, his need to find hope in action as a response to standing up to evil when it has forced one to become an animal, is one of the testimonies he leaves to challenge us who are basically living secure lives. The fury and obsession he conveys about his memories of his helplessness, about having to ignore considerations of conscience, are painful to us, given that he was more than entitled to put the reasoning about guilt and shame entirely into the camp of the perpetrators. Yet, he dismisses psychologists who find this guilt a “neuroses” due to the traumas suffered. Levi is stubborn in insisting that inside the broad categories of his last book are distinctions that are useful if one is ever to find the threads with which to returning to normal life. They provide openings in the dialogue about how and why things happen to ordinary people.

Simone Weil in her work gave the example of how the same act, standing in line for a piece of bread, could have different meanings and consequences depending of the context. The same act can require different amounts of courage. Levi’s categories speak to us who are standing in line for bread, not in the Lager, but an air-conditioned supermarket. We live, under completely different circumstances, in what he defines in his Lager world, as the Grey zone. The Grey zone is that place, where in different degrees, many explanations can be given for actions that are questionable or non-actions.

In Levi’s explorations of the difficulty of actions in extreme and dangerous situations, he sets up mirrors for use in everyday lives that are not extreme and dangerous. He challenges the unseeing that most of us manage to do in spite of what we know is happening in the world. He provides a scale for our indifference as we are faced with his pain about not sharing the drops of water with his second friend.

He remembers acts of kindness, when he had some “extra energy” in the camp. He examines his memories of personal shame and regret because he knows that he would never have had to make such choices had he lived in normal circumstances. Yet in normal circumstances, few of us feel torment or shame about our general responses to the suffering of others. Few of us ever suffer the psychological risks that a witness who has lived torture with his own skin. His ability to acknowledge guilt as part of his humanity, surely should give us new insights into our own denials.

Nabokov in commenting on memory and the ethics of memory wrote: “one can not unsee what one has seen.” I had not realized twenty years ago the absolute cost of

what Levi is willing to see as he goes further and further along the path of memory in his forty years of writing. His fight against being a victim never allows him rest. Nor does his perception that he is a man “who does not hate.” The task of witnessing, the commitment that is in no way satisfied with the first book, is really an announcement of the pledge to continue writing about the Lager. His writing as testimony and witnessing evolved into an ever more unknown set of consequences. His writing was action dedicated to the creation of dialogue that in spite of its horrors was about cleaning wounds.

Shame as a category seems quaint and even unhealthy in normal circumstances. The right to comfortable survival is something that does not occasion much defensiveness. Talking to an Italian who decided to remain in Japan, after the recent nuclear explosions, she recounted that foreigners almost to the last person boarded planes after the disaster. She cast no judgment, because people have a right to escape from danger. But she said that the Japanese on the streets bowed to her even three months after the fact, because they took her gesture as one of solidarity, one of empathy. Here, I thought, is an unexplored testimony that opens up an issue of solidarity versus survival that Levi was alert to. Here is action that he would have appreciated. Here is a zone within a gray zone where a human being, without any external measure that would have condemned her if she left, touched risks and issues of complex meanings in actions. Here lay issues of identity, empathy and ethics that most people would have not considered. Here are drops of humanity that occasion meditation and no clear answer. Here is kind of Lager, a new one, that again touches conscience.

We sign petitions, we give encouragement to people who are being exploited. We sign against wars, against torture. We try to give money, to volunteer, to write articles, to do the right thing. We may follow certain rituals because of wanting to respect the environment. Maybe we give up meat. But the torment of one who has lived in extreme life-changing, and life-lapsing conditions and paid by witnessing for it is particularly vivid in Levi’s work. It is this on-going examination of his own feelings of inadequacy and his search for actions that illuminate his work and take readers to new places in themselves.

Witnessing for a writer who has seen the extreme conditions that Levi has overtakes his life. He will not shut or cannot shut the event down. The grey zone that we as citizens have seen, I might say witnessed, in the last twenty years of wars in the world, the grey zone of financial scandals, of environmental lapses, where lies have been released, where a certain amount of blame has been assessed, the return of torture and its justifications, are places where Levi is willing to stop, calibrate and make distinctions between all the various kinds of people who are living in the gray zone. His clarity about its characteristics penetrates the darkness and then, like the light in a lighthouse, eventually flicks for a few moments onto the shore and passes over our bodies. The ability to be critical about oneself, ironic and self-examined in terms of courage and steadiness, is so far out of fashion, except in largely narcissistic ways, that it seems especially precious to feel his witnessing silently turn to us.

Levi says in his first book that from the first days when he is loaded on a train in Modena in 1944, he grasps at the idea of witnessing. The mission of telling, of processing the mechanisms, and feelings and events during the years in which he was a prisoner and then on his long march home from Russia, kept him alive. He understands the power of testimony. The passage that Kofi Annan cites when Germans begin to fear witnesses, once it appears that they may lose the war is certainly a motive that drives Levi's work. He writes so the world will remember, although he explains:

"Today I know it is a hopeless task to dress up a man in words, make him live on the printed page, especially a man like Sandro. He was not the sort of person you can tell stories about, nor to whom one erects monuments—he who laughed at show, he who lived completely through his deeds and when they came to an end, nothing of him was left, nothing but words precisely." Nevertheless, Levi believes in the work of telling, because telling falls to the sphere of action.

Yet the meaning of witnessing, the meaning of testimonies that are joined by other testimonies, the wide realities that pour into forty years of facing a topic to which many others begin to contribute, meant that his writing, as action, never let him rest. He faced a sea whose tides created a pull along the shore of everyday life when he returned to it in 1946. It continued to batter him, positioned as he was at the line where the waves break. But each year as a writer makes him more a writer in terms of how he approaches

truth. Thus the last book is not one of a witness and survivor as much as it belongs to a writer who realizes that very fact.

We know something happened to Primo Levi. We know he died by falling down an elevator shaft. It was an instant that no one can fully interpret; yet the conflict and suction that witnessing can bring about, cannot be underestimated. One wave can carry a human being off. The drowned and the saved. Why did he choose a word like drowned in his last book when water was hardly a metaphor for conditions that were completely dominated by other elements, death, noise, smells, terror and suicide.

It is well known that Levi finished writing the book that recounted his time in Auschwitz, as soon as he returned to Turin in 1946. He wanted to be as close to his Lager memories as possible. When he turned the manuscript in, no one wanted to publish it. Natalia Ginzburg as an editor for Einaudi rejected the text, she a writer who had suffered the death of her Jewish husband by torture and at the hands of the Germans. The idea of divulging, re-visiting, revealing, witnessing was not seen as appropriate. Perhaps for the courts, the Nuremberg trials, testimony was necessary for rebuilding civil society and reestablishing laws and institutions, but it was not right for a climate where hope had to be reestablished. If the truth of the Lagers were told and told so soon, by ordinary voices, it would not help the process of making enemies come to together in civil society. It might fuel more hate.

It took more than ten years to publish Levi's first book and even then it went out of print after 2000 copies were sold. Later, it was translated into all the languages of the world. By then there was enough distance so that the horror could be looked at, perhaps, above all, without denying that the events occurred while still holding a sense of one's identity. When Levi's first book finally was acknowledged, the world was able to accept the guilt that was largely narrated as confined to a single nation but that fed into questions extending more broadly. Genocide, the hideous mechanisms developed with the main scope of eliminating an entire people, torture, wars against independence were starting brush fires in other places.

Today witnessing, because of the internet, is often an immediate response, an alert, a flagging of attention. It is a burst from somewhere through barriers of censorship,

often accompanied by brief videos and petitions that spread through systems. In quality and quantity it is an entirely different thing in terms of time and use of the information. Through modern means of communication this tool momentarily brings some lapse to the attention of the entire world and then leaves it to experts or NGO's to keep it alive and perpetuate its importance. We all lived the horror of Guantanamo, the invasion of Iraq, the Central American wars, the drug cartels, the war in Bosnia, the war in the Ivory coast, the resistances in Burma, in Tibet. Responses are immediate and in another way, slow, complex, filled with compromises and a growing tiredness on the part of the public to hear more once the first crises or event has been told. These testimonies however often feed into collective reactions of positive resistance. The young understand the technology of relationships that can lead to action by using networks and blogs.

The tiredness and exhaustion that Einaudi identified in the late forties is the same and yet different for people who are not directly involved in the area of conflict today. The depth of Levi's passion was not something he could extinguish because public interest had changed to following another hot spot. The action he was looking for was more about dialogue than rebellion. Levi was a writer. It was this action, this thirst for truth, that allowed him to move further in developing an understanding that literally explored a sub-zero planet that needed to be given a name and a set of characteristics. The persistence of the genocide, the logic of the camps, and the melma that continued to furnish further questions about the nature of Germans, people who Levi could not hate, because of his own nature, but whom he could never forgive, this commitment through time is a focus for all of us who reached saturation points in many of our human rights activities or anti-war campaigns. When we feel like quitting, it is perhaps Levi's thoughts that might tweak us and ask if we should feel a touch of shame? When testimony has thrown out horrors to the world, how do we keep alive the reality that will lead to justice and healing? How do we manage to keep asking questions that often grow more complex?

Levy asks in his last book, questions about the Nazi Germans, because he wants to understand culpability—who inside the system knew all, who knew something, and who, if that were possible, nothing at all. He wants to explore civilian responsibility as well. The letters he receives from German readers once "If This is a Man" is published,

are included in his final book. The forty people who write letters after its translation into German are shocking because of the distance they are able take from the events. The often miserable and certainly detached apologies they give are beautiful examples of grades of perception and responsibility people who live in a normal world need in order to go on. From the young woman who writes that “young people have had enough of the *mea culpa* of the press and their teachers,” to the person who writes that it will take courage to put the book into the hands of Germans, our sleeping Germany, of people who refuse to consider the possibility of such cruelty among us western Christians” we see no one tormented to the extent that Levi as a victim was. But what a service Levi has done by passing on reactions of the few people who actually even bother to write him about his testimony. In the letters of people who respond to his descriptions of the horrors, we see people who are only at the furthest edges of the reality of wanting to understand, to empathize and to explore guilt and shame. The German who wrote “it will take courage to put the book into the hands of people who refuse to consider the possibility of such cruelty” is surely a person useful to us interested in the work of narration and witnessing. How do we find the courage to keep bringing before people’s eyes horrors that in some basic way implicate us all and stir up an unwelcome sense of guilt and shame? How do we communicate to people who have no interest in being implicated? How do we address people, who like those among the Germans, also consider themselves legitimate victims?

The awful number on Levi’s arm, that he “neither hid nor flaunted,” underlies the way he asks questions. Today in most of the information we receive we are given coherent narratives that keep at a great distance the sharp pieces of a puzzle, which while complex, could also implicate many of us in different degrees of not wanting to know. Yet the fact that our fellow countrymen and women often cannot bear to accept the truth, either because they do not want to know, or they embrace the exaggerated feelings of dominance and superiority, adds to our feelings that we have done all that we can do, if we have actually tried to get parts of the story out.

I have worked with people who have written personal narratives where conflict in the act of telling drives one close to collapse. The freshness of the material and thus the freshness of the pain of the convulsive way life can transgress one’s entire education, can be overwhelming. A man whom I have worked with, who was kidnapped along with two

Italians, who saw beheadings, feared for his own life, has humbled me in terms of witnessing, the costs of it, and the meaning of memory and truth. The havoc the events played with his life and his eventual break down of the life he possessed not only pulled off veils that had protectively fallen over memories, but also raised issues of conscience that Levi suffered with. A person who has been raised decently has to face issues in the lapsed world, which, in normal circumstances, would never occur. One would not steal. One would not tremble in fear. One would not betray another person. Yet those choices arise, if torture is a threat or takes place.

The Lager remains under all of Levi's writing. Yet Levi dedicates no time to eternal recriminations. He finds life fascinating, and much of it is pleasure. Twenty years ago I was interested in Levi's identity as we found it in his work. His interest in setting up dialogue is real and a metaphor for how he understands that a society can remain healthy. Most of his characters are talkers and one interrogates the other. Levi is such a singular writer in part because dialogue was central to his discoveries of himself as a witness and storyteller. Yet something happened to Levi. Whether it was to the witness or the storyteller is something we will never know.

Levi proposes in his novel *If not Now, When*, a story of people who resisted. If they steal a truck abandoned in a Russian junkyard, they will in essence come out of hiding. They will stand on a road from which they will be exposed and will have no choice but to risk in order to find normality. In the novel, Gedaleh poses the question, "If not now, when," as the characters hesitate over the action of taking the truck. The question is the climax in fiction. In fiction, the consequences of action can be spelled out to exhilarating effects, even if characters die. The question mutates when it appears in non-fiction testimony. If not now, when, the question Levi so rightly poses in his non-fiction for the Germans, and for the Kapos, and finally for himself is the question that he usefully and indelibly explores for all of us.

Who are Kapos in the Iraqi war? What pernicious mechanisms are at work in the companies outsourced to fight wars? What grade of thirst do we support and how full of shame should we feel when we keep the drops of water for ourselves? What degree of regret should we harbor for our identities linked to a nation and how much should we

support, given how comfortable our lives are. Levi's exploration of Lager events, once he is again living in what is considered normal Turinese society, the normal society that has let him back in to chemistry and eventually to publishing works awarded one prize after another, begins to reveal how his obligation to search out truth has brought him face to face with suicides that he has mentioned in earlier works.

All through his work we see signs that he would love to write stories that are simply about normal life, but the Lager always bleeds through. He passes judgment on those writers who survive only to later succumb to despair. A champion of reason, he steers past them. He narrates and explains, trying to find ground where he can stand without that feeling of rage and desperation that for him reveals an erroneous conclusion about life's meaning. But the task of witnessing over forty years is merciless. The search for hope, the truth of hope, if not in fact, at some basic level of weariness and conflict may have cost him his life. The wound never closed.

Levi's death, an instant, when some confusion or a second of madness struck, does not undermine the truth of his last observations, even to his observation that he was not a suicide. His assertion that a person who witnesses is a person of action remains his challenge and gift.

While we sign petitions, and see the rightness of our causes, it is that extraordinary and unsolved set of questions in Levi's last book that are questions for us, the reasoned, researched and considered thoughts that follow beyond the initial factual witnessing of terror and genocide. He challenges us with his luminous courage to get to the bottom of things, to cry out in order to help contain evil, by taking up the difficulties of getting information into the hands of people who do not want to hear, by working on topics that grow in complexity. He opens up the imperative of dialogue on horrifying subjects of which we must not tire or back away.

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