

3. “... racchiudere in una immagine tutto il male del nostro tempo”. Primo Levi, *Indifference and the Faces of Evil*

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To the memory of Norman Geras (1943-2013)

There is a textual crux that erupts, stark and disturbing, at the very opening of Primo Levi's entire, extraordinary oeuvre, and which taints with a certain note of doubt and instability all the magisterial lucidity that follows. In that crux lies the seeds of a vision of evil in Levi as an insidious form of “near enemy” of humanity, starkly distinct from any idea of radical evil.

Levi's first great work of reflection on the physics and the ethics of the Holocaust, *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man*, 1947/1958),¹ establishes a perspective on genocide which is ostensibly one of detached analysis and experimental demonstration: he sets out to add nothing, as he says in his Preface, to the “atrocious details” (“particolari atroci”)² that, already in 1947, he assumes are all too well known to his readers, indeed to readers across the world. Instead, his much-quoted aim is to offer “documents for a calm study of the human mind” (“uno studio pacato”);³ even today, seventy years on from his deportation, the very idea of such a reflective mode is astonishing. And for many of his most intensely loyal readers, it is the analytical, evidential, anthropological, experimental eye this precept opens up that allows Levi to pinpoint the horror of what he describes and of what he lived through, without loss of dignity or voice, against the oblivion the Nazis had planned for him and for the Jews of Europe.

¹ Texts are given in Italian and in English (my own translations).

² Primo Levi, *Opere*, 2 vol., Turin, Einaudi, 1997, vol. 1, p. 5.

³ *Ibidem*.

For the same reason, there is little or no space for a theodicy of Auschwitz in the secular, rationalist modeller that Primo Levi embodies in textual-testimonial form, in his programmatic passage from darkness towards light, which is declaredly not to be taken as a passage from evil to good, but rather from chaos and indecipherability towards understanding and knowledge, a new *Aufklärung*. To borrow one of his characteristically ironic and light plays on words – in this case from a chapter title of *Se questo* – Levi's Auschwitz ostensibly exists "On This Side of Good and Evil" ("Al di qua del bene e del male"),⁴ in a universe of messy human degradation where such blunt categories are at least blurred and quite possibly useless as categories of explanation. If anything, it is social and animal evolution – good and bad *adaptation* – that replaces Manicheistic struggle in Levi's concentration camp universe, as the once-again heavily ironic chapter and later book title "The Drowned and the Saved" ("I sommersi e i salvati") is surely intended to illustrate. Radical evil – or in indeed absolute good – are both irrelevancies, points of impossible infinitude in Levi's universe of finites and impurities. Here he is in a telling and highly characteristic series of passages, from *Se questo* and then from the essay "The Grey Zone" ("La zona grigia") in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), reflecting on the figure of the "saint", a figure that clearly troubled him as a token of the non-human, the impossible and indeed the undesirable reign of the absolute – here absolute goodness:

Moltissime sono state le vie da noi escogitate e attuate per non morire: tante quanti sono i caratteri umani. Tutte comportano una lotta estenuante di ciascuno contro tutti, e molte una somma non piccola di aberrazioni e di compromessi. Il sopravvivere senza aver rinunciato a nulla del proprio mondo morale, a meno di potenti e diretti interventi della fortuna, non è stato concesso che a pochissimi individui superiori, della stoffa dei martiri e dei santi.⁵

⁴ Ivi, vol. 1, p. 73-82.

⁵ "The ways we all thought out and put into practice to cheat death were legion: as numerous as there are different human personalities. They all bring with them a draining struggle of all against all, and many also bring a not inconsiderable degree of aberration and compromise. Survival without having to deny even the smallest part of one's moral world, except in cases of powerful and direct strokes of good fortune, was a gift given to only a tiny handful of higher beings, made of

È ingenuo, assurdo e storicamente falso ritenere che un sistema infero, qual era il nazionalsocialismo, santifichi le sue vittime: al contrario, esso le degrada, le assimila a sé.⁶

Non esiste proporzionalità tra la pietà che proviamo e l'estensione del dolore da cui la pietà è suscitata: una singola Anna Frank desta più commozione delle miriadi che soffrirono come lei, ma la cui immagine è rimasta in ombra. Forse è necessario che sia così; se dovessimo e potessimo soffrire le sofferenze di tutti, non potremmo vivere. Forse solo ai santi è concesso il terribile dono della pietà verso i molti; ai monatti, a quelli della Squadra Speciale, ed a noi tutti, non resta, nel migliore dei casi, che la pietà saltuaria indirizzata al singolo, al *Mit-mensch*, al co-uomo: all'essere umano di carne e sangue che sta davanti a noi, alla portata dei nostri sensi provvidenzialmente miopi.⁷

For Levi in these passages, the saint or the sanctified human being, is a figure of power but also deep ambiguity: to read human experience through the lens of the saintly is a profoundly mismatched heuristic, a discourse of purity, of holistic (holy) vision and bottomless capacity, none of which is consonant with the human.

The same goes for radical evil, indeed for all absolutes and extremes: our human nature is, simply, the enemy of all that is infinite ("[la] nostra condizione umana, che è nemica di ogni infinito").⁸

Any yet, and yet... There are cracks in this edifice, in the calm model of moderate experience of terrifying extremes, moments of

the stuff of martyrs and saints." Ivi, vol. 1, p. 88.

⁶ "It is naive, foolish and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims. On the contrary, it degrades them, it remakes them in its own image." Ivi, vol. 2, p. 1020.

⁷ "There is no proportionate relation between the pity we feel and the extent of the suffering which causes that pity: a single Anne Frank moves us more than the myriads of others who suffered like her but whose image has stayed in the shadows. Perhaps it has to be like this: if we were to, if we could suffer the pain of all others, we could not live. Perhaps only saints are given the terrible gift of pity for the many; for the gravediggers [the reference is to Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, 1842], for the Sonderkommandos, and for all of us, the best we can hope for is occasional pity towards a single individual, towards the *Mit-mensch*, or fellow-human: the human being in flesh and blood who stands before us, present to our senses in all their providential myopia." Ivi, vol. 2, p. 1033-1034.

⁸ Ivi, vol. 1, p. 11.

exception and deep instability in Levi that open a door onto a terrain where a certain form of good and evil, if not a theodicy, nevertheless pertains, inhabiting a human, if not an absolute space, a relational rather than a radical space, a “third” or “grey” space between conventional moral binaries. Berel Lang, in his recent biographical essay on Levi, provides some remarkably potent suggestions for reading Levi’s moral imagination in this light, including several pages on Levi’s implicit notions of evil and of justice.⁹ Lang departs precisely from the influential and not a little ambiguous pages of the essay “The Grey Zone”.¹⁰ Lang’s argument, and it proves powerfully pertinent here, is that for Levi, evil remained a contradictory puzzle, a paradox that was both open to and beyond explanation, both utilitarian and, as he called it in *I sommersi*, “useless”.¹¹ This space of irreducible contradiction in evil and indeed good (akin to Isaiah Berlin’s liberalism) opens up a profoundly innovative category, the grey zone, a position that is, precisely what Lang calls a “third modality of ethical judgement”,¹² *not* to be misconstrued as merely a halfway-house between the two poles of “good” and “evil”, of white and black, a little dose of one with the mitigating juice of the other (or vice versa). Instead, Lang posits, the grey zone is “its own autonomous domain: separate, yet still within the compass of ethical judgement”.¹³ For Lang, this places Levi’s moral centre and focus beyond good and evil,¹⁴ but we can slightly adjust this formulation to suggest that within the widely encompassing and irreducibly complex grey zone, there are elements of a “tertiary” human evil we are tracing here.

And so to that textual crux mentioned above, where a shadow of human evil is thrown across the blank canvas of Levi’s work. It comes not in the Preface to *Se questo è un uomo*, but in another element in its paratextual apparatus, the poem-epigraph, later entitled “Shemà”, built around the Torah prayer known by that name and

⁹ Berel Lang, *Primo Levi. The Matter of a Life*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 121-130.

¹¹ P. Levi, *Opere*, cit., vol. 2, p. 1073-1090.

¹² B. Lang, *Primo Levi. The Matter of a Life*, cit., p. 129.

¹³ Ivi, p. 128.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 129.

incipit.¹⁵ The very first crack in Levi's edifice of "calm study", in other words, precedes the edifice itself; its foundations are already fractured, we might say, and they are marked by a point where the voice of the oath and the curse burst in on the Levian scene.

The poem is rightly famous for its lapidary declaration of the limit-state of manhood and of womanhood, of human identity and dignity in Auschwitz; this is Levi's *Ecce homo*, with its imploring imperative or petition to the reader to *Consider* ("Considerate") these victims-creatures-men/women, to "*Meditate that this has been*" ("Meditate che questo è stato") – an appeal to history and ontology simultaneously – and to remember and transmit this knowledge.¹⁶ But often glossed over and left uncomfortably hanging at the end of "Shemà" by many of its readers are its last three lines, the violent Biblical curses thrown down upon those readers who wilfully fail to "consider", to "meditate", to remember and transmit. The final tercet is introduced by a conjunction of simple but apocalyptic power, "Or" ("Or else..."):

...

O vi si sfaccia la casa,
La malattia vi impedisca,
I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.¹⁷

¹⁵ The poem is dated 10 January 1946 and appeared without its title in *Se questo è un uomo*, but with the title in Levi's later collections of poetry (ivi, vol. 2, p. 525). It was variously placed after and before the Preface in the 1947 and 1958 editions, without title. Before even the first edition, it had been published in a local anti-Fascist journal in 1947, where Levi was publishing several stories that fed into *Se questo è un uomo*, with the alternative Biblical title "Salmo" ("Psalm"); see notes at *Opere*, cit., vol. 1, p. 1382; vol. 2, p. 1543.

¹⁶ Some recent work that comments on the poem includes: Uri Cohen, *Consider If This Is a Man: Primo Levi and the Figure of Ulysses*, «Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society», XVIII, 2 (Winter 2012), p. 40–69; Jonathan Druker, *Ethics and Ontology in Primo Levi's «Survival in Auschwitz»: A Levinasian Reading*, «Italice», LXXXIII, 3/4 (Fall – Winter 2006), p. 529–542; Nancy Harrowitz, *Primo Levi's Jewish Identity*, in *Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. By Robert S. C. Gordon, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 17–31.

¹⁷ "Or may your home crumble, / May sickness impede you, / May your children turn their faces from you." P. Levi, *Opere*, cit., vol. 1, p. 3.

This remains one of the most remarkable, and most opaque, turns in Levi's work, one so shocking as to require deep reflection that, to my knowledge, has thus far been missing from the critical field. The source, as for the whole poem, is clear: the text of Deuteronomy, from which not only the Shema prayer is taken, on which Levi bases this foundational poem for all testimonial discourse after the Holocaust, but also the covenant of the Jewish people with God, the binding declaration of obedience and the subsequent curses of disobedience. The three lines that close the poem echo the litany of curses, especially in Deuteronomy 28: 15-68, which begin thus:

But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. (Deut. 28: 15, New King James version)

If the source is clear, the impact of this final *congedo* of Levi's poem is by no means exhausted by its source: Levi is as far from pastiche in this poem as could possibly be imagined, and the source captures little of the deep moral jeopardy of these lines for 20th-century conceptions of morality. Why this awesome violence towards the reader, this curse of disobedience following the imperatives, this dark looming threat left hovering over "you" / "us"? And why, particularly – and here the instability and potential for confusion in a lyric panorama of evil is intense – why all this, in a poem that makes no mention whatsoever of the perpetrators, but rather only of victims and readers, of third and of second persons (and a shadowy enunciating subject or first person)? The answers to these questions and the enigma of Levi's curses open a door onto the residual terrain of human evil in Primo Levi.

Giorgio Agamben has written extensively (and for some, rather distortingly) of Levi, in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz (Remnants of Auschwitz)* and elsewhere.¹⁸ But one of the books in the *Homo Sacer* series that does not touch on Levi at all can perhaps illuminate our

¹⁸ For examples of critiques of Agamben, with a particular emphasis on his (mis-)use of Levi, see Dominick LaCapra, *Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben*, in *History in Transit. Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 144-194; Lisa Guenther, *Resisting Agamben: The Biopolitics of Shame and Humiliation*, «Philosophy and Social Criticism», XXXVIII, 1 (January 2012), p. 59-79.

analysis here. In *Il sacramento del linguaggio*, Agamben explains that the oath, in both legal and religious terms, is that which renders sacred – in Agamben’s perception, both holy and accursed, or apart – through language.¹⁹ Through this nexus, as Laura Moudarres has explained, the performance of the oath binds together words and deeds, actions and consequences.²⁰ As I “swear” that I will act in a certain way, I thereby already enact, predicting and determining the action itself (“Or else...”, “if I do not, then...”). The performance of the contrary curse of the potential perjurer (“If I should break my oath, then may...”), the self-destruction of s/he who fails to respect that declared bond, is above all marked by its reflexivity: “giurare equivale innanzitutto a maledire, a *maledirsi* nel caso che si dica il falso o non si mantenga ciò che si è promesso.”²¹

Levi’s combination of imperative and curse in “Shemà” shares something of both the collective and reflexive in Agamben’s oath: like the latter, it is constitutive of a polis and of a law – here the law of testimony or more capaciously, a law demanding the acknowledgement of human suffering, as much as the knowledge of it, which Levi inaugurates through language in this very declamation. The law in “Shemà” – and indeed in aspects of Agamben’s account also – comes less in the form of legislation, however, than in the form of a contract. The poem binds us to certain actions and sets down the penalty clauses for derogation of the contract, in its language of collapse, impediment, of torque, *à rebours*, “against nature”: “si sfaccia” is literally “undone”; “impedisca”, “impede”; “torcano”, literally “twist”. It is this counterpoint to Levi’s polis or law of human acknowledgement, this shattering of the contract and the consequent anathemas, which the final three lines of the poem declare and which, I suggest, amounts to Levi’s first vision of human evil in this civic polis, an evil which, as I shall argue, which we might usefully label “indifference”. We shall see below the contractarian consequence of this torque.

If the tone of “Shemà”’s ritual and contractual curses is all but missing from the remainder of *Se questo è un uomo*, the motifs of the home, of illness and crucially also of the look, the face and the turn

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2008.

²⁰ Laura Moudarres, *Sacrament of Testimony: Agamben and Biblical Language in Primo Levi’s Se questo è un uomo*, «The Italianist», XXXIV, 1 (February 2014), p. 88-102.

²¹ G. Agamben, *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*, cit., p. 42.

on which the curses are built, all return to make up some of its core constitutive elements, some of the fundamental vessels of Levi's troubled, probing *ethical* reflections.

In particular, as I've argued elsewhere,²² the look is a key vessel for Levi. He seems to operate ethically in something of a Levinasian universe in which the acknowledgement and recognition of the other, in particular acknowledging the "otherness" of the other, marks the entry in the realm of the ethical, what Levinas calls the "face-to-face" – and conversely, the denial of that acknowledgement marks the exit from human reciprocity into something else, a refusal of the human that amounts to something like "evil".

Beyond the sheer physical degradation and suffering, one of the earliest and repeated traumas of arrival at Auschwitz for Levi came in the form of the looks denied, the questions unanswered. And even as he becomes bluntly inured later on to these blows and humiliations, both metaphorical and literal, the trauma of the look denied, the turning of blind eyes and deaf ears returns at key moments of anguish and recognition, typically moments of transition and memory that briefly take him out of the fog of hunger, cold and the raw struggle for survival. Three key examples, taking place at three important sites within the Auschwitz camp system, make the point powerfully. It is telling that the sites – the hospital, the office and the lab – are three interior and transitional spaces, as well as perverted forms of three spaces and institutions of modernity, and each brings Levi what he later called "moments of reprieve", as well as contact with outsiders/bystanders and so also humiliation, in a rare kind of mirroring, as he sees himself as they see him.

First, in the Monowitz camp clinic, the KB or "Ka-Be", Levi asks his neighbour, a Polish inmate patient for help:

Lui *si è voltato* all'infermiere, che gli somiglia come un gemello e sta in un angolo a fumare; hanno parlato e riso insieme senza rispondere, *come se io non ci fossi*: poi uno di loro mi ha preso il braccio e ha guardato il numero, e allora hanno riso più forte. [...]

²² See Robert Gordon, *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues. From Testimony to Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 39-54, on which I have drawn in part here; and cfr. J. Druker, *Ethics and Ontology in Primo Levi's «Survival in Auschwitz»: A Levinasian Reading*, cit.

L'infermiere indica all'altro le mie costole, *come se io fossi un cadavere* in sala anatomica; accenna alle palpebre e alle guance gonfie e al collo sottile, si curva e preme coll'indice sulla mia tibia e fa notare all'altro la profonda incavatura che il dito lascia nella carne pallida, come nella cera.

Vorrei non aver mai rivolto la parola al polacco: mi pare di non avere mai, in tutta la mia vita, subito *un affronto* più atroce di questo. [...] *si rivolge a me*, e in quasi-tedesco, caritatevolmente, me ne fornisce il compendio: "– Du Jude kaputt."²³

As the terms highlighted indicate, the affront, the insult and the present reaction of disgust ("I wish" is poised between a historical present-tense of Levi's sensations in the "Ka-Be" and the vaster present human regret of this encounter with (inhumane) human evil) is literally embodied in the turns and the looks that render Levi invisible, dead.

A reprise of this charged encounter of the ordinary and the perverse permeates one of the most quoted and intense episodes of *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi's encounter with Pannwitz, the Nazi doctor who tests Levi's chemistry as a condition of his entry into the Buna laboratory (a test that will save Levi from weeks of the Polish winter and so save his life). Here too, we are confronted with a perversion of a dynamic of human enquiry, in this case the specific "scene" of the school or university oral examination, the "interrogation" of a student by a professor. On top of ethical enquiry, then, we find here, as often in Levi's ethics, a form of pedagogical exchange. And once again, the perversion of the look is at the very core of the offence:

²³ "He *turned* to the nurse, who looked rather like his twin standing in a corner smoking; they spoke and laughed together without replying, *as if I were not there*. Then one of them took me by the arm and looked at my number and they let out an even louder laugh. [...] The nurse points my ribs out to the other, *as if I were a corpse* in an anatomy theatre; he mentions my eyelids and my swollen cheeks and thin neck, he bends down and presses my tibia with his index finger and points out the deep dent his finger leaves in my pale flesh, like in wax. *I wish I had never spoken a word to the Pole*: I don't think I have ever been so *insulted* in all my life. [...] *he turns to me*, in his almost-German, and charitably offers his summing up: 'Du Jude kaputt.'" P. Levi, *Opere*, cit., vol. 1, p. 42-43. Emphases added.

Quando ebbe finito di scrivere, alzò gli occhi e mi guardò.

Da quel giorno, io ho pensato al Doktor Pannwitz molte volte e in molti modi. Mi sono domandato quale fosse il suo intimo funzionamento di uomo. [...] Soprattutto, quando io sono stato di nuovo un uomo libero, ho desiderato di incontrarlo ancora, e non già per vendetta, ma solo per una mia curiosità umana.

Perché *quello sguardo* non corse fra due uomini; e se io sapessi spiegare a fondo la natura di *quello sguardo*, scambiato come attraverso la parete di vetro di un acquario tra due esseri che abitano mezzi diversi, avrei anche spiegato *l'essenza della grande follia della terza Germania*.²⁴

The figure of Levi is here something other than human, just as he rendered a corpse in the “Ka-Be”; but so too, in the perverse refusal to recognise the human in him, is the look of Pannwitz. Conversely, the voice of Levi the survivor who wishes to encounter Pannwitz again, to look him in the eye, in order to plumb the depths of folly of the Third Reich, is a voice of salvaged humanity and ethical enquiry.

Shortly after this look / non-look comes a rare moment of flashing anger akin to the curses of “Shemà”, a moment of righteous “judgement” (something Levi elsewhere tends to refuse, pleading *impotentia judicandi*).²⁵ This is the moment of Alex, the Kapo, wiping his hand on Levi’s shoulder:

Senza odio e senza scherno, Alex strofina la mano sulla mia spalla, il palmo e il dorso, per nettarla, e sarebbe assai stupito, l’innocente bruto Alex, se qualcuno gli dicesse che alla stregua di questo suo atto io oggi lo giudico, lui e Pannwitz e gli innumerevoli che furono come lui, grandi e piccoli, in Auschwitz e ovunque.²⁶

²⁴ “When he had finished writing, *he looked up and stared at me*. From that day, I have thought of Dr Pannwitz many times and in many different ways. I have wondered about his innermost workings as a man [...] above all, once I had regained my freedom, I wished to meet him again, not for revenge but just out of human curiosity. Because *that look* did not run from one man to another; and if I could get to the bottom of *that look*, exchanged as if across the glass of an aquarium between two beings living in two different worlds, I would have found also *the essence of the great folly of the Third Germany*.” Ivi, vol. 1, p. 101-102. Emphases added.

²⁵ Cfr. ivi, vol. 2, p. 1037.

²⁶ “Without hatred or disgust, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, first the palm then the back, to clean it off, and he would be astonished, the innocent, brutish

Like the Pole in the infirmary looking at his body parts as a prelude to looking through him as if he is not there, Alex wipes hand to shoulder, with no face-to-face, no look, no turn and thus no dynamic of engagement or human acknowledgement of any kind. Levi's judgements, condemns, sees a profound evil here.

In the Buna laboratory, finally, we find the same dynamic once again: this time with civilian outsiders, from normal world, young German, Polish and Ukrainian women. And once again, it is the rejected question, the turn away and the denied look that embodies their inhumane ignorance:

Di fronte alle ragazze del laboratorio, noi tre ci sentiamo sprofondare *di vergogna e di imbarazzo*. Noi sappiamo qual è il nostro aspetto: *ci vediamo l'un l'altro*, e talora ci accade di *specchiarci* in un vetro terso. Siamo ridicoli e ripugnanti. Il nostro cranio è calvo il lunedì, e coperto di una corta muffa brunastra il sabato. Abbiamo il viso gonfio e giallo, segnato in permanenza dai tagli del barbiere frettoloso, e spesso da lividure e piaghe torpide.²⁷

Una volta ho chiesto una informazione a Fräulein Liczba, *e lei non mi ha risposto, ma si è volta* a Stawinoga con viso infastidito e gli ha parlato rapidamente. Non ho inteso la frase ma 'Stinkjude' l'ho percepito chiaramente, e mi si sono strette le vene.²⁸

It is no coincidence that there is something of a crescendo in each these cases, the turning away and the contemptuous rejection of mutual

Alex, if someone were to tell him that today, for this act of his, I judge Alex, Alex and Pannwitz and all those like him, the great and the small, in Auschwitz and wherever else they may be." Ivi, vol. 1, p. 103-104.

²⁷ "Before the laboratory girls, the three of us felt ourselves submerged *in shame and embarrassment*. We know what we look like: *we see each other* and sometimes we catch a *reflection of ourselves* in a clear glass. We are ridiculous and repugnant. Our skulls are bald on Mondays and covered with a brownish, short mould by Saturday. Our faces are swollen and yellow, permanently scarred by the marks of the hasty barber and often also with hardened bruises and wounds." Ivi, vol. 1, p. 138. Emphases added.

²⁸ "Once I asked Fräulein Liczba about something, and *she did not reply, turning instead* to Stawinoga with an irritated look and saying something quickly. I didn't catch the sentence in full, but I clearly heard the word 'Stinkjude', and my blood froze." Ivi, vol. 1, p. 139. Emphases added.

reciprocity bringing with them a touch of the aura, the dynamic and the force of the malediction that ends “Shemà”. This seems especially to be the case as each scene spills over from a double staging – what in the language of cinematography would be called a two-shot or in Levinasian terms a “face-to-face” (Levi to the Polish patient-neighbour in the “Ka-Be”; Levi to Pannwitz; Levi to Fräulein Liczba) – into a three-shot or a more complex triangle of looks, turns, turnings away and gestures: Levi asks the Pole who turns away to address the nurse; Levi is interrogated by Pannwitz and is then escorted away by Alex, who in turn does not look but “uses” Levi as a rag; Levi asks Fräulein Liczba, who turns away towards Stawinoga. In each of these cases, Levi is ejected from an axial face-to-face, and the turn propels him into a marginal, reduced position, a position of invisibility, even of phantasmal death, in a violently exclusionary double-take. He is pushed off-centre, thrust to one side: and, crucially, his look, the moral look of the witness and the judge, is a look that comes from that one side, oblique and devastating. (Alex, he says, would be stunned to receive judgement *from there* – just as we readers were similarly shocked to see the dark shadow of judgement erupt in the curses at the end of “Shemà”). The judgement of human evil comes from the sort of self or reflexive mirroring made possible by the dynamic that moves from the two-shot to the three-shot: he sees himself as he is seen, judged, assessed, insulted.

This complex, deflected and oblique mirroring recalls nothing so much as the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon that Levi evokes so powerfully forty years after *Se questo è un uomo* in *I sommersi e i salvati*. There, at stake is the precarious, flawed status of all survivors, all witnesses:

[N]oi sopravvissuti siamo una minoranza anomala oltre che esigua: siamo quelli che, per loro prevaricazione o abilità o fortuna, non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato per raccontare, o è tornato muto; ma sono loro, i “mussulmani”, i sommersi, i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto significato generale. Loro sono la regola, noi l’eccezione.²⁹

²⁹ “We the survivors are not the true witnesses [...] We are a small, anomalous minority [...] whoever looked at the Gorgon’s head did not come back to tell the tale, or they came back dumb; but it is they, the ‘Muselmänner’, the drowned, the fully fledged witnesses, whose evidence would have hold as generally true. They

For Levi the survivor is the one who has looked upon death, upon human evil, but only obliquely, indirectly, like Perseus, through a mirror, through a glass darkly. Or as Levi puts it a few lines later, in place of others, as their proxy, their delegate, as a "third party": "noi toccati dalla sorte abbiamo cercato, con maggiore o minore sapienza, di raccontare non solo il nostro destino, ma anche quello degli altri, dei sommersi, appunto; ma è stato un discorso 'per conto di terzi'... Parliamo noi in loro vece, per delega."³⁰ This is perhaps the closest Levi comes to articulating what is staged in those encounters with forms everyday human evil, in everyday modern spaces transplanted to an horrific "other" place - in the clinic, the office, the lab - the "tertiary" spaces where human good and human evil inhere.

Mention of the *Muselmänner* is crucial here, because the figure of the *Muselmann* is revealed in *Se questo è un uomo* as the *trait d'union* between that whole cluster of motifs that circle around the look, the face and the turn, and the potential for rupture in each of these. The *Muselmann* stakes out a new territory for a human, contingent, ferocious, consequentialist evil:

Sono loro, i *Musulmänner*, i sommersi, il nerbo del campo; loro, la massa anonima, continuamente rinnovata e sempre identica, dei non-uomini che marciano e faticano in silenzio, spenta in loro la scintilla divina, già troppo vuoti per soffrire veramente. Si esita a chiamarli vivi: si esita a chiamar morte la loro morte, davanti a cui essi non temono perché sono troppo stanchi per comprenderla. Essi popolano la mia memoria della loro presenza senza volto, e se potessi racchiudere in una immagine tutto il male del nostro tempo, sceglierei questa immagine, che mi è familiare: un uomo scarno, dalla fronte china e dalle spalle curve, sul cui volto e nei cui occhi non si possa leggere traccia di pensiero.³¹

are the rule, we are the exception." *Ivi*, vol. 2, p. 1056.

³⁰ "We who were touched by ill-fate have tried, with more or less wisdom, to relate not only our destiny but also that of the others, the drowned, precisely; but it has been a 'third-party' report [...] we speak in their stead, by proxy." *Ivi*, vol. 2, p. 1057.

³¹ "The *Muselmänner*, the drowned, they are the heart of the camp; them, the anonymous mass, always changing and always the same, of non-humans who march and struggle in silence, bereft of all divine spark, already too empty really to suffer. It is hard to call them living, hard to call their death a true death; they do

Levi does something quite remarkable here – and Agamben was understandably fascinated by it: Levi takes as his emblem of evil, “the image of all the evil of our time”, not the enactment or embodiment of evil in the figure of the agent of death or the perpetrator, but rather its other embodiment in the consequence of torture and violence, its embodiment in *the empty face*, the faceless face (“la loro presenza senza volto”), somewhere on the edge of the human, in the emptied-out humanity of the victim.

Evil is present, in the loss of the look, the loss of human contact. The empty look of the Muselmann echoes the refusal of the look in Pannwitz, Alex, Liczba, the Pole, creating a converse image of evil – not radical evil, not theological, but evil historically enacted (the evil of our time), born of the truncated human reciprocity of the face-to-face, inflicted or chosen.

In this re-vectoring of evil, the key figure, the test case – flagged up through its mirroring in the figure of the Muselmann – is in fact neither the perpetrator, nor the victim or first-hand eye-witnesses, but – to recall a taxonomy made famous by Raul Hilberg – the bystander, the ordinary Germans or Poles or Ukrainians who stand aside, themselves oblique, the third-party witnesses.³² The test-case drama of human good and evil lies in the attentiveness of these bystanders, and the case leans towards evil in those who chose not to know, who literally and metaphorically turned away, averted their gaze. Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* has his camera stare down, relentlessly, unturning, on the local inhabitants near Treblinka such as Czeslaw Borowi, who saw nothing, as the passage of the trains or the crematorium smoke seemingly left no trace. Levi also talks bitterly of the ordinary Germans who conveniently “knew nothing”, had no inkling, “keine Ahnung” (in *Se questo è un uomo* and again in “Vanadio” in *Il sistema periodico* – 1975).³³ And Levi staged their indifference

not fear it because they are too tired to comprehend it. They populate my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could capture in a single image all the evil of our time, I would choose this one, which I know so well: a bony figure of a man, his forehead hanging low, his shoulders bent over, with not a trace of thought on his face or in his eyes.” Ivi, vol. 1, p. 86.

³² Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders. The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945*, London, Lime Tree, 1992.

³³ P. Levi, *Opere*, cit., respectively vol. 1, p. 110 and vol. 1, p. 931.

as a fundamental, terrible post-war legacy for Germany and for humanity in one of the most telling scenes in *La tregua* (1963), when he finds himself in Munich staring at crowds of cowed former citizens of the Reich – once again, looking for a face, a look, a turn, an ear: “mi sembrava che ognuno avrebbe dovuto interrogarci, leggerci in viso chi eravamo e ascoltare in umiltà il nostro racconto. Ma nessuno ci guardava negli occhi, nessuno accettò la contesa: erano sordi, ciechi e muti.”³⁴ This moment comes near the end of the *La tregua*, and it is the seed of a far greater intuition that Levi says struck him in the early 1960s as he was writing *La tregua* and was articulated with full force in *I sommersi e i salvati*; the intuition that the Germans, perhaps especially these Germans, the *Germans as bystanders*, were his true readers, his book aimed at them like a gun:

Da soverchiatori, o da spettatori indifferenti, sarebbero diventati lettori: li avrei costretti, legati davanti ad uno specchio. Era venuta l'ora di fare i conti, di abbassare le carte sul tavolo. Soprattutto, l'ora del colloquio. La vendetta non mi interessava; ero stato intimamente soddisfatto dalla (simbolica, incompleta, tendenziosa) sacra rappresentazione di Norimberga, ma mi stava bene così, che alle giustissime impiccagioni pensassero gli altri, i professionisti. A me spettava capire, capirli. Non il manipolo dei grandi colpevoli, ma loro, il popolo, quelli che avevo visti da vicino, quelli tra cui erano stati reclutati i militi delle SS, ed anche quegli altri, quelli che avevano creduto, che non credendo avevano taciuto, che non avevano avuto il gracile coraggio di guardarci negli occhi, di gettarci un pezzo di pane, di mormorare una parola umana.³⁵

³⁴ “I thought that each one of them should have asked us questions, should have read into our faces who we were and listened in humility to our story. But no-one looked us in the eye, no-one took on the challenge: they were deaf, dumb and blind” Ivi, vol. 1, p. 393.

³⁵ “From oppressors or indifferent spectators, now they would become readers: I would force them, tie them down before a mirror. It was time for a reckoning, to put our cards on the table. Above all, it was time for dialogue. I was not interested in revenge; I had been deeply satisfied by the symbolic, incomplete, tendentious, sacred drama at Nuremberg, but I was happy also that the entirely just execution had been carried out by others, by professionals. My task was to understand, to understand them. Not the handful of the great guilty leaders, but the others, the people, the ones I had seen close at hand, the ones recruited from the ranks of the SS, and those others

Levi's vocabulary here descends in a direct line from his persistent evocation in *Se questo è un uomo* of dynamics of mirroring, moral accountability, dialogue and exchange, looks and human acknowledgement, the absence of which, the neglect of which in the bystander who is called upon to decide between doing something and doing nothing, amounts to a form of evil.

At this point, we can return to the poem "Shemà" and to what I called above its "contractarian" nature: the oath, the law, the word, and the curse of disobedience. 'If you do not look, do not listen, do not consider, do not remember, then may others not look, not listen, not consider you in your suffering', the poem seems to say. It is a sort of profound *contrappasso*, a punishment for the evil of human disattention. We might extend this to say that the same evil, the same disattention to what constitutes the human, in some analogous way produced the image of evil that is the absolute disattention of the Muselmann, "l'uomo senza volto": faceless, without the means to attend to the world, blind, deaf, mute, in an uncanny echo of the citizens of Munich Levi came across in 1945.

One term captures especially well and binds together all these patterns of disattention, these images of a relational human evil in Levi's writing, and indeed the whole underlying edifice of human failing that made the Holocaust possible: the term is a simple one, one that has occurred more than once already in the discussion thus far including in his characterization of the ordinary Germans of the 1930s and 1940s as spectators quoted above: *indifference*.

One of the most compelling of all recent philosophical reflections on the Shoah was political theorist Norman Geras's essay of 1998, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*.³⁶ In his essay, Geras quotes Levi repeatedly, including several of the loci we have been citing and exploring here ("it is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act"), along with Elie Wiesel, Adina Szewajger, Aaron Landua and a rich series of other survivor and witness voices, all of whom lament the vast imbalance between impossible suffering in the camps and the peaceful normality of lives lived in its vicinity. Geras quotes historian Ian

too, who had believed, or who had not believed but had stayed silent, who had not shown the frail courage needed to look us in the eyes, to toss us a scrap of bread, to mumble a word of human compassion." Ivi, vol. 2, p. 1125.

³⁶ Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, London, Verso, 1988.

Kershaw's epigrammatic declaration, "The road to Auschwitz was built by hate but paved with indifference"; and sociologist Rainer C. Baum's bold essay "Holocaust: Moral Indifference as *The Form of Modern Evil*".³⁷ What I am proposing here, ultimately, is that Levi guides us to a nuanced understanding of and warning about the modern inflection of the universal evil of indifference. As Geras's title indicates, he sees in the Holocaust a contractarian degradation of the "social contract", describing and modelling a prevalent new "contract", one that undermines all sense of polity and reciprocity, of balances of rights and duties in the Rousseauian contractarian tradition, and one that still pertain powerfully today. The Nazi Final Solution, Geras proposes, flourished on the following brutally pragmatic alternative "contract of mutual indifference": "if you do not come to the aid of others who are under grave assault, in acute danger or crying need, you cannot reasonably expect others to come to your aid in similar emergency; you cannot consider them so obligated to you."³⁸

In the light of a lucid set of reflections such as these, the profound importance of the contractarian oaths and curses of "Shemà", its piercing and shocking focus on the victim and the bystander / reader to the exclusion of the perpetrator, become a little clearer. The contract of mutual indifference elevates the Holocaust bystander, Czeslaw Borowi and his like, to the level of an ethical norm that sets us 'on the edge of a moral abyss', as Geras puts it.³⁹ Both Geras and Levi understand that the bystander figure represents the stable ground of human and social relations *against which* the unicum of the genocide, the terrible dance of perpetrator and victim, is set in train.

If we revisit some of the sites of Levi's staging of the look and the turn, the markers of the neglect of human mutuality, it is striking that the terminology of indifference is regularly present. To give a sample: the Muselmann's condition, seen in the figure of Null Achtzehn, is described as a form of essential indifference: "tutto gli è a tal segno

³⁷ Ivi, p. 18-19. The references are to Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 277; Rainer C. Baum, *Holocaust: Moral Indifference as The Form of Modern Evil*, in *Echoes from the Holocaust*, ed. by Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1988, p. 53-90.

³⁸ N. Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, cit., p. 28.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 77.

indifferente [...] alla morte ci andrà con questa stessa totale indifferenza."⁴⁰ Similarly, the air raids in the skies near Monowitz leave the inmates indifferent, as one death looks much the same as another, both met "con immutata indifferenza: non era rassegnazione cosciente, ma il torpore opaco delle bestie domate con le percosse, a cui non dolgono più le percosse."⁴¹ In this case, the analogy with animals, with a pre-moral or pre-conscious state of mind is of a piece with a vision of humanity as the capacity feel one's own and others' pain. The SS are indifferent in their way also: like Pannwitz, they do not see and this is a mark of their climactic success in enacting moral violence to the category of the human (of their evil): "ai piedi della forca, le SS ci guardano passare con occhi indifferenti: la loro opera è compiuta."⁴²

Finally and conversely, however, in quite another moment of his work, Levi posits an opposite, positive model of non-indifference (which equates with difference, discrimination, but also attention and recognition), explicitly given as the governing (ethical) principle of his work as a scientist and more broadly for his engagement with the human and moral matter of the world:

Ho contratto dal mio mestiere un'abitudine che può essere variamente giudicata, e definita a piacere umana o disumana, quella di non rimanere mai indifferente ai personaggi che il caso mi porta davanti. Sono esseri umani, ma anche "campioni", esemplari in busta chiusa, da riconoscere, analizzare e pesare.⁴³

Indifference is, in other words, both cause and effect of a moral and physical death, of the human evil at the root of the Holocaust and its

⁴⁰ "Everything is indifferent to him, to such a degree that he will go to his death with the same utter indifference." P. Levi, *Opere*, cit., vol. 1, p. 37.

⁴¹ "With unyielding indifference: this was not a conscious resignation, but rather the opaque torpor of beasts tamed by blows, who no longer feel the pain of the blows." Ivi, vol. 1, p. 114-115.

⁴² "Beneath the gallows, they watch us past with indifferent eyes: their work is complete." Ivi, vol. 1, p. 146.

⁴³ "From my profession I have acquired a habit, which might be variously viewed, seen by some as humane and others as inhumane, of never remaining indifferent to the characters that chance throws in my path. They are human beings, but also 'samples', secret prototypes, to be recognized, analysed and weighed." Ivi, vol. 2, p. 1101-1102.

modernity. The SS's and the Germans' indifference finds a strange and complex mirrored refraction in the indifference of the Muselmänner: they share an obscure mimetic bond. Both the bystanders and the hollow men "do not see, do not listen, do not act"; and both are the proper objects of testimony. We could summarize the implication of this for Levi's work thus: he writes *of and for* the Muselmänner, in his third-party, proxy voice; and, further, he writes *to* the bystanders, emblematically the Germans, or the Poles whom he harangues in the market place in *La tregua*, in a plural act of declamation, transmission and, yes also, of potential curse ("Or else..."). He writes along an axis of indifference, as the very essence and condition of modern evil.

Against the looming threat of indifference, Levi ranges his complex, contrary ethics of attention, a plural dynamics of turning outwards and towards, of knowledge and acknowledgement. This is a lucid turning, haunted by the shape of that modern evil. It is not an evil in the face of God or the radical evil of Kantian tradition, but relational, between humans. It is John Donne's 'triumph of evil' that requires merely that "good men do nothing". To resist it, Geras talks of a possible new moral settlement, a generalized "duty to bring aid" set against the "contract of mutual indifference".⁴⁴ Absolute self-sacrifice may be neither possible nor indeed desirable – we would be back in the uncomfortable (because not-human) territory of the saint – but choosing to see, giving credence to the possibility of aid, looking at others "face to face", perhaps this is possible. This is why, for Geras as for Levi, the contract of mutual aid, of human solidarity, is signed not in blood or (only) in language, but in the guarantor of the face, in the faces of the suffering of others.

It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the turn of the face is not only the mark of indifference, but is also the emblem of another iconographic field, from Adam and Eve's naked expulsion from Eden onwards, the mark of human shame, another great Levian theme. The turn of the face as a mark of the "species shame" of being human, which Levi describes in some remarkable pages of *I sommersi e i salvati*,⁴⁵ is also of course a turn away from our own human capacity for evil, which in Levi amounts to our all-too-human capacity not to see.

⁴⁴ N. Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, cit., p. 48 and ff.

⁴⁵ P. Levi, *Opere*, cit., vol. 2, p. 1045-1058.

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