

«Meditate that this came about».
The dialogue, a way to a public reflection on the Shoah*

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Abstract. Dialogue represents for Levi his chosen strategy to deal with the Shoah, both on a personal and on a public level: not only it plays a major role in his survival and his coping with the experience and characterizes his personal and literary contact to other survivors and scholars of the Shoah, it also distinguishes his relationship with his readers and society in general, whom Levi wishes to bring to a greater awareness and reflection. To reach this goal Levi relies on the characteristics that typify dialogue, like the active participation of both speakers, the exchange of opinions, the conservation of rationality and of the topicality of the subject, to involve his readers and society in general in a reflection on the Shoah and to face the obstacles to its realization, like the incredulity and indifference of post-war society or the denial of the Shoah.

Key words: Primo Levi, dialogue, Holocaust, Shoah

“Consider if this is a man [...] Meditate that this came about.” These words from Primo Levi welcome the reader who picks up *If This Is a Man* for the first time and invite him to actively contribute in the author’s reflection on Shoah. They also reflect accurately Levi’s attitude towards the Shoah, both on a personal and on a public level.

First of all, the importance given to communication with the reader is clearly shown: Levi does not write to free himself from his taunting experience as a prisoner, but to report it, to explain it to the reader. Therefore the communication between witness and reader must be open and direct, it must work:

“I see the work of the writer as a public service that must work. The reader must understand what I write, not every reader, because there is the almost illiterate reader, but most readers, even if they are not well prepared, must receive my communication, I will not say message, which is a too refined word, but my communication. The written book must be a working telephone.” (P. Levi in D. Luce 1982, p. 40)

Precisely because his role is that of a witness, Levi reports the facts, he testifies, and does not accuse or pass judgment. The task of passing judgment is left to the reader:

“I am the witness, so I must express myself with the language of a witness on a trial, quietly and soberly, and not with the language of the persecutor or the avenger. The witness gives the judge the means to judge. And you are the judge.” (P. Levi in G. Poli/G. Calcagno 1992, p. 102)

The reader is therefore urged to personally take an active part in the reflection, a necessary premise for the conservation of the memory of the Shoah through the years. Moreover, reflecting on the tragedy keeps the reader’s personal dealing with the subject on a rational level that goes beyond the solely emotional response. After the initial indignation, it would eventually fade, thus possibly condemning the memory of the Shoah to oblivion. Thanks to rationality, the memory can remain

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steady and true to itself, and thusly be better equipped to face negativistic attacks.

To lead the reader and the whole of society, both reluctant because of the discourse's difficulty, to think over the Shoah, Levi chooses the dialogue, which lends itself perfectly to this purpose. Each of its characteristics contributes to making it a winning strategy in the context of conservation of memory.¹

First of all, the active participation of both speakers, which typifies the dialogue,² encourages an active contribution to reflection instead of a solely passive reception. Moreover, because of its nature, the dialogue promotes exchanging opinions and taking others' points of view into consideration. For Levi and his goal, this is the ability to keep the discourse on a rational level thus avoiding sentimentalism, which would distort its memory. Through its structure of question and answer, the dialogue emphasizes and maintains the topicality of its subject,³ which effectively helps to keep the memory of the Shoah alive despite the passing of time. Finally, ever since Socrates and Plato, the dialogue is of great help in the process of understanding not only the subject of the discourse, but our opinions and methods of reasoning as well; in this instance too, it is clear how helpful the dialogue can be for the Shoah discourse.

The seeking out of dialogue, with all the different aspects mentioned above, constantly identify Levi's attitude towards the Shoah: from the moment he experienced persecution and deportation is dialogue for him fundamental. Communication and dialogue with his fellow prisoners as well as with his cultural and literary roots play a major role in Levi's physical and psychological survival and in his ability to deal with this experience.

The attitude displayed in his discourse also distinguishes his personal and literary contacts to other witnesses and scholars of the Shoah. It characterizes, as well, his relationship with his readers and society in general, whom Levi wishes to bring to a greater awareness and reflection.

For this task, the dialogue is helpful in more ways than one: it urges the public to react, especially in the post-war period, when the common attitude was incredulity and indifference. Later on, it helps to fight excessive simplifications and generalizing dichotomies (for example between perpetrators and victims), to encourage a rational reflection and finally to fight denial and the attempts to reappraise the Shoah.

The dialogue from Levi is primarily the dialogue with his readers: he consults them directly; he urges them to take on an active role. Many examples for this can be found, from his very first work onwards. In *If This Is a Man*, Levi's intention is mainly to inform the reader about what happened in concentration camps, because at the time, the knowledge about the Shoah and the dimensions of its horrors were widely unknown and to be gained only with some difficulty, so that it provoked incredulity.

Levi shows the facts with the style of a witness to be more credible, but does not distance himself completely from the reader. He involves him in the story and invites him to identify himself, at least partly, with the victims: "Would you not do the same? If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him to eat today?" (P. Levi 1969, p. 21)⁴

But, most importantly, he urges him to think about the things Levi reports, as we can see in the poem that introduces his testimony:

"You who live safe
in your warm houses,
you who find, returning in the evening,
hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
[...]

¹ For a thorough examination of the characteristics of dialogue see R. Lachmann, 1982.

² See also H. Engdahl, 1982.

³ See also H. R. Jauss, 1982

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of Levi's relationship with his readers and the techniques he uses see G.P. Biasin, 1990, p. 1-20.

Consider if this is a woman
[...]
Meditate that this came about:
I commend this words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
at home, in the street,
going to bed, rising,
repeat them to your children.” (P. Levi 1969, p. 17)

The exhortation to the reader to contribute with a personal reflection to the Shoah discourse and its questions is even more pronounced in the essay that Levi wrote forty years later. In 1986, when *The Drowned and the Saved* was published, the knowledge about death camps was universally known and accessible to the public. At that point, more than ever, Levi felt the need to reflect on it and to get the reader to think rationally about it. He encourages society to avoid simplifications and dichotomies:

“One of the reasons that urged me to write is a sort of extreme simplification especially from my young readers, who reading *If This Is a Man* think of a humanity divided in two: there are the perpetrators, who are monsters, and there are the victims, who are innocents. [...] We are not all the same, we have different levels of guilt. But we are made from the same cloth.” (P. Levi in M. Spadi, 1986, p. 247)

To analyze the many aspects of this complicated topic and to fight the attempts to polarize absolute evil and complete innocence, Levi devotes a chapter of his essay to the “gray zone” between perpetrators and victims and fights for a well-considered distinction.

It remains true that in the Lager, and outside, there exist gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise. The extreme pressure of the Lager tend to increase their ranks [...]. It remains true that the majority of the oppressors, during or (more often) after their deeds, realized that what they were doing or had done was iniquitous, or perhaps experienced doubts or discomfort, or were even punished, but this suffering is not enough to enroll them among the victims. By the same token, the prisoners' errors and weaknesses are not enough to rank them with their custodians: the prisoners of the Lagers [...] represented an average, unselected sample of humanity. Even if one did not want to take into account the infernal environment into which they had been abruptly flung, it is illogical to demand – and rhetorical and false to maintain – that they all and always followed the behavior expected of saints and stoic philosophers.” (P. Levi 1988, p. 49)

Levi's search for dialogue does not stop at his readers: he searches for an active exchange of thoughts with those who have not read his books or refuse to do so. In the post-war society reigned incredulity and indifference. This incredulity towards the Shoah was due to its enormity and its distance from everyday life. It had even been foreseen by the Nazis, who used it to their advantage, taunting prisoners and reminding them that even if the prisoners were to survive, the Nazis would still win the war because nobody would believe the survivors. (see P. Levi 1988, p. 11-12) This was also a recurring nightmare of the survivors: to come back from a death camp, tell friends and family about it and to not be believed or even listened to.

They are all listening to me [...]. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. A desolating grief is now born in me [...]. It is pain in its pure state [...].” (P. Levi 1969, p. 66)

For Levi, the nightmare of finding his friends and relatives not ready to listen to him did not come true. Rather, it was when he tried to reach a broader audience with his testimony that he faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Already the search for a publisher for his testimony proved to be anything but simple: two of Italy's main publishers refused the manuscript on the grounds that it did not fit in their programs before it was finally published by the De Silva, a small publishing house in Turin, but struggled to find a national audience and was primarily read by just the Turin

intellectual circle. The general public remained however indifferent, mirroring post-war society's general attitude that saw everybody, even the survivors, turned towards the future and wishing to forget the war and its horrors. But Levi did not give up and eventually got his book published by Einaudi. Quickly gaining national and international attention for his testimony, he tried to awaken public awareness through speeches and articles in newspapers and magazines.

In particular, the article *Deportees. Anniversary*, published in April 1955 in the magazine *Torino*, reflects on the causes of this silence. The article opens with the distressed observation that the public seems to have already forgotten the Shoah:

“Ten years on from the liberation from the concentration camps, it is both distressing and deeply indicative to note that, in Italy at least, far from being an important part of our history, the subject of the extermination camps is in the process of being completely forgotten” (P. Levi, 2005, p. 3)

To fight this worrying trend Levi appeals to the public to open themselves to dialogue and testimony, reminding them that

“It is not permissible to forget, nor is it permissible to keep silent. If we fall silent, who then will speak? Certainly not the perpetrators and their accomplices. If we fail to bear witness, in a not too distant future we could see the deeds of Nazi bestiality relegated by their very enormity to the status of legend” (P. Levi 2005, p. 3).

Levi relies even more on dialogue to face another difficult obstacle to the memory of the Shoah: the denial. From the Second World War onward there have been attempts to deny completely or in part the Shoah. Some maintain that the massacre of Jews never happened and is only a Zionist-socialist invention to discredit Germany. Others refuse single aspects of the Shoah, such as the number of victims, the use of gas chambers and so on.⁵

In spite of the many testimonies of survivors and the documents found on the Shoah that contradict clearly the denial theories, these are still in the public discourse and represent a tangible danger to the memory of the Shoah: because of its very enormity, genocide leads to incredulity, repression and refusal.⁶

Precisely to warn the public about these unfounded but dangerous theories Levi sought the dialogue with society, particularly through two articles, published in January 1979 in two of the most important Italian newspapers. In them Levi explains to the reader the denial theories of Darquier and Faurisson and shows them as unfounded and absurd. Darquier de Pellepoix, former Commissioner for Jewish Affairs under the Vichy Regime, disputes the official number of victims and the use of gas chambers in Auschwitz to kill prisoners. According to him, they were just used to kill lice. Literature professor Robert Faurisson disputes the use of gas at all in Auschwitz, saying that it would be impossible to use the Zyklon B on a continuous basis.

In the article, Levi not only discusses Faurisson's theories with the reader, he chooses dialogue even from a formal point of view and addresses Faurisson directly,⁷ inviting him to talk with the survivors, whose testimony he's trying to deny:

“No, Professor, this is not the way. The dead were there, including women, including children: tens of thousands in Italy and France, millions in Poland and the Soviet Union, and it is not that easy to shake them off. It doesn't take a great deal of effort to find out, if you want to find out. Go and ask the survivors. [...] If you deny the massacre carried out by your friends of old, you need to explain to us how the seventeen million Jews in 1939 were reduced to eleven million by 1945. You have to say that hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans are lying. You have to say that each and every survivor is lying. Come and discuss this with us, Professor: you will find it harder than preaching nonsense to your ill-informed students.”⁸

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the denial theories see also I. Heidelberger-Leonard, 1996.

⁶ See P. Levi 1979², pp.79-80.

⁷ Even the title of the article, *But we were there*, is an answer to Faurisson.

⁸ Primo Levi, *Ma noi c'eravamo*, Corriere della Sera, January 3rd 1979. English translation in: P. Levi, 2005, p.51.

If it's difficult to open oneself to dialogue with people who try to deny one's life experience, it is even more so to look for dialogue with the very same people that caused this suffering or turned their head the other way. Yet Levi, from the very beginning, looks for a dialogue with the Germans, who, as he notes, are still “those” Germans. (P. Levi 1988, p. 168) He feels the need to try to understand Germans, not those in command who decided the massacre, but the people who obeyed their commands.

When German publisher Fischer in 1959 (just one year after the publication by Einaudi) bought the rights to *If This Is a Man* for the Federal Republic of Germany, Levi saw that the day of reckoning had arrived. And for him this meant not revenge, as one might think, but dialogue in search of understanding.

“ [...] The Germans who would read me were “those”, not their heirs. Before they had been oppressors or indifferent spectators, now they would be readers: I would corner them, tie them before a mirror. The hour had come to settle accounts, to put the cards on the table. Above all, the hour of colloquy. I was not interested in revenge. [...] My task was to understand them. Not that handful of high-ranking culprits, but them, the people, those I had seen from close up [...]” (P. Levi 1988, pp. 168-169)

In the preface to the German edition of *If This Is a Man*, taken from a letter he wrote to his German translator, Levi invites the German readers to build a dialogue with him, so that he can understand them.

“I never harbored hatred for the German people [...]. But I cannot say I understand the Germans. [...] I hope that this book will have some echo in Germany, not only out of ambition, but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps make it possible for me to better understand the Germans [...]” (P. Levi, 1988, p. 174)

From this appeal, a correspondence between Levi and his German readers was born, a veritable dialogue in writing, in which Levi tries to understand, and make his readers understand, the terrible event that was the Shoah.

This correspondence, which was in part published and commented in the chapter *Letters from Germans of The Drowned and the Saved*, deals with various topics of the Shoah discourse and how Germans deal with them: there are those who try to show the German people as “betrayed” by Hitler, solely responsible for the extermination of Jews, those who admit that they were not brave enough to react actively and those who thank Levi for helping them cope with their past.

The dialogical nature of the correspondence between Levi and his readers is resumed in *The Drowned and the Saved* through the publication of excerpts from the letters, connected by the commentary of the author. Thusly, the reader of the book is included in the dialogue as well.

Thanks to the correspondence with Hety S., one of his German readers, Levi also began a wider dialogue with other survivors and authors such as Hermann Langbein and Jean Améry.

In the context of the dialogue with Hety S., Levi also experiences how difficult the search for dialogue with the Germans can be. When Hety visited Albert Speer in prison and left him a copy of *If This Is a Man*, Levi admitted his relief at the fact that this did not bring about an attempt at dialogue from Speer: “ [...] If I had been forced (as is the customs among civilized persons) to answer a letter from Albert Speer, I would have had some problems.” (P. Levi, 1988, p. 196) It is significant, however, to note that Levi does not say he would not do it.

Levi was therefore aware of the difficulty of dialogue but did not back out: from his first book to his very last, he steered to dialogue to establish contact with his readers, to overcome the wall of silence that post-war society put up, to bring the public to a personal reflection on the Shoah. And he resorted to dialogue as well to fight the obstacles to the conservation of the memory of the Shoah: denial, trivializations, and the tendency to deal with the Shoah exclusively inside sentimental *topoi* that prevent the living and true memory of the Shoah. As Levi wrote, “I'm ready to tolerate some rhetoric, it's indispensable for living. [...] But [...] a prosaic commentary on the flights of rhetoric [is necessary].” (G. Calcagno, 1986, p. 143)

Levi was certainly aware of the difficulty of his intention to create and keep alive a public, active reflection on the Shoah, but was also convinced of its absolute necessity:

“It is neither easy nor agreeable to dredge this abyss of viciousness, and yet I think it must be done, because what could be perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, could overwhelm us and our children. One is tempted to turn away with a grimace and close one's mind: this is a temptation one must resist.” (P. Levi 1988, p. 53)

Levi addressed to us these words, this invitation to reflection in 1986, a few months before his death. More than twenty-five years later, the day has come to ask ourselves if, even considering the good basis that the dialogic approach offers for dealing personally and publicly with the Shoah, it was indeed a successful strategy in the conservation of the memory of the Shoah and of an active reflection on it. The organization of conferences and workshops on the Shoah and the release of proceedings such as this one, that strive to reflect on the Shoah and Levi, undoubtedly represent a confirmation of its effectiveness.

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