

## **A space for reflection upon, and a psychoanalytical hearing of, Primo Levi the man and the writer**

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*Abstract.* The author reflects upon the role of Levi-the-Writer in assisting Levi-the-Man in holding the nameless physical and mental pain over the course of his enslavement in the concentration camps together with his Community and during his eventful journey home. He made public a *sui generis* work of psychoanalysis through his novels which testify his reflective and observational abilities. The novels have proved to be important components of his survival in extreme conditions such as the ones Levi endured.

*Keywords.* Need to remember with the heart. Need to bear witness. Portraits as testimonial fragments. Process of psychological death and rebirth.

What moves me to reflect on this subject is not the simple exercise of applying a psychoanalytical tool 'outside the boundaries' to a life lived by a concentration camp survivor; I do not intend to carry out an explicative task, but instead I refer to my recent experience of re-reading<sup>1</sup> Levi's work. During this rereading I surprised myself by making use of the analytical devices that I have at my disposal in order to comprehend in greater depth his affective life, and the implicit and explicit steps in a man's dehumanisation process. He was a man capable of retaining his humanity while living under such extreme conditions through his continued observation and consideration of what was happening to and around him and others. I mainly questioned myself about the role that 'the Writer' had in helping Primo Levi 'the Man' uncover his need to be Himself, as testified by the witness-writer. He carried out a silent self-analysis over the years, although, as he himself noted (1986), he remained diffident about turning to the psychoanalyst's couch. This work is an *a latere* reflection on Levi's self-analysis work, which allowed him to do two things: firstly, to recover a rich mental space in which to think his thoughts and feel his 'nameless' feelings, and, secondly, the need to remember with his heart, body and mind and testify as to what had happened to a Man and his Community in 1943-44, flung into Hell as if in one of Dante's circles. Through the novels on *his* Shoah, he allowed both the Writer and the Man to recognise his own particular dual relationship which attempted to observe, reflect upon and modulate his and others' dreadful mental suffering - which clouded his expression when he would meet people like himself, "reduced to suffering and need, oblivious to dignity and discernment" (1947; *Published in English 1959*).

As Raul Mordenti reminds us, Levi's essay (1987) has provided us with written evidence, which contains a paradox, expressed as follows:

[Primo Levi] would still have been a great writer even if he hadn't spoken out on Auschwitz, yet, at the same time, he can write what he does because he speaks out on Auschwitz, he talks about that and nothing else.

He talks about it to everyone, but mainly to Levi-the-Man, so as to support him through the difficult psychic elaboration of his distressing experience, just as an analyst does when offering to hold his or her patient, revisiting both the uninhabited territory of memories of the brutality he endured, and those of potential Self-development, free from the destructive process.

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In the story “Iron” from his book *The Periodic Table* (1975, *Eng. 1984*), the Writer remembers with his heart and body<sup>2</sup> and describes with quiet nostalgia his memory of taking a youthful bound while out rock-climbing with a friend, Sandro. At the same time, he makes an indirect reference to a concentration camp in which he observes his young and somewhat carefree Self, “unaware of his iron future inching ever closer.” The ‘iron’ character and his friend’s vitality make him feel he could – says the Writer in the text – “solidify himself with the material over time, the very material, the rock and ice of the nearby mountains.” These pages are rich in poetic prose in which the Writer bears witness to young Levi’s physical and mental growth, because, as it says in the text, with his vital and courageous alter-ego Sandro as a witness he could experience “the taste of bear meat: the taste of being strong and free” at that time.

Just as the attempt to cure with and be attentive of one’s words are the mark of a good psychoanalytic procedure, so does Levi-the-Writer, deprived of everything while under cruel prison conditions, all the while continuing to take care of himself by bringing together the multiple and deep ramifications of his pain and that of others; his participatory, placid and patient observation of himself and others would be the backdrop of his writing, another vital means of scaling the mountain. In other words, his acquisition of bravery, not to mention his ability to write clearly and effectively, endowed him with the singular rule of freedom of expression and, being easily understood by his readers, did not attempt to mortify them with any obscurity.

In Levi’s opinion, making oneself obscure was “wanting not to exist to the reader, bringing oneself close to death, instead of ‘wanting to be Master of a hazy subject,’” (Mordenti 1987: *ibid*) which seems to have been the underlying thrust as his life proceeded, in spite of it all.

When one takes a look at different routes taken to achieve clarity or obscurity in writing, one can find analogous paths of darker and lighter thought akin to when researching specifically emotional language in psychoanalysis. In both contexts, there is an implicit tension, spiritual or lay, towards a restitution of the person in question’s dignity and towards the denunciation of violent usage of words or actions, which is, even today, the sign of a man’s dehumanisation. One of the many deprivations suffered in Auschwitz was the prohibition of the word ‘human’. At the same time, the prisoners used it themselves in common language and as a force of resistance against a psychic death. The splendid passage in *If This Is A Man* (1947; *Eng. 1959*) in which Levi recounts The Canto of Ulysses by heart to his fellow prisoner - albeit with gaps and omissions - at perhaps the climax of the novel signifies this precisely. However, the moments in which the man felt empty and alone are unavoidable, therefore it was of great value for him to find not only the *fighting* chemist within himself, working with obscure materials, but also the observer Self and profound knower of the human mind, the future Writer.

Having kept a vital link between the two Selves, an interior twin bore witness - at times as hostile Nature and others as his close Friends - to the process of entering and returning from a non-place into which the Man had found himself hurled, lying at the bottom of his own Being, while the unluckier ones around him were swallowed up by the dark night. The Writer, capable of empathy even with this extreme, nameless pain, comes to the aid of the Man several times by undertaking a seemingly impossible psychic elaboration, even if he is helped by his capacity to remember with the heart and bear witness to the atrocities suffered by himself and others in the camps.

In this, my personal revisiting to the human events of the Man-Writer, I have chosen to concentrate on two fundamental works – *If This Is A Man* (1947; *Eng. 1959*) and *The Reawakening* (1963; *Eng. 1965*) – in order to forward my case. I will look at Levi-the-Man’s psychological need to bear witness as his need to be Himself, as testified by the Witness-Writer who is capable of comprehending the thorny truths about the internal process of a Man reduced to slavery. I will thus

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<sup>2</sup> The author uses three terms in Italian to differentiate the way of remembering: *rimembrare*, *ricordare* and *rammentare*. *Rimembrare* is one of the terms used to remember something that highlights the Latin etymology of *member* which indicates limbs and movement. In Italian, *ricordare* is another term that evokes the etymology *cor-cordis*, which refers to the heart. In Italian *rammentare* is a term evoking the etymology *mens-mentis* which refers to the mind. In this work, the translator has chosen to specify, when using the term *remember*, the author’s given meaning, by referring to *remembering with the heart* as opposed to *remembering with the body or with the mind*.

deal with the voices of some of his characters<sup>3</sup> as testimonial exhibits, heard with indulgence on occasion, with severe judgment on others, as well as those accompanied by senseless actions or ones with all the banality of evil. I am referring to the memories that are brought to mind via the heart both by remembering with the heart and the body. The latter has a detachment in the memory by exclusively emotional - as opposed to physical – means.

Moreover, in these two works, I recognise Levi's quest for an ethic when bearing witness which, as in the case of a legal trial, culminates in the question of the Other as fundamental to and recipient of the deposition itself.

One can infer an ethical search such as this in a psychological reading of the vicissitudes of this just Man who was attentive to that which was happening in his internal and external setting. This search is entrusted to the Writer who makes himself the guard of the behaviour inside and outside of the camp in the working-model scene. When describing Hurbinek - the three-year old boy with no name nor a language who is born in Auschwitz and dies in the first few days of the liberation without having been able to communicate with words despite tenacious and desperate efforts, Levi solemnly says, "Nothing remains of him; he bears witness through these words of mine." (1965)

If we look from a bi-directional psychological standpoint, which allows us to flip the perspective, I would like to encourage readers to observe the way in which the various environmental settings and some of the characters, starting with Hurbinek, also prove to be symbolic of mental states with varying degrees of extremity. They can be looked upon as sources of evidence, guarding the spiritual, emotional and instinctive drives of a Man who has slipped down to the bottom of his Existence. Testimonial voices such as these which have been brought to life by the Writer contribute to the reconstruction of his Trial on interior truth, which concerns his physical and psycho-subconscious adjustment to the regressive and progressive psychic modalities which a 24-year old found himself living out, in extreme conditions of life and death.

In this type of bi-directional testimonial proffered by the various character portraits which are guarding his encrypted feelings or drives, he uses words which are clear and efficient in their descriptions. He does this through the use of the Other, alien or human, aspects of himself, for us all to get to know or recognize over time. There is a to-ing and fro-ing between a familiar sense of self and one which is gradually becoming estranged in a mental and physical elsewhere, catapulted into a silent, timeless fishbowl in which *just moving* within that non-space seems to allow him to remember with his mind or, more precisely, *to remember his mind with his body*.

Unlike a historian's point of view, understanding the way in which one deduces the use of a psychoanalytically applied point of view raises questions on whether and how the Writer carried out a psychic holding of the Man who was overcome by the turmoil in his own external world, and to what extent he protected him from the effects of this once far removed.

In order to keep this brief, I will limit myself to a reflection on just a few functions that Levi-the-Writer offers Levi-the-Man, paying specific attention to his distinct need to remember with his heart and to bear witness.

How can one understand the need to remember with one's heart and to bear witness from Levi's aforementioned works following the standpoint that I have chosen to analyse? We can do so by giving space to an understanding of the Man's metamorphosis during his year of horror and his gradual search for self-revitalisation in the subsequent months.

Levi-the-Writer seems to give space to his need to remember with his heart, in which he is also re-tuning, or better still, letting his heartstrings vibrate in unison as they had done when the memory had taken place.

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<sup>3</sup> On this subject, it is his description is breathtaking in the theatrical performance of *The Three-Cornered Hat* where, during 'The Reawakening', a close-set community of former prisoners – left on the margins of the world – finds itself all together one evening in the *slanting/crooked* Room of the Red House. He comments on the three actors' faces as being deathly pale and decrepit, singing with trembling and insipid voices: Under the grotesque appearance, one perceived the heavy breath of a collective dream, of the dream emanating from exile and idleness, when work and trouble have ceased, and nothing acts as a screen between a man and himself; perhaps because we saw the impotence and nullity of our life and of life itself, and the hunch-backed crooked profiles of the monsters generated by the sleep of reason.

The need to remember with the heart therefore takes advantage of this reminiscence, bringing the subconscious knowledge into the conscious mind.

This act of Remembering with the body or the mind, moreover, allows the novelist to put down his thought in writing, after which it can be told and passed on.

On one hand, writing serves the objective facts that have been recollected over the course of Levi's *Little Iliad* and *Little Odyssey* (Antonicelli, 1963); on the other hand, it serves the need to remember with the heart, which, in particular, is understood to be that in subjective and often vague and imprecise way of making use of reminiscence, through which something long forgotten can emerge. It is interesting how, in certain passages, the Writer is able to remember the body, stripped of humanity, with the mind evoking the brutal level of life into which he had been forced while in the lager, thus salvaging the Man's psychosomatic unity. We see this in the text:

In this place it is practically pointless to wash every day in the turbid water of the filthy washbasins for purposes of cleanliness and health; but it is most important as a symptom of remaining vitality, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival. (1959, p. 38)

The Writer, therefore, allows the Man to “remember his mind with his body and remember his body with his mind”,<sup>4</sup> (2010) through his figurative art, and thus restore the link between his mind and body, as is established at the beginning of a chapter of *The Reawakening*, entitled 'Southwards.' He writes:

I was not very steady on my feet, but I felt an imperious need to take possession of my body again, to re-establish a contact, by now broken for almost two years, with trees and grass, with the heavy brown soil in which one could feel the seeds chafing, with the ocean of air wafting the pollen from the fir trees... (1965, p. 106).

From my point of view, his need to bear witness is held by the Writer in order to show what took place and also to interpret the nuclei of psychic truth in relation to the Psychic Process that the Man went through: psychological death and rebirth.

As an exercise in conscious assessment, his search for evidence also makes use of recollections, which anchor themselves to fragments of testimonial evidence - the Self-Portraits and those of others - oscillating between fact and fiction, aware of the fallacy of certain memories as well as the use of comforting truths. Moreover, he accompanies the Man and acts as a witness to the gradual process of realisation of another truth that emerges over the course of his exile outside the camp: *one that is relative to his deep feeling that it is easier to comfort oneself about death than about life.*

As is well known, his deposition of his long and tortuous journey home is not simply about the difficulty in finding his external home again. It is also about the difficulty in finding an interior place, given life to by those he refers to as his “innate feelings of trust towards the other.” This eventful trip took a long time, a length that was necessary for the Man to come back into contact with the real state of affairs and reinstate the human significance of his job and those of his companions once again.

At the same time, the Writer is there to give evidence on the Man's and his companions' oscillating emotional reactions over the course of their journey to the ends of the civilised world and brings him close to questioning *whether his life and everyone else's* “can go back to being human again”. Thus, he waters down his harsh judgment of the Man in comparison to several other companions who had defended themselves with their own madness. They had allowed their chilling hardship to reach them, since neither dreams nor reality offered them a frank space within which to rediscover their ability to remember with their hearts.

As well as his prose, Levi appears to continue his investigation through poetry attempting to hold this profound feeling that, again, *it is easier to comfort oneself about death than about life* on a plane of symbolic transcription and representation.

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<sup>4</sup> Giannakoulas A. & Hernandez M., “Remembering the mind with the body and remembering the body with the mind”. *Psicoanalisi*, 2010, vol. 14, n. 2 (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2010).

The poems that I have chosen to provide precious evidence of this evolution of feeling are *Shema* and *Almanac*.

In *Shema* (1946; *Eng. 1976*), as is understood, he documents his profound illusion of and hope for a new world, evoking the fundamental Hebrew prayer. The building of this new world avails itself of his testimony by remembering what had happened with the heart, body and mind.

I would like to quote in extenso another poem entitled *Almanac*, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1987<sup>5</sup>, about which, until recently, I knew little. It was written forty years after *Shema*, just three months prior to his death:

They'll continue their flow to the sea, the indifferent rivers,  
Overwhelming ancient dikes of tenacious men.  
The glaciers will continue their grinding and smoothing,  
Or crashing down to shorten the lives of firs.  
The sea must continue to batter the lands that contain it,  
More and more a skinflint with its riches.  
Stars and comets continue on their courses;  
Earth, too, obeys creation's immutable laws.  
But we, rebellious offshoots, ingenious fools,  
Destroy and corrupt, always in more of a hurry;  
Spreading the desert to the forests of the Amazon;  
To the living hearts of our cities; to our very own hearts.

The second poem, therefore, shows itself to be in total contrast to the begging and strident cadence of *Shema*<sup>6</sup>. In *Almanac*, it is as though Levi has gone back to saying, "Alas for the dreamer the moment of consciousness that accompanies the awakening is the acutest of sufferings" (1959, pp. 43-44).

In the end it is the Poet, not the Writer, who presents the testimonial proof to the inexorable interior Process of loss of trust and hope in the Man; his rivers of indifference, his trees felled by icy landslides, and the cynicism and senselessness of humanity are witnesses to Levi's increasingly sharp feelings of disappointment. They cause him to oscillate and lose himself between reality and fantasy, among the perceptions of a new world but one neither just nor right and thick with violent dreams which, on occasion, would come back to life inside of him.

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<sup>5</sup> Levi P (1987) in *Opere II*, edited by Marco Belpoliti, Torino 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *Shema (Hear)*, Primo Levi (January 10, 1946; *Eng. 1976*): You who live secure / In your warm houses / Who return at evening to find / Hot food and friendly faces: / Consider whether this is a man, / Who labours in the mud / Who knows no peace / Who fights for a crust of bread / Who dies at a yes or a no. / Consider whether this is a woman, / Without hair or name / With no more strength to remember / Eyes empty and womb cold / As a frog in winter. / Consider that this has been: / I commend these words to you. / Engrave them on your hearts / When you are in your house, when you walk on your way, / When you go to bed, when you rise. / Repeat them to your children. / Or may your house crumble, / Disease render you powerless, / Your offspring avert their faces from you.