Holocaust Literature and Culture

Ethics and Ontology in Primo Levi's
Survival in Auschwitz: A Levinasian Reading

How was I able to survive Auschwitz? My principle is: I come first, second and third. Then nothing, then again I; and then all the others.¹ — Ella Lingens-Reiner

It is not the concept of "man" which is at the basis of this humanism, it is the other man.² — Emmanuel Levinas

To offer a new reading of Survival in Auschwitz, this essay borrows Emmanuel Levinas's critique of Western thought and also the posthumanist ethics he proposes as a remedy for its deficiencies. A critical approach of this type is needed to insert Levi's canonical text into a larger discussion about whether the Holocaust, along with the other genocides that have stained the last century, constitute a watershed in the history of Western culture that marks the end of modernity, the end of blind faith in instrumental rationality, and the end of humanist ethics. In the context of this essay, ethics are defined as the continuously negotiated relations between the self (or the subject) and the other (that is, the one who is irreducibly not the same as the self), which, at the negative and positive extremes, encompass either inequality and exploitation or mutuality and obligation.

No literary text engages the ethical implications of the Holocaust more searchingly than Survival in Auschwitz, which is both a record of what the author personally endured in the death camp and also a testimony to the sufferings of others. Levi reports his own physical, intellectual and moral degradation with notable restraint. He candidly admits to having more or less internalized the corrosive ethics of Auschwitz whereby "a man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means" (13; "[il] primo ufficio dell'uomo è perseguire i propri scopi con mezzi idonei," Se questo 7). At the same time, he engages the reader ethically with continual references to the victims' faces and eyes, and also to the dehumanizing stares of the SS guards and kapos that deny human status to the victims. These descriptions of face-to-face encounters, harsh gazes, and the seeming invisibility of the extermination camp prisoners before their oppressors provoke our reflection on the problematical relationship between self and other that is always at the heart of ethical questioning. As readers of Levi's memoir, we sense
that we are summoned to posit and live by an ethical obligation between humans strong enough to prevent further genocides.

In contrast to the partially misleading American title, the memoir’s original Italian title, *Se questo è un uomo* [“If This Is a Man”], offers no happy endings, but instead promises to interrogate the definition of man, both in Auschwitz and after, and the ethical obligations that may accrue from this unresolved “If” statement. At moments, Levi seems determined to repair the humanist idea of man by reasserting the Enlightenment principle of universality (that is, the idea that all humans are essentially the same and must be accorded the same rights and freedoms) against Nazism’s shocking determination that some among us are sub-human. At the same time, and perhaps against Levi’s conscious intentions, the memoir also puts in doubt the efficacy of this Kantian universality by refusing to answer definitively the grave ethical question posed by Auschwitz: when a man has lost everything — his name, his language, and his intellectual faculties — what compels us to treat him as a fellow human? In other words, when another is conceived as wholly other, as the Jews were during the Holocaust, humanist ethics might no longer function.

While Levi scholars have usually noted the memoir’s humanist agenda, in which reason and culture are only redemptive, they have seldom taken into account the counter-narrative embedded in the text which corroborates that after Auschwitz the Enlightenment conception of man, and the ethical guarantees the word implies, have been damaged irreparably. As one of the most widely read descriptions of Auschwitz from the prisoners’ point of view, Levi’s testimony shoulders the heavy responsibility of speaking for victims who did not return and who have no voice of their own. Therefore, it is important to find and apply new interpretive models that can account for the text’s ambivalence toward universality as a basis for ethics.

In this essay, Levi’s term, man, will be used rather than a gender neutral one. It serves the argument put forward here that the word will strike readers as a false universal incapable of accommodating difference.

*Ulysses and Abraham*

For philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the logic of Nazism was not at odds with humanist ethics; rather, it revealed definitively the flawed foundations of Western thought whose intolerance of difference legitimated the Nazis’ genocidal anti-Semitism. In response to the willful destruction of humanity Levinas rejects the primacy of ontology, with its subject-centered conceptions of universal knowledge and truth, in favor of a system of ethics that posits an obligation to the other that precedes even the subject’s own being. This ethical obligation originates in the sight of the other’s face, the most naked, vulnerable part of the body. The paradigmatic Levinasian ethical moment is the face-to-
face encounter in which the subject accepts the irreducible difference of the other that is beyond knowledge and assimilation.

Levinas writes in opposition to Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger, and to the whole of Western thought for which ontology is primary. He argues that philosophy has privileged reason and epistemology over ethics, the “Greek” language of being, which violently absorbs difference into ontological self-identification, over the “Hebrew” responsibility for the other. (His use of these terms is not primarily historical.) The dissimilar stories of two paradigmatic figures, Ulysses and Abraham, illustrate this sharp contrast. With its “horror of the other,” philosophy prefers “the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who through all his peregrination is only on the way to his native island” (“The Trace of the Other” 346). In his drive for knowledge and self-preservation Ulysses disenchants the strange and infinite world of myth, mapping its new, finite boundaries onto his narrative. However, Levinas promotes an ethics “whose movement into the other is not recuperated in identification, does not return to its point of departure.” Thus, to Ulysses’ nostos, Levinas “oppose[s] the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land” (348). This direction of travel, toward the other rather than back to the self, is what makes Abraham’s story instructive not just to Jews but to those “of all nations.” “The heirs of Abraham [are] men to whom their ancestor bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward the other man, which one is never done with, an order in which one is never free” (Nine Talmudic Readings 99). This heavy obligation is asymmetrical in that our duty to the other is boundless, and we are commanded to act without expectation of symmetrical treatment that is implicit in Kant’s categorical imperative. Thus, ethics is “a vocation of an existing-for-the-other stronger than the threat of [one’s own] death” (Entre Nous xii). The ethical therefore opposes Spinoza’s conatus essendi (“the right to existence”), a central tenet in Western thought that legitimates violence whenever the survival of being appears threatened by the other.

The West’s persistent claim that being is the highest good has had broad social and political implications in that, according to Levinas, “ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power” (Totality and Infinity 46). While he does not elaborate in detail the relationship between his ideas and the Holocaust, Levinas implies time and again that Nazism exemplifies the violence of being. In practice, as the first principle of Nazi racial science, the “survival instinct” promised the mastery of nature over humanity. As a microcosm of Nazi society, the extermination camps operated by the same principle: to be a survivor of Auschwitz is to have been forced to confirm the validity of the “survival of the fittest” concept in a fashion that mirrors the role the Nazis cast for themselves.
In outward form, nearly all survivor testimonies mimic Ulysses' tale: after hardship, the witness returns altered, to be sure, but also the same person now possessed of new knowledge. The conventions of the genre demand an explanation of how the writer/protagonist escaped peril. Levi's memoir shares these general qualities and, even more specifically, Dante's version of Ulysses dominates an entire chapter. As a narrative compelled to explain how one survived, the memoir's inaccurate American title is not completely misleading as it conditions the reader to expect an uplifting story of endurance and integrity, initiative and invention. All of those elements can be found in the book. Yet, embedded within the coherent and complete story of return, Levi speaks of the moving, unfinished Holocaust narratives that the prisoners never cease to recount while in the camp. These stories, "all different, all full of a tragic disturbing necessity . . . are simple and incomprehensible like stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?" (Survival 65–66). These profound tales with uncertain endings (will the teller survive?) represent suffering beyond our comprehension and beyond any utility. Indeed, unlike Levi's own story of return, they prompt no Hegelian temptations to synthesize the negative into a positive result, to reduce difference and multiplicity to the same, or to find lessons in the Holocaust. By incorporating these fragmented narratives into his memoir, Levi illustrates the following Levinasian maxim: "Ethical testimony is a revelation which is not knowledge" (Ethics and Infinity 108).

When Survival in Auschwitz functions as a narrative of return and self-preservation, as an Odyssey in which the autobiographical subject is constituted in the overcoming of extreme experience, Levi writes himself into being. He speaks as a rational humanist "convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world we are describing" (Survival 87). Thinking about the camp, both its functioning and its meaning, becomes a process for turning negative experience into positive knowledge. Yet, these totalizing claims often give way to ethical testimony that has no other purpose than to register the suffering of those around him. In a Levinasian key, this narrating subject is constituted by the other over which it has no control, perhaps fulfilling the humanism to which Levinas aspires: not one based on the autonomous I but on the ethical summons of the other person. The desirability of Levinasian ethics is undeniable in any meditation on the extermination camp where the exchange of human solidarity for individual survival sadly affirms the validity of Nazism's social Darwinism. After Auschwitz it is hard not to concur with Levinas's claim that the realm of "ethics is . . . against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first" (Face to Face with Levinas 24; emphasis in original).
The claim of this essay is that *Survival in Auschwitz* and to some degree all Holocaust survivor narratives framed by humanist assumptions negotiate the contested terrain between Spinoza’s *conatus essendi* and the unvoiced suffering of the other person who has not survived. Accordingly, while Levi’s memoir is dominated by the “Greek” mode, at times, as illustrated above, it slips into the “Hebrew” mode. The ontological position is interrupted repeatedly by the ethical call of the other which, in turn, succumbs once again to the compelling narrative of being. The rest of this essay is dedicated to close readings of a few key passages in *Survival in Auschwitz* showing that the dilemma at the heart of Levi’s testimony resides in the simultaneous entwinement of, and opposition between, the “Greek” and “Hebrew” modes.

The Face of the Muselmann

The memoir’s ethical aspect is brought to front and center by the epigraphic poem which, as echoed by the Italian title (“If This is a Man”), commands the “safe” reader, surrounded by “friendly faces,” to reflect on whether the dehumanized victim, unable to assert his or her own subjectivity, is yet a human being for whom the reader is responsible.8

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
    Who works in the mud
    Who does not know peace
    Who fights for a scrap of bread
    Who dies because of a yes or a no.
    Consider if this is a woman
    Without hair and without name
    With no more strength to remember,
    Her eyes empty and her womb cold
    Like a frog in winter.
    Meditate that this came about:
    I commend these words to you,
    Carve them in your hearts
    At home, in the streets, Going to bed, rising;
    Repeat them to your children,
        Or may your house fall apart,
        May illness impede you,
        May your children turn their faces from you. (*Survival* 11)9

The poem’s imagery is almost entirely visual: the imperative verb “consider” [“considerate”] suggests in its Latin roots a meditative form of
vision, a kind of star-gazing suitable for apprehending the transcendent. But here the human face is the focal point of the poem’s gaze as the “friendly faces” [“visi amici”] of the first stanza give way to the dehumanized victim’s blank stare ("her eyes empty"; "vuoti gli occhi"). The poem’s directive to reflect on and remember the effects of dehumanization is strategically positioned before the memoir properly begins so that one is forced to respond even before learning why and how these people are reduced to such a state. No details firmly identify them as Holocaust victims; indeed, apart from their innocence, the specific circumstances under which they suffer seem to have no bearing on our obligation to consider whether they still possess human qualities. From first sight, we find we have already incurred a commitment to these others who are not individuals but abstract humans with whom we cannot easily identify. Like the memoir as a whole, the poem works to overturn the oppressive gaze that did violence in the camp and to replace it with one that acknowledges the vulnerability and nakedness of the anonymous victims. Indeed, Levi states in the book’s preface that his testimony is meant to force his readers to confront this inhumanity, “to make ‘the rest’ participate in it” (9; “di fare gli ‘altri’ partecipi,” 5).

As a survivor-writer, Levi takes on the difficult task of using language to mediate between us, the complacent public, and the distant victims who have an ethical claim on us. He puts before us the faces of countless victims who did not survive, who cannot by themselves demand anything of us, who cannot make themselves present or stop us from forgetting them. In this way, Levi not only testifies to the suffering of the other but also, in the language of religion, witnesses the covenant that ethically binds humanity to itself. In fact, the poem imitates but also alters biblical passages in Deuteronomy that form the key prayer in Judaism, the “Shemà,” which asserts by another imperative (Hear, O Israel!) the fundamental principle of monotheism. (Untitled in the memoir, the poem was titled “Shemà” when published in Levi’s first poetry collection, privately printed for friends and family.) The speaker of the poem is positioned as Moses who talks on behalf of an infinite, radically other God. But now, after Auschwitz, the Jews’ commitment to Yahweh has been supplanted by our ethical obligation to the wholly other who offers us nothing in return.

Both the ideas and vocabulary of the poem’s ethical discourse bring to mind Levinas’s concept of the face. The face of the other, exposed and threatened, incites us to an act of violence against it, while, at the same time, signifying the interdiction against murder. “The face says to me: you shall not kill. In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. The celebrated ‘right to existence’ that Spinoza called the conatus essendi and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility is challenged by the relation to the face. My duty to the
other suspends my natural right to self-survival” (Face to Face with Levinas 24). This other, radically alone and a potential victim of violence, is analogous to the victims evoked in Levi’s poem who, in their utter silence, still command our attention. The command issued by the face, which is at once the weakest and strongest of forces, puts the subject, the I, into question. The face of the other demands that ethics preceed ontology, necessitating what Levinas calls, in an essay of the same title, “Ethics as First Philosophy.”

Surprisingly, in contrast to the rest of the poem, which operates in a “Hebrew” mode, the final stanza renews the idea that one’s humanity exists only in reciprocity. Our failure to confront the dehumanized victims, to recognize the suffering in them, will bring on a curse articulated in the last line. Our children will turn away their faces, will, in effect, deny the human recognition that we, who now mimic the position of the victims, certainly require. (Again, Levi draws on Deuteronomy, where the blessings offered to those who follow the commandments are balanced with lists of curses that will befall those who do not.) This sudden shift to the self-interested, ontological position illustrates the ethical dilemma at the core of Levi’s poem and the memoir as a whole. On one hand, Levi and his readers have reason to fear that Levinasian ethics are too abstract and demand too much selflessness to command our responsibility. On the other hand, the Nazis’ ability to render their victims inhuman challenges the efficacy of any ethics based on reciprocal obligation among men who must first be recognized as subjects like ourselves. Apart from the last stanza, Levi’s poem effectively conveys the victims’ inability to look at the reader’s face and, therefore, to commit the reader to reciprocal respect for all human subjects. In sum, the Kantian categorical imperative cannot bind us ethically to the totally dehumanized victims of Auschwitz whose alterity is beyond assimilation.

The dehumanized victims in Levi’s poem figure significantly in the memoir itself, although the ethical demand that Levi-as-witness transfers from them to us is now markedly reduced. The so-called Muselmanner (or “Muslims”) of Auschwitz are “the men in decay” [“uomini in dissolvimento”] who “drag themselves along in an opaque solitude, and in solitude they die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone’s memory” (Survival 89; “essi soffrono e si trascinano in una opaca intima solitudine, e in solitudine muoiono o scompaiono, senza lasciar traccia nella memoria di nessuno,” Se questo 85). Of course, they are remembered in Levi’s testimony and in many other survivor memoirs, but not as individuals who can narrate themselves into being. Levi writes that “all the [Muselmanner] who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story” (90; “Tutti i musulmani che vanno in gas hanno la stessa storia, o per meglio dire, non hanno storia,” 86). In their complete emptiness, the Muselmanner are
unknowable and impervious to the humanizing effects of narration. Slavoj Zizek corroborates this point, stating that “there is no way to ‘symbolize’ their predicament, to organize it into a meaningful life-narrative.” But he hastens to add that to say this is to “inadvertently reproduce and thus attest to the very dehumanization imposed on them by the Nazis” (76–77). Thus, with some discomfort we read that the Muselmänner are, for Levi, “an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death” (90). While these callous words renew the oppressive gaze of Nazism’s violence of being, they are also an honest description of the dehumanizing rituals of Auschwitz that rendered the victims unable to appeal to their victimizers. At or past the limit of the human and of the thinkable, the experience of the Muselmänner in life, suffering, silence, and death, has no meaning in an ontological framework where the other to whom one owes compassion must be recognizable as another version of the self, or where the other must at least be an object of knowledge. If Levi’s epigraphic poem implies that, in Levinasian fashion, we are ethically obligated to those who have been robbed of every human vestige, the descriptions of the dehumanized prisoners in the body of the memoir leave the question far from resolved. Without paradigmatic human qualities the Muselmänn is alterity itself, the other who pushes humanist ethics beyond the point at which the categorical imperative falls apart. In the extermination camp, Levi and all the survivors were forced by circumstances to turn their faces away from the weakest victims who constituted the vast majority of the prisoners. Finding almost no space left for ethical behavior, the would-be survivors either had to embrace self-preservation or perish.

Despite the persistence of the survival narrative in the memoir, the retelling of his story of return, Levi’s final remarks about the Muselmänner shift suddenly into a Levinasian ethical position in which one has no choice but to regard and never forget even the most vacant, defenseless faces.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (90)11

The eyes of the Muselmänner, emptied of thought, refer us back to the empty eyes of the epigraphic poem. The paradoxical locution — the faceless face on whose face nothing is seen — suggests that something essential of Auschwitz remains unspeakable, trapped in a negativity
and silence that Levi confronts with difficulty. In hesitation, he resorts to a hypothetical clause ("If I could . . ."); "se potessi . . ."). The subject, the self-conscious I, is put into question by this single image which epitomizes the gratuitous suffering that Nazism worked to produce, a useless suffering that can never be justified by narratives of redemption or martyrdom or Hegelian syntheses. At this moment, Levi’s writing is "for-the-other," which, to Levinas, "is the most upright relation to the other — is the most profound adventure of subjectivity." However, this ethical position produces no universal knowledge; it "cannot give itself out as an example, or be narrated in an edifying discourse. It cannot, without becoming perverted, be made into a preaching" (Entre Nous 99).12

Survival and the Narrating Subject

Unlike the Muselmann, Levi, as a survivor and author, is able to tell his individual story, to explain the circumstances which allowed him to retain a critical degree of human identity, even as he also records the sensation of being dehumanized, of being an other to exploit and then to eliminate. This dual point of view is especially evident in the "Chemical Examination" chapter, in which he has an exceptional face-to-face encounter with Pannwitz, a German chemist who works for one of the civilian industries that exploits prison laborers provided by the SS. A tremendous amount is at stake for Levi: he knows that passing the examination administered by Pannwitz might give him a job in the factory’s laboratory as a "Specialist," and that the favorable working conditions might allow him to survive the camp for a few more months. (This comes to pass after Levi demonstrates his qualifications. He spends the coldest months of 1944 working indoors [Survival 136–44; Se questo 132–40].) In the paragraphs leading up to the anticipated encounter, Levi and other members of the so-called Chemical Kommando are described as virtual Muselmanner on the verge of having no story to tell. With "empty faces" ["face vuote"] and feeling "no longer alive" ["non più vivi"], it strikes them as absurd that, with their withered minds, they should be invited to demonstrate their specialized knowledge of chemistry (102–03; 98–99). At this point, Levi makes a remarkable aside, unlike any other in the memoir, which transports the reader outside of the camp and beyond the past that is narrated to the time of narration, when, in his hometown of Turin, Levi puts into words these events that happened as much as two years before. "Today, at this very moment, as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened" (103, "Oggi, questo vero oggi in cui sto seduto a un tavolo e scrivo, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose sono realmente accadute," 99). Perhaps, as a writer of survivor testimony who works within the strictures of the genre, Levi lacks complete confidence in his ability to narrate a plausible account
of how, through such exceptional circumstances, he escaped peril. More significantly, however, this aside underscores that Levi’s is a narrative of return which promises to domesticate the monstrous world of Auschwitz by incorporating it into his own *Odyssey*. The aside, as if drawing back a curtain, reveals the moment at which the first-person subject writes himself into being, as Levi does in telling the story of his successful chemistry examination.

The description of the encounter between Levi and Pannwitz begins with a few sentences noting the complete dissimilarity between the two individuals and the abyss that separates them. Filthy and “half kaputt” [“mezzo kaputt”] Levi stands; Pannwitz, “tall, thin, blond” [“alto, magro, biondo”] sits behind his clean, orderly desk (105; 101). The ethical dimension of the encounter is strongly insinuated by Pannwitz’s hostile gaze at Levi, and then by the look they exchange, which “was not one between two men” (105; “quello sguardo non corse fra due uomini,” 101). In Levinasian terms, the ethical aspect of the face of the other remained invisible in the concentration camp, overwhelmed by the *contus esseendi*. However, if human life really boils down to survival of the fittest, as Nazi ideology purported, then humans are no different from animals, and that is precisely what the camp produces: neither Levi nor Pannwitz are men at this point. As the examination proceeds, Levi imagines the German saying to himself, “this something in front of me belongs to a species which is obviously opportune to suppress. In this particular case, one has to first make sure that it does not contain some utilizable element?” (106; “questo qualcosa davanti a me appartiene a un genere che è ovviamente opportuno sopprimere. Nel caso particolare, occorre prima accertarsi che non contenga qualche elemento utilizzabile,” 102). Pannwitz, who seems concerned solely with moving his work ahead, dismisses Levi’s humanity altogether. At best, the prisoner is merely an object to be exploited, at worst, a dangerous mutant. In this darkest moment, Levi’s belief that thinking and knowing confer human-ness is validated when, through his knowledge of organic chemistry, he convinces Pannwitz that he is a man whose individual identity “is impossible to doubt” [“è impossibile dubitare”]. Levi feels a “lucid elation” [“ebrietà lucida”] resulting from the “spontaneous mobilization of all [his] logical faculties” [spontanea mobilitazione di tutte le facoltà logiche’]. Indeed, he “seem[s] to grow in stature” [“mi pare di crescere di statura’”] as his intellectual prowess is recognized (106; 102). He begins the interview as a prisoner known only by a number, and ends up as Primo Levi, B.S. University of Turin, as a man whose individual story merits the respect of a fellow chemist. In this moment we are tempted to re-subscribe to the continued efficacy of Kant’s categorical imperative. Having considered whether this filthy prisoner possessed of reason and knowledge is a man, Pannwitz is compelled, at least implicitly, to respond in the affirmative.
Before the examination began Levi was aware that failure to pass this test of mental agility could mean his death; thus, he felt "like Oedipus before the Sphinx" (105; "come Edipo davanti alla Sfinge," 101) who must solve the famous riddle (whose answer is "man") or die. In a sense, Levi's successful chemical examination is analogous to unraveling the Sphinx's riddle, to defeating the dangerous forces of myth by means of intelligence and knowledge. When Oedipus outwits the Sphinx he shows how the rational mind overcomes terrifying figures of myth by seeing them as anthropomorphic, as aspects of the self rather than as embodiments of difference beyond assimilation. Since solving the riddle depends upon conceiving of a single entity that can crawl, walk and hobble, Oedipus condenses multiplicity to the unity contained wholly within himself, a man. In utilizing the "Greek" language of being to absorb difference into ontological self-identification, Oedipus refers us back to the figure of Ulysses. Both characters are agents of disenchantment who use rationality to reduce the mythical and infinite to a controllable finite. Likewise, in the "Chemical Examination" chapter and in much of the rest of the memoir, Levi narrates a survival story that explains how, through the power of knowledge and rational thought, he masters the mythical terrors of Auschwitz, ensuring his self-preservation.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to trace the "Greek" and the "Hebrew" modes, two narrative structures in Levi's memoir that reflect two contrasting positions of the subject in relation to the other. The tension between these two versions of testimony is captured but also hidden in a remark made by a fellow prisoner, Steinlauf, which Levi implicitly endorses: because of this inhumanity, "one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness" (Survival 41; "si deve voler sopravvivere, per raccontare, per portare testimonianza," Se quest 35). The proposition of surviving in order to testify underscores how difficult it was to act ethically in the camps and also to deliver an ethical narrative in the aftermath. If, as this essay’s first epigraph states, the survivor must place himself first, second and third, what authorizes one to claim to speak ethically about the camp and especially the Muselmanner? How can one be for oneself and the other at the same time? Levi understood this problem all to well, especially in relation to Auschwitz, when he stated "that each man is his brother's Cain" (The Drowned and the Saved 81; "che ognuno sia il Caino di suo fratello," I sommersi e i salvati 1054), a formulation that does not emphasize how we ought to keep and care for our brother but how we usurp his place. The double bind for Levi and all survivor writers who seek the ethical high ground is the near impossibility of writing from a position outside of the ontological narrative as exemplified by the Odyssey. "If 'know thyself' has become the funda-
mental precept of all Western philosophy,” Levinas asserts, “this is because the West discovers the universe within itself. As with Ulysses, its journey is merely the accident of a return. The Odyssey, in this sense, dominates literature” (Difficult Freedom 10). Similarly, while the ontological narrative in Survival in Auschwitz is often undermined by the memoir’s ethical narrative, the speaking I is never definitively overwhelmed by the other. The I dominates this and all survivor narratives.

The problem of escaping being and the violence of being is so intractable that even Levinas struggles against it. In his sympathetic critique of Levinas’s Totality and Infinity, Jacques Derrida argues that Levinas ultimately fails in his attempt to supplant the discourses of totality, and therefore totalitarianism, with that of infinity that resides in an irreducible other. Forced to rely on the ontological language of philosophy to formulate ideas and arguments, Levinas cannot write the “Hebrew” narrative, cannot argue for “ethics as first philosophy,” without first adopting the “Greek” logos (Writing and Difference 79–153). But perhaps this critique of Levinas offers us a model for an ethical interpretation of Survival in Auschwitz. The salient quality of Derrida’s critique is that it defers the decision between totality and infinity as if to say that Levinas must be encountered in the crux between the two (Critchley 94–95). This stance suggests that an ethical approach to Levi would attend to both the “Greek” and “Hebrew” discourses in the memoir without finally choosing between the subject and the other. In conclusion, the Holocaust and the literature it has produced defy ethical closure; therefore, this present essay argues for a reading practice that discovers and embraces the survivor’s unresolved ethical relation with the Muselmanner.

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NOTES

2 Nine Talmudic Readings 98.
3 The meaning of this unselfish outward journey without end is reiterated in the figure of Moses. “The one-way action is possible only in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering the promised land” (“The Trace of the Other” 349).
4 Eagleton devotes an entire chapter to making explicit Levinas’s preoccupation with the Holocaust (249–78).
5 See my article on the violence of being in “The Canto of Ulysses” chapter in Levi’s memoir. “As deployed in Survival in Auschwitz, Dante’s Ulysses seems to affirm his humanity by audaciously pursuing knowledge; however, . . . the figure of Ulysses in Western culture is ambiguous: he represents the liberation of humanity from myth but also embodies aspects of fascism in
that he conceives of knowledge as power, and uses language and reason to further his self-interests" (151).

6These stories “tutte diverse e tutte piene di una tragica sorprendente necessità... sono semplici e incomprensibili come le storie della Bibbia. Ma non sono anch’esse storie di una nuova Bibbia?” (Se questo 60).

7Noi siamo infatti persuasi che nessuna umana esperienza sia vuota di senso e indegna di analisi, e che anzi valori fondamentali, anche se non sono sempre positivi, si possano trarre da questo particolare mondo di cui narriamo” (Se questo 83).

8It is also plausible, although more relevant to my argument, that the “ecce homo” reference contained in the phrase “this is a man,” offers a dual challenge to the ethical claims of Christian Europe. In referring to the martyrdom of Jesus in the context of Auschwitz Levi may wish to call attention to the long history of Church sanctioned anti-Semitism and also to reject the notion that the suffering of Holocaust victims is in any way redemptive.

9“Voi che vivete sicuri / Nelle vostre tiepide case. / Voi che trovate tornando a sera / Il cielo caldo e visi amici. / Considerate se questo è un uomo / Che lavora nel fango / Che non conosce pace / Che lotta per mezzo pane / Che muore per un sì o per un no. / Considerate se questo è una donna. / Senza capelli e senza nome / Senza più forza di ricordare / Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo / Come una rana d’inverno. / Meditate che questo è stato: / Vi comandando queste parole. / Scopritele nel vostro cuore / Stando in casa andando per via, / Coricandovi alzandovi; / Ripetetele ai vostri figli. / O vi si sfaccia la casa, / La malattia vi impedisca, / I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi” (Se questo 3).

10The Muselmänner are, for Levi, “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 chiamarli morte la loro morte” (86).

11Essi 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 nudo, dalla fronte china e dalle spalle curve, sul cui volto e nei cui occhi non si possa leggere traccia di pensiero” (86).

12The complex interplay between the “Greek” and “Hebrew” modes that shape Levi's discussion of the Muselmänner also illustrates in specific terms how Levinas thinks about the ethical aspect of testimony. It is not “based on knowledge and thematicization,” the qualities of finite being. Rather, he states, “the concept of testimony I am trying to describe surely implies a mode of revelation, but this revelation gives us nothing... It is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception that the revelation of the Infinite occurs” (Ethics and Infinity 107, 109; emphasis in the original).

13See also Gordon 39–54. In those pages, he sketches out a convincing Levinasian reading of parts of Survival in Auschwitz. The present essay’s contribution to this approach has been to move beyond the ethics and imagery of the face, which is Gordon's focus, to how the ethics of narrative modes and the nexus between Western philosophy and the Holocaust function in Levi’s memoir.

WORKS CITED


