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The Shadowed Violence of Culture: Fascism and the Figure of Ulysses in Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*

Culture has evolved under the shadow of the executioner.¹

In many critical readings of Primo Levi’s death camp memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, the short chapter titled “The Canto of Ulysses” has proved pivotal.² While most of the book records lucid, unflinching descriptions of death and life in the camp, this chapter, in contrast, focuses on Levi’s struggle to recall and then recite Dante’s *Inferno* XXVI to his French friend, Jean. Without a doubt, the terrain of epic poetry is familiar and uplifting to most readers, even though the menacing landscape of Auschwitz is always present in this narrative framed by an actual quest for food. The two prisoners’ trip to the camp kitchen to fetch a kettle of soup for their *Kommando* provides a rare distraction from the everyday hunger, fatigue, and terror, and a moment when other, less obvious needs can be nourished: Jean wishes to learn some Italian and Levi needs, almost with the urgency of a fundamental physical need, to remember the verses of


Ulysses’s famous speech in Canto XXVI, and explain their beauty and meaning to Jean. The very act of retelling how Dante’s Ulysses affirms his humanity by audaciously challenging irrational, inhuman forces greater than himself produces a momentary sense of liberation for Levi and Jean who, in their identification with the ancient hero, fleetingly resist the death camp’s dehumanization. The brief journey for soup stages a scene of cultural memory and transmission that, in Levi’s narrative, promises to give meaning to the two prisoners’ pointless suffering. Language, literature, and rational thought are erected here as a putative bulwark against Auschwitz, that is, against all forces antithetical to “the human.” In a modest but unmistakable fashion the chapter makes heroes of the resolute prisoners and affirms, in the guise of sublime poetry, the still vital redemptive power of culture.

An indispensable author, Levi is one of the most authoritative, most cited Holocaust witnesses. To date, nearly all scholarship approaches Levi within the terms of his own discourse, naturalizing the humanism that undergirds the Ulysses chapter and *Survival in Auschwitz* as a whole, and sharing his faith, battered but intact, in the West’s grand narrative of progress through rationality. In his memoir, Levi presents the “Final Solution” as a barbaric counterattack on Enlightenment values and human rights; he invokes the Hebrew Bible, Dante, and Darwin in the defense of rational humanism; he deploys both the literary canon and scientific method as tools of resistance against corrosive Nazi and Italian fascist ideologies that abused science, stained language, and perverted the virtue of work. Although he writes to repair the ruins the Holocaust left in its wake, this book and his others are not wholly redemptive, seeming to defend the humanist subject and, at moments, chart its

demise. Indeed, for thinkers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the events of the Holocaust, and their long germination in the heart of Europe, raised grave doubts about the benevolence of the Enlightenment project, despite its apparent commitment to social progress. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they assert that fascism was not only a bitter enemy but also a logical result of the Enlightenment; that the social and political structures of domination that serve totalitarian regimes so well are implicit in Enlightenment thought; and, more broadly, that Western civilization and barbarism are not binary opposites but bound together in a perpetual dialectic. If true, these claims demand a rethinking of the origins and meanings of the Holocaust and, in addition, a rereading of Holocaust texts framed by humanist assumptions.

In this essay, I borrow Horkheimer and Adorno’s radical critique of the Enlightenment to undertake a reading of *Survival in Auschwitz* with particular focus on the Ulysses chapter. This approach entails deconstructing the binaries that distinguish for Levi the normal world from the negative world of Auschwitz. The central question is whether Levi’s humanist account of the death camp is compromised by either acknowledged or unacknowledged discourses of domination embedded in his text and in its appropriation of Dante’s *Inferno*, the authoritative literary source most frequently invoked in the memoir. At moments, Levi himself suggests that foundational binaries have been unsettled by the Holocaust, but for the most part he takes as a given that barbarism flourishes at the expense of culture and that culture, in the figure of Ulysses, is redemptive. The retrieved poetry, Levi later reflected, “made it possible for me

4. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), 139. “Culture was useful to me. Not always, at times perhaps by subterranean and unforeseen paths, but it served me and perhaps it saved me. After forty years I am reading in *Survival in Auschwitz* the chapter entitled ‘The Canto of Ulysses.’ It is one of the few episodes whose authenticity I have been able to verify . . . because my interlocutor of that time, Jean Samuel, is one of the book’s few surviving characters. . . . [H]is memories jibe with mine” (139). Levi added: “Culture could be useful even if only in some marginal cases, and for brief periods: it could . . . keep the mind alive and healthy. It definitely was not useful in orienting oneself and understanding” (142). I take this last remark of Levi’s with some skepticism because the culture of rational humanism is his most important cognitive tool in Auschwitz.
to reestablish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity” (139). Still, Horkheimer and Adorno compel one to ask whether culture, as Levi deploys it, contains forgotten brutality, and whether, in the form of Dante’s terza rima, it nurtured the fascist ideologies that produced Auschwitz.

Urgently written in the midst of World War II and published formally in 1947, the same year as Levi’s memoir, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* attempts to explain why highly civilized nations like Germany sink into barbarism and resort to violence. The main culprit is instrumental reason, which frees humanity from fearful subservience to nature, but also, as it accommodates itself to power, facilitates social repression. The remedy for this failure of the Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is not less rationality but more of it devoted to self-reflection (xvi). The challenge to critical thought is substantial because a powerful dialectic drives Western civilization toward self-destruction: “myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (xviii). (“The Enlightenment” refers to the historical period; with the term “enlightenment,” Horkheimer and Adorno refer more broadly to the application of reason to any aspect of human society.) Each concept in this linked pair requires some explanation. Instrumental reason, whether applied to science or society, claims sole possession of truth and is therefore an “absolute authority” (18) resembling a force of nature, or even a new myth, that neither justifies nor reflects critically on itself. “Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced” (19). “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (18) in that it brooks no dissent, and seeks uniformity at all costs: “Bourgeois society is ruled by

5. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* began as a critique of late capitalism but the changes made in the 1947 edition to the little circulated 1944 edition indicate that Horkheimer and Adorno were rapidly moving away from a thoroughly Marxian position. Even as early as 1940, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer: “It seems to me that what we were used to seeing in terms of the proletariat, has today shifted with terrible intensity to the Jews. I ask myself, though it is not completely consistent with the project, if the things which we actually want to say should not be said in connection with the Jews, who represent the counterpoint to power.” Quoted in Anson Rabinbach, “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?” The Place of Antisemitism in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* in Adorno: A Critical Reader, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 139.
equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion” (4). This is why in the era of fascism, the cherished principle of universality, the idea that all humans are essentially the same and deserve to be accorded the same rights and freedoms, contributed to a tyrannical social integration, a “repressive égalité” (9), that crushed difference of all types—racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, ideological—and fostered anti-Semitism (9, 22, 138-39). Enlightenment’s regression to myth, that point at which thought no longer serves the interests of human freedom, was most complete at Auschwitz, where the Nazis exploited rational means to achieve irrational ends.6 Social Darwinism and spurious racial science were enlisted to validate the myths of anti-Semitism. Enabled by technology and bureaucratic efficiency, the Nazis perpetrated mass murder so that Germany might realize a utopian future harkening back to a mythical past when, supposedly, its pristine racial and cultural qualities had not yet been polluted by enlightenment and its agents, the Jews. When progress serves superstition, as in the case of fascism, it becomes clear that our modern era does not escape from the barbarism and irrationality associated with prehistoric societies. As such, the Holocaust was not an isolated return to humanity’s “heart of darkness,” but a paradigmatic instance of the genocidal violence inherent in modernity.7

Admiration for ancient Greece had been central to German culture since the eighteenth century, and the “cultural fascists” of the 1930s looked there for the archaic roots of Germany’s Aryan superiority, and also for images of the reborn world they wished to create, one ruled by naked force and uncorrupted by “liberality and middle-class qualities” (36). Horkheimer and Adorno argue that even though fascism’s “most urgent concern is to liquidate enlightenment,” the primal force it imagines itself to be is already


7. See also Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).
manipulated by reason (37). What the fascists failed to see is that “myth is already enlightenment,” in that even an ancient text like Homer’s *Odyssey* narrates the triumph of the enlightened mind, with its creativity and guile, over the witless forces of myth. “The purportedly authentic, archaic principle of blood and sacrifice is already marked by the bad conscience and cunning of domination [i.e., enlightenment], which are characteristic of that current [Nazi] program of national renewal that uses images of the primordial for purposes of self-advertisement. The most primitive myth already contains the element of falsehood that triumphs in the fraudulence of fascism, a deceitfulness that fascism imputes to enlightenment. No work, however, bears more eloquent testimony to the entwinement of enlightenment and myth than the *Odyssey*, the fundamental text of European civilization.”

The progressive and regressive effects of reason that characterize modernity are visible *in ovo* in Ulysses, an ambiguous figure in Western culture who anticipates the Enlightenment’s fully realized bourgeois subject. Like the cold bourgeois, his chief concern is “self-preservation through adaptation” (8), his character is marked by “unwavering self-assertion” (35), and his strongest tool of domination is the cunning use of language (46-47). He escapes the mythical powers with a combination of uncommon knowledge, divine favor, and ruthlessness. Like an unstoppable force of nature or a new myth, he dominates both his crew and the suitors who besiege his home. Ulysses is an overdetermined figure that embodies the contradictory elements in Western culture, giving shape “to the entwinement of enlightenment and myth” (37). On one hand, in his wisdom and courage, he seems to affirm that thought, understanding, and knowledge define humanity at its best, the very qualities that Auschwitz assaulted; on the other, like his Enlightenment descendants, what he wishes “to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate both it and human beings” (2). Moreover, his drive for self-preservation prefigures “the fascist struggle for power” (71): he is

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the fittest and survives, and even his death will result from self-determined actions. Armed with this nuanced view of both Ulysses and the dangerous vagaries of reason, we now turn to *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Borrowing a line from its epigraphic poem (11), the original Italian title of Levi’s memoir, *Se questo è un uomo*, “If This is a Man,” evokes the humanist binaries that structure his conception of Auschwitz as a “world of negation” (122) in which men are reduced to “non-men” or beasts, rational thought is overwhelmed by instinctual behavior or madness, and language is drowned out by unintelligible babel. The camp exterminates enemies of Nazism, but also undermines the very idea of the “human.” The newly arrived death camp prisoner, shorn of community, family, dignity, and even of his own name, becomes “a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs... a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity” (27). It is the death camp’s ferocious assault on humanity-at-large, not just individuals, not just the Jews, that spurs Levi to write his testimony. The narrator of *Survival in Auschwitz* effectively identifies himself, in order of importance, as a man, an Italian, and a chemist; his Jewish background seems rather insignificant to him but not, of course, to the Nazis and, later, to the Italian fascists who adopted anti-Semitic “racial laws” in 1938. Levi had a Jewish identity, but the basis on which he testifies is as a citizen and rational human being whose particular ethnicity and religion are precisely that which ought to have no bearing in the public sphere. Thus his occasional recourse to Biblical language and references is meant to engage the common inheritance of secular European culture. To see himself as a Jewish victim would have been a capitulation to Nazi essentializing and an admission that the Enlightenment had failed to deliver the emancipation and equality it promised to the Jews.

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9. “In society as it is, despite feeble, moralistic attempts to propagate humanity as the most rational means, self-preservation remains unencumbered by a utopia denounced as myth. For those at the top, shrewd self-preservation means the fascist struggle for power, and for individuals it means adaptation to injustice at any price” (71).

A key theme in the memoir is the embattled status of rational thought in Auschwitz, which is represented as a giant, mind-emptying machine that efficiently produces the non-man (or "Muślim"), the victim completely drained of physical and mental vigor who is, for Levi, the emblematic image of "all the evil of our time . . . on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen" (90). Levi’s own encounter with the camp’s crushing assault on thought is summed up concisely by a camp guard who tells the new arrival, "Hier ist kein Warum" (there is no why here)” (29). Levi takes this remark to mean that the camp’s function is to diminish the prisoners’ humanity by denying their capacity for understanding. Later, in a moment of self-criticism, he muses that he is "not made of the stuff of those who resist [death]," that he is "too civilized" and "think[s] too much" (103). Thought and civilization are inexorably linked for him, just as madness is an inherent feature of the barbarous world of the death camp (20). Survival in Auschwitz seeks to affirm the value of rational thought and scientific method, the very habits of mind that Auschwitz almost completely eliminated in its victims. Thus thinking about the camp, its function and its meaning, was a modest form of resistance to Nazism and also a process for turning negative experience into positive knowledge. "No human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis," Levi asserts. "Fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world we are describing" (87). By turning Auschwitz into a complex problem for analysis, he resists the system designed to diminish the mental abilities that, in his view, distinguish humans from animals.

The culmination of this idea, that thinking and knowing confer humanness, is put forward most forcefully in the Ulysses chapter, which hinges on the analogy between Ulysses’s audacious voyage and the audacity of Levi and Jean, who "dare to reason" in Auschwitz (114). Unmistakable here is the reference to Immanuel Kant’s motto of the Enlightenment, sapere aude (dare to know), which characterizes the intellectual maturity of the rational subject who,
according to Horkheimer and Adorno, always has the potential to dominate the other.\textsuperscript{11}

An eloquent spokesman for the positive power of reason to debunk myth, Levi too, though rarely, speaks to the dangers posed by reason in the service of myth, asserting that genocide results when irrational fear of the other "becomes the major premise in a syllogism" that is "carried rigorously to its logical conclusion" (9). Even as Auschwitz worked toward irrational ends, it used rational administration systematically to dehumanize the prisoners, as the memoir demonstrates in depressing detail. This observation lends support to Horkheimer and Adorno's contention that instrumental reason (or reified thought) is not only a progressive force, but also a tool for domination in the hands of the powerful. A similar tension is evident in the memoir's embrace of scientific method and knowledge, as expressions of human dignity, and its rejection of the social Darwinism used to justify the creation of Auschwitz. The dilemma for the rational humanist is that Darwin's potent theory, a credit to the powers of the human mind, actually dethrones humans, transforming them into animals subject to exploitation and even natural selection. As deployed in \textit{Survival in Auschwitz}, Dante's Ulysses seems to affirm his humanity by audaciously pursuing knowledge; however, for Horkheimer and Adorno, 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.

Before exploring why Dante's medieval text figures so crucially in Levi's memoir, it is necessary to consider Lawrence L. Langer's assertion that literary citations, far from enriching Holocaust testimony, actually sterilize it, filtering the reader's "experience of Auschwitz . . . through

\textsuperscript{11} "The system which enlightenment aims for is the form of knowledge which most ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature. . . . [It]s principles are those of self-preservation. Immaturity amounts to the inability to survive. The bourgeois, in the successive forms of the slave-owner, the free entrepreneur, and the administrator is the logical subject of enlightenment" (65).
the purifying vocabulary of an earlier time."¹² Langer holds that the Holocaust ruptured history and culture, rendering old phrases unable to articulate a new poisonous knowledge. Thus unlike most readers he considers the Ulysses chapter an irrelevant and even dangerous intrusion in Levi’s memoir because it introduces high culture’s version of hell into the literal hell of the death camp.¹³ “For a moment both Levi and Jean, under the compelling sway of Dante’s art, forget who and where they are. And this is precisely the point: when literary form, allusion, and style intrude on the surviving victim’s account, we risk forgetting where we are and imagine deceptive continuities” (45).

Langer’s larger claim is that the most effective Holocaust testimony whether written or videotaped, enables the reader or viewer to share the victim’s unmediated experience. Yet it seems beyond doubt that mediation is unavoidable: all witnesses draw upon their cultural and ideological frames of reference in order to understand and represent experience, just as Levi’s rational humanism and strong Italian identity shape his Holocaust narrative. While Langer’s primary interest is in effective testimony, even if this emphasis tends to dehistorize the Holocaust, the present essay is concerned with how memoirs like Levi’s testify to the structures of thought and culture that made Auschwitz possible and make likely the recurrence of genocide. Langer is justifiably concerned that Dante’s verses allow readers to escape from the unbearable yet indispensable truths that Levi’s memoir provides elsewhere. But focusing too exclusively on the unique horror of Auschwitz opens the possibility of forgetting its cultural and historical genealogy. Langer’s interpretation stresses the genuine incongruities between Dante’s Ulysses, “a man of action who creates his fate,” and the prisoners pushed into an “unwilled voyage to an unchosen destination” (46). However, Horkheimer and Adorno’s synthetic critique of Western culture suggests that, despite the differences,


¹³. See Gunzburg, “Down Among the Dead Men,” for example, for a typical reading of the passage. “[Levi’s] assimilation of Dante’s text informed his perception of reality by providing him with a conceptual grid through which to examine and make sense of the details of the incomprehensible world into which he had been so cruelly cast” (27).
there is a significant continuity linking Homer’s world to Dante’s and to Levi’s (that is, Auschwitz) that is governed by the dialectic of enlightenment, by the regression of reason to myth.

The trope that links all three texts is the journey: Ulysses’s journey home, or in the case of Dante, Ulysses’s unethical journey to perdition for the sake of knowledge, and the prisoners’ humble journey to fetch soup, which quickly becomes extraordinary because it promises a revelation whose source is Ulysses’s famous speech to his men. “Consider your origin: you were not made to live as beasts but to seek virtue and knowledge” (113). One hardly exaggerates in saying that Ulysses’s lines distill the founding ethos of Western culture. The issues are origins and identities (that is, fathers), culture versus nature, the mind over the body, the power of cognition and knowledge, and the superiority of the human language over the shrieks of animals. The passage as a whole reiterates one of the fundamental narratives of Western culture, the utopian striking out for a new world as yet uncorrupted by civilization. Now, spoken inside the death camp, Ulysses’s message of human nobility touches Levi more than it ever did in school when he was required to memorize these lines. Evoking the revelation at Mount Sinai, these verses strike him, “like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am” (113). The Hellenic and the Hebraic strands of secular culture come together in a synergy that allows Levi to transcend his desperate situation and reclaim his humanity. However, by the end of the chapter, the harsh world of Auschwitz reasserts itself.

For Langer, Levi’s forgetfulness about who he is and where he is implies “deceptive continuities” between the liberating power of art and the inescapable brutality of Auschwitz. Yet it is precisely to the hidden continuities between culture and violence that Horkheimer and Adorno draw our attention. In its pursuit of unity, enlightenment tends to subsume contradictions to the grand narratives it serves. Collective forgetting assumes the role of memory. However, on closer inspection, the story of Ulysses shows

14. My translation of the original Italian, which is accurately quoted in Levi’s Italian text: “Considerate la vostra semenza: / Fatti non foste a viver come bruti/ Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.”
itself to be a palimpsest whose erasure is never complete. The heroic debunker of myths is remembered but the dominator has also left his traces. Even as successive retellings remake the story to serve new agendas, the original meanings bleed through to reveal what has been suppressed. It becomes evident that Homer, Dante, and Levi share not only the continuity of cultural memory but also the constancy of forgetting. In Levi’s text, the noble aspirations inherent in all Ulysses stories not only resist the camp’s dehumanizing function but also obliterate acts of domination carried out by means of reified thought.

Levi and most of his readers accept without suspicion the rhetoric of noble human aspirations in Ulysses’s famous speech to his men. But Dante’s Ulysses, in his evident false modesty, is not one well suited to embody moral worth; he is destined for a region of Hell where reason deceives reason, and where relationships are shown to be infinitely open to manipulation. Ulysses’s words, “Consider your origin: you were not made to live as beasts but to seek virtue and knowledge,” contain an instrumentalized or reified view of humanity at large. Indeed, the search for origins, as a pretext for defining the human in opposition to the subhuman, was central to Nazism’s racial theories and its eugenic vision of community. These same racist principles were taken up enthusiastically by Mussolini, whose anti-Semitic “racial laws” effectively denied Levi’s Italian identity and his claims on Dante and Italian culture. The pressing question, whose very formulation betrays skepticism about Western civilization’s manipulation of the word “human,” is whether Ulysses’s lesson might have been more useful to the Nazis and Italian fascists than to the death camp prisoners.

Current scholarship on the Ulysses chapter endorses the redemptive powers of Levi’s heroic narrative and the humanist forces he marshals against Auschwitz. Ulysses’s message, and Levi’s own, according to Victor Brombert, is “that what defines a human being is the need and ability to pursue higher aims” (117). This interpretation mirrors Levi’s humanism, but ignores that Nazism articulated its own ghastly set of “higher aims” for a subjugated humanity under German leadership.

The influence of Homer’s epic on Levi is so pervasive that it distorts how he understands Dante’s Ulysses, who is not a hero in the conventional sense but a clever deceiver
relegated to the eighth circle of hell. Among the evil counselors who have used their high mental gifts for guile, Ulysses is deeper down than the simonists and thieves. For most critics, Levi's misreading, if it is that, is not relevant; what matters is that he dares to resist a totalitarian discourse whose aim is to silence him and deny his humanity. However, in our search for signs of cultural amnesia, what Levi's interpretation leaves out is instructive. To be sure, Levi's forgetfulness is not his alone: the Risorgimento, the nineteenth century vehicle of the nationalist, Enlightenment project in Italy, secularized Dante and fostered a heroic reading of Inferno XXVI that erased Ulysses's sins. That this profoundly Christian text plays such an important role in the formation of Levi's Italian identity attests to the powerful forces of assimilation that induced Jews to forget painful memories of past discrimination for the promise of equal rights and a place in the bourgeoisie.15

A less tendentious reading of Dante's text yields very different results. His Ulysses sets off from Ithaca one last time and ends up (by means of a shipwreck willed by God) in Christian hell because, in his hubris, he exceeds human limits. He is the prototype of Faust and Frankenstein, seductive men whose excessive desires for power and knowledge unleash demonic forces. Driven by ego, he rejects the demands of home and kinship. A great storyteller and orator, he uses language to mislead his companions and lead them to catastrophe. In a fine example of Dantesque contrapasso, the principle by which the punishment suits the crime, he is embodied as a tongue of fire: indeed, in life his speech deceived and hurt those around him. Born before Christ, Dante's Ulysses cannot name the powerful divinity that finally limits the advance of his ship, calling it simply "an other." Gian-Paolo Biasin has described this other as both Ulysses's and Levi's encounter with "absolute alterity" (141), but this interpretation forgets that the Jewish prisoners are sentenced to die solely because they have become the paradigmatic sign of alterity for the Nazis, "the antirace, the negative principle" in Horkheimer and Adorno's description

15. "The enlightened self-control with which adapted Jews effaced within themselves the painful scars of domination by others, a kind of second circumcision, made them forsake their own dilapidated community and wholeheartedly embrace the life of the modern bourgeoisie" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 138).
(137). Indeed, Dante’s text suggests a fuller interpretation of this other: it seems to stand for all the others whom Ulysses has disregarded, his family and his crew. Levi ends his chapter with Dante’s final image of drowning, attempting firmly to link the literary hell to the real hell of Auschwitz. But Ulysses’s voyage is willed, Levi’s unwilled. Levi can teach Italian to Jean, but what does Ulysses teach?

The Ulysses chapter repeats over and again scenes of instruction: Ulysses’s lesson to his men, but also Levi’s schoolboy lesson back in Italy, the lesson he gives Jean in the camp, and even the lesson offered to us, the readers. As he recites Dante’s immortal lines, Levi hopes Jean has understood that Ulysses “has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular, and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with soup poles on our shoulders” (114). There is a priceless though momentary sense of liberation as the condemned prisoners audaciously contemplate the exercise of free will embodied by Ulysses. And yet is not Levi also unintentionally transmitting Ulysses’s false counsel to the effect that superior men break limits and dominate nature and the men under their command, in pursuit of fame and individual identity?

The tension between the liberator and the dominator is evident in the contradictory meanings of “virtue” (derived from the Latin vir, a man) by which Ulysses seeks to affirm his manliness. Virtue, as in moral excellence, must include compassion for the other, but this definition is at odds with Spinoza’s proposition (“preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue”) that, in Dialectic of Enlightenment, is called “the true maxim of all Western civilization” (22) and “the true bourgeois virtue” (79). Here, Ulysses’s drive for self-preservation and self-interest is affirmed but not compassion for the other’s suffering, that which reified thought always forgets.\(^{16}\) Yet compassion for the other plays an important role in Levi’s memoir, starting right from the epigraphic poem, which challenges the reader to “consider”

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\(^{16}\) Reflecting on how surgical anesthetics make us forget our pain, Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that the price of progress made possible by technology is the inability to remember the other’s suffering. “Loss of memory [is] a transcendental condition of science,” they conclude. “All reification is forgetting” (191).
the intrinsic humanity of the dehumanized Holocaust victim: “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” (11).

The stark contrast between these lines and Ulysses’s “Consider your origin” reveals the irreconcilable difference between two competing notions of virtue that hold sway in Western civilization and cannot be resolved in Survival in Auschwitz: the Judeo-Christian “survival of the weakest,” which informs Levi’s ethical discourse, and the Darwinian “survival of the fittest,” which, embodied by Ulysses, serves the dark side of enlightenment so well.17 While Ulysses models resistance to inhuman forces greater than himself, much of his lesson does not apply to the death camp prisoners, but was well studied by Nazis and Italian fascists. Hitler and Mussolini learned that knowledge is power, that power is its own moral justification, and that rousing but deceitful oratory is an essential tool for manipulating the masses. Gabriele D’Annunzio, a poet and political figure whose brash, heroic style was later adopted by the Italian fascists, wrote his own Ulysses poem. Inspired by an encounter with the Greek hero, the speaker of the poem concludes: “Man, I never believed in any virtue / Except the unstoppable beating of a strong heart. / To myself alone I was faithful, / To my own designs.”18 There is nothing left here of the myth-debunking champion of humanity, only the egotistical dominator. The negative virtue associated with all Ulysses, his self-determination and the will to power, is in harmony with D’Annunzio’s superficial interpretation of the Nietzschean superman. These same ideas had an influence on the development of Italian fascism, which was founded on “the exaltation of conflict, the continuous assertion of man’s ability to control and transform reality and impose his will without limits.”19 Essentially elitist,


Italian fascism counted on superior individuals to lead a national regeneration that would return Italy to a mythical state of racial and cultural purity. The figure of Ulysses embodied this ideal type for fascist sympathizer Ezra Pound. In his Cantos, Ulysses "seeks to break free from the conditions of a corrupt present and return to the purity of human origins, where he can begin to work toward a healthy order."\textsuperscript{20} Mussolini defined Italy’s mission in similar terms, insisting that the cultural and historical basis for its current greatness derived from the earliest days of ancient Rome. "To found a city," he stated, "to discover a colony, to found an empire, are the wonders of the human spirit."\textsuperscript{21} When criticized by the League of Nations for brutally invading Ethiopia, where Italy eventually used both poisonous gas and concentration camps before the Nazis did, Mussolini argued that Italians were incapable of acting in an uncivilized fashion, having a long, noble history as "poets, artists, heroes, saints, and sailors" (172). Ulysses, as hero, sailorman, and prototypical colonizer, was not only a part of the classical heritage that the fascists exploited but also, in his willfulness, a handy embodiment of the "new man" fascism wished to create, a virile, disciplined warrior who lived for the struggle.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, Ulysses and Mussolini are linked in Pound’s writing, where "he examines the present historical figure as a possible embodiment of the prototypical fascist hero."\textsuperscript{23} In the final analysis, Ulysses is Levi’s role model but also Mussolini’s.

"The Canto of Ulysses" chapter is not only about literature as a form of cultural memory, but also about forgetting it. While reciting for Jean, Levi agonizes over the gaps in his memory of Canto XXVI, which become "irreparable" by the end of their soup-fetching journey. "I would give up today's soup," he writes, "to know how to connect [this verse] to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers—but it is no use, the rest is

\textsuperscript{20} Stephen Sicari, "Reading Pound’s Politics: Ulysses as Fascist Hero," Paideuma 17 (1988), 146.
\textsuperscript{21} Quoted in Falasca-Zamponi, 39.
\textsuperscript{22} See Emilio Gentile, The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996), for a discussion of how the fascists used myth to try to create a “new man” and from him a new kind of state.
\textsuperscript{23} Sicari, 160.
silence” (114). The silence evokes the painful death of memory that precedes the demise of the self. In his extraordinary willingness to sacrifice food in a place where hunger is constant, Levi acknowledges that his mind and spirit need nourishment, as well as his body, if he is to remain a man for a few more days.24

While his pained, fragmented narrative bears the signs of trauma that are characteristic of Holocaust testimony, enacting the features of Maurice Blanchot’s “disaster writing,”25 it also affirms Levi’s contention that Auschwitz wiped out memory and deadened thought. Less obviously, it gestures toward the grim prospect of Levi’s “unwilled journey” ending in an anonymous death deprived of all meaning, like that of the non-man emptied of all consciousness “who dies because of a yes or a no.” Here and now, Levi and Jean can “dare to reason” but, he writes, “tomorrow he or I might be dead.” Not to be denied any longer, the world of Auschwitz, its “sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers” and their hungry babel, encroaches on Ulysses’s sublime tale, but not before Levi recalls and recites, in Dante’s pure language, the drama of Ulysses’s drowning: “the prow went down, as pleased Another / And over our heads the hollow seas closed up” (114-15). Even though he is a sinner in Dante’s text, Ulysses dies the beautiful death of the self-determined individual. (God is not capricious in ending the hero’s life; rather, Ulysses has brought this end on himself.) Such a death is impossible in Auschwitz where, as Adorno asserts in Negative Dialectics, “it was no longer the individual who died, but a specimen” identical to all the others. “Genocide is the absolute integration,” because human beings are wholly unified in “their total nullity” (362). In the Holocaust, the Enlightenment’s principle of universality reaches its tragic completion. Reason, at its most reified and unreflective, has rendered human beings mere material and, then, nothing at all.

24. Levi later confirmed the accuracy of his recollection and the legitimacy of the gesture. “Where I wrote ‘I would give today’s soup to know how to join, ‘I had none whatever’ to the ending,’ I had neither lied nor exaggerated. I would really have given bread and soup, that is, blood to save from nothingness those memories... Then and there they had great value” (The Drowned and the Saved, 139).

Levi’s courageous and preposterous invocation of great art in the death camp and, especially, the beauty of Ulysses’s death, lead him to a kind of epiphany, to feeling at that moment that he understands “the reason for our fate, for our being here today…” (115). The ambiguity of poetical language has allowed a space for human freedom that the precision of scientific language cannot accommodate; even here art is redemptive to a degree. But it is significant that the thought and the sentence, stopped by an ellipsis, reach no conclusion. Can there be a reason for Auschwitz? The workings of the dialectic of enlightenment might begin to answer that question but certainly do not exhaust it. In these last, gripping paragraphs of the Ulysses chapter, a palpable tension arises from the sense of time running short, the time for poetry and the time for life. A less explicit source of tension stems from the difficult analogy between Ulysses’s fate and that of the prisoners, which, as the ellipsis indicates, falls apart at the moment of its realization. Having challenged God and smashed the limits meant to confine humanity, Ulysses’s death affirms that his was a self-determined life. Beyond their useless suffering, Holocaust victims contend with the fact that they cannot dictate the reasons for their fate because they cannot reason with the imperatives of fascist myth. In Auschwitz, life was all the more unlivable because death had lost its meaning.

The present discussion of Ulysses’s contradictions, evoking liberation for the prisoners and domination for the fascists, has not been made in the service of Langer’s claim that pre-Holocaust culture sheds little light on Auschwitz. To the contrary, this essay demonstrates that the Ulysses chapter and Survival in Auschwitz as a whole are ideal texts for helping us uncover the destructive, unending dialectic of culture and barbarism posited by Horkheimer and Adorno. Fundamental Western values are transmitted in “The Canto of Ulysses,” but they always contain darkness and light, always affirm, as Horkheimer and Adorno say, that “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (4). Their analysis of the figure of Ulysses suggests that the epic tradition renews culture, but also silently recuperates the violence out of which culture is constructed. When Levi rereads the figure of Ulysses in an effort to resist Auschwitz, he also makes evident a peril in Holocaust writing framed by humanist assumptions: entangled in “the indissoluble alliance between
reason and atrocity” (92), it risks complicity with the murderous master narrative of fascism that it seeks to overturn. To have arrived at this conclusion is not to say that Levi’s humanism is naïve. On the contrary, only by tracing the historical and moral depth of his testimony to both Auschwitz and the violence of culture can one imagine a new humanism that, with the aid of Horkheimer and Adorno’s self-reflective critical thought, achieves a more genuine human emancipation.

Finally, there is much to support the idea that, in its essence, the Holocaust constitutes an abyss beyond thought and a silence beyond words. Nevertheless, we would do well to balance our recognition of its unique and incomprehensible aspects with a broader awareness of other ethnic cleansings that, whether large or small, raise the same urgent ethical imperatives. The very persistence of genocide demands that we think more deeply about the historical and philosophical roots of the Holocaust, and how culture, while solidifying collective memory, also obscures its violent assimilations of the other.

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