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Testimony of a suspended saying

Testimony is that experience of language that remains when all other phrases have been said, all meaningful opinions have been uttered.
Giorgio Agamben, 2020

Language would be clear if one word always followed another... but history babbles and repeats. It is a stammerer. Like Moses.
Daniel Bensaid, 1990

If our time is the most talkative of all, as it is said, it makes sense to address the speaking drive¹, with its actions and production of speech. This is a rather difficult issue, since it inevitably includes us. Nevertheless, this language is our own face, as Agamben (2020/2022) states, and not simply an instrument, a tool, as we often think.

If it is true that to exist we must be inscribed in language and in code, then that language requires a speaker. A speaker in the singular, as it is developed one by one, piece by piece, making a mark of difference each time. When it is not the case, language becomes pure cliché or perhaps a rehearsal of a neo-language, the dystopian program Orwell imagined, where dehistoricization and desymbolization are taken to their zenith.

As the word makes the speaker speak, its performative power acquires inestimable proportions in this inflationary era that courts the epic of identity, from conflict-free happiness to the inflammation of individualism in the consumer ego. More myths are invented in a single day than could be invented in a century. This invention becomes algorithmic reproducibility in the public space of the networks, characterized by its recursiveness, as well as for its volatile representationality, as described by Federico and Gerardo Caetano in this *Dossier*.

The papers that initiate the Arguments section approach the topic from proposals rich in personal rather than doctrinal production. They turn their gaze to our profession and to the shared spaces of psychoanalytic production as analysts based in Latin America.

1. See: Maurice Blanchot (1969 p. XXVI)



Luis Camnitzer
Una que cubre la palabra que la nombra, 1973–1976
Mixed media 13 1/2 x 9 3/4 x 2 in (34.3 x 24.8 x 5.1 cm)
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
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Alicia Leisse writes about the migratory transit, from her own experience and that of many migrants. Laura Verissimo wonders about the Psychoanalyst's social role in Latin America facing democracies in risk and the painful consequences of poverty and child malnutrition. Mariano Horenstein contributes an incisive work, devoid of romanticization of testimony, in a time where there is a lack of listeners. He adopts the model of testimony as it has been theorized after the genocidal catastrophe to specify what distinguishes the analytical testimony.

The poetic word in the touch of meaning inspires reflections. Marcelo Toyos leads us through the question about the analyst and their style. Following poets and musicians, he leaves us authorial traces that break with any possible idea of identity in order to consider the "own", the singular, from a suspended notion. Elina Weschler proposes to include poetry within the formations of the unconscious, threading precise reflections with exemplary testimonies from different poets.

From a voice involved in saying, interesting approaches are proposed. The problematic of racism in the clinical practice is approached by Raya Zonana, who, through a black patient's narrative, introduces reflections about the possibilities of listening and the transference movements in which the analyst shows how she is affected.

Cecilia Lauriña researches the effectiveness of remote psychoanalytic supervisions, through rich testimonies and lines of analysis in which the living experience of our job is shown, highlighting the inventive aspect that Psychoanalysis has always had, case-by-case.

If clearly there is not a single way of writing our practice experience, the testimony we give of it does not aim to exemplify or make, from one case, a series, but rather, to show the stumbles that misalign and bifurcate the meanings. That was Freud's way of bearing witness to his practice and presenting his writings, more through his failures, through the *non liquet*, through that which came to undermine the path that he traced with effort.

Insofar as testimony carries some power, this would be none other than that of fragility. The fragility of the subject who testifies according to their inability to say. A saying which has a value of an event, not because of the world's strength, but because of its weakness. It is the experience of the injury, of the wound (such is the meaning of *trauma* in its greek etymology), that mute and tear the word before the catastrophe of meaning, and from where only remains, pulverized crashes can be uncovered.

The impossibility is twofold, both in speaking and in remaining silent. "What cannot be said, cannot be silenced", as F. Davoine (Davoine y Gaudillière, 2004, p. 147) states. A true oxymoron from where an opportunity arises, however. The analyst is both witness and object, in transference, of a non-word, an ellipsis that attests the confines of pain, the rupture of the transmission over the social bond failures. And the need to rebuild the Other to whom talk to.

Fragility is even the weakness of knowledge regarding the truth. The subject's truth, which is partial and delves into the universal. It uncovers what it offers of value or consensus. Even that which, from the universal, is not the objective but the dominant. We see its example in racist constructions, which have unmasked the fiction structure in scientific theories taken from social Darwinism. That quality of fragility, partiality of truth, knowledge insufficiency, is not a sign of failure nor is it a skeptical position. It is a position and an ethic of the word and condition of testimony.

To step slightly

Thus, I introduce you to the beautiful work of the author of Guaraní origin Sandra Benites, anthropologist, activist, art curator, who wrote in *The foreigner*. From a fresh language, nurtured by oral transmission, she drives us through ancient narratives. If testimony is written with corporeality, it is also inscribed with ways of inhabiting and walking the territory, since the body and the territory are not detached. Collective walking is the space for a singular listening: *hendú*, which means "listening with the whole body".

If there are different paradigms about *listening*, the *Vórtex* section takes this theme as title, problematizing and enriching its possibilities in the analytic encounter, beyond the borders of the consulting room. Psychoanalysis operates from a very simple formula: someone who speaks and another who lends their ears, the *walking listener* (Vitale, 2023) who is the analyst, capable of moving and shifting in the sonority of words if they have an awakened ear, willing to take the journey proposed by the analyst.

Since Benjamin, we have had to abandon the idea that culture rejects barbarism. *War*, plain and simple, is the title offered by the Incident section. A matter that pushes towards us with all the impact of the violent irrationality. Irrationality that leaves that common measure between madness, war and destructiveness, out in the open. In the sensitive and sharp voices of two Psychoanalysts from faraway continent lands, Brazil and India, *so far so close*, the narratives invite us to seek other paths of interpretation.

The past is never concluded, and each generation receives a weak strength over which the past enforces its right. Is it not human nature to deal with the past and with their dead?

We invite you to explore what the authors say in this *Dossier* dedicated to thinking about testimony from the perspective of the witness that remains in the place of *Survivor*. As a *superstes*, the witness testifies for the dead and the past, in their place. But not for them as they have spoken and continue to speak, that is the memory's job. The witness testifies for that silence, more painful than their words (Agamben, 2020/2022, p. 47).

Remembrance is a struggle for the oppressed past on behalf of the defeated generations. That idea of Benjamin's substitutes the progress speech for discontinuity, for the interrupted discourses, instead of the official points of view. The history of violence in the 20th century has shown that witnesses and survivors have been rarely listened to (Traverso, 2011/2012). The clearest example is the indifference towards the first editions of *If this is a man*, by Primo Levy.

That silencing has been a reflection of what happened in Latin America after the dark period of state terrorism in the civil-military dictatorships that ravaged the continent, followed by the policies of oblivion and impunity that sealed them. Faced with the eradication of memory and transmission, testimony is a resistance and re-existence strategy, as pointed out by Seligmann-Silva.

History is revisited in the work of Psychoanalyst and Historian Mariano Ruperthuz, in the pages of *Classic & Modern*. He opens a new perspective on Latin American Psychoanalysis through its reception and appropriation in various expressions of daily and cultural life of the beginning of the century.

Training as a Psychoanalyst and practicing this profession cannot be done without desire and an intimate commitment not to give in. Knowing the testimonies of colleagues who have had an “in-citation” role, organizing the first training groups, in unfavorable conditions, in which Psychoanalysis does not arouse transferences in culture, allows us to decentralize hegemonic looks and doctrinal corsets. Such is the testimonial chronicle by Jessica Salgado in *Invisible Cities*, paving the way to Psychoanalysis in Valle de Sula, Honduras.

Leftover: The figure of untestable

While we dreamed of having Luis Camnitzer between the pages of *Calibán*, we got the opportunity to meet him one morning in Montevideo. We lack a record or notes of that conversation, but, from its echoes, Luis’s notes came to us and were included in *Binnacle*.

Luis is an artist, a visual poet, but, above all, a teacher, an essayist and a critic. The cover of the *Testimonies* edition shows us an installation, an assembly of identical boxes stained with blood ink, each one identified with Roman numerals and with the enigmatic inscription *Leftover*. It is part of the artist’s work during the 1970s, a decade that marked Uruguay’s most tragic era. Boxes with bleeding remains, anonymous silences, in serialized urns. From the disturbing, the vocative-word echoes: *Remain*. Towards the end of our conversation, Luis, displeased, asks us: “What good have the testimonies done? What have we learned?”. A few days later, we received his notes.

From the resonances and the echoes of what remains formulated and unanswered, we invite you to continue and shift the horizons of the readings.

*As an echo, as circles in the water, always exchanging*² to outline what has not yet been written.

Carolina García Maggi

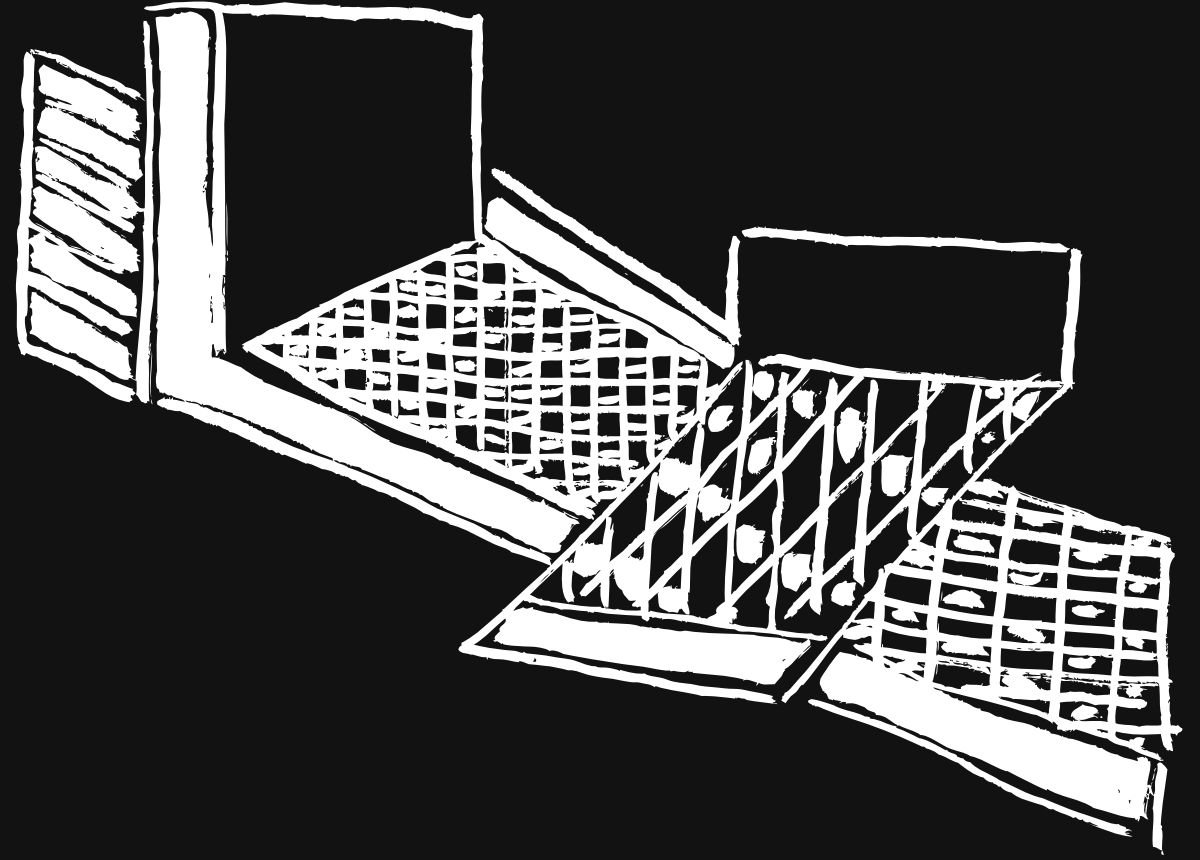
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2. “Our life events are never unique and do not happen in an univocal way. Irreducible multiples resound forever in consciousness, they come and go from our past to the future, extending like an echo, like circles in the water, always exchanging”

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Translation from Spanish: Luisa Marques Berrutti



Incident:
War

Cecilia Moia*

War

“Only business is war: lead is sold instead of bread.”

Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*

The epigraph refers to a chant from Bertolt Brecht’s monumental work, “Mother Courage and Her Children” (1941/2012), which, regardless of the context in which it was written (the Thirty Years’ War between Catholics and Protestants), is a profound anti-war plea. The cantinera Anna Fierling (Mother Courage) is a cunning peddler who tries to turn war into a business, skillfully navigating the differences between Catholics and Protestants. Mounted on her cart with her three children, she profits from the war and human suffering. In these circumstances, she loses her sons, murdered and executed by both armies. Despite these tragedies, which deeply move her, her sole objective is to maintain her business. Against the backdrop of significant historical events, she presents her materialistic-realistic idea of war. In the end, Mother Courage, old, miserable, and having learned nothing, continues pulling her cart.

At times, the author has been questioned about why the main character, despite losing everything due to the war, has not gleaned any lessons and ultimately continues to participate in it. Brecht’s intention is to show that Mother Courage shouldn’t learn anything; the German playwright’s aim is for the audience to do the learning, inducing a certain distance, estrangement, almost to the point of incomprehension¹. It’s a distancing effect (Verfremdungseffekt in German: “V-effect,” “alienation effect”) that Brecht himself (1949/1970) defined as “one that allows for recognition of the object, but simultaneously presents it as something foreign and distant (Freud)” (p. 42).

As an exercise in Brechtian style, in this edition of “**Incident**” readers are summoned as spectators to the writings of two authors from different latitudes: Daniel Delouya from Brazil and Shifa Haq from India.

From the very title of Daniel Delouya’s work, resonances of Freud’s question “Why war?” are implicit, but he goes further and poses two questions by way of exhortation: “And this war? For what?” Through a meticulous exploration of aspects of the absoluteness of narcissism, he leads us to question the purpose and consequences of armed conflicts. Through a narrative rich in psychoanalytical and philosophical references, the author explores the nature of war as a manifestation of the selfish and destructive drives of the individual, reminding us of the importance of recognizing every individual’s right to occupy a place in the world and the moral prohibition against taking another human being’s life.

* Argentine Psychoanalytic Association.

1. Brecht proposes the theory of distancing or alienation to organize his dramaturgical proposal. It prevents the viewer from instinctively identifying with and confusing the drama with reality. As one recognizes a situation as historical, the world seems capable of being transformed.

Shifa Haq’s text, through the figure of Gandhi and his proposal of nonviolent resistance, challenges us to consider the paradox of wielding both the olive branch and the weapon in the struggle for freedom. This approach leads us to contemplate the complexities of political resistance for peace. However, hunger takes center stage in her work, both as a historical consideration and in the major conflicts that have ravaged our world, particularly its role in war. Furthermore, hunger itself, which directly implies its satisfaction through food, as well as the close relationship between need and fulfillment. Her text highlights how profound imbalances and inequalities have been configured based on the need and satisfaction dichotomy. We are thus warned that there is another hunger, one that is based on an appetite for destruction.

Desiring what one sees is not inherently bad; what is harmful is possessing it without measure and without respecting the rules of the game. As Brecht (1941/2012) reminds us: “No cause is lost if there is a fool ready to fight for it” (p. 177).

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Luis Camnitzer

De la guerra [About War], 2016-2017. Mixed media Dimensions variable
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And this war? What for?

Some analytical works begin in this way or come to be formulated around the following verdict: either “me or you,” or “me and you, in the way I impose.” It’s war! The consequences of this clash between nations or between factions within the nation itself undermine the most precious acquisitions that man has achieved: culture. War is a *disillusionment*, says Freud (1915/2010a), of this conquest, for which civilization had to demand a high price from each of its members in order to establish itself as such, that is, the containment of drives, the selfish ones. The recognition of the right to occupy a place in the world and with others is the original concession given to each newcomer to this land¹, and it is in this right that the precept of “thou shalt not kill”² is based. In other words, no one has the right over anyone else’s life, which imposes a barrier to selfish motions for which the existence of the other opposes the insatiable desires for possession and expansion of the individual. Here lies Kant’s categorical imperative. It’s a practical reason that, however, opposes the natural tendency upon which the law of culture and its work are imposed. Love, that is, inclusion among others, therefore requires transformations of drives or, in the case of many, some reactive formations to deal with the threat of loss of love. There is a mourning to be done from this conflict of feelings between love and the murderous tendency, the annihilation of the other, so that culture is constituted and remains: “It was above all out of this conflict of feelings that psychology arose”³ (Freud, 1915/2010a, p. 237). Psychology thus has the law of culture as a condition for its birth. Psychology would be precisely that work of mourning which is simultaneous with the emergence of language as a mythical and poetic place of concession, of ceasing to occupy the absolute, narcissistic position of the all-powerful perverse father, thus opening the space for exchanges, cultural production in communion with others. Language is precisely that myth of the hero that transmits-lies⁴

* Brazilian Psychoanalytic Society of São Paulo.

1. See: Freud (1895/1995).

2. See: Freud (1913 [1912]/2010c).

3. Translator’s Note: Translation by J. L. Etcheverry. The translation corresponds to p. 295 of: Freud, S. (1992). On War and Death: Contemporary Themes. In J. L. Etcheverry (trans.), Complete Works (Vol. 14, pp. 273-303). Amorrortu. (Original work published in 1915).

4. “The poet transmits reality in the sense of his longing” (Freud, 1921/2011, pp. 101-102), therefore it is a lie, at the same time that it is a transmission of the death of the primordial father and of the new kingdom of word and poetry, that is, that murder can only occur in speech, that is, in mourning, and the assumption of its consequences, of castration and constitution of a human community. Translator’s Note: In Freud’s Portuguese quote, there is a wordplay, *transmentiu* [transmuted], present in the translation by P. C. de Souza for Companhia das Letras. In J. L. Etcheverry’s Spanish version: “The poet presented reality in a lying light, in the sense of his yearning”. The translation corresponds to p. 128 of: Freud, S. (1992). *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In J. L. Etcheverry (trans.), Complete Works (Vol. 18, pp. 63-136). Amorrortu. (Original work published in 1921).

to others about desire and the realization of patricide by replacing his place, this time with the site of language, in a new time in which occupation and loss of that place can be realized through words to give birth to the work of culture. A work that is reiterated ad infinitum in the work of analysis and that is, finally, a constant stoning of that endeavor. When civil war erupts, or between peoples, and the killing ends up being authorized, as well as the destruction of nature, homes, material and cultural goods, generating refugees and causing hunger and misery, the cultural pact is broken, and most cultural acquisitions end up being harmed.

The origins of peoples are associated with geographical regions, the establishment of communities, and their organization under the dictates of the dead father, totems, and taboos. They are the singular identifications around certain ideals that have maintained the ties and development of peoples, and their origin legends. A recent study on early human groups shows that indigenous peoples consisted of small egalitarian communities where the progressive accumulation of scientific, technological, and cultural goods was distributed, and not used for domination over others, but for the benefit of all, in favor of the group as a whole⁵. Only later would power, slavery, and wars appear on the stage of history. At the moment when power over the other is imposed on a group, or between groups, it is violence that is announced, and mutual identification, the bonds between the subjugated, are what can unite forces to claim justice. However, they later result in a war that further increases violence⁶. Freud emphasizes that the discovery of the two groups of instincts, of life and death, has a fundamental place in the relationship with peace and war. The death instincts are essential for life, as their actions on the sexual instincts allow differentiation in the service of language for the establishment of the cultural dimension in love, sex, play, sports, science, trade, the creativity of the arts and literature, etc. However, due to their preponderances, the death instincts, to the extent that they become disconnected from the work of language, tend to serve survival, selfishness, fanaticism, and death. This is the extreme point of their actions when they end up being saturated by cultural demands. At that moment, domination and annihilation of the other prevail. It is difficult, therefore, according to Freud, to eliminate wars. In the current perspectives of the digital age, the future scenario seems even more astonishing: wars would take a different course, in which it would be possible to destroy entire social layers or peoples, making them useless and dispensable, hungry and destined for death, without the use of firearms or nuclear weapons⁷.

The conflict of the current war in the Middle East

The recent war in the Middle East – sparked by the cruel massacre committed by the Hamas group ruling the Gaza Strip, targeting the adjacent Israeli population – is a new edition of a conflict over the occupation of the ancient land of Palestine that has been repeating for a hundred years, but whose roots are much older.

5. See: Graeber and Wengrow (2021). A work by an anthropologist and an archaeologist with numerous new evidences based, in part, on precise research techniques from different parts of the world.

6. See: Freud (1933 [1932]/2010b).

7. See: Harari (2018/2019).

The current debate on war and the part of its sad devastation arises in geopolitical terms, as well as igniting anti-Semitism worldwide. The complexity of this debate should take us back to a long and unique history of the Jewish people, but which is, at the same time, characteristic of the West as we know it today, because, with each terrorist or military escalation, Israel's right to exist, the nature of Zionism, together with questioning of Israeli anachronistic colonialism and the alleged apartheid in relation to the Palestinians, end up exacerbated alongside strong waves of anti-Semitism. Here, war and the psychology of peoples come to life and curiously evoke Freud's (1939 [1934-1938]/2018) latest book on the contribution of Moses, with which I would like to begin the final part of this essay.

When Freud (1934/1970) begins to write his book, he writes to Arnold Zweig: "We ask ourselves once again how the Jews became what they are [...]. Then I discovered the formula: Moses created the Jews" (p. 91). What invention is this? A new idea about a single god, creator of the universe and life, confirmed by various historical and archaeological evidence, arises in the glorious eighteenth Egyptian dynasty. A young pharaoh, Amenophis IV, takes power in 1375 BC and establishes a narrow monotheism. His reign lasted seventeen years before being overthrown by the previous regime. A priest or governor of the defeated kingdom chose a slave people to revive that religion in exchange for their freedom. Hence the exodus and arrival in the land of Israel. The monotheistic precepts of this religion are: the fight against polytheism and its representations, opposition to any worship of beings in that land, whether natural or human, and the abolition of the belief in life after death. The central idea is that man serves God, who in turn cannot be figuratively represented. The fight against idolatry becomes a unique mission, and for this, the organization of a community through 613 practical precepts that span food, sexuality, death, and relationships among its members. Needless to say, this imposition of the total eradication of idolatry is impractical and leads to the murder of Moses; however, the resurgence of that tradition with those extreme and constant aspirations of symbolization and sublimation point to the highest cultural acquisitions in relation to the dictates of the laws of the dead father: the valuation of word and intellectuality, as opposed to sensoriality. The change from instinctual satisfactions to these ideals endowed that group, on the one hand, with a sense of pride in fulfillment, and on the other hand, with strong bonds of belonging and guarantee of life for one in relation to the other. Mosaic religion –with its extreme mark of negativity– nullifies God as a person and, therefore, is a religion without God, which makes its assumption and goals unattainable; the era of the prophets demonstrates a continuous failure to fully fulfill them⁸. But that's history. The biblical kingdoms come to an end with the destruction of the two temples by the invasions and wars with the Greeks (586 BC) and Romans (70 AD), the latter leading to the diaspora, although a significant core of Jews remains in the land of Israel. The persecutions of Jews for centuries in the Christian world are known, culminating in the atrocities of the Holocaust, with the pretext of the first to arrogate to themselves the place of the chosen people⁹. The Jews have always aspired to return to the promised land, and this is evidenced in their vast literature, beyond the nicknames of their festivities. With the emancipation of the Jews (which accelerates the disconnection of religion from the identity of the Jewish people) and the European movements of national and territorial vindication of peoples, between

8. See: Delouya (2000).

9. The truth is that the biblical term is not "chosen people," but Am Segula, people with a special property, for assuming the fight against idolatry, Milhemet Avoda Zara."



Luis Camnitzer

They found that reality had intruded upon the image, 1987. Mixed media. Dimensions variable

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the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the idea of the Jewish state in Israel emerges. Idea advocated by the Viennese playwright Theodor Herzl (1896 [1895]/2016), from which a Zionist movement and successive migrations are consolidated (1882-1903, 1904-1914, 1919-1923, 1924-1928, etc., until the Holocaust). It is worth remembering that returns to Israel already existed before, in the 6th, 13th, 17th, and 18th centuries, with a more religious character. In the Modern Age, the land of Israel with its natives (Christians, Muslims, and Jews) has been successively occupied by the Syrians, Egyptians, the Ottoman Empire, and the British. In the early Jewish migrations, lands were bought to establish farms with Marxist and anarchist regimes, and relations with the natives were of friendship and collaboration. However, with the 1917 declaration by British minister Arthur J. Balfour on the right to the establishment of a Jewish state, relations soured and in 1920 Palestinian leaders met in Damascus to ban land sales to immigrants and oppose the establishment of the Jewish state. Armed conflicts soon began and remain ongoing to this day. In 1948, with the declaration of the State of Israel, the Palestinians refused to establish their own state alongside Israel, claiming the entire territory, which sparked the war that generated over 700,000 Palestinian refugees. Israel's war crimes have increased

Hunger and a Place for Yum-Yum

And We would certainly try You with somewhat of fear and hunger..”

Holy Qur’ān, 2:155

since then. And, on the other side, Palestinian liberation organizations have resorted to terror against the Israeli population.

Until the emancipation of Jews in Europe, the Jew was considered the foreign other – “you are not from here” –, with no rights over the land and the registration of their properties, among other denied civil rights, in addition to being seen as the cause of all evils, it is interesting to note how that idea that Jews have no right to the land of Israel returns to support the Palestinians and, therefore, Zionism is genocidal and colonialist, reigniting structural anti-Semitism everywhere.

The Palestinian people and Israel have equal rights to the land, and it is necessary to facilitate the coexistence of two neighboring states. The State of Israel as exclusively the home for the Jewish people, despite its historical reasons, ultimately violates the necessary hospitality for any foreigner who wants to settle there.

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When I overcome the forces that may have silenced the musicality of Indian history, its joyous orchestral refrain with foreign lands and cultures -be it near or far, I recount growing up in an India that had deep friendship with the historic Palestine through an intimate festooning of mutual imagination. Even though the right-wing forces, and their islamophobia, wish to erase the many chapters from our collective memory, in the ruins of our democracy the truth endures. Legends have it, that Baba Farid, the beloved poet and mystic travelled to East Jerusalem in the early thirteenth century, Ottoman Empire. His saintly presence touched those who he encountered and seven centuries later the place where he lived is still known as *Al-hindi Serai*, a shrine, that has welcomed *murids* or the desirous ones who seek union with the mystic teacher. Not so long ago, the Nizam of Hyderabad, an independent monarchy in the Deccan before it joined the Indian Union post-independence, presented chandeliers to adorn Al-Aqsa Mosque, that perhaps glow even now in hours of silence and prayers. Besides the image of effulgent chandeliers, lies the sepian images of fallen Indian soldiers that fought alongside Allied forces against the Ottoman Empire. Around forty soldiers were buried in two cemeteries at Gaza far away from the motherland but closer to Baba Farid. While the monster that haunts people of the market driven globalized world reduces cultures to forms of consumptions such as the promise of “authentic” hummus, zaatar, kunefe in supermarkets, in the deep recess of Indian imagination, Palestine flickers as a tall, burly man in keffiyeh we came to recognize as Yasser Arafat. Perhaps it was the memory of the long night of British colonization of India, with its wounds still quite fresh in the mind of its people, the new republic of India found an undaunting connection with the political struggle of South Africa and Palestine Liberation Organization. India was the first non-Arab country to recognize PLO as the only legitimate representation of Palestinians. One might even say that India was able to receive and acknowledge that Palestinians, through Arafat, in the words of Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish, ‘carried olive branch in one hand, and freedom fighter’s gun in the other.’ These words come back to our minds as a plea for a binocular vision or scotopic

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vision without which we may experience a tragic divide within ourselves or the contemporary moment. How do we reconcile with the two aspects of the image as coterminous or sharing a border? The challenge such a picture poses is not unknown. When Gandhi spoke of a nonviolent resistance, or non-violence, in the same breath, it was an impossible proposition. The world wondered: is it possible to be nonviolent in a political resistance? In the Indian experiment with the truth of the oppressed, we learned that nonviolence is not the same as cowardice and that violence may one day give way to non-violence. The image of a freedom fighter could therefore carry the two sides, the olive branch and the gun, in a paradoxical relation. It is important to consider that support for Palestinian right to freedom and sovereignty has a history, an old friendship, that did not engage in antisemitism.

Soon after its independence, India was the first country to sever diplomatic, cultural or commercial relations with the Apartheid government of South Africa. The ANC maintained a representative office in the 1960s onwards while working side by side in the UN, NAM and other multilateral organizations standing against the oppressive racial classification. One might ask what the colonies know about rule by force that does not allow for political neutrality or liberal humanist approach. It is as though the past colonies fail to repress the specters of colonialism that mark their consciousness. This is sometimes visible in politics of friendship but also in the ethnic, ethno-nationalist or caste enactments they perpetuate on their own soil. India is neither without its own colonial ambitions nor innocent of its deep-rooted preference for homo hierarchicus. It has practices “apartness” for centuries, segregating people based on their birth or belonging, on its land and around its peripheries.

Like the Greek monster Hydra, ‘segregation’ or the need for ‘apartness,’ what in Africans came to be known as apartheid in South African political unconscious, has more than one head. Freud confronted the many-headed beast in his clinic as defensive operations, of repression, negation, disavowal and foreclosure through which ego perpetuates an internal apartheid for intolerable aspects of reality. In ‘Fetishism’ (1927), Freud observes that it is possible, and in painful situations necessary, for the ego to split itself to keep two contradictory experiences incommunicado, prevented from patriation. This way, for instance, one can host a memory of one’s victimization while also being identified with the aggressor, as two separate heads. Similarly, Freud noted that the fantasy of a child being beaten while appearing masochistic could also be sadistic (1919). Most instances of ethno-nationalisms insist on attacking and delegitimizing the existence of contradictory states in favor of pure histories of innocence. The colonizers carried the burden to civilize the colonies while killing thousands in through the logic of racial darwinism or religion; while post-colonies, chaotically pluralistic in most cases, may be organized by the fear of minorities to establish their regimes of power.

The Israeli retaliation, following October attacks by Hamas, has killed and wounded thousands and more than two million displaced. The world is looking on to those who narrowly escaped death but may not escape hunger, starvation, dehydration, and disease. I wish to stay with the image of the starving hungry person to imagine what will be an ethical obligation, not only for those we grieve but those who are disappearing before

our eyes. For the poorer nations, hunger has always been a war. But now we are called to witness an appetite for destruction. Through the consternation of the starved, wounded and displaced Palestinians, Giorgio Agamben’s formulation of “bare life” as an analysis of sovereign violence and biopolitics returns to our minds. Palestinians fate connects them to the millions starving in Sahel region, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan whose dispossession like their Palestinian counterparts is a consequence of expanding armed-conflict, coup d’état and poverty. Freud knew that hunger is a catastrophe, where care and violence take macabre shape inside the body and the mind. Even in the concentration camps, Levi testified, it was the starved ‘Muselmann’ that were the most abject form of life for whom fear, humiliation and horror had taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic who the inmates wished to avoid at all costs (Agamben, 1995). Agamben viewed bare life called “Muselmann” to designate “not so much a limit between life and death... [but] the threshold between the human and the inhuman (Agamben, 1999, pp 55).

It is interesting to imagine that an Arabic word, ‘*Muslim*’ appears as the master figure of ‘bare life’ in the concentration camps, literally meaning, “the one who unconditionally submits to the will of God” (Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, 45). Upon reading Levi’s account of the abject life in the camps, Agamben writes, “In any case, it is certain that, with a kind of ferocious irony, the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews” but, rather, as Muslims. A riveting association emerges from Thomas Keneally’s Booker Prize winning novel, Schindler’s Ark. Keneally writes that the camp jargon was “based on people’s memory of newsreels of famine in Muslim countries, for a prisoner who had crossed the borderline that separated the ravenous living from the good- as- dead. Some analysts suggest that one can also assume that some prisoners of Nazi camps had seen photographs or perhaps read Albert Camu’s chronicles of the famine in the Kabyle region of Algeria in 1939 (Jarvis, 2014). What is important to note is that the image of the Muselmann, throws light on modern European colonial violence and its procedures that carry holographic affinity with Arabs of Algeria, ‘coolies’ of India and ‘niggers’ of Africa. These epithets are markers of necropolitics and hunger, a line that separates the favored and the damned.

With the news of the alarming rate of hunger experienced by the dispossessed Palestinians in Gaza, coincided with a change in my dream life that’s now pervaded with nightmares. The image of children, women and men queuing for food in empty plastic containers; trucks of food vanishing before a starving mass of people; or the manic relief on the rain drenched faces of children hopeful that Allah was trying to quench their thirst had begun to evoke a traumatic reaction in my unconscious, linking me to the experience of hunger that’s stored in my tissues generationally. Lacan famously wrote, “The drives necessitate us in the sexual order; they come from the heart. To our great surprise, Freud tells us that love, on the other hand, comes from the belly; from the place of yum-yum (Lacan, 1973, p. 189). This place, however, is a place of the first wound. Recently, my early oral life has a new formation, that of the vampire. In a dream, a vampirish presence is approaching fast to feed on me. It began to dawn on me that it is an unconscious representation of those for whom my heart was consciously bleeding. On waking up, shame replaced terror. Besides, one’s identification and *caritas*, is it possible to perpetuate a private caste division in which I must protect against the one’s condemned to starve? While vampire folklores and representations tend to suggest heterosexual phallic-oedipal aspects (an aristocrat lurking around the bedroom of a female), the necrophilic, cannibalistic invasion in my

dream brought associations of the Great Hunger and Bengal famines, where thousands collapsed in the private pits of fire without a grain of compassion by their absentee landlords or colonial rulers. Vampires, as we know, are dead and condemned to live forever; a state similar to hunger where one is being destroyed silently by a sensation that doesn't yield itself to a quick death. Like the folklores, the undecaying body of the vampire, unapologetically, walked out of its burial ground to affect this dreamer.

In the paper on transference love, Freud draws the reader's attention to elemental passions more urgent than what can be lulled by analytic technique. Implicit in the text is a reckoning that the subject of love soon turns into a discussion on food. He turns to poetics of protests, where the psychical diminishes in favour of the material and what appears at its place is 'the logic of soup with dumplings for arguments' (Freud, 1915, pp 169). He goes on to dream up food, in a manner similar to a cloaked confessions, that the real threat to the psychoanalytic project is an unassimilable hunger, that is at best tolerated but not forgotten by the patient. He writes, 'He must not stage the scene of a dog-race in which the prize was to be the garland of sausages but which some humourist spoilt by throwing a single sausage onto the track. The result was of course that the dogs threw themselves upon it and forgot all about the race and the garland...' (pp.169). Freud could see that both in love and war, we are challenged to imagine that we might gain from command over thinking, a function that has inestimable importance for us. Thinking here is not so much a plea for reason rather an invocation for eros or culture. Perhaps vampires do not return to living with torments of hunger. They covet life itself and envy its effect that runs in the veins of the living as their eternal right. Freedom.

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*Dossier:
Survivor*

Luis Camnitzer
A to cosmopolite, 2020-2022. Lambda c-type prints in 678 parts
11 x 8 1/2 in each (27.9 x 21.6 cm each)
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
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Silvana Rea*

Survivor

Nadia Murad, Iraqi human rights activist, and winner of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize, stated in an interview with the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (2023): “If you don’t share your story, you protect criminals.” Engaged in the fight against the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, of which she was a victim and survivor, she argues that only testimony can prevent other women from going through what she went through and bring those responsible to justice.

In fact, several thinkers point out that the rapid erasure of the crimes of the military dictatorship in Brazil by the broad, general, and unrestricted amnesty, and even of slavery, not only prevented public reparation policies, but also helped to perpetuate certain social practices, such as work analogous to slavery and police violence. On the other hand, Argentina not only did not forget but also condemned those involved in the atrocities, giving voice to those who survived and to so many others who perished, testimony recorded almost 40 years later, in the film “1985” by Santiago Mitre.

There are so many who do not survive: by the lives stolen by the situation to which they were subjected, or by suicide due to extreme desubjectivation, or by guilt for having remained alive. The survivor is condemned to the penalty of their pains, the experiences

lived, the marks in memory. They rely on testimony for non-forgetting, even though many prefer to forget. By exposing their scars, they denounce, break narratives that omit facts and insist on unique versions, make their horror enter the symbolic order.

Surviving is a privileged means of placing oneself in History. That’s why Primo Levi (2016) divides the survivors of the Nazi extermination camps into two categories: those who remain silent and those who can speak about what happened. He chose to recount what he experienced in Auschwitz. But there are those who return without words, as Benjamin (1933/2012) notes in the combatants of the First World War, who faced with the radicalism of the experience returned in a state of muteness, unable to narrate what they had lived. And when no narrative survives, men lose the ability to transmit teachings and the cultural heritage of Humanity is impoverished. To the point that Agamben (2005) states that contemporary man has, as one of the few data available about himself, his inability to make and transmit experiences.

It is important to think that the suppression of historical experience functions like in the individual psyche. Culture also has denied aspects and, as such, there is always what remains as indomitable, which escapes control and tends to repeat violent and traumatic events, as Freud (1914/1969) already indicat-



Luis Camnitzer

Uruguayan torture series, 1983–1984 (detail) Photoetching in 35 parts, 29 1/2 x 21 5/8 in (74.93 x 55.12 cm)
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2024 Luis Camnitzer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

ed. Or the return of the oppressed, which unlike the repressed, is the result of a censorship that is organized against the right of the self to exist, carried out from an overdetermination from outside, and under the effect of the oppression of the other (Bollas, 2015).

There is therefore a painful work to be done by the subjects and through culture itself. In social catastrophes, individual and collective remembrance are fundamental interdependent processes of elaboration, even if a temporary repression is necessary for this. Weil (2021) cites the case of the Holocaust, which required more than thirty years for the testimonies to find a place of belonging, recognition, and shared memory in the community.

That’s why Zaltzman (2007) recalls that the concept of crimes against humanity,

which emerged as a legal notion in 1945, in the Statute of the International Military Tribunal of Nuremberg, went through successive revisions of what would characterize this notion, showing the difficulty in defining this statute, and reaching the point of qualifying it based on the non-human. Understood as a situation of exception, there is a risk of positioning the criminal dimension as outside the human condition, preserving the illusion of an idealized humanity. Which would leave the “spirit of evil” active in an invisible way. Fundamental, therefore, is the work of culture that brings to the level of consciousness what until then was denied, in order to construct a new intelligibility bringing together the psychic, individual and collective dimension, and to transform the unthinkable into the thinkable to be thought.

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In other words, recounting the remembered allows for the elaboration of the traumatic. This is what determines the listener of the analyst, it is what transforms raw experience into individual re-signification and social repertoire. And what makes it possible to achieve transgenerational flights, since the denied content is also transmitted transgenerationally; an unconscious inheritance that in the form of symptoms appears in the subjectivity of new generations, through the processes of identification and construction of ideals (Rosa, 2001). And this is the task of the survivor. It is up to them to have the power of historical and, therefore, political resistance capacity. Only then can those who survived a physical or intellectual genocide prepare the conditions for self-forgiveness and forgiveness of the other, and for the rehumanizing reparation of the group (Bollas, 2011). And to be able to assert their story in History.

To address the topic, we have the article by Enzo Traverso, which recovers the importance of the testimonies of the survivor Primo Levi in his politics of the present and ours and reflects on certain misconceptions that pursue him. Next, Marcio Seligmann speaks of a new modality of constructing the memory of the exploited, which includes anti-monuments and counter-images, provoking a testimonial and decolonial turn of knowledge. The policies of forgetting State terrorism that raise denialism voices are the focus of Gerardo and Federico Caetano, who highlight the civilizing potential of memory. Following this, to address the power of photographic records, Ángeles Donoso starts from family images of photos by her grandfather to trace her personal testimony on the Pinochet dictatorship. And Claudia Cavalcanti brings her testimony of her experience in East Germany and the wait for her documentation produced by the Stasi. And closing our Dossier, Claudine Chamoreau and Jonathan Rangel speak of the survival of a language as a socio-historical construct with which a group of people identi-

fies, and the imminent risk of some languages disappearing.

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Translator: Stella Barnabé

Enzo Traverso*

Primo Levi and the Public Use of the Past

It would be easy—and banal—to start this presentation by emphasizing how much we miss the voice of Primo Levi today, in times of rising xenophobia, racism, and far-right movements throughout Europe, the US and Israel, at a time in which public intellectuals have almost disappeared in Italy. But I will avoid lamentation, which did not belong to Primo Levi's style of thought.

There are two ways of speaking about Primo Levi and the politics of the present: the first consists in inscribing him into the politics of his own present, which was significantly different from ours, and the second deals with the current uses of his work. These distinct levels of interpretation cross and merge and it is almost impossible to carefully separate them, but this swinging between past and present reveals misunderstandings related to his legacy which are interesting to consider. Misconceptions currently persist concerning Levi's position in Italian culture, his definition as a Jewish writer and, last but not least, his role as a literary witness of the Holocaust, a word he deeply disliked and with which today he is completely identified. I will try to analyze them sequentially.

The destiny of classics is to be permanently “used” and reinterpreted, and Levi does not

escape this. Twenty years ago, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998), a remarkable book built on a sort of posthumous dialogue with Primo Levi, notably through a rereading of his last essay, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). I am not sure that Levi would have shared Agamben's vision of the extermination camps as the biopolitical nomos of Western civilization and the “naked life” of the “Muselmann” as the modern expression of its subjacent paradigm, *homo sacer*, but this is not the point. Agamben's “use” of Primo Levi is perfectly legitimate. The point is that, regardless his own intentions, Agamben engendered the misconception of Levi as a forerunner of so-called “Italian theory,” a current of thought represented by philosophers as diverse as Agamben himself, Toni Negri, Roberto Esposito, Mario Tronti or Simona Forti. It seems to me that this renewal of Italian critical thought has entailed both the assimilation of Foucault and post-structuralism and a radical break with an intellectual tradition going from the Enlightenment to historicism, a tradition that precisely defines the philosophical horizons of Primo Levi. It is true that he pushed this tradition to its limits, almost putting it into question, but he still remained a critical enlightener, a writer for whom reality was a material, anthropological, cultural, and historical product rather than a linguistic construction or a semantic structure. In spite of their missed dialogue, he probably shared Jean Améry's stoic claim of a “positivist” spirit, the spirit of somebody

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who believes in experience, who “clings to reality and its enunciation.” And he would have subscribed without hesitation to Jean Améry’s definition of the Enlightenment as *philosophia perennis*.

Classicism and positivism are the pillars of his first books. *If This Is a Man* (1947) is shaped into the model of Dante’s *Inferno*—deportation as a fall into Hades, the camp with its circles, the inexhaustible variety of the pains inflicted on the inmates, and the great diversity of its characters, from his suffering comrades to the omnipotent torturers—whereas *The Truce* (1963) tells of his coming back to life: the journey that allowed him, after his liberation from Auschwitz in January 1945 and an interminable peregrination throughout Central Europe, to reach his home in Turin. Differently from Dante, however, his prose is naked, sober, humble. It is also opposed to the rhetoric of antifascism—to which he belonged nonetheless—which aimed at pronouncing moral sentences and spreading political messages.

Beside Dante’s literary model, *If This Is a Man* reveals a second, fundamental source, which is a scientific paradigm: the legacy of a chemist who describes, orders, classifies and scrutinizes the overwhelming experience endured in Auschwitz. The literary sensitivity of the writer and the analytical gaze of the chemist are the foundations of his entire work. The Nazi camps were for him an anthropological laboratory in which, beside the serial destruction of lives, the human condition revealed its extreme limits. Of this anthropological laboratory, Levi was first a fragment—what the Nazi lexicon called technically “a piece” (*Stück*), i.e. a victim—and then a witness; even more than a witness: an analyst. Witnesses always filter their experience through their own culture, select and interpret their recollections according to their own knowledge and questions. Witnesses ask themselves what is the meaning of their suffering and their answers are neither unique nor immutable. In the eyes of

Levi, the Holocaust remained a “black hole,” a definition borrowed from the language of natural sciences, but this mysterious abyss had to be explored, studied and possibly understood. He explained—this is the legacy of his books—that it is impossible to investigate the Nazi camps without the testimony of the deportees. The point was not adding a touch of color or authenticity to a whole of facts clearly established; the point was using an irreplaceable source for understanding the extermination camps, for penetrating both the phenomenology and the meaning of an experience that transcended the archival materials and whose evidence its architects had tried to erase. Thus, *If This Is a Man* has become a fundamental link in the chain of an open discussion on the conflictive yet nonetheless vital relationship between memory and history.

This posture reveals a form of rationalism that Levi had inherited from his scientific education, a rationalism that had guided his career as a chemist and became a permanent feature of his mind. One of the lines describing the diagram that opens his personal anthology, *The Search for Roots* (1981), reads “the salvation of understanding” (*la salvazione del capire*). It is marked by four names tracing, from Antiquity to the twentieth century, a scientific and rational canon that had inspired his intellectual journey: Lucretius, Darwin, Bragg, and Clarke. As Levi stressed during his conversations with Tullio Regge, he was attached to a “romantic” vision of science: a science “with a human face,” he said, that carried on the joyful explorations of the Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars, antipodal to the lethal performances of instrumental reason. In his few science fiction stories, he warned against Promethean—and totalitarian—projects for dominating nature and annihilating humankind by means of modern technology.

Primo Levi’s work, as I emphasized above, has to be put under a pre-Foucauldian epistemic horizon, but his definition of Auschwitz as “a gigantic biological and social experience”

clearly suggests a definition of National Socialism as a biopolitical power. This is an example of how he reinterpreted and pushed to the limits the classical tradition from which he came. He does not belong to the so-called “Italian thought,” but the latter has found in his work many elements for building its own hypotheses and categories.

The second widespread misunderstanding of Primo Levi deals with his Jewishness: the tendency to classify him as a “Jewish writer.” Undoubtedly, Levi was a Jew. He never tried to hide this obvious fact: he had been persecuted and deported to Auschwitz as a Jew and spent most of his intellectual life bearing testimony to the Nazi extermination of the European Jews. Nonetheless, he was not a “Jewish writer” like Elie Wiesel, Aaron Appelfeld or Philip Roth, to mention some of his contemporaries. The Italian-Jewish writers of the twentieth century deeply differed from their Israeli fellows, as well as from the New York intellectuals, however diverse the latter could be. Not only did he never consider himself as the representative of a religious community—his attachment to the tradition of science and the Enlightenment implied a radical form of atheism, which his experience of deportation strongly reinforced, even if he always expressed respectful feelings towards believers, in his life as well as in his novels—but he probably never felt part of a Jewish milieu with clearly defined social and cultural boundaries. Rather than as an Italian Jew—a definition in which Jew is the substantive and Italian the adjective—he preferred to depict himself as a *italiano ebreo*, a “Jewish Italian.”

Interviewed by Risa Sodi after his successful lecture tour of the United States in 1985, he stressed that in Italy the notion of “Jewish writer” was very difficult to define. There, he said, “I am known as a writer who, among other things, is Jewish,” whereas in the US he felt “as if [he] had worn again the David star!” Of course, he was joking, but he wished to emphasize that his education and his cultural for-

mation had not been particularly Jewish, and that most of his friends as well as the overwhelming majority of the Italian readers of his books were not Jewish. In a lecture given in 1982, he admitted that he had finally resigned himself to accept the label of “Jewish writer,” but “not immediately and not without reservations.” This remark could be extended to most Jewish writers of twentieth century Italian literature, from Italo Svevo to Alberto Moravia, from Giorgio Bassani to Natalia Ginzburg, and many others.

Between 1938 and the end of the Second World War, i.e. between the promulgation of fascist racial laws and his liberation from Auschwitz, Levi probably fitted the famous Sartrean definition of the Jew: “The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew ... for it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew.” In a conversation with Ferdinando Camon, he mentioned his Jewishness as “a purely cultural fact.” “If not for the racial laws and the concentration camp,” he said, “I probably would no longer be a Jew, except for my last name. Instead this dual experience, the racial law and the concentration camp, stamped me the way you stamp a steel plate: at this point I am a Jew, they have sewn the star of David on me and not only on my clothes.” Levi certainly was a “Godless Jew” (*gottloser Jude*), as Peter Gay depicted Sigmund Freud, but he probably would not have inscribed himself into the noble gallery of those whom Isaac Deutscher called the “non-Jewish Jews,” i.e. the Jewish heretics. After the war, Primo Levi did not feel targeted by anti-Semitism and considered emancipation from religious alienation and obscurantism as a legacy of the Enlightenment rather than a task of the present. He did not consider himself as an iconoclast or a dissenter.

In many articles and interviews, Levi repeatedly affirmed that his Italian roots shaped his way of writing—books such as *The Periodic Table* or *The Wrench* celebrate the Pied-

montese Jewish culture and even the Piedmont dialect—but had to be projected into a broader world. Auschwitz was the paradoxical locus where, as an Italian Jew, he discovered cosmopolitanism. One of the first chapters of *If This Is a Man*—significantly titled “Initiation”—depicts the camp as a “tower of Babel” where people spoke dozens of languages and where the capacity to overcome these linguistic boundaries became a condition of survival. Like *The Truce*, this book offers an extraordinary gallery of characters belonging to different cultures, from Poles to Russians, from Ukrainians to Greeks, from Frenchmen to Germans, as well as to different social layers, but merged in a world in which all traditional cleavages and hierarchies were turned upside down. Whereas in Italy, as a Jew, he was a member of a minority, in Auschwitz his particularism was Italian, not Jewish. In both *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*, his Italian origins become a prism through which he discovers and describes other cultures, distant and unknown to him. This is true, first of all, for Yiddish culture, which appeared very strange, not to say “exotic,” to an Italian Jew. But he also reversed this gaze: in the eyes of a Russian or a Polish Jew, the image of a Jew in a gondola or on the top of Vesuvius was just as exotic. Today, Auschwitz has become the locus par excellence of a *Western* memory of the Holocaust, but the world he described in such a colorful and sympathetic way is an Eastern-Jewish, Slavonic, Yiddish, Central European and Balkan world. And the richness of his books lies in this contrast. In Auschwitz, he learned the existence of a national Jewry, with its own language and culture, made of traditions, practices and rituals. His last novel, *If Not Now, When?* (1982), is a saga of the Jewish Resistance in Poland, experienced as a sort of national redemption. He was fascinated by this Judaism, a Judaism of which he had learnt the history, celebrated the greatness and mourned the destruction, but which was not his own world.

Against the cliché portraying the modern Jewish intellectual as a figure of exile and extraterritoriality, Levi was a striking example of rootedness in a national society, language, and culture. We could almost speak of physical roots, if we simply recall the words with which he evoked his family house in Turin, where he was born on July 31, 1919 and where he committed suicide on April 11, 1987. Presenting himself as an “extreme example of sedentary life,” he wrote that he had become encrusted in his apartment as seaweed “fixes itself on a stone, builds its shell and doesn’t move any more for the rest of its life.” He passionately described the streets, the river, and the surrounding mountains of Turin, as well as the austere and industrious character of its inhabitants. In 1976, he portrayed his town with the following words: “I am very linked to my little fatherland (*patria*). I was born in Turin; all my ancestors were Piedmontese; in Turin I discovered my vocation, I studied at University, I have always lived, I have written and published my books with a publisher very rooted in this town despite its international reputation. I like this town, its dialect, its streets, its paving stones, its boulevards, its hills, its surrounding mountains I scaled when I was young; I like the highlander and country origins of its population.” In short, he was a *rooted* writer, who needed a deep anchorage in a particular social, cultural, national, and even regional background in order to express the universality of his themes and messages. Maybe, he added, it was because of this remarkable rootedness that journey was the *topos* of so many of his books. Just as his melancholic Enlightenment was antipodal to the cult of science and conquering technology, his “sedentary life” was neither provincial nor nationalist. For him, science was not a blind, instrumental rationality, rather a universal language inseparable from classical humanism (a category he never put into question, differently from postmodernism or structuralism); likewise, his Italian identity,



Luis Camnitzer
Fenster [Ventana, Window], 2001-2002/2010. Mixed Media 27 4/8 x 23 5/8 in (70.01 x 60.01 cm)
 Daros Latinamerica Collection. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
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both Jewish and Piedmontese, was able to enter into dialogue with any culture, just as how Faussone, the hero of *The Wrench*, traveled around the world to build bridges, barrages and power plants.

A third misunderstanding of Primo Levi’s work deals with his role as a witness. After his death, he has been canonized as a witness par excellence of the Holocaust, and thus achieved the status of a paradigmatic victim which he did not have during his life. He wrote most of his books at a time in which the Holocaust had not yet entered our common historical consciousness as a central event of the twentieth

century or even, in broader terms, of Western civilization. When he published *If This Is a Man*, the word Holocaust did not exist for defining the Nazi extermination of the Jews, and later, he pointed out that this word, etymologically meaning a sacrifice offered to the Gods, was “inappropriate,” “rhetorical” and finally “mistaken.” When he died the “age of the witness” was far from having reached its peak.

The memorial turn in Western culture—I refer to the rise of memory as a central topic of public debates, the cultural industry and academic scholarship—took place precisely in the middle of the 1980s. Its symbolical landmarks

were successful books such as *Zakhor* (1982) by Josef Haym Yerushalmi in the US; *Realms of Memory* (1984), the collective volumes edited by Pierre Nora, and *Shoah* (1985), a nine-hour movie by Claude Lanzmann, in France; the so-called *Historikerstreit* around the Nazi past “that will not pass” in Germany; and *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) by Primo Levi himself in Italy. Thus, Levi powerfully contributed to the emergence of memory in the public sphere, but this happened at the end of his life and most of his work should be located before this memorial turn. He observed this change with a critical eye—I would say with a certain skepticism—and felt unsettled by this metamorphosis in both the perception and the representation of the past, as his last, testamentary essay clearly shows.

Two features of this new era of commemorations are particularly significant: first, the transformation of the remembrance of the Holocaust into a sort of “civil religion” of the West and, second, its separation from the memory of antifascism, which had been a hegemonic memory for three decades in postwar Italy. The “civil religion” of the Holocaust—I think Peter Novick was the first scholar to coin this concept—aims at making sacred the foundational values of our democracies by commemorating the Jewish victims of National Socialism in a liturgical, institutionally ritualized way. It turns the survivors into iconic figures who witness violence and human suffering in their own bodies. In short, *homines sacri* in the opposite sense of Agamben’s definition: not the ones permissible to kill but rather the selected ones to be commemorated.

Rereading Levi’s last essay, *The Drowned and the Saved*, today, many of his remarks sound like warnings against the dangers of this “civil religion” of the Holocaust. He always rejected the temptation to turn victims into heroes. He refused to present the survivors as the “best,” those who put up the most relentless resistance to oppression. As he explained,

his survival in Auschwitz was fortuitous, simply a matter of luck: the chemistry exam that spared him from being immediately selected for the gas chambers; the extra soup ration which he received daily from his friend Lorenzo Perrone; and his sickness, in January 1945, at the moment of the evacuation of the camp, which spared him the “death marches.” Thus, he deliberately chose to write *If This Is a Man* by adopting “the calm and sober language of the witness, not the complaining voice of the victim, nor the angered tone of revenge.” He refused to judge and played his role as a witness with great humility: “The history of the Nazi camps has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension.” The survivors could witness their experience, a fragment of the historical event in which they had been involved, and their testimony did not reveal any transcendent truth. In other words, the “drowned” (*sommersi*) who had been swallowed up by the gas chambers could not come back to bear witness. But they, rather than the survivors, were the “complete witnesses.” In *The Drowned and the Saved*, her wrote that the survivors were “not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority;” they were “those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they’re the ‘Muslims,’ the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.”

When Levi wrote about the ethical and political “duty of witnessing” carried out by the Holocaust survivors, this formula had not yet become a rhetorical *topos* of the dominant discourse on memory. He stressed that the survivors not only *could* not, they *would* not forget and wanted the world not to forget, because they felt forgetting to be the most dangerous

threat. In *The Periodic Table*, he tells the story of his postwar correspondence with Dr. L. Müller, one of the German chemists who led the laboratory at Auschwitz (Buna-Monowitz) where Levi worked as a deported, and who mentioned their letters as a wishful attempt at “overcoming the past.” “Overcoming the past,” *die Bewältigung der Vergangenheit*: this catchword, Levi observed, “is a stereotype, a euphemism of today’s Germany, where it is universally understood as ‘redemption from Nazism.’” When he wrote these words, in the middle of the 1960s, a Holocaust Memorial in the heart of Berlin was simply unthinkable. In Levi’s writings, memory never appears as a Hegelian *Aufhebung* overcoming the contradictions of history; its function is cognitive, not allowing repair or reconciliation. We can learn from history, but the past cannot be redeemed. At best, recollections could fulfill a therapeutic function, as for writing *If This Is a Man*, an act he experienced as “the equivalent of Freud’s divan.” In short, Levi’s claim of “the duty of memory” has been consecrated in our age of obsession for the past, but it was conceived of in a time of collective amnesia.

The “civil religion” of the Holocaust tends to depoliticize memory, focusing on innocent victims as objects of compassion. It has emerged from a radical break with antifascist memory, which focused on the celebration of fallen fighters. It is not by accident that the rise of the former has corresponded with the decline of the latter, like in a system of communicating vessels. Primo Levi was a witness of Auschwitz, and in many of his writings he distinguished between Jewish and political deportation. In his eyes, this difference should not be hidden or diminished, but neither should it be stressed as a separating line. He had been deported as a Jew, but had been arrested as a partisan, and when he wrote *If This Is a Man* after coming back to Turin, he decided to publish some chapters in a small magazine of Piedmontese Resistance: *L’Amico del popolo*. In his views, Jewish and antifascist memories

could only exist together, as twin memories.

In 1978, Levi wrote a short text for the Italian pavilion of the Auschwitz Museum, which is a strong defense of antifascism. The text speaks in the name of witnesses who “come from a country that was civilized and became civilized again after the night of fascism.” Moreover, these witnesses are depicted as “the children of both Christians and Jews,” putting into parentheses “but we don’t like these differences.” In the last decades, this pavilion commissioned by the ANED (National Association of Ex-Deportees) and realized by a team of committed authors—the architect Ludovico di Belgiojoso, the composer Luigi Nono, and the painter Mario Samonà—became a realm of memory of Italian antifascism. It no longer fits the current standards of public memory and was finally closed.

Antifascism—a particular form of antifascism, made of a fusion of the critical Enlightenment and left-wing republicanism—was the political background of Primo Levi, but he never claimed the antifascist rhetoric of postwar Italy. His books are faraway from the epic and heroic tales of a Resistance struggle for national liberation. In *The Drowned and the Saved* he described himself as the worst of the partisans, lacking physical courage, experience, and political education, and he emphasized that his career as a partisan had been very “brief, painful, stupid and tragic: I had taken a role that was not mine.” The tragic legacy of his experience as a partisan is summarized in a handful of passages of *The Periodic Table*, which Sergio Luzzatto magisterially analyzed, reinterpreted and explained a few years ago. Levi referred to a “ugly secret:” the execution of two of his comrades accused of betrayal—something quite common in partisan warfare—that burdened his consciousness and destroyed him psychologically, depriving him of the necessary resources for carrying on the struggle.

In the last years of his life, which were punctuated by repeated and deepening depressions,

he grew obsessed with the “gray zone,” the area of indistinctness where the boundaries between persecutors and victims, good and evil, were blurred; an ambiguous space whose “incredibly complicated internal structure” hindered the faculty of judgment. It was in this period that he depicted the “Muselmann”—the dehumanized inmate, the embodiment of another intermediate area suspended between life and death—as the “complete witness” of the Nazi camps. Survivors were simply vicarious representatives of these “complete witnesses,” who could not speak.

Levi remained a melancholic enlightener, but his optimism had disappeared. He bore testimony without considering himself—due to being a survivor—as a “true witness,” and defended antifascism in spite of portraying himself as a pitiful partisan. In short, he believed in the necessary search for truth, but he never preached truths; he rather tried to excavate them, to problematize them, by both recognizing their contradictions and exploring their darkest shadows. This critical skepticism did not spare his Jewish identity and his role as a witness. In 1967, he took a position in defense of Israel, which he felt was threatened with destruction, defining it, in several interviews, as his “second homeland.” In 1982, at the moment of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, he denounced this aggression and warned against the birth of a paradoxical form of Israeli “fascism” embodied by leaders such as Menachem Begin, whom he stigmatized as a disciple of Zev Jabotinsky, an admirer of Mussolini. He knew that many of the founders of Israel had been people who, like him, had survived the Holocaust, but could not come back to their homes. This was a matter of fact, but it did not immunize them nor Israel against fascism. This was another dimension of the “gray zone.”

In an interview in 1983, Primo Levi admitted his exhaustion. He no longer wished to meet pupils and students who repeated the same questions, but he also added that he was not

satisfied by his own answers. He described having been deeply unsettled by the question asked by two adolescents in a school: “Why do you still come to tell us your story, forty years later, after Vietnam, the Stalin camps and Cambodia, after all this... Why?” He remained in front of them, voiceless, mouth agape, as a witness retreating back into himself. His convictions, his pedagogical talents and rhetorical skills, his long career of witnessing suddenly seemed useless in front of this simple question. He felt overwhelmed by shame, the human shame he had discovered in Auschwitz and which he met again translating *The Trial* of Kafka. The past is an inexhaustible receptacle of materials for literary creation, but unfortunately history is not a *magistra vitae*.

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Luis Camnitzer

Leftovers, 1970. Mixed Media, 12 x 24 x 12 in each (30.48 x 60.96 x 30.48 cm each) Installation view: *Luis Camnitzer: Hospice of failed utopias*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain, 2018
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