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Trauma and Poetry. The Case of Primo Levi

Most North American readers have come to know and appreciate Primo Levi by his major works in prose. His *The Periodic Table* (1984) catapulted Levi onto the American stage of scientific-humanistic authors, having the *New York Times* named it among the Best Books of the Year in 1985. Instead, American readers will likely stumble upon Levi's poetry by accident, simply because every now and then one of his poems in translation appears in print somewhere. Compared to Levi's prose, his poems inevitably evoke a sense of unease, for their tone, their style and their content are so unlike the familiar, reasoned approach we have come to experience in his works in prose. Levi's authorial voice shifts dramatically between his prose works and his verse.

According to Ariella Lang, in his prose works Primo Levi writes objectively and with the 'voice of reason'.[1] His prose is not overcome with emotional revenge or hatred. Levi, thus, remains a credible witness to the facts that he observed and narrated, especially in his autobiographical *Survival in Auschwitz* which appeared in English language translation in 1959. Overall, his prosaic works are generally emotionally detached. Levi shows a strong and impartial voice, and 'he demonstrates the Lager's failure to destroy the integrity that identifies him as a moral human being'.[2] Readers appreciate Levi by 'the simplicity of his language and his straightforward descriptions'[3] which, when analyzing Shoah literature, contribute to the construction of clear, documented and accurate historical narrative.

Readers familiar with *Survival in Auschwitz* and with *The Reawakening* (1965) are also familiar with their respective epigraphs: Levi's poems 'Shemà' and 'Wstawać'. Their lines clearly foreshadow the content matter of each book, containing tones of resentment, implicit condemnation, and unfathomable sadness. In 'Shemà', Levi writes of the Unspeakable: 'Meditate che questo è stato: / Vi comando queste parole. / Scolpitele nel vostro cuore'.[4] The word 'meditate' has a strong meaning in Levi's writings, both in poetry and prose. More than just an appraisal or assessment, the author invites his readers to ponder deeply, to weigh insightfully, and to remain aware of events which cause tragedies such as the Shoah, for the dead of the concentration camps will remain among the living forever, as part of the human collective historical consciousness.

This study proposes a reading of Primo Levi's poetry through a lens that brings to light symptomatic characteristic of a person who might be suffering from Post-traumatic Stress

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[1] Lang, Ariella, 'Reason As Revenge: Primo Levi and Writing the Holocaust', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal of Modern Literature* 1999 (54: 4): 255-68 (255).
[2] *Ibidem*.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 256.
[4] All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by Feldmann-Swann. My appreciation goes to Roberta S. Kramer, Roberta Ricci, and to the late Nicholas Patruno for their helpful comments on a preliminary version of this study.

Disorder (PTSD).

Among 'Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders', the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM 5* lists the diagnostic criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.[5] The personal experience must involve

> exposure to actual or threatened death […] directly experiencing the traumatic event(s) […] witnessing, in person the event(s) as it occurred to others […] experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to adversative deaths of the traumatic event(s) […] recurrent, involuntary and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s) […] recurrent distressing dreams […] related to the traumatic event(s).[6]

Primo Levi's internment in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz when he was twenty-four years old meets the *DSM-5* criteria of a person experiencing 'traumatic events [that] include […] exposure to war […] threatened or actual physical assault […] being kidnapped […] being taken hostage […] incarceration as prisoner of war.'[7]

Subjects experiencing PTSD will manifest symptoms of reoccurring 'distressing dreams that replay the event itself, or that are representative or thematically related to the major threats involved in the traumatic event. […] highest rates [of PTSD] are found among survivors of rape, military combat and captivity.'[8] There may or may not be concomitant physical components to the trauma (malnutrition, for instance). The person affected by PTSD might experience any or all of the following: psychic numbing, dissociative states, emotional anesthesia, recurring nightmares, and significant degrees of distress.

A brief study by Klaus Kuch and Brian J. Cox suggests 'chronic' PTSD in Shoah survivors,[9] and finds 'persistent distress and sleep disturbances' almost forty years after liberation.[10] Kuch's findings emphasize that 'tattooed Auschwitz survivors experienced more recurrent and intrusive recollections [than non-tattooed prisoners ... and] were also three times

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[5] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC:American Psychiatric Association, 2013), pp. 271-280.

[6] Ibidem, p. 271.

[7] Ibidem, p. 274.

[8] Ibidem, pp. 275-76.

[9] I am grateful to Dr. Robert Krell (psychiatrist, Professor Emeritus of the Dept of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia, and founder and former president of the Vancouver Holocaust Centre Society) for a brief personal conversation which we had on this topic in November of 1995. To the best of my knowledge, he has not published on the subject. He maintained orally, and I agree with him, that PTSD manifestations in Shoah survivors do not necessarily constitute a *medical pathology*. Indeed, in this, my analysis of Levi's poems, I never intend to imply PTSD as a *pathological* component to the author's personality. Rather – and paraphrasing Krell correctly – PTSD in Levi and in other concentration camp survivors forms a personality trait which is, tragically, relatively predictable and common among Jewish lager survivors, thus not pathological nor strikingly exceptional among most individuals who share this terrible and haunting life experience. Krell states that 'it is a relatively normal response to a desperately abnormal experience.'

[10] Kuch, Klaus and Cox, B.J., "Symptoms of PTSD in 124 Survivors of the Holocaust," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 149 (1992): 337-340.

more likely to meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.'[11] After studying long-term consequences of 'massive traumatization,' Arie Nadler and Dan Ben-Shushan write, significantly, that 'victims of social trauma such as the Holocaust may suffer a dual blow. Their youth is shattered by the trauma, and their old age is overshadowed by its aftereffects'. Their study concludes by suggesting that 'effects of major traumas resurface in old age'.[12]

This study's hypothesis that a large part of Levi's poetry is haunted by PTSD's ghosts derives from the factual observation of a marked difference in the linguistic register of Levi's prosaic works when compared against his poetry. The written linguistic register of his poems resembles an impressionistic and fragmented tone typical of oral recollections and narrations, rather than the more formal and grammatically constrained style of his autobiographical writings. In fact, Levi's poetry shows a range of characteristics found in oral linguistic registers such as, for instance, impulsiveness, expression of deep emotions, associations, projections, non-sequiturs, intuitive reactions, and idiomatic verbal spontaneity. Far from stating that Levi's psychological 'secrets' can be easily unlocked by paying careful attention to his poems, this study suggests, however, that his poetry helps reveal how the rational, successful, cautious, sensitive, calm, and just Primo Levi was at the same time a profoundly wounded, scarred, disillusioned man still haunted by the experiences of his past. He was an author very possibly suffering from symptoms of PTSD. The key to the discovery of a different side of the author lies in the understanding of the nightmares which he uncovers and weaves in his verse.

According to Nicholas Patruno, Primo Levi's poetry shows an 'emotional charge' that allows him to vent 'his innermost sentiments expressive of, but not limited to, joy, love, anger, social and environmental concerns, irony, humor, frustration, sadness and solitude' where he sometimes 'touches the nadir of despair'.[13] Especially in the poem 'Il superstite' one clearly detects the heart-wrenching *topos* of 'survivor's guilt' that heavily haunts Levi (see also the chapter entitled 'La vergogna' in his *I sommersi e i salvati*). In his poetry 'Levi expresses the pain of a man who fears that his story, and through his that of millions' of others 'will be forgotten'.[14]

Primo Levi's volume of poetry *Ad ora incerta* (1984) reveals a much more psychologically complex portrait of the chemist-turned-writer who died in April of 1987. In Italian, it was first published in 1975 with the title *L'osteria di Brema*. Later, for the Italian 1984 edition which appeared in its better-known and present title, Levi added another thirty-four poems to the twenty-eight already published. *Ad ora incerta*, published by Garzanti, was an immediate success among the readership and critics alike.[15] Posthumously, a collection of Levi's *opera*

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[11] Ibidem, p. 339.

[12] Nadler, Arie and Ben-Shushan, D., 'Forty Years Later: Long-Term Consequences of Massive Traumatization as Manifested by Holocaust Survivors from the City and the Kibbutz', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 57 (1989): 287-293 (292-93).

[13] Patruno, Nicholas. 'At an Uncertain Hour: The Other Side of Primo Levi', in *Memory and Mastery. Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, ed. Roberta S. Kremer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 91-102 (pp. 94-96).

[14] Ibidem, p. 98.

[15] Levi's poems were translated into English by Ruth Feldmann and Brian Swann as *Collected Poems*, (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988). The English translation does not include Levi's own translations from German and

omnia appeared in Einaudi's series *Biblioteca dell'Orsa*, and it included poems dating through January 1987 which, incidentally, is the date of his last-known published poem. All Primo Levi's published poems are dated by his own hand, and they spanned his entire adulthood, from February 1943 to a few months before his death.

Primo Levi's sudden death left the literary and the Jewish worlds speechless. His readers stood in mute disbelief at the news, mostly because in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986) – his last volume in prose – Levi appeared to have rationalized and partially come to terms with the heavy aftermath of his ordeal in Auschwitz. In this book's series of essays, he gave the impression of being able to face the Shoah and its terrible, lasting legacy in his characteristic clear, rational, linear prose. Levi's poetry, on the other hand, is permeated by helplessness, resignation, sadness, and filled with nightmares. Only a pale trace is left of the author's characteristic *impotentia judicandi* exhibited in his essays. In his poems surface fear, sketched impressions, anxiety, and the misgivings of a man whose emotional life spanned from the annihilating humiliation of Auschwitz to public international recognition as a successful author.

Gabriel Motola defines Levi as a scientific humanist. He correctly points out that literature, especially the recollection of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the chapter 'Il canto di Ulisse' in *Se questo è un uomo*, was so important for Levi that he was willing to have 'given up one day's ration of soup'.[16] Recalling Dante's poetry in the concentration camp was important, for it attempted to preserve Levi as a *Mensch*, a human being, in Auschwitz. After the liberation, Levi's continued poetic production (not necessarily abundant, but nevertheless so seminally meaningful) contained, as Motola has noted, numerous references to Latin, French, German, and British poets. Motola observes that Levi wrote 14 poems between '45 and '46, representing 25% of his whole poetic production; 'writing [poetry] fulfilled more of an emotional or psychological need than a creative one'.[17] And Giovanni Tesio worked out the statistics on Levi's poetry,

> 1 poem in 1943, 1 in '45, 14 in '46, 1 in '49, 1 in '52, 1 in '53, 1 in '59, 2 in '60, 1 in '64, 1 in '65, 1 in '70, 1 in '73, 2 in '74, 3 in '78, 3 in '79, 5 in '80, 4 in '81, 5 in '82, 6 in '83, 9 in '84. The peak is thus 1946 [...] and then a continuous flow between '78 and '84.[18]

The topics of Levi's poems span many subjects: from his concentrationary experience, to his return to civilian life post-war, to his focus in his job as a scientist. In the midst of all this, Levi was pained by the nightmares that came to the surface, scarring his life. Through poetry, less constrained by the linearity of syntax that prose is obligated to follow, one is freer to express sentiments via associative cognition, whether consciously or not. Poetry is universal in its manifestation, and, as Lang pointed out, poetry in general 'has a tendency to dehistoricize events'.[19]

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from English into Italian of some poems by Heine, von Bergengrün, a Scottish ballad, and a poem by Kipling. Unless otherwise noted, all verse quoted here in English appears translated in the Faber and Faber edition.

[16] Motola, Gabriel, The Varnish-Maker's Dream', *Sewanee Review* 1990, 98, 3: 506-514 (506).

[17] Ibidem, p. 507.

[18] Tesio, Giovanni. '*At an Uncertain Hour*: Preliminary Observations on the Poetry of Primo Levi', in Joseph Farrell (ed), *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist* (Oxford-Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 161-170 (p. 168).

[19] Lang, 'Reason As Revenge: Primo Levi and Writing the Holocaust', p. 257.

Motola truthfully observed that 'Levi constructs poems whose acute complexity belies their brevity'.[20] Lucie Benchouiha correctly noticed that the composition of Primo Levi's poetry shows a time frame wider than the composition of his prose. Out of his earliest poems 'a significant amount [of them] deal directly with Auschwitz'.[21] When looking to compare his poetry to his prose, one finds meaningful examples that mirror and amplify each other, thus aiding the readers' understanding of Levi's motives. Benchouiha successfully seeks parallels and echoes of terms used in his prose which appear also in his poetry, and vice versa (such as between the poem 'Il tramonto di Fossoli' and the chapter 'Il viaggio' from *Survival in Auschwitz*). The prose and the poetry of the earlier-composing years often reflect, engage, and enhance each other. Benchouiha writes: 'Between Levi's narrative and his poetry there […] exists a very unique form of intertextuality and a very original form of rewriting'.[22] Among the topics covered in Levi's poetry, according to Benchouiha, one finds the animal world, the natural world, science, historical figures, daily life, writing, and other subjects.[23] Levi deems the suffering of enslaved and/or encaged animals as a mirror of the suffering of mankind: 'The humiliation of these creatures reflects the degradation of the prisoners of the concentration camps'.[24] Both in humans and in animals, failure to communicate, failure to be understood, failure to be heard are topics that Levi addresses in his prose and in his poetry.

This essay now turns to a brief analysis of a few poems by Primo Levi, with the intention of highlighting passages which define some of his characteristics as a poet. 'Shemà' borrows heavily from *Deuteronomy* 6:4-9. The last three lines of the poem diverge from the original text of *Deuteronomy*, and instead they intensely echo the fire-and-brimstone wrathful God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Levi, the quiet, agnostic, and integrated Italian Jew includes strong and overtly vengeful verbiage in 'Shemà'. 'Man' and 'woman' emerge like ghosts of flashbacks from their concentrationary world, fulfilling some of the PTSD diagnostic criteria (listed in section B of *DSM-5*), such as recurring nightmares. What clearly emerges in 'Shemà' is an angry and frustrated authorial voice, commanding justice for the victims of the camps. Here, Levi's emotional and demanding authorial voice is foreign to what his readers have come to expect from his prose work, typically calm and lucidly displayed.

In 'For Adolf Eichmann" (a poem composed in 1960) Levi displays some of his most intensely bitter reactions. Again, deep anger, reaction to the acute offence suffered, and a cry for just punishment surface from the lines, as concentration-camp victims ask for and await justice. Severely firm in his indignation, rather than assuming himself the role of judge, Levi adds his voice to that of the other victims. Addressing Eichmann directly, Levi writes,

> prezioso nemico, / Tu creatura deserta, uomo cerchiato di morte. / Che saprai dire ora, davanti al nostro consenso? / [...] / Dell'opera tua trista non compiuta/ Dei tredici milioni

[20] Motola, Gabriel, The Varnish-Maker's Dream', p. 508.
[21] Benchouiha, Lucie, '*Ad ora incerta* and *Altre poesie*: 'Dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesie se non su Auschwitz" ', in *Primo Levi. Rewriting the Holocaust* (Leicester, UK: Troubador, 2006), pp. 120-131 (p. 120).
[22] Ibidem, p. 126.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibidem, pp. 127-28. For more on the subject of animal cruelty compared to the suffering of concentration camp inmates, see Klein, Ilona, 'Reconciling the Controversy of Animal Cruelty and the Shoah: A Look at Primo Levi's Compassionate Writings', *Lingua Romana* 10 (1) 2011: 42-52.

ancora vivi? / [...] O figlio della morte, non ti auguriamo la morte. / Possa tu vivere a lungo quanto nessuno mai visse: / Possa tu vivere insonne cinque milioni di notti, / E visitarti ogni notte la doglia di ognuno che vide.

When writing in prose, Levi had never manifested quite so explicitly this inner torment and anguish. Anger and profound sadness appear throughout his volume of poetry *Collected Poems*. Here, as in 'Shemà', a ghost appears from Levi's past. Levi dates his penning of 'Per Adolf Eichmann' to 20 July 1960. And Levi borrows from a chilling phrase that Eichmann is said to have pronounced, 'I laugh when I jump into the grave because of the feeling that I have killed 5,000,000 Jews. That gives me great satisfaction and gratification.'[25]

In another poem, 'Annunciazione' (composed in June 1979), Levi creates a cynical, sad parody of the canonical Christian visit by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. Levi borrows religious terminology from Luke 1:26-38 in the *New Testament*, and immediately weaves his poem against it. Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus foretold the trepidation and initial confusion expressed by the innocent, young Mary in front of the mysterious angel of the Annunciation. Archangel Gabriel reveals to her the salvific message of her baby, of Christ's redemption for humankind. In Levi's re-make of the Gospel's narrative, the messenger angel of 'fierce form' appears, and tells the expecting mother the plans for her yet-unborn child. From its first lines, however, it is immediately clear that Primo Levi crafts a pessimistic and macabre twist to the event. In the poem, as he materializes in front of a pregnant woman announcing the birth of a child, the angel clarifies that he is not bird of prey (his aspect must be dreadful, although he is not fully described), but he is a messenger. By now, also the reader feels trapped in the same nightmare – clearly, the angel is talking to Hitler's mother – and foretells of a baby son whose magnetic eyes and rhetoric will captivate an audience of believers, who will instigate hatred and crime, 'predicherà l'abominio' and 'evangelizzerà con la bestemmia e la forca'. Her son will 'evangelize [… and] rule' among the people who will follow him 'jubilant and wild, singing […] kissing his footprints.' Levi's poem represents an Annunciation of hatred and spilled blood, of slaughter, darkness, and loathing. As though the poem were not harrowing enough in its very conception and painful in its elaboration, Levi writes the concluding lines with such sarcasm, so as to leave no gleam of hope: 'Morrà non sazio di strage, lasciando semenza d'odio. / È questo germe che cresce in te. Rallegrati, donna'. The ever-agnostic Levi asks himself and his readers the long-standing question, If God exists – a concept Levi could never quite resolve because Auschwitz did happen – how could history run its course the way it did in Auschwitz and in other concentration camps? Why were such atrocities allowed to happen? Why did God not intervene? How does one question God's role in human events?[26] Primo Levi is obviously

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[25] 'Affidavit of Dieter Wislinceny'. See Insana, Insana, Lina. *Arduous Tasks: Primo Levi, Translation, and the Transmission of Holocaust Testimony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 286.

[26] For a better understanding of Primo Levi's denial of God's existence in matters connected to Auschwitz, it is worth re-reading the last couple of pages of his interview with Ferdinando Camon. '*Camon*. - Lei non è credente? *Levi*. – No; non lo sono mai stato; vorrei esserlo, ma non ci riesco . . . Devo dire che l'esperienza di Auschwitz è stata tale per me da spazzare qualsiasi resto di educazione religiosa che pure ho avuto. *Camon*. – Cioè: Auschwitz è la prova della non-esistenza di Dio? *Levi*. – C'è Auschwitz, quindi non può esserci Dio. [*Sul dattiloscritto, a matita, ha aggiunto*: Non trovo la soluzione al dilemma. La cerco, ma non la trovo]'. See Camon, Ferdinando.

pointing his reader to a theological and a metaphysical discussion about the role that religion plays (or does not play) in history.

In another poem, 'Un ponte' (1982), that which should unite two banks divides instead. Levi describes a different kind of bridge, an anthropomorphic structure capable of sensing people's confusion concerning the eternal questions of purpose and relevance of life. The bridge 'gode se ti fermi a mezzo cammino / […] e ti domandi se / Metta conto di vivere l'indomani'. Prolonged psychological distress is a criterion listed in *DSM-5* as a diagnostic factor for PTSD,[27] coupled with questioning one's own worthiness in life.[28] Just as invisible chemicals dissolved in water, 'lento […] veleno' can damage the pillars of a bridge and destroy its foundations, similarly existential doubts that permeate a human mind in subtle ways create 'un malefizio'. In the poem, no one finds peace when crossing this kind of bridge. Some people would like to traverse it to admire what they imagine is the landscape's beauty on either side of the river; however once on the bridge, there are no soothing sights of quiet waters whirling and eddying under its span. Instead, one sees vortexes and currents violently crushing against the structure, slowly sanding it down. This bridge does not offer refuge to the weary travelers, writes Levi, it is not a haven for restless minds who seek solitude and peace. It is 'non è come gli altri ponti / che reggono alla nevicata dei secoli'. Halfway destroyed by the force of water and debris, this bridge draws a kind of Mephistophelian pleasure in witnessing people's most troubled thoughts, most profound moments of doubt. Phonetically, the last lines of the poem emphasize the harshness of the pebbles and the stones pressing and crashing against one another, slowly grinding the pillars to sand, while also demolishing the shore line: '*Perciò* lima *s*e *s*te*ss*o in *s*abbia, / E *str*ide *p*ie*tr*a con*tr*o *p*ie*tra*, / E *preme*, *preme preme* con*tr*o le *sp*onde / *P*er *sp*accare la *cr*o*s*ta della te*rr*a' (my italics). This bridge and mankind are similar in their fate: they can either link different worlds or, paradoxically, isolate and separate instead. And just like the bridge, mankind may feel slowly crushed into insignificance, or oblivion, or impotence and inability. Through these lines, Levi has sketched a prism of multiple possible interpretations.

The German title 'Nachtwache', appears as such in both the English and in the Italian versions. Written in August 1983, the poem provides an eerie ambience. From the well-known question, 'A che punto è la notte, sentinella?', verses unfold treating mankind's ephemeral status. The impassive and predictable answer comes in a monotone voice: death and life go on, indifferent to one another, in a repetitious cycle of disinterest in human affairs. *DSM-5* includes under criterion D6 symptoms of 'detachment or estrangement from others'.[29] The watchman who answers the above question proves to be emotionless towards the tragedies surrounding him, and incapable of human compassion towards the subjects over whom he keeps watch. The point, of course, is not that the Watchman suffers from PTSD (there is nothing in the poem that would

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Conversations with Primo Levi, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro, Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1989), pp. .67-68. Within an entirely different context, I am reminded of Elie Wiesel's remark during a conversation with Cardinal O'Connor: 'We Jews don't blame God. We question God. I can blame human beings. And I do, and we should blame human beings when they do something wrong to other human beings. But to blame God, that's quite an act of arrogance. And we don't do that. But we question God'. See Wiesel, Elie, and Cardinal O'Connor, J. *A Journey of Faith*. New York: Donald Fine, 1990), p. 12.

[27] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* p. 271.

[28] Ibidem, p. 272.

[29] Ibidem.

lead the reader to believe that the watchman has suffered a past trauma as terrible as to warrant PTSD on his part). The point is that Levi, upon his return to Turin in October of 1945, was surrounded by indifference to human suffering during the war, thus he knew well how to describe it and include it in his poems. The hint for this interpretation and possible explanation lies in the title, which is in German, pointing to the Germans and their indifference towards the plight of deported Jews. In 'Nachtwache', Levi briefly sketches the portrait of a suicidal girl who does not realize the full depth and consequences of her gesture ('[del]la ragazza che ha smarrito il senno', as Levi calls her), and effectively transforms her own bed into her coffin. The watchman relates that another elderly man dies while wasting his last drop of strength to futilely fight against his inevitable death. The impassive, monotone voice of the watchman from within the darkness continues to describe these and other facts betraying no emotion: 'Stenditi e prendi sonno, cittadino, / È tutto in ordine; questa notte è al suo mezzo.' Levi's pessimism targets today's world suggesting that 'man' is ultimately a creature of habit surrounded by a quasi-Leopardian universe of apathetic indifference.

Written during the summer of 1984, 'Scacchi' and 'Scacchi II' reveal Primo Levi worried and sadly resigned. In 'Chess', the white queen proudly proclaims her superiority above all other pieces of the chess board, disdainfully scorning both 'inept and cowardly' kings, while reserving special bitter words of contempt for her companion, the white king, who – at first – fearfully hides behind a row of courageous pawns, and later flees the battle 'askew, absurd, with little stumbling steps.' She openly and readily acknowledges the worthiness of her fiercest enemy, the black queen, for it is she, her enemy, who swiftly and proudly takes charge of her black ranks, while her clumsy companion, the black king, proves inconsequential to any vital plan. 'Le battaglie non son cose da re' the white queen concludes. However, her image of victorious and prideful regality shatters in the second strophe when 'una gran mano' sweeps the chessboard clear, and the game pieces fall into a box 'con scroscio di ghiaia'. Primo Levi shows here the force of destiny, mightier than any human achievement which can only be temporary and nearsighted, dwarfed by the illusion of existentialism. The author points out how everyone in life plays out a role on the chessboard of everyday events. Whether mankind actively plans resolutions, or whether each person is simply a game piece on the board of collective circumstantial human moves, everyone eventually falls under the rulership of destiny, a mighty hand indeed, which has the power to sweep clear the stage of life at any moment. Those who fight for their own and others' rights are just as vulnerable to destiny's brutal 'cleaning of the slate' as those indifferent to their own surroundings.

Published back-to-back in its English edition, 'Scacchi (II)' retains the same theme while changing points of view.[30] This time, it is a personified fate who challenges man to continue a chess game previously started. A monologue on fate's part, the poem mocks humans' indecisiveness, fears, inadequacy and incompetence. At the same time, fate sternly admonishes the human opponent that 'il nostro è un gioco serio, non ammette / contratti, confusioni e contrabbandi'. Chess, viewed as a symbol for life, is developed in this poem as one of Levi's

[30] In the Italian edition, *Ad ora incerta*, 'Scacchi' and 'Scacchi (II)' are divided by the poem 'Pio'. 'Pio', however, is not translated in the English edition, thus 'Chess' and 'Chess II' appear here next to each other. 'L'ultima epifania' is also not translated. Moreover, the authors of the translation, Feldman and Swann, note that 'Agenda' appears in the English edition even though it is not part of *Ad ora incerta*.

most pessimistic topics. Life grants only one opportunity at a time, and that which is not seized in the moment is lost forever. Humankind stands alone against life's agents, against the cosmic indifference of the elements. The reader, too, feels trapped in mankind's ineptitude, a pawn in a survival game whose winner has already been declared before the start. Levi suggests that no matter the circumstances, humans are ambushed in a no-win situation. On the one hand, it is foolish to hope that anyone might be able to bargain with death; on the other hand, however, even knowing for a fact that ultimately death comes for everyone, people refuse to surrender their only opportunity to play out their own life. This position is both heroic and futile at the same time. Keep in mind, admonishes Levi, that no matter the choice, the outcome of the game is clear before the start: eventually we will all die. It could well be argued that the game is rigged from the beginning: why, then, not recognize the ineluctability of it all, and surrender one's life in the face of destiny's mockery? 'Non senti ticchettare l'orologio? / Del resto, perché insistere? / Per prevedere i miei tratti / Ci vuole altra sapienza che la tua. / Lo sapevi fin da principio / che io sono il più forte.'

Eighteen additional poems appear in the second volume of Levi's *opera omnia* (*Biblioteca dell'Orsa*).[31] In 'Ladri' (1985), the poet approaches the problem of today's society's fading collective memory, as an older generation feels robbed of the truth of its experiences and is disillusioned by not having anymore a captive audience eager to listen to the stories of Jewish survival from the Nazi genocide. The thieves of time (a symbol of involuntary memory loss, both personal and collective) are portrayed as creeping through the keyholes and crevices of a house, the House of History, I would submit; and tragically also the house of one's own life. They leave behind no broken windows, and no signs of burglary whatsoever. This embezzlement of the memory of times past is an overlooked and unsolvable crime, for it leaves no fingerprints. The thieves are 'mignatte: / Bevono il tuo tempo e lo sputano via / Come si butterebbe un'immondezza.' The thieves, who have no faces, show 'dentini minuscoli, affilati' with which they slowly suck and ingest their booty, causing more discomfort than actual pain. Burglars who leave no clues behind are seldom caught, and their victims are left with little consolation. The reader cannot but notice, embedded in 'Ladri', Levi's dismay at today's general cultural indifference towards memory and its lessons from the past, towards allowing recent history, specifically that of the Shoah, to slip away from the forefront, and the widespread judicial ineptitude, still decades after World War II, to bring to justice all the perpetrators of genocidal crimes. In these lines, the implicit condemnation of coeval historical negationism is at the base of Levi's indignation.

Cesare Segre noted that most of Primo Levi's poems directly address his audience through the II-plural form, 'you' ('voi').[32] Thus, his poems speak directly to his readers, as he reveals his innermost thoughts; they envelop, they involve, they exact a response. Levi's verse shows an impetus, a force, often anger, and passions that do not, and cannot, leave his readers impassive. One such poem that impacts the reader is 'Il superstite' written in 1984, and dedicated to the

[31] The following poems appeared in the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* between September 1984 and January 1987 (the translations which follow are mine). It is rather clear that the nightmare of PTSD, which may have tormented Levi, permeated through in his poems until the end of his life.

[32] Segre, Cesare, in Levi, Primo, *Ad ora incerta* (Milano: Garzanti, 1990), pp. 143-147 (p. 144).

Italian intellectual and partisan Bruno Vasari, a Mauthausen concentration camp survivor.[33] While Levi borrows his first line from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner' (VII.582), the poem's lines 2-5 are his own interpretation of Coleridge's subsequent verses (VII.583-86). Levi paraphrases and then edits meaningfully the original English text.[34] The last line of 'Il superstite' draws close scrutiny. It obviously is borrowed from Dante's *Inferno* 33:141 ('e mangia e bee e dorme e veste panni'). In *Inferno*, Branca D'Oria is relegated to the worst part of Hell, the bottom, reserved to the traitors. While Dante was composing *Inferno*, Branca D'Oria was, actually, still alive: Dante deems Branca so corrupt and guilty that his soul has already been banished to Hell's eternal damnation. Haunting flashbacks form the backbone of 'Il superstite'. *DSM*-5 indicates some of the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis as 'distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others' (p. 272). In this poem, Levi is clearly defending himself from a group of dead souls whom he perceives as accusing him of having survived Auschwitz. But are the ghosts, actually, accusing Levi? There are no words in the text of the poem that explicitly indicate such indictment. The sorrowful, empty, emaciated, tired ghosts simply appear as a vision, as they go about their own heart-wrenching concentrationary existence. As Levi defends himself from the vision, he borrows from Dante, grafting in his own defense the words of the damned Branca D'Oria, condemned to Hell as a traitor to others. Who did Levi fear he might have betrayed? Why does his survivor's guilt rule in this poem?

Logotherapy has been essential in helping find meanings for human life. Transposing thought into words, oral or written, sheds light upon life's circumstances and can help clarify one's own position and scope regarding life. Primo Levi may well have resorted to coping with his own possible PTSD though writing in verse, allowing for a passionate and emotional style, which reveals a part of his psyche that did not surface in his rationalizing prose.

Primo Levi shows two authorial voices, one in his prose works, and the other in verse. In most instances, it is his poetry that reveals Levi-the-Survivor's innermost feelings and his post-concentrationary psychological turmoil. Here, his reader is presented with, becomes privy to, and understands, a more complex dimension of the author's personality. Primo Levi was a courageous witness to history. He was also a magnificent science-fiction writer, a skilled chemist, a profound thinker, and chronicler of our time. After surviving Auschwitz, apparently, he 'went on with his life'. This study hopes to have shown that he was still haunted by those past ghosts. One must question whether the scar of horrors survived in the Shoah is truly a 'scar,' or whether, instead, it should be considered a 'permanent wound', continually trying to heal, yet never quite able to do so. Can one ever completely overcome PTSD? Through clinical therapy most PTSD patients learn how to get on with their lives and be productive and how to manage some or most symptoms of the disorder. They master coping mechanisms in the attempt to conquer PTSD. Most PTSD patients learn to cohabit with their diagnosis, as they are provided

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[33] Bruno Vasari was born in Trieste (North-Eastern Italy) in 1911, when the area was still under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His mother was Jewish, and she converted to Catholicism when she married. The couple's son, Bruno, was raised as a typical Catholic boy. Vasari was arrested and deported to Mauthausen because of his anti-Fascist activities as a partisan. See: *Du bald Kaputt. Rammemorando i Lager i dettagli che non si trovano nei libri di* storia, Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino, 77.

[34] See Insana (pp. 76-81) for an excellent textual analysis of 'Il superstite', which includes a careful reading of Levi's changes from Coleridge's original text.

with therapeutic strategies to try to face their ghosts, the nightmares, and the unpredictable. However, and in light of Primo Levi's poem 'Scacchi (II)', for some survivors of the Nazi persecution (Bruno Bettelheim, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Jean Améry-Mayer, and others), perhaps death might have been the only way to defeat the ghosts of a survivor's Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.[35]

[35] Shoah survivor Viktor Frankl claimed that logotherapy allowed him to find meaning and scope in life, even under the most drastic, dreadful, and tragic moments of the human experience. Both Frankl and Bruno Bettelheim used logotherapy extensively as a psychoanalytical method of existential therapeutic healing. Their logotherapy was applied both as 'search for meaning' as well as the use of *logos*, 'word' to transfer the trauma of an experience into its narrative form, thus setting some therapeutic distance between the stressor and the patient. See Frankl's text and Bruno Bettelheim's 'Forward' in Miklos Nyiszli's volume: Frankl, Viktor, *Man's Search for Meaning. An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon P., 1992), pp. 8-21.