

Remains to Be Transmitted¹

Primo Levi's Traumatic Dream

by

J.J Blévis

Translated from the French by J.R. Hanson

Following more than fifteen years of voluntary withdrawal (Blevis, 1984) from almost everything concerning the Holocaust - essays, articles, creative or documentary films, with the one exception of C. Lanzmann's film – I was unexpectedly brought back to it quite directly by personal circumstances. An unplanned, absolutely unforeseen trip to Auschwitz and Birkenau, in the depth of the icy, snowy winter of 1999. I will leave in silence the shock of this brief trip and try rather to start out anew from the testimony of Primo Levi, whose books I found it necessary to reread following my return from Crakow.

The life and work of P. Levi, his irreplaceable testimony, but also his end, his suicide, could not fail to lead us to formulate an additional question he did not ask, which he could not and certainly did not want to ask openly.

A question that could only be raised anew by P. Levi's suicide, a suicide that remains opaque, enigmatic, insane, like all successful suicides. Personally, I hesitated, understandably I think, before taking the risk of putting forward a psychoanalytically-oriented reading of certain texts of Primo Levi; a reading that concerns first of all the dead-ends and failures that are at the very center of, and at the same time inseparable from, the imposing success of P. Levi's writing.

A proposed reading that is thinkable only with the condition that we refuse to reduce the evolution of someone's life, above all if we are speaking of a survivor of the death camps, to nothing but the trauma suffered in the camps. That was, if it needs recalling, the very intention of the Nazis: to deny the history and individual existence of those they were planning to exterminate. It is a matter of the respect we owe to the memory of those who died there and to the survivors, increasingly rare, who are still among us.

Moreover, I must admit I neither grasp nor share the position of some, among them many psychoanalysts, who object to the very idea that the trauma of survivors should be conceived beyond the concentration camp experience itself. No

¹ Originally published, in a shorter form, in *Figures de la psychanalyse* (2002), 6: p?

interpretation, no approach to the survivors' traumatic destiny, especially if it is psychoanalytically oriented, seems acceptable to them. In the mere fact of envisaging a project like the present one they see a sort of blasphemy, a repetition of the insult and humiliation, ultimately of the crime already perpetrated. I do willingly admit that the risk of obscenity is great for anyone undertaking an attempt to analyze the life or the memory of survivors in order to render less opaque or enigmatic the burden of the trauma they've had to bear after the experience of the camps. An attempt requiring such immense tact and respect that one can certainly only feel inadequate. The opposite reasoning nevertheless presses itself upon me with urgency, demanding that one not abandon the life and destiny of these men and women exclusively to the criminal fate the Nazis inflicted upon them. Similarly, for the rare survivors, it is of considerable importance not to let their traumatic survival be defaced by appearing solely in the gloomy light of the camps.

Experiences that confront the subject with the unimaginable, with words that give way and with the eruption of the real that brings murderous violence upon psychic life; experiences that hit the body and also, in language (*langue*) strike the proper name. One can say that the proper name, the family name, in its eminently symbolic function, suffered in the camps and was damaged in numerous ways and not simply from the fact that it was the common fate of all deportees to be dispossessed of their names upon arrival in the camps, doomed by the murderous will of the Nazis to the anonymity of a number inscribed on the very flesh of their arms. We will see that the coalescence of multiple traumas forces those who undergo these traumas to fall toward the melancholic side where the proper name ends up abolishing itself. The subject falls there without being sure of finding the resilience to get out (and to get out again) decisively in the future. P. Levi, it seems, had a fairly precise idea of this: "At a distance of thirty years I find it difficult to reconstruct the sort of human being that corresponded, in November 1944, to my name or, better, to my number: 174517." (Levi 1984, p. 139)

I must maintain here what our psychoanalytic practice has given us to understand: for those who find someone to truly speak to, historical traumas are always revealed, after the fact, as doubly traumatic. Consequently, they compel the victim to isolate a part of his psychic life and to a fragmentation or splitting of the latter.

Not only are there indeed direct effects of the shock of the event and its indirect psychic repercussions, but in addition the traumatic shock, notably when it is a collective shock, has the further effect of severely compressing the array of

traumas of the person exposed. Compressing to the point of rendering inaccessible the re-appropriation of a unique history, of a childhood that has known, as is the rule, a certain number of basic traumas that are found included, covered over, encapsulated in the later collective trauma.

It was no different for the survivors of the camps, and doubtless not for Primo Levi either. In spite of the mistrust he felt for psychoanalysis, I readily find in his writings the encouragement necessary to carry through this reflection, which only psychoanalysis makes possible.

No doubt the necessity that led Primo Levi after his return to Turin to quickly write the text he would call *Se questo é un uomo* (If this is a man) required no justification of any kind. He had not the slightest idea that he had written what was quite simply one of the great books of twentieth century literature. Whether it was the deafening silence following the first publication or the relentless guilt already assaulting him, in any event, he felt obliged to justify himself as he faced the deep unease he felt among those around him as he noted their inability, if not unwillingness, to accept his testimony. For a long time he therefore found the justification for his writings in the idea that his testimony could be useful to younger generations and contribute to bettering the world, so that the “vile beast” would never return. In the preface to a new addition of *Survival in Auschwitz* (If this is a man) (Levi, year?) he wrote that the book could doubtless have some utility “to furnish documentation for a quiet study of the human mind.”

The aim of this article is first of all to contribute to better specifying the relation of psychic trauma to historical catastrophes; it is far from being evident that this approach differs from one that tries to redefine more precisely what psychoanalysis understands by “trauma”. Let us even add, they appear to me to be one and the same project.

But before going further let us consider the plethora of discourse to which the Holocaust is currently giving rise. Even taking only France into account, dozens of publications, articles, issues of journals, books, over a period of just a few years a number of multidisciplinary conferences dedicated to the event, and this although it had been necessary to await the end of the seventies for the first significant studies on the subject to appear. It is worth recalling that in France a book like *Survival in Auschwitz* was only published, in a form faithful to P. Levi’s text, in 1987. There had indeed been a faulty first edition brought out by a small publishing house in 1961.

Les Temps Modernes had brought out some selections, but the translation was so poor that Primo Levi had it withdrawn almost immediately.

For years, silences, taboos on thought and speech. Then, this intense focusing of interest, with the feeling no doubt that somehow we're missing the essential. That we've gone from the forbidden to the impossible. And that the response to the impossible has come in the characteristic superego form of the duty of memory. The misunderstanding, from that point, could be complete.

With the passing years it was right, useful and necessary to gather the maximum of testimonies, written or oral, of all those who, still living, were willing and able to participate. Yet one fact is clear: all testimonies are not equal in quality, their force of transmission is unequal. Accordingly, we should perhaps read and listen to those whose testimonies set the highest standard.

Once again, artists and writers preceded the scholars. Primo Levi was and remains the foremost among them: survivor, chemist, great writer. And although his first book met with indifference, here again it was the writers who first recognized the decisive importance of Levi's work.²

Contrary to what Levi himself believed – guilt, as always, can lead to the darkest errors of judgement – he was indeed the irreplaceable witness of what was perpetrated in those places. It has taken a long time to finally, truly, read his books. And also to accept certain readings they have progressively inspired. On this occasion I was led to re-encounter G. Agamben's important work, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, (Agamben, 1999) sometimes separating myself from him on points which seemed to me essential from the viewpoint of psychoanalytic experience.

The hypothesis which has suggested itself to me and which I wish to pursue in the course of this study, laying out even its slightest difficulties, is the following: the physical mistreatment and humiliation suffered in the camps, the murder of the metaphorical dimension of language [*langue*] (its poetics – many of the survivors, and P. Levi first among them, have pointed to the vital importance of recourse to poetry, recalling verses remembered, repeated and recited in the most extreme circumstances), in short all that P. Levi was subjected to at Auschwitz, would have “coalesced” with the other forms of trauma that would have marked him during childhood. When I speak of the other forms of the traumatic, I do not mean only those traumas, more or less inevitable, that every child undergoes as a result of the shortcomings of his immediate environment. I also include therein the traumatic dimension that we can call structural and necessarily linked to each child's encounter

² Writers, and not lesser ones, were the first to praise Primo Levi's books: S. Bellow, P. Roth, F. Camon, I. Calvino.

of the difference of the sexes along with the limits that are those of beings with speech. Lacan would come to a radical formulation of these limits in the proposal that “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship.”

What is truly traumatic for the psyche is surely the most difficult to explain. A traumatic event never occurs alone. The one speaking to us of it always makes it understood that he experienced a kind of chiasmus and, even more, of coalescence of several traumas.

Across the stages of a lifetime that perhaps only art or oneiric activity (that of dreams and nightmares) allows us to grasp in outline, we would hope to illuminate, if only a little, the feeling of being wounded that this life bears within it, the shadow of its most intimate fracture. When a historic trauma suddenly takes place and events come to strike those who are the object of attempted murder or suffer the effects of natural disasters, the ones who escape and survive do so only by paying a high price.

The reading of P. Levi put forth by G. Agamben brings out that in every human being, however far the destruction striking him may go, there is a remnant, something irreducible and indestructible, that also remains enigmatic. N. Zaltzman (1999) advanced an idea extremely close to this in speaking “of an ‘unconscious trait’ which resists the concentration camp universe of killable life.” This is a reality that is not unknown to us; we encounter it in extreme situations that certain patients have experienced and which they recount in the course of their psychoanalysis.

Basing ourselves on a nightmare – the one P. Levi reports in *The Reawakening*, near the end of the long return trip to his home city of Turin, after the liberation of the camp – we will try to formulate our hypothesis: the rebus in the dream is taken to reveal the attack inflicted upon his name (his surname: Levi); and to reveal one of the most traumatic aspects of the nightmare, brutally interrupting the dreamed illusion of the pleasant and quiet life he finally seemed to have regained. As Kafka had intuited, immediately confiding it in a letter to Milena, there seems to be a point beyond which nothing holds together, not even a name. For now we only point this out, to consider its significance later.

Forty years after writing *Survival in Auschwitz*, P. Levi was led to re-examine the experience of the Lager. The re-examination yielded, a year before his suicide, the book *The Drowned and the Saved* (Levi, 1986)³. A risky book he found it a necessity to write. “It may result,” he said, “in a sociological study, no doubt already

³ The signifiers, “*sommersi*” and “*salvati*” in the Italian title, *I sommersi et i salvati* are much closer in sound than the English signifiers “drowned” and “saved”.

attempted by others, but in which I think I have something very personal to say. The position I take is at the limit of ambiguity.”(Levi, P. *Ha Keillah*)

Notably in the chapter “The Gray Zone,” P. Levi attempts to analyze in detail, as a “sociologist,” how the Nazi system led a large number of prisoners to participate in the persecution and extermination of other detainees, up to the extreme horror of the formation of the “Sonderkommandos” – special squads – assigned to carry out the administration of the gas chambers and crematoria (C. Lanzmann devoted a major part of this film to gathering the testimony of survivors of these squads). P. Levi concluded that “(c)onceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime.”(Levi 1986, p, 53)

This very dark book hurt the feelings of a certain number of survivors whose experience contradicted Levi’s. H. Langbein has shown that communist militants, for example, did their utmost to save the lives of their comrades.

Few lines of Levi’s are as revealing as the following of the subjective disarray of a man who, struggling with the concern for truth that was his, finds himself forced into such a demeaned position. “I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses.(...) We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are 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 are the ‘Muslims.,’ the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.” (Levi 1986, p 83) “We speak in their stead, by proxy.” (Levi 1986, p 84)

These few lines, in part enigmatic, often cited and open to a variety of interpretations, hold within them all the violence of their dark, melancholic side. *They attempt to conjugate the paradox of the impossible to live with and the ultimate consideration of the root of what remains to be transmitted to others, precisely when almost nothing remains of life and this “almost nothing” then appears the most precious human possession.* This is in any case the path chosen by G. Agamben. It is the interpretation, literally, that he retains of P. Levi (the “Muslims” are the complete witnesses...) and the point of departure for the long ethical reflection that the existence of Auschwitz seems to him to call for.

It was, it is, also possible to understand these lines of Primo Levi’s as an effect of the combined shame of surviving and a still deeper guilt; for it seems that during the writing of this book, according to testimony from those close to him gathered by his biographer, he was in a truly melancholic state of depression.

Such is not the avenue Agamben chooses; on the contrary, his decision commits him to unfolding all of the consequences he sees as following.

To begin with, the first of them is to reintegrate into the human what seemed the most excluded from it. The “Muslims” were precisely those who, having abandoned all willpower, had entered a state of psychic and physiological defeat which led them to the border of life and death. In the “Muslim” there is no trace of the will to live or of dignity, but only a state of destitution, dereliction and apathy.

P. Levi, exactly like other survivors, confirmed this; those who held up, who asserted their will to remain standing, most often no longer spoke to the “Muslims.” Bettelheim says it as well: “they were nearly always beyond help” (Bettelheim 1960, p. 156) And yet, at Auschwitz, within a few weeks, at most a few months, the *Muselmann* was the fate of the average prisoner, of the immense majority.

“The common prisoner of the camps,” Levi writes, “has been described, by me and others, when we speak of the *Muselmann*: but the *Muselmänner* themselves have not spoken.” (Levi 2001, p. 252)

It is this “common prisoner,” this “Muslim,” that Agamben, with Levi, chooses not only to restore fully to the category of the human but beyond that to promote as the paradigmatic ethical figure.

“If one establishes a limit beyond which one ceases to be human, and all or most of humankind passes beyond it, this proves not the inhumanity of human beings but, instead, the insufficiency and abstraction of the limit.” (Agamben 1999. p. 63). “Simply to deny the *Muselmann*’s humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture. The *Muselmann* has, instead, moved into a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless.” (Agamben 1999. p. 63-64).

To conclude with these words:

“(N)o ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see.” (Agamben 1999. p. 63-64).

Agamben is undertaking here to put to work an ethics free of certain idealized images of the human (perhaps at the price of reconstituting other idealized images?). His project is to affirm that, after Auschwitz, the unsayable does not pose a limit; in spite of the pronouncements made by Adorno for a time, later ultimately withdrawn, poetry has not become impossible. On the contrary, something remains to be transmitted !

What remains, the remnant, incarnated by the figure of the “Muslim,” can be and is named by Agamben as representing the most basic of the human, the ultimate support of subjectification. This is probably the point at which Agamben’s reasoning can provoke a certain discomfort. If I must follow in the gesture that leads him to

rehabilitate, to restore the memory of the “Muslims” (that is to say, as P. Levi points out, those who in the end were the majority of the exterminated deportees and if I follow him still when he lets it be understood that this “experience,” extreme beyond all others, holds a strictly human meaning that must be grasped and conceptualized, then on the other hand, discomfort arises when, rightly or wrongly, one perceives Agamben as taking the further step of a sort of idealization of the figure of the “Muslim,” a reification of the paradigmatic value of the “remnant” he sees in them. His precise, prudent, demanding reasoning is in the end exposed to the very pitfalls it criticizes.

Not to consider the process of subjectification to be the fulfillment of a realized identity, a sort of *telos* at work, is in itself an appreciable overcoming of the most common metaphysical approach. Yet how can one not be astonished that an author like Agamben – who makes statements like “(i)n shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification,” or then “(t)his double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame,” - that the author of those lines avoids all reference to psychoanalysis, and more precisely to Lacan’s work? The issues he addresses, the concepts elaborated and put to the test (the “remnant,” “desubjectification”), the formulations he arrives at - “desubjectification is constitutive of all subjectification” - are so close, so clearly in the same neighborhood, they could not be nearer to what Lacan developed on his own part. Should one assign responsibility for this to P. Levi, himself quite reticent concerning psychoanalysis, no doubt not without personal reasons? This explanation of the matter would seem a bit thin.

In sharp contrast, for our part we unhesitatingly find in psychoanalysis the support suitable to dislodge the “fetish” object this “remnant” can become, if another subject is not found to give that remnant awareness of another destiny, a task to which P. Levi devoted himself, although in his own case with the limitations we’re aware of. It seems to me precisely here that Lacan can provide assistance.

Bettelheim was deported in 1938, a date at which – luckily for him – the extermination camps did not yet exist. He was able to be released before the latter began to operate. Afterwards, Bettelheim (1980) wrote a certain number of texts likening the extreme situations encountered by prisoners in the camps with those of young patients he later had in treatment. He entitled one of his articles “Schizophrenia as a Reaction to Extreme Situations.”

The attention P. Levi focused on all those around him in the Lager led him to record observations that are infinitely precious for anyone interested in psychic functioning in situations at the limits. For the psychoanalyst, the experience of analysis with psychotics or more generally with the degree of madness present in

everyone, in those who turn to the analyst and in the analyst himself as well, can only increase our sensitivity to what P. Levi wrote, notably his observations concerning deportees' relation to languages (*langues*) and to language (*langage*) in the camp. He returns to this matter several times and in quite different contexts.

For example, when he notes the important role his knowledge of German, rare among his Italian co-prisoners, played in his survival. More fundamentally it was, as we will try to set forth, the entire relation of man to language (*langage*) and speech (*parole*) that seemed to him absolutely determining, as much for the physical as for the psychic state of the deportee. Nothing less than one's relation to others, and thus to the Nazis, was at stake; in other words, in that context, it became a question of life or death.

Accompanying the processes of physical and psychic destruction, the deterioration suffered by a subject's language (*langue*) crudely exposes how far into defeat one has been driven. However far the endeavor to destroy detainees' humanity can be pursued, there remains in man the survivor a remnant, a materiality of language (*langage*), even if profoundly damaged, destructured, disoriented: it may remain without voice, nearly mute, or on the contrary projecting high and loud, but is always in search of an other to address itself to in spite of appearances.

Little Hurbinek, whom P. Levi speaks of in *The Reawakening*, testifies to a state in which language (*langue*) has been damaged to such an extent that the interjections a subject still commands can appear as "an inarticulate babbling" or "a groan of the dying" (thus has P. Levi unjustly characterized the poet Paul Celan's treatment of German in his poems),

"Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and he had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the articulate ~~sounds~~ sounds that the baby let out now and again.(...) The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency." (Levi 1993, p. 25) (I emphasize especially this last sentence.)

This "need of speech" asks only to be received and heard by someone to possibly be realized; precisely that happened with Hurbinek, which did not escape P. Levi, although Agamben, in the reading he proposes of this passage, strangely does not point it out.

"Henek " – a young Hungarian fifteen years of age – "spent half his day beside Hurbinek's pallet. He was maternal rather than paternal; had our precarious coexistence lasted more than a month, it is extremely probable that Hurbinek would have learnt to speak from Henek." (Levi 1993,p. 25)

When a week had passed, Henek announced that Hurbinek had said a word: “What word? He did not know, a difficult word, not Hungarian: something like ‘mass-klo’, matisklo’. During the night we listened carefully: it was true, from Hurbinek’s corner there occasionally came a sound, a word. It was not, admittedly, always exactly the same word, but it was certainly an articulated word; or better, several slightly different articulated words, experimental variations on a theme, on a root, perhaps on a name.” (Levi 1993, p. 26)

Everyone in the camp tried in vain to decode this budding vocabulary, this secret word. “(i)t was certainly not a message, it was not a revelation, perhaps it was his name;(…)perhaps (…)it meant ‘to eat’, or ‘bread’; or perhaps ‘meat’ in Bohemian…”(Levi 1993, p. 26)

Let us emphasize the connection made here between the name and orality; as soon as we recognize the importance of the question of incorporation relating to the name, one can only be receptive to the hypothesis advanced by P. Levi.

Hurbinek died a month later, in the first days of March 1945. Primo Levi ends his account of the child with these words: “Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.” (Levi 1993, p. 26)

The story of this little Hurbinek, as I reread it, brought to mind the story of another child, by the name of Robert, a child seriously affected, reported on by his psychoanalyst, Rosine Lefort, in Lacan’s seminar in 1954.

His father unknown, his mother suffering from paranoia and institutionalized at the time of his treatment, the child had spent his first months with the mother, who neglected the most basic care. Very quickly his life was at risk, marked by a succession of physical manifestations, hospitalizations and multiple placements, until he was definitively abandoned and did not see his mother again.

When Rosine Lefort first sees him, he is three and a half years old. He presented at that time many behavioral problems, and, in terms of language (*langage*), could only say two words: “madame” and “the wolf.” Abandoned at the beginning of his life to a world of deprivation and repeated traumas, the child gave R. Lefort the impression that he had sunk, as she said, “beneath the real,” and that at the beginning of treatment, he had no symbolic function and even less imaginary function. Lacan pointed out to her that the child did have two words at his disposition. Lacan laid out on this occasion a commentary, an interpretation of the case, of amazing depth and inventiveness. He emphasizes that for Robert, the function of language (*langage*) is “reduced down to a word whose meaning and

significance for the child we are not even able to define, but which nonetheless ties him to the community of mankind.” (Lacan 1991, p. 103)

The word “wolf” appears to Lacan a sort of “pivot of language [*langage*],” which is, as he formulates it, “the summary of a law” for the child Robert. The root of a “law” that will permit the child, thanks to the transference firmly supported by R. Lefort, to pursue an “extraordinary elaboration, brought to a close by this touching self-baptism, when he utters his own Christian name.” (Lacan 1991, p. 103) Lacan then adds: “At that point we come close to the fundamental relation, in its most reduced form, of man to language [*langage*]. It is extraordinarily moving.” (Lacan 1991, p. 103)

The word “wolf,” this simple word, which one can relate to the primordial signifier (S1) of a subject, held for this child, in its fundamental non-sense, a promise of signification.

“Wolf,” this single word, this “inarticulate babbling” one is tempted to think, just like the “mass-klo” of Hurbinek, is an appeal to the Other, from this very place at which the child finds himself, from the depth of his desubjectification. In the absence of an Other in a position to receive this appeal, this single word would remain nothing but the representation of the “superego [which] is at one and the same time the law and its destruction.” We can cite Lacan’s reflection on the scope and function of this word for Robert as he continues: “(I)t is speech itself, the commandment of the law, in so far as nothing more than its root remains.(...) It is in this sense that the superego ends up by being identified with only what is most devastating, most fascinating, in the primitive experiences of the subject. It ends up being identified with what I call *the ferocious figure*, with the figures which we can link to the primitive traumas the child has suffered, whatever these are.” (Lacan 1991, p. 102)

Psychoanalytical experience shows us that only through the action of transference can the primordial signifier (S1), through the “luck” of a chance encounter and the intermediary of the Other, supported by the dimension of the unary trait (symbolic identification), open the subject to the dimension of metaphor and the hollowed-out object thus produced.

In order to lift the burden of traumas that the subject has suffered early in his history, the analysis of neurotics, in a direction opposite from the child, “*Robert-wolf*”, must take into account the primordial signifier, “the remnant of the remnant”: below or beyond fantasy, the primordial signifier is in a way the symbolic trait from the field of the Other and thus the starting point from which the object will be elaborated

And that is what is never completely guaranteed; analysis leads each one to approach more clearly his relation with madness – that of his parents, of his ancestors, as well as his own points of madness.

* * *

I've always lived in the house in which I was born. I believe I constitute an extreme case of sedentariness, comparable to certain mollusks which attach themselves to a cliff and spend their entire lives there. It is said that the desk on which I'm writing today is placed at precisely the spot on which I came into this world, since my mother was already living in this apartment and gave birth at home.

Primo Levi (?year)

Primo Levi survived a terrifying “experience.” Over forty years later, he killed himself, throwing himself into the stairwell of the building in which he'd been born in Turin. Every suicide, when it actually brings about death, carries its mystery, its secret, away with it. No-one will ever know why another being was led to end its life. As inconceivable as were the violence and the physical and psychic damage suffered by the survivors of the Holocaust, it would be a renewal of that violence, muffled certainly but no less real, to reduce the entire traumatic burden of their lives after deportation to what they lived through in the camps. That is what it would amount to if, through lack of understanding or also of tact, we interpret P. Levi's suicide solely as one of the consequences of his captivity in Auschwitz.

In *The Reawakening*, Primo Levi tells the story of the long journey of many months across Europe preceding his return to Turin after the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army. The book ends with an account of a horrible dream that, after his return, came to him at regular intervals:

“It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has

changed to chaos; I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, ‘Wstawàch’.” (Levi 1993, 207-208)

‘Wstawàch’ – a foreign word, curt and low, “on your feet, get up.” A madness which could make one believe that everything is taking place quite normally. A word, a traumatic signifier, that I take to be a bit like the nightmarish “wolf” of the young Robert. Or perhaps yet again like Hurbinek’s “mass-klo” . Here, ‘Wstawàch’ is the traumatic signifier of the dream, the nightmare.

And yet, ‘Wstawàch’ means “to get up, to rise” in Polish. Its meaning is said to be less brutal than the imperative form “Get up!” And yet perhaps precisely the opposite is true. The imperative, as brutal as it may be, is addressed to someone, whereas the infinitive form implies no particular addressee.⁴ There remains only the anonymous and deadly message arriving in this “peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction”.

How, reading this account of the nightmare, can one not be reminded of the analysis Lacan proposed of the forbidden thing, *das Ding*,⁵ showing, through “the image” of the scream, how it is precisely the most intimate which is recognizable only from the outside? Lacan had found this image in Munch’s famous engraving “The Scream” where it is manifested only in the absolute silence emerging from the twisted mouth of the woman in the foreground, while in the background, two persons are moving away on a road, not even turning around towards the woman. The terror,

⁴ “Among all verbal forms, the infinitive is the one carrying the least grammatical information. It says nothing about the protagonist of the process of utterance, nor of the relation of this process to the other processes within the utterance or to the process of enunciation. The infinitive thus excludes person, gender, number, order and time.” R. Jakobson, “ Les embrayeurs, les categories verbales et le verbe russe (Shifters, Verbal Categories and the Russian Verb)” in *Essais de Linguistique (Linguistic Essays)*, Points Seuil, Paris: 1970, p. 191

⁵ ‘*Das Ding*’: the Thing (*la Chose*) was Lacan’s translation of ‘Das Ding,’ introduced by Freud in his *Entwurf* (“Project for a Scientific Psychology”) as the ‘*Nebenmensch*’ or first precarious apprehension of reality. The thing is thus the first object, the “absolute other” of the subject and a “supreme good,” the “mother” in the form of the object of desire as the radically forbidden.

the anguish which erupt in the nightmare are all the more implacable as they emerge in a context of calm, but also of absolute ignorance, of the silence of primordial distress.

Traumatic dreams, nightmares, are repetitive, and take place in an attempt to elaborate the traumatic signifier which is at the closest point to the real. The nightmare first menaces the subject by awakening him by means of the anguish which brutally erupts in the midst of sleep, disturbed along with the psyche of the dreamer. But at the same time the untimely awakening saves the subject from a greater danger presented by the traumatic signifier, representing the “law” of a primordial *jouissance*, forbidden and literally impossible. Here it is the task of the analyst to attempt to accompany the analysand who encounters these points of dereliction until he grows away from and disengages himself from subjection to the traumatic signifier.⁶

P. Levi, like the other prisoners, understood the word ‘Wstawàch’. A word that came back, insistent, and at the same time remained enigmatic, foreign, as incomprehensible as this “law” which is the very destruction of all human law. ‘Wstawàch’, a word which there in the nightmare is the place of condensation of fundamental signifiers which carry within them the very core of non-sense of language.

P. Levi’s suicide remains opaque. Whether an irreparable raptus or not, everything preceding it, the subjective threads of a life, its unconscious weave long worked on, everything led him to this suicide, where certain people are sometimes led without it being possible for others, even psychoanalysts, to untangle the web sufficiently for the destinies of those who committed suicide to be altered or even, afterward, be clarified.

That should not prevent us from presenting the few associative elements we happen to know from his biography and which coincide strangely with his traumatic dream.

⁶ For Lacan, the analyst’s aim is to constitute a shelter from “where a livable, temperate relation of one sex with the other can be established,” which requires “the intervention of this intermediary which is the paternal metaphor.” To this end, it is necessary, still according to Lacan, “to obtain the absolute difference, that arising when the subject, confronted with the primordial signifier, for the first time comes into a position to subjugate it.” One may understand this as the result of progress in analysis through which the analysand will be able to bring into play the asemantic nature of the primordial signifier as guarantor of the signification of the phallus, which is nothing other than to elevate it to the function of the name-of-the-father.

First, on his father's side, is the suicide of his grandfather Levi. Then, his father, Cesare, died of cancer in 1942, shortly before his departure for the resistance, and then the arrest and deportation of Primo Levi. In an interview, P. Levi confided thinking that his father would not have survived deportation.

Finally, let us consider "Levi," the family name. Not only does it designate in Hebrew he who serves the temple, but in Latin and in Italian as well, in certain forms, the word means: lift into the air; rise; arise! We may add that Leviticus is the name given to the third book of the Pentateuch, containing principally the laws of the Levites and the rules for sacrifices.

'Wstawàch' – Levi, there is no relation between these two words, these two signifiers. And if there were a relation, it could only be traumatic.

Traumatic, in the interior of the dreadful trauma of Auschwitz inflicted by the Nazis who will have destroyed and murdered the greatest part of the deportees. As for the small minority of survivors, they will have had to survive any way they could, with whatever forces and weaknesses they possessed before deportation.

A certain number of external and internal facts, in the eyes of some due to chance, for others not at all, came together for P. Levi to come out of the Lager alive. P. Levi painfully explained himself on the matter in *The Drowned and the Saved*.

The repetitive dream which came to haunt P. Levi's nights after his return was indeed a traumatic dream. Traumatic for the subject Primo Levi, if the family name Levi had for him in fact been affected in its paternal metaphorical function. A function which operates starting from an irreducible primordial non-sense, the guarantor of the signification of the subject.

Children, spontaneously, are aware of this; they play at scratching out their school friends' family names to make fun of them; to give some everyday meaning to those family names (a pejorative meaning, of course) to better measure the assurance that the other (oneself) has received or not received from his father's name. A child is the more capable of handling all of the traumas necessarily encountered in the first years of childhood to the very extent that he has found the possibility of being supported by this "name of the father," a name making little sense, from whose subjection he will have been able to free himself.

In this task, we may add that the mother will have played a role. P. Levi's biography, barely evoked here, only lets us guess the major part she played.

Could we say that analysis is exactly the movement of a subject's words, a subject sure of the support of an Other, sometimes called a psychoanalyst; a movement of words leading the subject to take many turns around "it" (id), in order to come out Other? Said differently, it is not a question of my speaking in Primo Levi's place or for anyone else. There remains a place from where, let us

wager, as did others, as did Primo Levi, it is possible to transmit what is properly human.

References

Agamben, G. (1999) *Remnants of Auschwitz*. New York: Zone Books

Bettelheim, B. (1960) *The Informed Heart*. New York: The Free Press

Bettelheim, B. (1980) "Schizophrenia as a Reaction to Extreme Situations," in *Surviving and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books

Blevis, J.J. (1984) "A l'impossible chacun est tenu" ("The Impossible is Required of Everyone") *Patio*, No 1, Paris: Editions de l'Eclat

Lacan, J. (1991) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Levy, P. (1984) *The Periodic Table*. New York: Schocken Books

Levi, P. (1986) *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Summit Books

Levi, P. (1958, 1996) *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Levi, P. *Ha Keillah* (journal of the Jewish community of Turin).

Levi, P. (1993) *The Reawakening*. New York: Collier Books/Macmillan.

Levi, P. (2001) *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987*. New York: The New Press.

Zaltzman, N. (1999) (directed by) *La résistance de l'humain*. (“The Resistance of the human”)
Paris: P.U.F.,