Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

Caroline Williams, Arts One
March, 2013
You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
  Consider if this is a man
  Who works in the mud
  Who does not know peace
  Who fights for a scrap of bread
  Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without a name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.
From: an interview with Primo Levi in 1979 – on the subject of concentration camp guards at Auschwitz:

“These were not monsters. I didn’t see a single monster in my time in the camp. Instead I saw people like you and I who were acting in that way because there was Fascism, Nazism in Germany. Were some form of Fascism or Nazism to return, there would be people, like us, who would act in the same way, everywhere. And the same goes for the victims, for the particular behaviour of the victims about which so much has been said ...”
“Because that look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany.” (p. 105)

Dr. Pannwitz, Elias, Henri, Kuhn
Monster, monstrous

Monstrum – monstrare, monere
Define? No

Characteristics – general
- powerful, terrifying, large
- Malevolent
- Imaginary creature
- Incongruous elements
- Rare and extraordinary
- Portent or marvel
- Sign which “demonstrates” or warns
- Deviation from the normal

“. . .and I feel like Oedipus
In front of the Sphinx.” (p. 105)
“It has not been written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind.”

Author’s preface, p. 9
PRIMO LEVI
“an extraordinary ordinary man”

- 1919 - 1987
- Turin, Italy
- Chemist
- Secular Jew
- p. 13 24 years old
- Auschwitz: 25 years old
- Author: 27 years old
“civilized Cartesian phantoms” (p. 13)

versus

“Hier ist kein warum” (p. 29)
Why in the 20th century’s top 100?
KATABASIS - THE DESCENT NARRATIVE

Homer, *Odyssey*

Virgil, *Aeneid*
Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Cantico 1, *Inferno*
Katabatic Narrative = Descent Narrative

Motifs

- The protagonist enters a place apart
- A guide or guides to or from the underworld
- Initiatory rite(s)
- A moment of crossing the threshold – often with a message (Dante’s “Abandon hope...”)
- River crossing with a ferryman
- Large numbers of damned souls often compared to birds, leaves etc.
- Animal-like creatures and demons
- A lake of forgetfulness
- Regions of Hades/Hell with boundaries defining them and graded punishments
- Distortions of time
- Distortions of space
- Graded series of tests that must be overcome
- Narrative trajectory – descent, turning point, return to surface
Why does the protagonist descend?

• He acquires special knowledge important for his quest or mission e.g. Odysseus, Aeneas
• He experiences events through which he acquires knowledge important, and indeed necessary, for other human beings to have e.g. the way to salvation, the purpose of human existence, the grave dangers threatening man’s life e.g. Aeneas, Dante, Marlow, Levi.
• Aeneas, Marlow and Levi – their historical understanding is expanded. Aeneas learns of Rome’s imperial mission to establish the *Pax Romana*. Marlow sees the ugly and destructive nature of European imperialism. Levi bears witness to a 20\textsuperscript{th} century horror rooted in an imperialistic vision
• The problematic nature of the human psyche can be explored in such descent narratives
A Transformative Journey

- In a descent narrative the protagonist comes to know both his own true self and something of profound importance outside himself.
- He can learn only by first having his selfhood destroyed through difficult tests or degradations.
- At the moment of greatest danger of permanent dissolution, the protagonist reaches the turning point.
- The protagonist, changed in some way, returns to the world of the living.
HADES, THE UNDERWORLD, HELL
a very brief outline

• Hades - a shadowy place below ground where all the souls of the dead go and in a more developed form in e.g. Plato – a place where a soul readies itself for reincarnation

• The Medieval theological Hell (of e.g. Dante) - an actual place of eternal punishment to which only the souls of sinners go

• The modern theological concept of Hell – not a “place”, except for fundamentalist believers, but a self-exclusion from communion with God and exists, therefore, in the here and now.

• The modern secular concept of hell (Freud, Marx, Eliot) sees it as immanent and historically real. Its sources are variously identified (See, for example, Stevenson’s *Strange Case*) but the ideas of the destruction of the self through suffering, the absence of community, the lack of autonomy, the pervasive presence of violence all figure prominently in accounts of modern hell.
LEVI AS KATABATIC WRITER

The descent narrative offers Levi a structure to represent the process by which the Levi of “little wisdom, no experience and a decided tendency ... to live in an unrealistic world of my own,” (p. 13) survived the “demolition of a man” (p. 26).
Dante and Levi: “This is hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this.” (p. 22)

- Hell and the Lager are outside normal human experience
- Dante is Levi’s guide to provide some form of “way in” for understanding what it means to be a human being even when placed in the most extreme of circumstances
- Dante’s Hell as an expression of Divine justice versus Auschwitz as a place of human injustice
- Chapter 11: “The Canto of Ulysses” is the fulcrum or turning-point for Levi’s journey through Auschwitz
- Ulysses in Dante’s hell represents the unconquerable human spirit.
“During the halts, no one tried any more to communicate with the outside world: we felt ourselves by now ‘on the other side.’” (p. 18)
“And on the basis of the reply they pointed in two different directions.” (p. 19)
“it is obvious that it is a small private initiative of our Charon.” (p. 21)
“Then the lorry stopped, and we saw a large door, and above it a sign...” (p. 22)

The crossing of the threshold is a moment set apart and noted.
“He looks at us slowly and asks, ‘Wer kann Deutsch?’... The SS man makes a long calm speech; ... we must take off our shoes but pay great attention that they are not stolen.” (p. 22)

“Be careful how you enter, whom you trust.” (King Minos to Dante V, 19)
Dante and Levi: In Hell, encounters lead to valuable knowledge

- Dante and Levi gain their insights from the people they encounter in hell.
- Steinlauf: the power to refuse consent
- Null Achtzein: the Musulmann
- Schepschel: redirection of violence received into violence to others
- Elias Lindzin: madness outside the Lager will be magnified once inside
- Alberto: innate goodness in a strong personality remains intact
“Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself.” (p. 27)

On the bottom we are introduced to the Musulmann
“They from the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer ... If I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.” (p. 90)
Brings us back to the implicit question of the original title *If this is a man*

“as if everyone was aware that only a man is worthy of a name, and that Null Achtzehn is no longer a man. I think that even he has forgotten his name, certainly he acts as if this was so. When he speaks, when he looks around, he gives the impression of being empty inside, nothing more than an involucre, like the slough of certain insects which one finds on the banks of swamps, held by a thread to the stones and shaken by the wind.” (p. 42)
• Naming by a number follows the Nazi system of identification
• Each camp had own name for the type (Kretiner in Dachau. Cripples in Stutthof, swimmers in Mauthausen, camels in Neuengamme, tired sheikhs in Buchenwald)
• Names coined by Nazis or by the long-term inmates in the camps and are derogatory
• Levi himself seems to have been considered a Musulmann or close to in his early months at the camp (p. 49, “Du Jude, Kaputt. Du schnell Krematorium fertig.”)
• Levi’s ambivalent feelings toward the Musulmanner can be seen in poems such as Buna where he calls Null Achtzehn a “friend,” “companion” and “once-strong man”.

MUSULMANN
What a Man Is

• There are limits beyond which men cannot go: "that none should prove so hardy to venture the uncharted distances..." (p. 113)

• Ultimately Ulysses drowns in the attempt: "And over our heads the hollow seas closed up." (p. 115)

• Men must nevertheless always strive and try to expand their boundaries and break through the limitations even if they perish in the attempt: "Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance / Your mettle was not made; you were made men, / To follow after knowledge and excellence." (p. 113)
“We are now at the soup queue, among the sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers from other Kommandos.” (p. 115)

“And over our heads the hollow seas closed up.”
The Ascent from Hell
Chapter 17: The Story of Ten Days &
The Reawakening
“...the path to hell is easy: black Dis’s door is open night and day: but to retrace your steps and go out to the air above, that is work, that is the task.”

Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.126 - 131
“Only a day before a similar act would have been inconceivable ... It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from prisoners to men again.” (p. 160)

BUT the road back is a difficult one:

“It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; it is no longer man who, having lost all restraint, shares his bed with a corpse. Whoever waits for his neighbour to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit guiltless, further from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pygmy or the most vicious sadist.” (p. 172)
THE GREY ZONE – what Levi learned in the hell that was Auschwitz

• In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi asks each of us to contemplate how we would behave if driven by necessity and at the same time lured by seduction.

• The boundary between “good” and “evil” as understood in a “normal” world

• His answer is to posit The Grey Zone (La Zona Grigia) – Levi’s important contribution to Holocaust studies

• The Grey Zone – a place of extreme moral ambiguity in which the onlooker or outsider (i.e. us) is asked to suspend judgement on the actions of individuals who act to prolong their lives or to alleviate unspeakable personal suffering
"We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words “good” and “evil”, “just” and “unjust”; let everybody judge on the basis of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.” (p. 86)

From Chapter 8: “This Side of Good and Evil” in which Levi outlines the small compromises.
“If there is an Auschwitz, then there cannot be a God.” Levi in *Conversations with Primo Levi* (trans. John Shepley)

- In the camp words take on a meaning unimaginable in the outside world e.g. “hunger” “thirst” “collaborator”
- See pp. 90 – 91 “If the drowned have no story........ The Jewish prominents form a sad and notable human phenomenon........”
- There can be no “rush to judgement”
- The collaborators who bear the greatest burden – the Sonderkommandos (SK) or “crematorium ravens”
The Complexity of The Grey Zone
There are “monsters” and “monstrous actions”

• Not all action in the Lager is “beyond good and evil”

• Elias Lindzin (pp. 95 – 98): “…like some little prophetic monster, continues his raging and crazy speech.”

• Kuhn: “If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn’s prayer.” (p. 130)

• Henri (pp. 98 – 100): “I know that Henri is living today. I would give much to know his life as a free man, but I do not want to see him again.”
“Let it be clear that to a greater or lesser degree all were responsible, but it must be just as clear that behind their responsibility stands that great majority of Germans who accepted in the beginning out of mental laziness, myopic calculation, stupidity, and national pride, the ‘beautiful words’ of Corporal Hitler, followed him as long as luck and lack of scruples favored him, were swept away by his ruin, afflicted by deaths, misery and remorse and rehabilitated a few years later as the result of an unprincipled political game.”

Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

Levi is not a “pardon”
HOLOCAUST

• A term in general usage by the 1950’s
• Note that E. M. Forster uses it in *A Passage to India* (1924) when the British in India speak of “holocausts of natives” after the ambiguous experience of a white woman in the company of an Indian.
• The word’s derivation is from the Greek “holokaustos” meaning total consumption by fire.
• Term is applied to genocide in its most extreme form
• Levi did not want to use this word to refer to the Nazi extermination program because of its ancient Greek religious connotations suggesting sacrificial victimhood.
GENOCIDE

• Word coined in 1943 by a Polish emigré to London, Raphael Lemkin, who called it “an old practice in its modern development”
• Word denotes the destruction of a nation or of an entire ethnic group.
• Derivation – ancient Greek *genos* (race or tribe) + Latin *occidio* (slaughter)
• Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the U.N. on December 9, 1948
COMMON FACTORS IN GENOCIDE

• Killing is state-sanctioned
• Directed at a group without any idea of real punishable crimes or transgressions. A group’s mere existence is enough to start the process.
• There are no distinctions of age, sex, occupation – i.e. People are killed not as individuals but as anonymous members of a group.
• Ideologically driven genocide is the result of the state’s implementation of a belief or theory about the targeted group – a modern version of the ancient idea of scapegoating in which fear of contamination and the unclean caused societies to target someone or something to take up the sins of the community and by being driven out of the group, potential harm in the form of punishment from the gods would be averted.
• See the Nazi slogans which refer to the “purification of the Aryan race” and “cleansing of the people” – the language of scapegoating.
THE AGE OF GENOCIDE (the 20th century)

• “The myth deeply imprinted in the self-consciousness of our Western society is the morally elevating story of humanity emerging from presocial barbarity.” (Z. Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust)

• Instead – future historians will possibly call this period in human history the “late barbarian”

• Argument – prevalence of violence such as genocides is predicated on the growth of nation-states since the end of the Middle Ages. Decision-makers in complex states are removed from the ramifications of their decisions. No one need take individual responsibility for the horrors that are perpetrated.

• Genocide can occur in periods other than the modern era but more probable in an age of technological advances and essentializing discourses (e.g. The “civilized/barbarian” binary)
Levi & Anti-Semitism
Dealing with the ‘monstrous other’

• “a quiet study of the human mind”
• “Many people – many nations – can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that ‘every stranger is an enemy’. For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts and does not lie at the base of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager.” (p. 9)
• Jews are the ‘strangers’ in Europe in a serious, sometimes institutionalized way in the Medieval period when the Church was a centre of power.
• From Renaissance onwards rapid social and economic change did not include any mechanisms to incorporate cultural difference. Jews increasingly become outsiders
Enlightenment universalism, which includes the idea of man’s essential goodness and rationality, may have alleviated stress on cultural difference for a time.

20th century cultural relativism challenged utopian universalism.

Fascists and National Socialists subscribed to ancient ideas (e.g. Aristotle) that racial inferiority is innate.


Anti-Semitism and similar attitudes may be the products of this non-specific instinct for destruction.

1899 – 1939: period of intense anti-Semitism in Western societies.

Theories account for this fact by looking at economic conditions, Jewish immigration and rise of leftist parties and in Germany particularly, a distinct political culture used the ‘Jew as Other’ as a unifying cohesive force for the German people to create a strong sense of self.
If the havoc and the shame continue
We’ll drown you in our putrefaction.


“The army of those who died in vain”

- Marne
- Montecassino
- Treblinka
- Dresden
- Hiroshima
- Disappeared ones of Buenos Aires
- Cambodia
- Ethiopia
- Prague negotiators
- Bled-dry of Calcutta
- Innocents slaughtered in Bologna