

Witnessing and Translating: Ulysses at Auschwitz

Gaëtan Pégny interviews François Rastier

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William Winder, translator.

In Ulysses at Auschwitz (2005 Auschwitz Foundation award), François Rastier reinterprets Primo Levi's entire corpus in light of the latter's work as a translator and a poet, an aspect of Levi's work that is too often neglected. Critics have taken all too seriously Levi's assertion that his poetry was the irrational part of his work. François Rastier counters that critical omission by showing just how important poetry was for Levi, who produced the most poetry when he was laying the foundations for If This Is a Man (published in 1947) and as well immediately prior to his last work, The Drowned and the Saved (1986). By reminding us of the poetic tradition they grew out of as well as opposed, Levi's poems offer a poetics that can capture the experience of survivors and their crisis, and testify for the witnesses, whose voices are echoed by those voices that poetry makes audible.

This interview arose out of the desire to pursue the avenues opened by François Rastier's double reflection on Primo Levi's poetry and translation.

GP: You begin your book by presenting your approach to translation and re-translation of Primo Levi's poems as the culmination of a critical reading. Is this in fact the very definition of the task of reading? As some translators have said, the translator is the most attentive reader. You have been unable to publish your translations because of copyright issues. Could you clarify the issues surrounding those restrictions and explain what, from your perspective, is problematic about the existing authorized translations?

FR: I'll begin of course at the end: I wanted to inspire people to read Levi's poems and to (re-)translate them as well. Of course, I gave in to this temptation myself because translating makes reading tangible.

A translation is a literary work – a parallel work – which follows in the footsteps of the original, pays homage to it without competing with it, and becomes its disciple. The model that no doubt inspires Levi is Dante, who makes his own adaptation of Virgil, just as the narrator of *The Divine Comedy* takes him as his *guida*. Moreover, a translation is also a critical work, a kind of beautifully concise commentary – an appropriation, of course, but it remains at a respectful distance.

Given its exclusive rights to all French translations, Gallimard did not allow me to begin my book with my re-translation of the ten poems I refer to most often.¹ It is not at all my

1 *Ad ora incerta*, Turin, Garzanti, 1984; new expanded edition, 1991 (trans. *À une heure incertaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997).

wish to enter into a debate with the translator, Louis Bonalumi, especially since his work does not seem to me to have any serious flaws. However, my opinion differs from his on several important points that I have posted here and there: for example, to turn *tedeschi* [Germans] into *Schleus* [sic] strikes me as both an error and in bad taste; nothing is more foreign to Levi's perspective than a colonialist nickname taken from the chauvinistic slang of the "poilus".

For lack of space, I cannot develop here the problems that intertexts create for translation: for example, in the poem *Shema* Louis Bonalumi translates *Vi comando queste parole* by *No, do not forget*, erasing the paraphrase of *Deuteronomy*, which is in fact crucial to a poem that is woven out of biblical allusions and openly summarized in the title by the first word of the prayer *Listen, Israel*. I would like to see a bilingual edition with a proper critical apparatus.

GP: In your book you show how important his work as a translator was for Primo Levi. In his collection of poems, we see he adapts Rilke, Heine or other authors. This seems important to me, insofar as on the one hand poetry has been put forward as the emblematic example of the untranslatable and the concentration camp as the emblematic example of the unspeakable, and on the other hand the question of passage, of communication is absolutely central. You show in particular that in his poems Primo Levi gave a voice to things that cannot speak, to a carbon atom for example, giving new life to a stylistic figure seldom found in contemporary literature. His poetic project is indeed characterized as public speaking on behalf of a third party through prosopopoeia, except when the executioners themselves speak, because those who are accused by their own attempt at justification are still alive. It is with the very figure of Ulysses that Levi instantiates the theme of striving and then overreaching; we find Dante's Ulysses in Hell for having led his companions beyond the Pillars of Hercules, which marked the boundaries of the world. Levi used this figure on several occasions as a representation of the Jews:

Auschwitz seems to be the punishment by barbarians, by barbaric Germany, by barbaric Nazism, against Jewish civilization, that is to say, the punishment for boldness, in the same way that Ulysses' shipwreck is the punishment by a barbarian god for man's audacity. I was thinking of this vein of German antisemitism which is directed mainly towards the intellectual audacity of Jews such as Freud, Marx and all the innovators in every area. That was what disturbed a certain kind of German philistinism, much more than the fact of blood or race.²

You point out that the ethics of translation corresponded to Primo Levi's character, to his demand for precision, his attention to others and to his modesty, but might there not be a greater need underlying his activity as translator? In Paul Celan's work, with whom Primo Levi's work contrasts emphatically, but which is equally infused with the need to account for the extermination, the issue of translation plays a crucial role as well (see in particular the chapter "The Translator" that J. Bollack devoted to this subject in *Poetry against Poetry*): it serves as a veritable re-semantisation or re-translation of German within German. Even though this project is foreign to Levi's program, could we nevertheless see in the experience

2 Interview with Danielle Amsallem cited by Myriam Anissimov in *Primo Levi, ou la tragédie d'un optimiste*, Paris, J.C. Lattès, 1996, 265, reprinted in *Ulysses at Auschwitz*, 39.

of the translator, who faces the strangeness of another language and the challenges of re-semanticisation, an activity that shares common features with the work of transmitting an unprecedented experience to the “outside world”? If, as you pointed out in your recent work in linguistics, translation is never word for word but from text to text and corpus to corpus, is it not then the role of the corpus of classical texts to provide a common reference that is shared by the survivor and the outside world, whose rewriting by the witness would make it suitable for transmission?

Is the work of translation to be understood therefore as a particular kind of work that is active in any language and that is challenged by the extermination? I am referring to what Georges Perec says about the work of Robert Antelme in a seminal article he had originally considered titling “Robert Antelme or the birth of literature”, and which was first published in issue 8 of *Partisans* (January-February, 1963), where he made *The Human Race* a paradigm of literature.³

FR: You are right to mention Perec’s article, which is crucial for any reflection on literary testimony: he rejects inadequate categories, such as the opposition between “fiction” and “non-fiction” or the separation between ethics and aesthetics, and the various prejudices that have long prevented recognizing Levi as a real writer.

Primo Levi’s prose translations (a text by Lévi-Strauss and *The Castle* by Kafka) were commissioned works in his eyes.⁴ Instead, I will consider the question of translation through his poetry.

The first edition of his only collection of poems, Ad ora incerta, was published in 1984, three years before his death; it was only preceded in 1975 by a slim volume of intimate poetry, L’osteria di Brema. The 1984 edition included a section of translations, of which Levi says in a note that they are “to

3 “Writing today seems to take increasingly the position that its real purpose is to conceal, not reveal. It invites us always and everywhere to experience mystery, the inexplicable. The inexpressible is value. The indescribable is a dogma. [...] It is more immediate and reassuring in today’s world to have something that cannot be controlled. But this world exists. And that trendy world that we see as Kafkaesque, where we try to find all too quickly a superb foreshadowing of our major modern “disasters”, does not explain it: we infer an eternal curse, a metaphysical anguish, a prohibition weighing down on the human “condition”. But that is not what it is about.[...] At the heart of humankind, the will to speak and to be heard, the desire to explore and experience, leads to unlimited confidence in the language and writing that founds all literature, even if, by its very nature, and because of the fate that our culture reserves for so called “testimonies”, humankind fails to connect to it completely. Because the expression of the inexpressible, which is its very reinvention, is language, a bridge between the world and us, that establishes the fundamental relationship between the individual and history, where our freedom is born. [...] Literature begins therefore when that transformation begins, through language, in language, a transformation that is not at all obvious and not immediate, and that allows an individual to become aware by expressing the world, by addressing others. By its movement, by its method, by its content ultimately, humankind defines the truth of literature and the truth of the world” (Perec, 1992, 111–115).

4 However, Levi believes that the trial is full of “omens”, not only because Kafka’s sisters died in Auschwitz, but because the final murder of Joseph K. remains a global threat: “We will die, each of us will die, more or less like this” (1998, 194).

his mind, more philological and musical entertainment than professional works”. I have no idea why those translations were dropped from the second edition, published after his death. Levi’s intention to include them in his poetic works was no doubt misunderstood, along with their value as a public homage. These undated translations could be taken at first blush as copies of masters, taken as a tribute. But we should consider their relationship to his larger work: of the ten translations, two are from English (Spens and Kipling) and eight from Heine – a Jew of the Enlightenment, as was Levi. Moreover, seven come from the same section of the *Buch der Lieder: Die Heimkehr* [The Return]. I can’t help seeing the shadow of Ulysses there, especially since the poem *Approdo* literally translates in its first verse (*Felice l’uomo che ha raggiunto il porto*, [Blessed is the man who returns to port]) the incipit of a poem by Heine *Die Nordsee* (II, 9 *Glücklich der Mann, der den Hafen erreicht hat* [...]), which in turn is obviously adapted from Du Bellay’s well-known sonnet.

Heine’s presence is all the more important given that the title of Levi’s first book, *L’osteria di Brema*, comes straight from the same poem, *Im Hafen* [In the port]: “Im guten Ratskeller zu Bremen” (v. 4). To my knowledge, this comparison has not been made; however, on the threshold of his first poems, Levi refers indirectly to Heine as his master in the art of poetry.⁵

Given that we know that Heine’s books were burned by the Nazis, not only because he was Jewish, but because even his aesthetic stance, with its humor, delicacy, and rejection of “lievitazione retorica” and of stylistic pomp, went against their program of grandiloquent pathos.⁶ And Heine, prophet in spite of himself, said in 1817 that wherever books are being burned, there are preparations underway to burn men.

For Levi, a man of the Enlightenment post Auschwitz, the easy themes of the untranslatable and the indescribable certainly do not have the sacred overtones they have for the French intelligentsia haunted by Blanchot and Bataille. Instead, his communicational and educational project is designed to confront the sayable and therefore, also, the translatable. Levi also closely followed the translations of his works, including the translation of *If This Is a Man* into German.

The inability to communicate is death: whoever does not understand an order in time is killed on the spot. In the stage adaptation of *If This Is a Man*, Levi insisted that everyone should speak their own language, as in the camp, so that the viewer is confronted with what he called “the tempestuous sea of non-understanding” where the drowning sank. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, his last essay, a crucial chapter is titled “Communicate”.

5 I cannot develop these points here, but for example his translation of a poem by Heine, *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, which dates from 1976, is probably the source of a key poem, *Una valle*, dated November 24, 1984; so too the theme of the double “O mio doppio, pallido mio compare” (1984, 87), which Levi developed with the duality between witness and survivor, made its first appearance in his work with the translation of a poem in *Die Heimkehr*.

6 Levi takes as an example Heine and Ariosto, recalling that the author who does not know laughter, including laughing at himself, eventually becomes an object of ridicule (cf. 1985, 152).

Levi believes he owed his survival to his previous professional knowledge of German, the language of chemistry. In the camp, he learned Yiddish from a pious Jew he calls “*guida*”, just as Dante’s narrator refers to Virgil. But Levi is himself a teacher. In the famous chapter of *If This Is a Man* entitled “Song of Ulysses” the narrator’s lesson in Dantean Italian is recognized by everyone as the enigmatic and revealing center of the work.

With the notion that communication is necessarily paramount, we can better understand his posthumous dispute with Celan: Levi sees Celan’s difficulty as hermetic, an inability to communicate, which he equates with the death rattle of a dying man. He feels perhaps obscurely threatened by Celan’s suicide, as later by that of Amery. However, he includes a poem by Celan in his personal anthology *The Search for Roots*, which has only thirty authors. Celan definitely mattered, and he said of the poem *Todesfuge*: “I carry it in me like a transplant”.⁷

Of the thirty texts, there are six Italian and four German authors other than Celan – Thomas Mann, Ludwig Gattermann, and Hermann Langbein, plus one in Yiddish. The others are English (11), French (4), Russian, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. With no tinge of *Blut und Boden*, these roots are cosmopolitan. The ancients and foreigners are family.

Among the German authors is Ludwig Gattermann, the author of a *Practical Handbook of Organic Chemistry*. Levi considers him his scientific initiator and even called the section dedicated to him *The Words of the Father*. This father teaches prudence and responsibility; the selected pages are tips to avoid accidents, including fires. There is no better way to recognize a symbolic debt than by saying “the words of the father, which waken you from childhood and declare you an adult *sub conditione*” (2002, 81).

GP: But if the project to pit the German language and tradition against itself – Paul Celan’s project – is foreign to Levi, nevertheless we cannot say that the German language and German people are for Levi like any other language or people. In “Silence of the missing, dialogue of works”,⁸ you find that the preface to the German edition of *If This Is a Man* is not intended for readers who have the book in their hands, but is presented as an excerpt from a letter to the translator which concludes with the hope that this translation will have an echo that allows him to understand the Germans, but without Levi ever evoking the desire to be understood by them. Can we say that there was for him a corruption of the German language and culture, and is there in his eyes a particular analysis still to be done? Even though Levi refuses to hate the Germans⁹, it is clear that they represent a significant challenge to his universalism and to his rejection of generalizations. In *If This Is a Man* he

7 2002b, 205.

8 In *Primo Levi à l'œuvre*, edited by Philippe Mesnard and Yannis Thanassekos, 2008.

9 Cf. the appendix of *Si c'est un homme* (Julliard 1987, p. 190) : “(...) hate is personal and turned towards an individual, a face; but as we can see in the pages of this very book, our persecutors had no name, no face and they were far away, invisible, inaccessible.” p. 193ff. He quotes Eugen Kogon (“Buchenwald prisoner and professor of Political Science at the University of Munich”) to illustrate the degree to which the Germans were aware of the extermination.

presents an example of “German schooling”¹⁰, which camp prisoners endured to the very end, when an SS officer orders that separate lists be drawn up for the Jewish and non Jewish patients. “No one will be surprised to see that the Germans were able to maintain their national love for classifications...”¹¹ Levi, the exquisite observer of human nature¹², could only react with incomprehension when faced with the madness of the concentration camp world, German stubbornness, and the methodical pursuit of their program of extermination, which continued even as the Russian army approached:

But the Germans are deaf and blind, enclosed in a shell of deliberate stubbornness and ignorance. They once again set a date for starting the production of synthetic rubber: it will be February 1, 1945. They make shelters, dig trenches, repair the damage, build, fight, condemn, organize and massacre. What else could they do? They are Germans: their way of being is neither conscious nor intentional. It has its source in their nature and in the destiny that they have chosen for themselves. They cannot stop themselves: if a dying man’s body is damaged, the wound will nevertheless begin to heal, even if the whole body must inevitably die the next day.¹³

And after the hanging of a rebellious prisoner, Levi clearly speaks to the “Germans”:

It is difficult to destroy a man, almost as difficult as creating one: it was neither easy nor quick, but you managed it, Germans. Here we now stand docile before you; you have nothing to be afraid of from us: no acts of revolt, no words of defiance, not even a look that judges you.¹⁴

If he tries to avoid essentializing and never completely rejects German culture (as when he points out the beauty of the word “Heimweh”¹⁵), it is still not a coincidence that he chooses Heine as a master of poetry. Though he writes in German, Heine has a singular place in German culture – especially, though not exclusively, because he is Jewish.

10 “(...) the Blockälteste are all German or those trained in the German style: they like order, method, and bureaucracy; also, though they are vulgar, aggressive, and brutal, they are nevertheless full of a childish love for flashy multi-colored objects.” (§ 16, “The Last One”, p. 158).

11 Ch. 17, “The Story of 10 Days”, p. 168.

12 See Ch. 15, “Three people from the Laboratory”, p. 149. At the moment when he had just obtained a special status in the laboratory: “No one can boast to have understood the Germans”.

13 Ibid., p. 150–151.

14 Ibid., p. 160.

15 “The word in German is ‘Heimweh’; it is an elegant expression, which literally means ‘homesickness.’” (§ 4, “K.B.”, p. 58).

FR: We are here very far from Celan's battle-lines, or even Amery's, which are within the bounds of the German language and are directed against the exhilaration and violence that its literary tradition, distorted by the Nazis, may contain.

If the German language is what we might call a stumbling block for Levi, it is because, according to Levi, it belongs to a cultural tradition that is not equipped to express unprecedented atrocities. His testimony is made not against the German language, but rather in spite of it.

Beyond the issues of language, the issue of the massive complicity of Germans remains open for Levi and torments him to the end. The last chapter of his last book is entitled "Letters from Germans". He reflects on the mail he received following the publication of the German translation of *If This Is a Man*. This chapter is dominated by the figure of Hety, a correspondent with whom he maintained a long friendship by mail, and the only German of whom he said he was certain that her "papers were in order". According to Ian Thomson, Hety's death probably had its share in his suicide.¹⁶

GP: At the same time, I am not suggesting a quest for the single right word, although I think that there are clear choices to refuse, like the term *Holocaust*, a term that refers to a sacrifice and thus paradoxically sanctifies the crime.¹⁷ The debate surrounding the proper term (for my part, I will continue to follow Raul Hilberg) has the merit of raising the question of what language is needed to approach the destruction of European Jews. Passage

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Cf. "The Good German", *The Guardian*, April 7, 2007.

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On this subject see "Pour en finir avec le mot *Holocauste*" by Jacques Sebag, *Le Monde* January 27, 2005, joined by Claude Lanzmann on the 25th of February. The term "Shoah" is also criticized for its implicit religious overtones. (Ruth Klüger, in an overall positive review that came shortly after the first editorials, did not however raise this issue, even though she characterizes negatively what she calls C. Lanzmann's belief in places – Ruth K. Angress / Klüger, "Lanzmann's Shoah and Its Audience", in: *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, Volume 3: <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVIuG&b=395045>, accessed 23/03/2012.) Jacques Sebag defends both the use of the term "Shoah", whose Hebrew origin can identify the victim, and the term used for the Nazi genocide because it singles out the aggressor and designates the culprit. Putting to the side the tone adopted by the protagonists, which was at best unsuitable to the subject, we would like to recall a few arguments from a debate between Henri Meschonnic and Claude Lanzmann, who notes that he does not say that there is a perfect word for every reality, let alone for the reality of the destruction of European Jews: hence the choice of what Lanzmann calls "a signifier without a signified, a brief outburst, an opaque, impenetrable word, as unbreakable as an atomic nucleus" (quoted in "Le mot Shoah", *Le Monde*, February 25, 2005). It was in response to the need for a title and to the need to make it impossible to be named ("If I could have left my film unnamed, I would have done so." Ibid.). But it is precisely for its obscurity that it is often criticized, sometimes through ignorance of the Hebrew meaning, "Shoah" designating a natural disaster in the Bible. Such was the criticism made by Henri Meschonnic in "Israël : pour en finir avec le mot 'Shoah'" (*Le Monde*, February 24, 2005), who defends the choice of the Hebrew term "hurban [destruction, ruin]", following Mans Sperber, Elias Canetti and Daniel Lindenberg. Yet it is the term "Shoah" that allowed what Lanzmann and Anne-Lise Stern have called the insertion of a Hebrew signifier into the French language. If we follow, as I do, J. Bollack's interpretation, we are led to the necessary step of circumcising the German language, which is Celan's goal.

through a Jewish language, Hebrew or Yiddish – is it necessary, and how? And how to avoid the pitfalls of the executioners' language (“*Endlösung*”, “final solution”)?

If Primo Levi's relationship to the German language cannot be that of Celan or Amery, is there not some language that has a more legitimate claim to naming that destruction? For Primo Levi, it seems that it should be the mother tongue, in both senses, first as the language most fluently spoken, but also as the language the mother spoke, which is associated with the other world beyond the camp – we know the return of Ulysses is also a return to the figure of the beloved and loving wife. You analyze this relationship between femininity and mother tongue repeatedly, especially on p. 43 when you come back to the scene where “Primo” (the name Levi gives to the protagonist of the story) translates into German for a young Hungarian who had miraculously received a letter from his mother. I quote note 5:

The two lessons, Italian for the Alsatian, German for the Hungarian, inspired by the attachment to the mother tongue and probably the mother, both testify to another world (Dante's *Inferno* and the miraculous news from the mother) and both conclude with a reward of food, turnips or black radishes.

FR: Atheist, and conscious of both the executioners' and our own historical responsibilities, Levi does not use terms with religious connotations such as *Holocaust* or *Shoah*. He distances himself from political theology, as from superstitious interpretation: the executioners are not demons, but, much worse, fairly ordinary officials.

Levi's attitude is very different from Lanzmann: he sees himself as a spokesman for those who were engulfed and who he will eventually join again, and not as a herald for a cause, not even his own.

The genocide of the Jews was part of the general business of extermination, which began with the metis of the Ruhr, the mentally ill, etc. Levi develops a post-disaster humanism, a humanism of preservation, to save both humanity and nature.

Thus he remains a stranger to any communitarianism. He was not a Zionist, saw Jabotinsky, the principal instigator of the Irgun, as a fascist, and sometimes stood against Israeli policy. For example, he called for the resignation of Ariel Sharon in the early 80s, at the time of the Sabra and Shatila massacres.

GP: “We write for those who died because of us. / We cannot reach them. We seek to translate them”. On p. 81 of your book, you quote François Vacluse trying to imagine the poems Primo Levi had not yet written. Why do you need a third writer and poet? Do you agree with Primo Levi that poetry expresses the irrational part of ourselves, and that literature begins where science stops? Or that science begins where literature stops? I ask this knowing that you are also a writer and publish literary works under a pen name, which to my knowledge is not the case for your critical essays, nor your translations – which, I take it, do not fall within the category of literature. Is it because the translator and the lyricist are not the same person, or because translations are more impersonal and therefore more “scientific”?

FR: I quote the text you are referring to, which is from the special issue of the journal *Scriptures* entitled “Palimpsestes” (No. 12, 2000). The editors asked various authors to define themselves in relation to a “master”, through parody, emulation, or appropriation. François Vauclose published there three poems inspired by Levi: one non-literal translation and two texts which were derived, in turn, from this translation; and then he commented on this appropriation. Through this study, I discovered the poetry of Levi. That’s why, in my chapter on the poetry that Levi was unable to write, I essentially followed Vauclose, just as he had followed in the footsteps of Levi.¹⁸

That chapter brings us to the poems on the mountain. Levi hiked through the mountains of Valle d’Aosta including the Grand Paradiso with his friend Sandro, without mentioning that the latter will be the Piedmont’s first partisan commander. With this friend in mind, he describes the “brown and white” mountains that are reminiscent of those the narrator sees in “The Song of Ulysses”¹⁹, patterned after the brown mountain of Purgatory.

In *The Periodic Table*, he said he had sought the masters’ teachings in the mountains, but found them in the partisans.²⁰ He would be captured with his band at the Col de Joux, in the Val d’Ayas. But the mountain also carries in its shadow a theory of writing: in *La valle*, Levi revisits the theme of the unknown valley, perhaps the *verlorenes Tal* in the Monte Rosa massif. This uncharted valley, a place of initiations, is engraved with signs: “Ci sono segni lastre su di roccia / Alcuni belli, tutti misteriosi / Certo qualcuno non di mano humana” (v. 14–16 [There are signs on the face of rock / Some beautiful, all mysterious / One of them is not made by human hand]). At the pass, beyond where the vegetation stops, an evergreen tree – like the isolated Arolla pines we see there – is perhaps the one mentioned in Genesis; in any case, its resin makes us forget.

It is true that Levi minimized so thoroughly the role of poetry in his work that critics have almost unanimously ignored it; but the first duty of literary criticism is certainly not to believe writers Even if Levi seems to reuse the classroom *topos* that links poetry and irrationality, let’s not stop there. He is sensitive to what we might call the poetry of science, as evidenced by his fine work *The Periodic System*, but also by his science fiction short stories, first published under the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila (*Storie naturali*, 1967). In addition, scientific themes are present in his poetry: the poem *Nel principio* (In the Beginning) refers to the first word of Scriptures (*Beresbid*) but also to the June 1970 issue of *Scientific American*. Similarly, *Le stelle nere* refers to the 1974 December issue.... But the “black holes” also evoke *buco nero* (black hole) of Auschwitz: one of the last articles by Levi, in *La Stampa* on 22/01/87, is entitled *Buconero di Auschwitz*. He criticizes there Nolte’s and Hillgruber’s revisionist histories.

18 Incidentally, Vauclose is himself translator and published a collection of aphorisms entitled *L’Art de traduire* (2008).

19 “O Pikolo, do not let me think of my mountains that appear brown in the evening when I came back by train, from Milan to Turin!” (1987a, p. 122).

20 1987b, 141.

To better understand Levi's relationship to poetry, and the values of commemoration, tribute and resurrection he attributed to it, I think we should consider how, in his own poems, he translated other poets and was inspired by them. The poem *L'ultima epifania* is too modestly presented as a translation of a passage from Werner Bergengruen's *Dies Irae*, a collection published in 1945. Levi chooses a passage where the narrator successively takes on the appearance of a "pale Jewish fugitive", of an old woman "whose mouth is filled with a silent cry", of an orphan, and of a prisoner, each one mercilessly rejected one by one and who finally return as judges and ask "Do you recognize me?" By including this translation among his poems, Levi actually transforms it into a testimony, because the narrator, presumably Christ in the German work, becomes the survivor of extermination in Levi's book. While in many of his poems Levi speaks for a third party, giving a voice to all kinds of animals, plants, and objects, this translation is the only poem that takes on an autobiographical tone, as if that disclosure was only possible through translation.

Levi's poetry multiplies prosopopoeia; it speaks on behalf of the deceased and inanimate. In his translations or adaptations of foreign poems, this strategy is reversed: third parties speak obliquely, in his name, and for him. It is thus through the translated work itself and the reasons for its selection that Levi speaks about himself.

L'ultima epifania finally introduced the theme of hauntings, because here the epiphany is a ghost: those who survived are prey to phantoms and are themselves phantoms who demand justice.

In a less direct way, the poem *Da R. M. Rilke*, dated January 29, 1946, certainly incorporates elements of *Herbsttag* (1902) from *Buch der Bilder*, but again Levi recontextualizes it implicitly to make a poem about going back to the camps: the "long letters" become testimonies, the final anxiety is that of the survivors.

Levi's relationship to the German language is in this way outlined in his poetry. He does not go against it; by translating, he begins to listen to it; by accepting, as an author, its translations or adaptations, he must also say what it left unsaid and speak in the name of the survivors and those lost. Rewriting Heine and Rilke is done in the same spirit; we find that approach to writing clearly developed in the Bergengruen translation, where the "I" of his narrator – representing multiple victims – is assumed implicitly by Levi.

After 1964, Levi no longer uses this device in his poetry; we only find allusions or occasional references that are unrelated to the German tradition. In the early sixties, after the success of *The Truce*, with the English, French (partial) and German translations of *If This is a Man*, Levi becomes more confident and begins to consider himself a writer.

The works he translated are the milestones in his journey. They no doubt helped him strengthen and tolerate his own poetry – a necessary step towards recognizing himself as a writer. Thus, through translation, readers can strike out for themselves and ultimately join the ranks of authors.²¹ Translation's role as an initiation or rite of passage is not really

21 I would like to extend to translators this reflection by Hamann: "Children become men, virgins marry, and readers become writers. That's why most books are a faithful reproduction of the competence and appetite with which they were read and can be read". [Aus Kindern werden

understood, because it falls outside the information ideology that would limit it to an instrument.

While German authors obviously attract our attention, also recall Levi's relation to Coleridge: the title of the book *Ad ora incerta* is the literal translation of the end of verse 582 of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, again the story of a witness who is the only one who survives. Similarly, as we have seen, the title *L'osteria di Brema*, translates the end of the 4th verse of Heine's *Im Hafen*. Thus, the monograph from 1975 and the 1984 collection, which are Levi's only poetic works, borrow their titles from foreign verses.

Borrowings are at once homage and rupture. Let's take a simple example: the poem *Il tramonto di Fossoli* (Levi was transferred from Fossoli to Auschwitz) ends with these lines: "Possono i soli cadere e tornare: / A noi, quando la breve luce è spenta / Una notte infinita è da dormire" (v. 6–8) [Suns can sink and return: / For us, when the brief light is exhausted, / We are left with sleep in an endless night]. The plural *soli*, suns, is an allusion that reveals the source, confirmed in a note, in three verses by Catullus: "Soles occidere et redire possunt; / Nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux / Nox est perpetua una dormienda" (*Liber*, V, 4, v. 3–6) [Suns may come and go: / For us, when the brief light is exhausted, / We are left with sleep in an endless night]. If this plural is found in Levi's poem, it has a different poetic value. The Latin poem begins with "Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus" [Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love] but the narrator of Levi's poem addresses a deceased person, someone whose name he does not reveal and who was probably a woman he knew from college, someone who joined the same group of partisans, was transported in the same sealed car and gassed on arrival. The poetic plural, which for Catullus had the value of passionate intensification (see "Give me a thousand kisses, and then another hundred" [*Da mi basia mille, deinde centum*]), marks the length of mourning here.

However, why do the ancient poet's words "rend the flesh" (v. 5), though at the same time the poem describes in a bantering way someone who gives up on counting kisses and evokes a perpetual night which simply reinforces the topos "enjoy the moment"? Kisses, which Levi does not mention, nevertheless enclose the quote, which continues to emanate a different tone, the tone of the source text. We transition from kisses explicitly requested in life to kisses implicitly given in death. For the narrator of the poems is himself dead. In *If this is a Man*, Levi wrote about his friend, at the moment of his arrival in Auschwitz: "We said then, at the decisive moment, things that are not said among the living". Such, at least, is my translation

All this takes place in a poem of eight verses, which only alludes to an ancient poet (Catullus is not named).

Leute, werden aus Jungfern Bräute, und aus Lesern entstehen Schriftsteller. Meisten Die Bücher sind ein daher treuer Abdruck und der Fähigkeiten Neigungen, mit denen man gelesen hat und lesen kann] *Leser und Kunstrichter nach perspectivischem Unebenmaasse*, in Majetschak S., ed., *Vom Magus im Norden und der Verwegenheit of Geistes. Ein Hamann-Brevier*, DTV Klassik, Munich, 1988, 155].

I can now return to the question at the end of your first remark about the theory of passages, which I have worked on in recent years. A text is not made up of words, or at any rate its words should be considered as minimal passages.

Within the hermeneutic tradition, a passage can now be redefined within a corpus linguistics that includes interpretation. Now a text is written by rewriting differently passages that appeared earlier, as well as rewriting passages from other texts, whatever the language. I mean that textual genetics, translation and hermeneutics involve the same types of transformations between passages, or at least can be described in a unified theoretical and methodological framework. Technically, this idea may have applications in information retrieval. In the context of a European project, we developed, for example, an automatic filtering system for racist sites in French, German and English.

What counts here is the relation between translation and extermination: translation can avoid xenophobic madness; it is cosmopolitan or nothing at all. During kitchen duty in Auschwitz, translating Dante for a young Alsatian becomes an act of resistance against barbarism.

Unyielding, translators testify; they are often spokespersons. Salman Rushdie is still alive, but two of his translators have already been stabbed.

As a jargon, the newspeak LTI, the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* of the Third Reich as described by the philologist Victor Klemperer, certainly had a fairly elaborate “poetics”, but that monolingual language expurgated even Latin roots (a purism found in Heidegger, who even regretted that Greek philosophy had been translated into Latin): that lexical *Gleichschaltung* began with proper names, notably those of Jews. With no other purpose than to impose ritualized formulas, the LTI took the opposite tack from a language of culture, that is to say, from a language that can only be truly understood in the corpus of other languages or other cultures.

In many ways, translating a book is the opposite of burning it. As we well know, Heidegger evokes the purifying fire during the “symbolic book burning” (*symbolischer Verbrennungsakt von Schmutz- und Schundliteratur*) of 24 June 1933, where he gave his *Feuerspruch* (GA 16, p. 131), which begins: “Flame! Announce for us [...] and illuminate for us the path from where there is no turning back” (Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger. – The introduction of Nazism into philosophy*, Paris, 2005, p. 91). The obscurantist “*Aufklärung*” or rather “*Erleuchtung*” incendiary is worth pondering today in the light of Levi’s words, “the path of submission and acquiescence [...] is a path of *no return*”.²²

Everyone knows that Troy would never have been found if Homer had not described its misfortune. To fight against oblivion, to avert the return of renewed horrors, literary witnessing goes beyond testimony and takes on a mission. Through that mission, literary testimony has the goal of becoming a classic, which puts it beyond the biographical circumstances or even the time and place of its birth. Finally, it seeks to be heard in a voice that goes beyond the language in which it was written.

In a belated postscript to *If This is a Man*, Primo Levi develops the expectations of his educational mission: “It is you who are the judges”.²³ Maintaining its confidence in the rationality of the universal jury composed of readers, witnessing is an extension of the Enlightenment ideal, which in fact gave us the notion of human rights. In its modern form, witnessing is born with the idea of universal human rights and especially of justice that is universal, but not divine.

In its own way, a translation can also fight against oblivion and nationalist prejudices. Yoko Tawada, a writer living in Hamburg and notably the Japanese translator of Celan, believes that a poem is incomplete until it has been translated into all languages. With that remark as my guide, I would suggest that the same idea applies to witnessing, since it addresses all humankind and thus contributes to all humankind’s ethical and aesthetic constitution.

Your question about the classics leads me to distinguish the question of classicism and a shared corpus, the reference intertext.

Levi’s own classical style is characterized by its controlled expression, its calculated and nevertheless unpredictable nature, and finally the reserved, discreet presence of the figure of the author. The “I” disappears: free from all pathos, emotion is present everywhere. This style is thought-provoking for everyone and increases the diversity in readers.

For the prisoner, the world of literature is an anticipation of liberation: maintaining its presence becomes an act of resistance and recreates a civilized society in the camp. It will then allow the survivor to assemble the corpus where from which the testimonial work will take its meaning – Levi’s book *The Search for Roots* is anchored in this corpus. The classical texts to which he refers, often implicitly, seem to have two complementary vocations, which concern both the author of the testimony and the literary space it reaches.

The witness saw what no one should see; and the survivor, haunted by this barbaric world, feels the threat that hangs over our world, to which he never returns completely. For the inner duality between witness and survivor, the classics, and especially poetry, play a mediating role. In the camp Odysseus’ chant in Dante’s *Inferno* allowed the witness to fight against barbarism, to establish the bond of transmission with a young companion. Through his writing the survivor addresses the reader as if he were this same camp companion, with the same revelatory errors in memory: in the last verse of Dante quoted in the closing chapter, *Il canto d’Ulisse*: “*infin che ’l mar fu sovra noi rinchiuso*” [until the sea was closed over us]. In a telling lapsus, Primo the narrator substitutes *rinchiuso* (enclosed) for Ulysses’ last word in Dante’s text, *richiuso* (closed): thus the waves suggest allusively an ending and the drowned companions represent the prisoners of the *Lager*. Even if Dante’s *Inferno* becomes here a kind of allegory of Auschwitz, it is not however Hell that helps us understand Auschwitz, but Auschwitz that deprives Hell itself of any meaning.

The corpus of classical texts is not at all a conservatory, a pantheon or a gallery of great men. Classical works disdain classicism; by their boldness, complexity, richness, and even

their lack of completion, they refute the frozen image moderns have given them. *Orlando Furioso* is one of these; in a serious article against Holocaust denial, Levi cites ironically these verses of Ariosto, which are themselves a parody of Dante: “And if you do not want the truth to be concealed from you, / Turn history into its opposite: / The Greeks were defeated and Troy victorious / And Penelope was a madam”.²⁴

A classic reuses and quotes other classics from various languages; it uses them to innovate, as a homage; it maintains a kind of internal otherness that indicates how to recontextualize indefinitely its own reading. By opening a multicultural and multilingual space, it creates humanity from the humanities. It should be noted the compositional parallelism between Kant’s universal citizenship (*Weltbürgerlichkeit*, literally *global citizenship*) and *Weltliteratur* by Wieland – who did not hesitate to translate *gentleman* (“*homme du monde*”) by *Weltmann* – and then adopted by Goethe; it culminates in the most positive globalization, the internationalism of the *Manifesto* of Marx and Engels: “Die Nationale Einseitigkeit und mehr und mehr wird Beschränktheit unmöglich, und aus den vielen nationalen und lokalen Literaturen bildet sich eine Weltliteratur”.²⁵ In contrast to the ethnocentric barbarism that refuses to translate and theorizes the untranslatable, this space becomes culture’s space, made up of specific, but universally shareable values, values that are shared initially through translations. Today this aesthetic dimension is doubled by an ethical dimension because the witness, demanding justice, is addressing all humankind. *If This is a Man*, *The Human Race*, these titles evoke this troubling question.

If there is no “witness of the witness”, the living requirement for testimony extends internationally: Rithy Pahn, survivor and author of the masterful movie *S 21, the Death Machine of the Khmer Rouge*, says: “‘Understanding completely is tantamount to forgiving’ said Primo Levi, who guided me throughout this time. But we cannot understand everything. By seeking to achieve this, I was able to begin the process of mourning.”²⁶

Though a role model for all those who want to tell the truth about genocide and practice the art of testimony, Primo Levi is nevertheless criticized today because of his ethical stature (and aesthetic stature, I would add), his lack of compromise, and his willingness to clarify, to distinguish victims from executioners, which directly opposes the theory of reversibility, where everyone, victims included, are potential executioners and only

24 “E, se tu vuoi che ’l ver non ti sia ascoso, / Tutta al contrario l’istoria converti: / Che i Greci rotti, e che Troia vittrice, / E che Penelopea fu meretrice” (the source is not cited – it is from *Orlando furioso*, XXXV, 27, 4–8; cf. Levi, 2002, 101.)

25 “The intellectual creations of individual nations become the common property of everyone. The narrowness and national exclusiveness become more and more impossible day by day and from the multiplicity of national and local literatures arises a world literature.” (I, 1). The problem of translation is indirectly raised immediately: “The only work accomplished by German intellectuals was to harmonize the new French ideas and their ancient philosophical conscience, or rather to appropriate French ideas starting with their philosophical point of view. / They were appropriated in the same way as a foreign language is appropriated by a translation.” (III, 1c).

26 http://www.diplomatique.gouv.fr/fr/actions-france_830/documentaire_1045.

the chance events of their personal history determines their fate. This thesis, which is both deterministic and relativistic, has many supporters today.

In 2013, on the anniversary of the Liberation, the historian Sergio Luzzatto published a thick book (*Partigia, una storia della Resistenza*, Milan, Mondadori) where he tries to show that the resistance group to which Levi belonged had executed two of its own members who were guilty of extorting money from farmers and putting the group in danger. In fact, the group fell victim of a dragnet a few days after the execution.

This revelation caused a stir. On April 17 the *Times* correspondent in Rome published an article entitled “Levi’s ‘ugly wartime secret’ uncovered”. Luzzatto was following the conventions of a successful journalistic genre in the United States that relies on its readers’ *Schadenfreude* to titillate them with posthumous defamation. The stakes are high: if even Levi tacitly approves of summary executions, the distance between the perpetrators and the victims is very small.²⁷

But Levi neither hid nor legitimized these executions. In two of his books, *The Periodic Table* (1975) and *The Drowned and the Saved* (1987), Levi clearly evoked this episode and its moral consequences. In addition, for a very long time, like so many other so-called secrets, it figured prominently in his poems. In 1952, he wrote *Epigrafe*, which gives a voice to one of them, from his grave, in the style of ancient funeral poems: the partisan who was executed by his comrades asks passerbys to listen to him, names his murderers and acknowledges his transgression (“Spento dai miei compagni per mia non lieve colpa” v. 8 [Killed by my comrades, for no slight mistake]). Without asking for forgiveness or prayers, his speech ends with a vow for peace, to be the *last*: “Senza che nuovo sangue, filtrato attraverso le zolle, / Penetri fino a me col calore funesto / Destando a nuova doglia quest’ossa oramai fatte pietra” (v. 13–15) [Without new blood, seeping into the ground, / Penetrating down to me its deadly heat / Awakening new pain in my bones, stones already].

For Levi, after Hiroshima, political violence was associated with violence against the environment (see in particular the poem *La bambina di Pompei*, 1978): they both belong to the same insane excess.

In the mountains, on the same pass where the executed partisan addresses passer-bys, Levi has this to say about former partisans who returned there after a quarter century: “They broke the blockade of the Germans, / Where now rises the chairlift”.²⁸ But the executed partisan began: “O you who leave tracks, on the trail of this pass / Along with so many

27 For parallels fraught with insinuations, see Giulio Milani Mario *Rigoni Stern, Hermann Heidegger. Ritorno sul fronte*, Massa, Transeuropa ; or Alain Minc’s book *L’homme aux deux visages: Jean Moulin, René Bousquet : itinéraires croisés*, Paris, Grasset, 2013.

28 V. 5–6. Now, the chairlift is for him an infernal machine. In an interview Levi gave to *Rivista della montagna*, the very same year that *Ad ora incerta* was published, he humorously evokes his pre-war years: “We never went to Sestriere, because there were cable cars there, and cable cars, they are worse than the devil”. Thus, in its own way, the chairlift was a figure of evil, as anything, in his poems, that does violence to nature.

others, in this snow no longer alone [...]”²⁹ Since then, three chairlifts have been built that leave from this pass over which I too have hiked.

NB: Now revised and expanded for the English translation (first edition : Gaëtan Pégny interviews François Rastier, Witnessing and Translating: Ulysses at Auschwitz, in Peter Arnds, éd. *Translating Holocaust Literature*, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2015, p. 63-80), this interview was first published in 2012: “Témoigner et traduire. – Sur *Ulysse à Auschwitz*, entretien réalisé par Gaëtan Pégny”, *Littérature*, 166, pp. 105–118.

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