

Poetry as Testimony: Primo Levi's *Collected Poems*

Critics in the field of Holocaust and Trauma Studies have regarded the relationship between poetry and testimony as either non-existent or self-explanatory. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub discuss Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Celan poems alongside Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*, Sigmund Freud's work and life testimonies, without commenting on the shift between analyses of different genres.¹ Yet testimony is generally seen as an 'unaesthetic' form of written or oral attestation to historical suffering opposed to more self-consciously literary forms such as poetry. Hence in *Beyond the Limit-Experience*, Gary Mole illustrates that some critics assume that 'the poetic and the testimonial [are] somehow incompatible'; Sue Vice points out that 'it is not poetic testimony but prose testimony that is typical of Holocaust eye-witness, while Holocaust poetry is considered a separate and self-contained genre'.² In this article I argue that, when a critical opposition between poetry and testimony is unravelled, Primo Levi's poems can be read productively as testimonial acts. They are sometimes positivistic, recounting historical details in poetic form, but, more importantly, they also comprise metatestimonies, modulating Levi's famous prose narratives, such as *If This is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. In addition, they often testify to the author's post-war experience, shedding new critical perspectives on the 'grey zone' and Levi's ambivalent response to the figure of the muslimann, which Jean Améry describes as a camp inmate who was 'a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions'.³

Vice illustrates the similarities between poems and prose testimonies, but ultimately argues that they constitute separate genres. Miklós Radnóti's poems are

‘not only testimony but aesthetic artefacts. An extra layer of mediation between event and reader is present, despite the poems’ first-person address’. This ‘extra layer’ is in evidence in the image of ‘pissing blood’ in ‘Razglednica 3’, which is, as Vice contends, more effective as a trope of suffering than for its testimonial acumen. Yet prose testimony too often goes beyond positivistic details, adding an aesthetic ‘layer’ of mediation. Levi’s *If This is a Man* – the most famous example of non-fiction Holocaust testimony for European readers – is full of such instances, as when he describes a muslimann as like the ‘slough of certain insects which one finds on the banks of the swamps’ (p.48), or ‘*Muselmänner*’ as ‘like streams that run down to the sea’ of oblivion (p.96).⁴ Levi deploys the poetic technique of simile because prose testimony does more than simply recount specific facts. The genre is sometimes assumed not to do so because of the term’s origin in the juridicial sense of a narrative which provides ‘attestation in support of a fact or statement’ (*OED*, 2nd edn.). Historians often respond to testimony in this way, as it helps to verify (or not) the construction of an historical narrative. In contrast, Elie Wiesel famously proposed that the Holocaust created the new *literary* genre of testimony.⁵

Initially, his proposition appears misguided, since individual accounts of historical atrocities obviously transpired after events as diverse as The First World War and The War of the Roses. However, Robert Eaglestone interprets Wiesel’s polemical comment in the context of critical response: the Holocaust has precipitated an intensification of writerly and readerly activity over the last sixty years which responds to the act of witnessing.⁶ Only recently has this work been recognised as sustaining a literary genre rather than being an untrustworthy adjunct to the writing of history. Instead of lambasting testimonies as slippery documents – in terms of their complex relationship to historical truth – Eaglestone argues that their overtly literary

characteristics should be analysed afresh as specifically *generic* techniques. 'Holocaust testimony', he argues, 'needs to be understood as a new genre, in a new context, which involves both texts and altered ways of reading, standing in its own right'.⁷ So far, the focus for these recent analyses in Holocaust Studies has been on prose. Scholars have not explored the prevalent (but often unwritten) critical assumption that testimony can only be produced in the style of nineteenth-century realism. Instead, this article proposes that once the genre is prised away from an historico-judicial context, other forms of writing - such as Levi's poetry - can be fruitfully analysed as instances of testimony. Paradoxically, testimony should not be entrenched in the historical experience: Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner comment that if critics focus only on the traumatic event, they add 'another form of abuse' by ignoring the lives of survivors after the advent of atrocity.⁸ What, after all, is more important about an occurrence that, as Giorgio Agamben argues, 'exceeds its factual elements': to be informed that an event happened on a certain day at a specific time, or to learn about survivors' feelings of relief, shame and guilt that persisted for a half-century afterwards?⁹ This question is central to the efficacy of poetic testimony, since in two poems I focus on in this article - 'Buna' and 'The Survivor' - Levi interrupts the recounting of historical details to reflect on his ambivalent response to his representations of former inmates.

In a 1948 article, Robert Antelme outlines the testimonial possibilities of poetry, and contrasts them with the drawbacks of prose testimony, which only provides a 'photograph' which 'makes you shudder'.¹⁰ Poems too have their pitfalls, he argues, in that they can produce only a 'melodic counterpoint' to the metanarrative. Yet texts which engage carefully with the survivor's experience constitute the 'poetry of truth', rather than just recounting the 'details of the horror' for possibly prurient

delectation. In reference to prose accounts depicting Nazis, Levi makes the similar point that documentary evidence cannot convey the ‘depths of a human being ... for this purpose the dramatist or the poet are more appropriate’.¹¹ His comment is applicable to the testimonial accounts of his own post-war existence: it is only in poems such as ‘Buna’ and ‘The Survivor’ that Levi gives full vent to his feelings of guilt and shame in relation to the musulmann and the grey zone, as opposed to the more objective, philosophical ruminations in *The Drowned and the Saved*. For Holocaust writers such as Levi and Charlotte Delbo, the genre of prose testimony, which comprises a substantial part of their *oeuvre*, is still not enough; but whereas Delbo enmeshes poetic epiphanies in the main body of her non-fiction, Levi chooses to compose separate poems.¹² Both authors are responding to a worry that prose accounts may be all too understandable, leaving readers unaffected as they turn to the next book: this concern is embedded in *If This is a Man* in that a poem, ‘Shemà’, comprises an epigraph, warning the recipient against a cursory reading. ‘Shemà’ challenges what Sarah Kofman terms the “‘idyllic” clarity of narrative’.¹³ Later in *Smothered Words*, Kofman asks, ‘How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story?’¹⁴ One answer is via ‘stymied’ poetic testimony, where brief, epiphanic poems enact a blocking of extended narrative accounts.¹⁵ Whereas Susan Gubar contends that ‘broken’ poems enact a ‘throttling of testimonial utterance’, I would argue that this ‘throttling’ *is a testimonial act in itself*. In relation to Levi’s work, short lyrics engage intertextually with the prose narratives, leading to re-evaluations of the prose testimony; for example, in relation to the musulmann-figure, which – contra Giorgio Agamben’s study of the *Musulmänner* in *Remnants of Auschwitz* – sometimes refers to Levi himself.

‘Buna’, testimony and the *Musulmänner*

‘Buna’ begins as testimony in a positivistic sense, recounting the experiences of chemical kommando 98. It ends with self-reflection on a troublesome aspect of the testimony: the narrator’s abandonment of a muslimann who retrospectively becomes a ‘sad friend’.¹⁶ As with ‘Shemà’ and ‘The Survivor’, ‘Buna’ also functions as metatestimony in relation to Levi’s prose texts: this poem comments as an intertext on the ‘factory report’ of *If This is a Man*.¹⁷ Whereas Levi’s first prose work is content to explain the nature of the muslimann (ambiguously, as I shall go on to demonstrate), ‘Buna’ betrays the guilt and shame that the narrator suffers from in his prosopopoeiac address to a former, ‘empty companion’ (p.5). This was this first poem that Levi wrote after his epic return from Auschwitz: it was completed on December the 28th 1945, just a few weeks before the fourteen-page draft of the first section of *If This is a Man* was completed in February 1946.¹⁸ ‘Buna’ is evidence of what Ian Thomson terms his growing sense of shame, guilt and “‘survivor’s sickness’” (p.223) – Levi calls it a post-war ‘phase of anguish’ in *The Drowned and the Saved* - the symptoms of which would be downplayed in the realist prose, rather than the self-reflexive contemplation in the testimonial poems.¹⁹ ‘Buna’ comprises an early, tentative exploration of survivor trauma in poetic testimony: it seems to be a traditional, elegiac address to a lost companion until the final line, where implicit guilt is registered in the question, ‘With what kind of face would we confront each other?’, if they saw each other again in the ‘sweet [world] beneath the sun’ denied to the inmate, who, like Alberto in *If This is a Man* (p.161), cannot return to tell his story.

The poem starts with a testimonial account of the chemical plant’s clayey ground familiar to readers of *If This is a Man*, where Levi writes of ‘the greedy mud

... this omni-present Polish mud whose monotonous horror fills our days' (p.73). Just as 'Shemà' reads like the original version of a paragraph in *If This is a Man* (p.33), the positivistic details in 'Buna' are similar to another section: the plant is the 'negation of beauty ... not a blade of grass grows, and the soil is impregnated with the poisonous saps of coal and petroleum, and the only things alive are machines and slaves – and the former are more alive than the latter' (p.78). The 'monotonous horror' and robotic slaves in these two quotations can be sourced in the first four lines of 'Buna', where the dehumanisation of the prisoners is registered in synecdoches of suffering. Repetitive labour – a 'day like every other day' – is refigured from the last poem Levi wrote before 'Buna' (nearly three years earlier) about factory life: 'Crescenzago', the first piece in the *Collected Poems*, has a sewing girl who 'never stops looking at the clock' (p.3); men keep 'The grim black stonecrusher panting' (p.4). As Jay Losey has pointed out, the 'multitudes with dead faces', the 'monotonous horror of the mud' and the 'day of suffering' also come from Canto VII of the *Inferno*, where the damned souls exclaim, 'Sluggish we were/ in the sweet air made happy by the sun' (ll.121-24).²⁰ (Levi transfers the 'sweet air' to the 'sweet' world at the end of the poem.) The influence of T. S. Eliot also hovers behind the first eight lines (which effectively form a separate octet, as they do in the original Italian version): the 'multitudes with dead faces' also recall the hoardes of workers pouring over London bridge in *The Waste Land*; the narrator laments that 'I never thought death had undone so many'.²¹ As in 'The Survivor' and 'Shemà', classic literature ('The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and the Bible respectively in these cases) *already* mediates Levi's experience in the camp before its literary transformations in the poetry and prose. Rather than lamenting the literary distortions of testimony, the poetry emphasises that for Levi, many Holocaust experiences are inextricably bound

up with work of his favoured writers. Even in the first eight lines of 'Buna', poetry as testimony does not just recall positivistic details; rather, it indicates their mediation through other, sometimes literary, contexts.

After the synecdoches of dehumanisation in the first few lines – images uncomfortably close to a perpetrator perspective at times – Levi shifts to an apostrophic address to a muslimann: the fraught nature of this encounter highlights that the figure is much more ambiguous in *If This is a Man* than has previously been suggested. In 'Buna', the various ways in which the narrator addresses and describes the inmate illustrate the difficulties Levi experiences in writing about the muslimann – it is not even clear whether the poem is just about one person - and the slipperiness of the term itself: the 'tired companion', 'sad friend', 'Colourless one', 'Empty companion' and 'Forsaken man' is depicted as cold, hungry, empty, broken, loveless, nameless, unemotional, too poor to grieve, too tired to fear, and then, in a final, tautological, one-line sentence, a 'Spent once-strong man'. The list of adjectives begin to appear as implicit self-accusation: this is clearer in the original Italian version, where the half-rhymes begin to cluster at the end of the lines ('*più nome ... più pianto ... più male ... più spavento*').²² '[M]an', the final word of the isolated sentence in the English translation, hints that this muslimann, not the author, is the signified referent of 'This' in *If This is a Man*. And the question behind the title of Levi's most famous book indicates the difficulty – that Agamben has dwelt on at length – of testifying about someone who by definition does not have control of their own story. Whereas Agamben focuses on the 'essential lacuna' of the muslimann's experience in survivors' testimony, however, the various approaches to the figure in 'Buna' indicate that *Musulmänner* are paradoxically both beyond representation and only encountered in representation.²³

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben argues that the witness chooses not to dwell on the musulmann if possible, yet Levi ruminates at length on one such particular figure in *If This is a Man*. The musulmann Null Achtzehn gives the *impression* of being an empty shell - like the 'slough of certain insects which one finds on the banks of the swamps' (p.48) - and has a '*face*' (my italics) with no thoughts written on it (p.96), but Levi is aware that he can only assume (poetically, in the case of the simile) that he is representing truthfully the state of the forlorn inmate. Null Achtzehn is 'no longer a man' (p.48) in the prose text, whereas in 'Buna' the narrator chooses to re-address the musulmann as a friend, companion, and 'once-strong man'. 'Man' is ambiguous in the sentence: it could mean the musulmann is still a man, or that he used to be a man. This connects with the irony of *Mann* in 'musulmann' itself, since, according to Levi's logic in *If This is a Man*, the *Musulmänner* cannot be men, since a man is defined (via Dante) as someone who can think with intelligence (p.89).²⁴ Ethical uncertainty is endemic in the testimony, however, since all the 'personages in these pages are not men' (p.127), but then three sentences later Lorenzo 'is a man' (p.128). At times such judgements in *If This is a Man* verge uncomfortably on a perpetrator perspective, particularly when the narrator becomes an older inmate who looks with derision on new arrivals, such as the Hungarian in the 'Kraus' chapter (p.140). The ambiguities of the grey zone are also enacted in relation to Null Achtzehn, whom the inmates name - following a Nazi system - with the last three figures of his entry number (p.48). As Levi notes in relation to this character, the term 'Musulmann' itself 'was used *by the old ones of the camp* [my italics] to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection' (p.94).

Levi does not know where the phrase comes from. It was mainly used in Auschwitz-Birkenau: Wolfgang Sofsky notes that 'Kretiner' instead was deployed for

emaciated inmates in Dachau, ‘cripples’ in Stutthof, ‘swimmers’ in Mauthausen, ‘camels’ in Neuengamme and ‘tired sheiks’ in Buchenwald; Joram Warmund that they were ‘goldstück’ in Ravensbrück and ‘gamel’ in Majdaneck.²⁵ In *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, Levi himself notes the use of ‘Schmizstück’ (‘pieces of filth’) for women at Ravensbrück.²⁶ Whatever its origin or synonyms, ‘musulmann’ was probably coined by the Nazis or ‘the old ones of the camp’. The term necessarily betrays a derogatory perspective, as when François Wetterwald – a medical doctor deported to Mathausen where he worked as a surgeon – addresses a musulmann thus in ‘Poème Macabre’: ‘You walk aimlessly, hobbling, ridiculous ... Hey, are you smiling?/ Hey, are you dead?’.²⁷ In *If This is a Man*, ‘if some Null Achtzehn vacillates, he will find no one to extend a helping hand’, whereas ‘Buna’ testifies to Levi’s remorse by imagining a contrary, literary space where the liminal status of the musulmann will not be mocked – as in the Wetterwald poem – and he can be addressed as a ‘friend’. (In the original Italian, he is not an ‘amico’, but only a ‘compagno’, ‘companion’, as Null Achtzehn is when first introduced in *If This is a Man* (p.48): the translators’ choice of word – as in ‘Shemà’ - is crucial to the changed meaning of the poem.) The prose explores the reasons why a musulmann will be knocked aside, ‘because it is in noone’s interest that there will be one more “musselman” dragging himself to work’, whereas poetry as testimony engages here with the guilt of the ‘accustomed’ inmate who can then re-imagine a fraught re-encounter. This generic difference recalls Robert Antelme’s argument that prose testimony comprises ‘the [factual] photograph which only makes you shudder’, as opposed to the poetry of the camps, which comprises a ‘poetry of truth’ which is ‘not merely discernable in the details of horror’.²⁸ The ‘poetry of truth’ in this poem

encompasses an admitted complicity in an instance of the failure of homosociality in the camps.

The slipperiness and ambiguity of address in 'Buna' and *If This is a Man* is mirrored in the spelling of the term 'musulmann' itself, which differs (musselmann/*Muselmann*) on a single page of the prose testimony in relation to Null Achtzehn (p.94). It is also enacted in the possibility that the poem is a form of self-address. Poetry as testimony functions here through subtle ambiguity: the abstract 'I' and 'you' of the poem cannot be definitively separated. Little has been made of the fact that Levi himself is described as a musulmann on at least two occasions in *If This is a Man*: when Alex calls him 'Was für ein Muselmann Zugang', which the author misleadingly translates as 'What a messy recruit!' (p.110), and when he enters the hospital, Ka-Be (a nurse refers to him as 'ready for crematorium' (sic)) (p.55). Perhaps the two instances are misleading, since some of the inmates use the concept of the musulmann as a survival strategy, marking out those who are doomed in order to perpetuate a potential illusion of personal survival, as when they reassure each other before the selections that they will not be chosen. Yet at the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, one of the former *Muselmänner* states that only other inmates or guards, rather than the subject him/herself, can recognise the musulmann:

I too was a Muselmann, from 1942 to the beginning of 1943. I wasn't conscious of being one. I think that many Muselmänner didn't realize they belonged to that category. But when the inmates were divided up, I was put in the group of Muselmänner. In many cases, whether or not an inmate was

considered a Muselmann depended on his appearance. (Jerzy Mostowsky)²⁹

Mostowsky's testimony is resonant in the context of Levi's: in *If This is a Man*, the two references to Levi as a muselmann appertain to comments from others on 'his appearance'. Hence, when Levi asks how he would react to the other's face in a world outside the camp, the poem enacts a conventional form of prosopopoeia where the poet addresses a former, lost self (as Tony Harrison does, for example, in the long poem V).

The inextricability of the Levi-figure from the concept of the muselmann in the poem and prose testimony is also indicated in the ambiguity in *If This is a Man* about who has reached 'the bottom'. The 'Muselmänner' in Levi's first book have followed the metaphorical slope of the camp 'down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea' (p.96), but after their initial shower the new inmates have also 'reached the bottom' where no human condition 'is more miserable ... nor could it conceivably be so' (p.32); on page forty-two Levi is still 'on the bottom', and even in 'The Drowned and the Saved' chapter on Null Achtzehn he is still 'crushed against the bottom' (p.93). In contrast, by the time of the *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi – and others who wrote about the camps – 'never fathomed them to the bottom', unlike those who did not return (p.6). However, even in Levi's last book, the former *Muselmänner* are also potential survivors, who cannot write the history of the camps because 'their capacity for observation was paralysed by suffering and incomprehension' (p.6).

If the two instances in *If This is a Man* when Levi is referred to as a muselmann are taken seriously, then Levi returns in 'Buna' as a former muselmann to

testify about his former, emaciated condition; equally, the poem could be testifying to the survivor's guilt about an abandoned companion. The generic possibility of multiple – and co-existing - meanings in 'Buna' points to one of poetry's strengths as a form of testimony. Rather than function as Antelme's derided photograph which just makes the reader shudder, it can testify in two different ways at once, as both the testimony of a musulmann, and testimony to the guilt about the absence of that testimony.

'Shemà' as metatestimony

Like 'Buna', 'Shemà' comprises poetic testimony in its own right: Levi invites the reader in stanza two to consider the description of a typical man and woman in Auschwitz. 'Shemà' also functions as metatestimony in relation to Levi's prose texts; more explicitly than 'Buna', since it was selected as an epigraph for *If This is a Man*. This decision indicates that Levi was worried about the reception of the 'objective' prose testimony. His uncertainty about a potential readership is reflected in another instance of the ambiguity of address in the poetry, since the 'You who live secure' in the first line (p.9) could refer to perpetrators, bystanders, civilian survivors or future readers. Rather than relying on an assumed, uncomplicated identification between the poet and reader, as in, for example, a poem which begins 'The curfew tolls the knell of passing day', the first word of 'Shemà' ('You') accuses the reader of something before the testimony's narrative begins.³⁰ Levi was perhaps concerned that the prose testimony would be all *too* understandable: Antelme's criticism of prose as merely a photograph of horror appertains in the sense that images of atrocity might glide by in the reader's imagination without any pause for self-reflection or self-criticism. The

fact that the poetic testimony is encountered before the main text also suggests that Levi was worried about a prurient response to the ‘photograph which only makes you shudder’. In her essay on consuming trauma, Patricia Yaeger calls for a ‘nervous’ and ‘stuttering’ cultural criticism that ‘refuses complacency and seeks the “jarring juxtaposition” of “places spattered with blood,” with the heat of imperfect words’ (p.41).³¹ Levi’s angry metatestimony insists on a considered, ‘nervous’ and ‘stuttering’ response to *If This is a Man*, rather than capitulating unreflectively to the pleasures of the imagination.

The metatestimony as epigraph also suggests that testimony demands, as Eaglestone suggests, a different kind of reception to other literary genres: the reader should be hyper-attentive to the text both during, and after, the reading process. Exploiting the genre of poetry to give free reign to a bitter, ironic tone that is (for the most part) exorcised from the prose, Levi gives the reader the task of contemplating ‘these words’ – both the poem as testimony and the entirety of *If This is a Man* – when the reader resides in their house, walks, goes to bed, and wakes up. In an appeal to the conventional poetic synecdoche for the imagination, Levi asks the reader to engrave the poetic testimony and metatestimony onto their hearts. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (no.79), William Blake subverts this poetic convention when he notes that ‘No man can think write or speak from his heart’, but the point of Levi’s deliberate over-statement is that it confronts the dialectic of im/possible secondary witnessing in relation to testimony. Readers cannot possibly fulfill Levi’s edict: it is the traumatised survivor, perhaps, who thinks about ‘these words’ constantly, rather than the distracted secondary witness who can consume testimony and then butter a bagel, fold up the paper and put their thoughts away.³² Yet Levi’s appeal to future readers also confronts the impossible necessity of what Delbo terms ‘seeing’ the

events of the Holocaust.³³ One survivor in *Auschwitz and After* desires to address only 'a like' (p.263), someone who has witnessed atrocity at first hand, whereas both Delbo and Levi's testimonies as a whole engage with the difficulties of making a non-survivor 'see' the events. Whereas Delbo laments the impossibility of a non-inmate 'seeing' the event, however, Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved* about the necessity of simplification through testimony as a possible route to understanding (p.32). On the one hand, Delbo is right that 'seeing' comprises an impossibility: the secondary witness will always imagine signified referents, rather than recall real referents, of any testimonial discourse. On the other hand, the best that can be hoped for is an approximation, in which the reader, rather than ignoring or misunderstanding the testimony – possibilities which this poem as metatestimony directly addresses – begins to engage with the other's suffering, rather than elide it with mis-approximations of his or her own experience.

In *Kings* and *Deuteronomy*, testimony is bound up with the word of God; here, the ten commandments are replaced with the meta/testimony engraved in the readers' hearts and imagination instead of in stone. Critics have often noted that the poetic testimony's bitter overstatement is derived from *Deuteronomy*. However, what is often overlooked is the subversion of specific details from the morning prayer, and the conventional form of the psalm. The psalms of lament usually begin with 'a cry of help to the Lord', followed by a description of the distress of the psalmist, but with a 'motif of trust [becoming] the heart of the prayer'.³⁴ Psalms which are hymns, or songs of praise, begin 'on a joyful note in which the psalmist summons [the] self or a community to praise the Lord' for reasons such as 'God's creative activity and saving intervention in Israel's history' (p.627). Instead, in 'Shemà' (which was first called 'Psalm'), the 'description of distress' becomes the details of suffering, in which the

Lord refused to intervene; the initial 'joyful note' turns into a criticism of an entire community of secondary witnesses.

Levi's subversion of the passages from *Deuteronomy* is even more conspicuously irreverent. This poem comprises a bitterly ironic parody, in which the Holocaust replaces God as the site of intense contemplation. The morning prayer demands *kavanat ha lev*, devotion from the heart, but in Levi's poem this concentration and single-mindedness is directed specifically towards testimony and metatestimony, rather than religious devotion. Demands in *Deuteronomy* (6: 4-9 and 11: 13-21) to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart', insert the words of the prayer 'in your heart' and serve God 'with all your heart' are replaced with the appeal to the readers to engrave testimony instead onto their 'hearts'. 'Shemà' becomes a metaphorical phylactery: the small leather box worn at morning prayer, containing Hebrew texts on vellum, signifies the poetic testimony that should, Levi intimates, be as all pervasive as the frontlets between the worshippers' eyes in *Deuteronomy*, and the sacred words (6: 9) written on the doorposts and gates of the houses. The heart returns in *Deuteronomy* as a site of human weakness: if the worshippers' hearts are deceived (11: 13-21), and they turn to other gods, then the Lord will 'blaze against you ... close the heavens, and there will not be rain, and the earth will not give you its fullness, and you will perish quickly'. For Levi, turning to false gods is the equivalent of not paying enough attention to testimony. If the reader does not comply with the impossibility of thinking about 'Shemà' constantly, then an Old Testament-style curse awaits of destruction, disease and ignorant offspring.

Levi famously stated that the existence of Auschwitz proved that there could be no God: the poem bitterly underwrites such sentiment, with its blasphemous erasure of sacred text with secular testimony.³⁵ In *Deuteronomy*, the narrator

commands ‘these words’ to the listener (6: 5), and promises succour for those who ‘surely listen to the commandments that I command you today’ (11: 13). This diction is echoed in the Italian version of ‘Shemà’ in the line ‘*Vi comando queste parole*’, which Feldman and Swann translate as: ‘I commend these words to you’. As in ‘Buna’, the translation of a single word (*amico*, in that case) has the ability to change the entire meaning of a poem. *Comando* originates from *comandare*, ‘to order, to give orders, to command’, whereas ‘to commend’ in Italian is ‘*commendare*’. Feldman and Swann retain the switch from ‘command’ to ‘commend’ in the 1976 collection *Shema: Collected Poems of Primo Levi*, published by the Menard Press, and the Faber *Collected Poems*.³⁶ Critics often appear to misread the translation’s ‘commend’ as ‘command’. Thomson and Agamben, for example, quote the line “‘I command these words to you’”.³⁷ (They may, of course, be re-translating from the original Italian.)

The two words have completely different resonances: ‘to commend’ means to entrust rather than to demand that someone do something (*OED*, 2nd ed.). Rather than picking up directly on the resonances from *Deuteronomy*, ‘commend’ softens the Old Testament-style didacticism in favour of a bitterly ironic line which fits perfectly with the overall tone of the poem. To paraphrase, it ironically suggests that the reader might find some worth in the testimony if he or she chooses (rather than is forced) to be attentive. Critics have often commented that Levi’s poetry gives full reign to a subjective bitterness absent from the ‘objective’ prose testimony: this distinction is evidenced in the re-writing of ‘Shemà’ in *If This is a Man*; the metatestimony’s recriminations give way to a passage which contains a calm appeal to the reader to ‘Imagine now a man ... whose life or death can be lightly decided’ (p.33), echoing the man who dies ‘at a yes or a no’ in the poem. However, this opposition does not entirely hold true. The irony in the English translation of ‘Shemà’ connects with

similar instances in *If This is a Man* reminiscent of Tadeusz Borowski's work, such as when Levi refers to the camp as 'the bosom of the Germanic social organism' (p.89). Thomson argues that this ironic bitterness was symptomatic of Levi's writing when he returned from Auschwitz: there were days 'when his anger and hatred of what had been done to him exploded into unintelligible jottings' (p.235). 'Shemà' is an example of an early text where Levi retains the 'anger and hatred', but channels it into a chillingly controlled, ironic declaration such as (according to the English translation), 'I commend these words to you'. Thomson goes on to state that such poems were originally not intended for publication; that they were part of a 'private ritual cleansing ... the rage had first to be excised in poetry. Far from being an afterthought to the ... prose to come, the verse was a vital part of the book' (p.226). In the case of 'Shemà', it literally became part of the book, not as an exorcising warm up, but as a form of metatestimony which warns the reader that if they choose to avert their faces from the subsequent text, then their offspring will in turn 'avert their faces from you'.³⁸

'The Survivor' in the grey zone

Whereas the narrator rails against uncomprehending secondary witnesses at the closure of 'Shemà', the poem 'The Survivor' directs all accusations against those who directly witnessed the events of the Holocaust. Like 'Buna', it functions as testimony partly by recalling positivistic details in the first eight lines, which (as in 'Buna') effectively form a separate octet. The next seven lines operate simultaneously as testimony and metatestimony, commenting self-consciously on the opening of the poem, but also testifying to the post-Holocaust guilt suffered by the generalised

survivor(s) in the title. Testimony does not end in 1945: once the genre is prised away from its historical and juridical contexts, it can be seen that the facts it describes are only one reason for its existence. In ‘The Survivor’, this post-war life includes wrestling with the ethical ambiguities of the grey zone.

Like ‘Shemà’ in relation to *If This is a Man*, ‘The Survivor’ functions partly as metatestimony for Levi’s prose work; in this instance, in relation to (the understudied) *Moments of Reprieve*. Whereas ‘Shemà’ as epigraph is enmeshed in the subsequent details of *If This is a Man*, however, ‘The Survivor’ appears, at first, not to be the most suitable entry point for some of the ‘stories’ in *Moments of Reprieve* (p.10). The latter is, in Levi’s words, not about ‘the anonymous, faceless, voiceless mass of the shipwrecked, but the few, the different, the ones in whom (if only for a moment) I had recognized the will and capacity to react, and hence a rudiment of virtue’ (p.10). ‘The Survivor’, with its concerns with guilt, shame, the grey zone and ‘the shipwrecked’, would seem to have been a much more suitable epigraph for *The Drowned and the Saved*, which only retains the epigraph from Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, rather than the entire Levi poem. Suitability is not the only criteria for the deployment of an epigraph, however: ‘The Survivor’ works as a counterpoint to the prose about ‘the different’ inmates in *Moments of Reprieve*, reminding the reader that this poetic testimony engages with the different, ‘anonymous ... mass’ surrounding the stories about the fitter inmates, such as the German political prisoner who strikes Levi when he finds him writing a letter home, but who then goes away to find him some more paper.

Metatestimony is immediately important to ‘The Survivor’ in a different way to ‘Shemà’ in that it forms an epigraph (with the Coleridge quotation) within the poem as epigraph (in the context of *Moments of Reprieve*). Levi instigates a post-

Holocaust reading of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' in a similar way to Geoffrey Hill's re-reading of Keats and Hardy in 'September Song', where 'the decaying resplendence described by Keats [in 'To Autumn']... is refurbished as a disturbing Holocaust metaphor', and Hardy's 'metonymic rose' in 'During Wind and Rain' is transformed 'into a terrible metaphor for the flaking skin of burnt victims'.³⁹ Levi reinterprets the mariner's constant 'agony' as a sign for recounting traumatic Holocaust experiences. Urges to testify about them can, as in the Coleridge poem, happen '*ad ora incerta*', at any time, a phrase which is repeated throughout Levi's work (forming the title of one of his poetry collections). Hence the recounting of trauma forms a 'ceaseless struggle', as Cathy Caruth suggests, for both Levi and Coleridge's narrator. In the preface to *Moments of Reprieve*, Levi writes that the 'memory of the offense persists, as though carved in stone' (p.10): this statement links with the function of the epigraph as metatestimony, since the poetic term also refers to 'An inscription on a statue, stone or building'.⁴⁰ The fact that Levi is telling the 'ghastly tale' again in the 1984 poem, nearly forty years after writing *If This is a Man*, emphasises Coleridge's intimation that the mariner's story will never be fully told. Nor will Levi's: thus *Moments of Reprieve* fills in some of the narrative gaps in *If This is a Man* as Levi remembers extra details, and un-censors others; whereas the original testimony avoids descriptions of violence – partly due to a fear of prurient responses – the later work includes a passage where the character Elias nearly chokes Levi to death. The 'struggles' of the mariner and Levi intertwine throughout the poem: the repetition of 'mist' connects with the mist elsewhere in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', which represents the moment of artistic creation. (This inextricability is emphasised in the Italian original, in which – unlike in the English translation – the Coleridge epigraph becomes part of the main text.) For Levi, there exists a paradox in 'The Survivor' that

the ‘shipwrecked’ might be turning into aesthetic fodder, at the same time that – like the *Musulmänner* in ‘Buna’ – they can only exist in his representation, in his ‘mist’.

When Levi insists that the ‘anonymous, faceless, voiceless mass’ ‘Go back into [their] mist’ (which can only really be the writer’s ‘mist’), he concludes the testimony’s engagement with the grey zone, and the ‘tainted luck’ of survival.⁴¹ First discussed briefly in *If This is a Man* (p.43), the concept describes a zone of ethical uncertainty that Terry Eagleton inadvertently trivialises when he refers to the meaning of life as ‘taking another’s place in the queue for the gas chambers’.⁴² Feldman and Swann date the poem’s composition as the 4th of February 1984, when Levi was once again dwelling on the potential culpability of complicity of various groups of inmates, but in a more nuanced way than Borowski’s claim that all those who survived ‘bought places in the hospital, easy posts ... shoved ‘Moslems’ ... into the oven ... [unloaded] the transports’’.⁴³ Levi and Borowski were both critical of survivors who pronounced about their virtue and ‘chosen’ status: in conversation with Ferdinando Camon, the Italian writer rails against someone who ‘came to see me after my release to tell me I was clearly one of the elect, since I’d been chosen to survive in order for me to write *Survival in Auschwitz*’ (p.68). The dedication in ‘The Survivor’, ‘to B.V.’, is also a thinly disguised criticism of Bruno Vasari’s sense - in his chronicle of his survival in Mauthausen, *Bivouac of Death* - that the ‘ex-deportees had survived the Nazi camps not by cunning or brutality but by force of their virtue’.⁴⁴

‘The Survivor’ thus comprises a brief testimonial account intimately linked to the extended philosophy of the grey zone and ‘Shame’ chapters in *The Drowned and the Saved*. The poem is a crystallisation of their concerns, but focusing on Levi’s own ambiguous status in relation to ethical uncertainty. *The Drowned and the Saved*

contains contradictions: inmates had no moral choices, argues Levi, and we should not judge them, yet the *Sonderkommando* are judged as inhuman as the SS because they play football with the Nazi officers; the former are, infamously, ““crematorium ravens”” (p.43). ‘The Survivor’ redirects such ethical uncertainty at Levi. In *The Drowned and the Saved* he mentions that he did not steal anyone’s bread (the sentence is repeated almost verbatim in the poem), yet the idea that someone else might have died in his place ‘gnaws and rasps’ (p.62): this worry is repeated three times on the same page, and becomes the central concern of the poem. The repetition of ‘No one’ (four times in the Italian original, and twice in the English translation) betrays Levi’s ‘gnawing’ worry that someone did indeed die ‘in [his] place’. Poetic testimony becomes here a paradoxical form of admitted denial, and also a screening out of traumatic details already recounted in *If This is a Man*: Levi claims at one point that he was mistakenly not selected (Alberto agrees) at someone else’s expense. The outcome of another’s death in this context is clearly not a sign of culpability in the sense of a moral choice, but it still results, for Levi, in ““guilt ... unjustified ... but I can’t clear it from my conscience””.⁴⁵

So far, my discussion of this testimony of guilt in ‘The Survivor’ has indicated that there are two distinct parties: the accused, general survivor in the title (including Levi himself), and the ‘shipwrecked’. However, this testimony as prosopopoeia – in which the silent ‘anonymous ... mass’ cannot reply to the apostrophe in the last seven lines – demonstrates Caruth’s ‘impossibility of a story’, never mind a ‘comprehensible’ story, from the companions in the poem, the *Musulmänner* in ‘Buna’, or Alberto in *If This is a Man*. Unlike in most prose testimonies, the complexity of language in this poetic testimony begins to undo the apparent distinctions between the survivor and the ‘submerged’. Linguistic intricacies function

here similar to the visual ambiguities in Alain Resnais's film *Night and Fog*: Emma Wilson argues that the director's 'wariness of images' leads to 'category disturbances'.⁴⁶ In the poem, it is often difficult to discern whether Levi (or the survivor figure), or the the 'shipwrecked' are described, addressed, or speaking. It is unclear – until the reader reaches 'their' in line five – whether the author-persona or the companions are livid, gray, and nebulous. Even after the pronoun is revealed, lines two to four could still be parenthetical clauses appertaining to the narrator, before the inmates are uncovered as 'Tinged with death' in line five. The adjectives in the first few lines are also curiously ambiguous: 'livid' can mean both bright and dark (as it does in the opening to Hill's poem *The Triumph of Love*), as can 'nebulous'. (This ambiguity does not work in relation to 'nebulous' in the original Italian, where 'Indistinti' means specifically faint or vague, as opposed to '*nebuloso*'.) Such ambiguities are mirrored in the indeterminable location of the companions' faces: the clauses – like the different descriptions of the *Musulmänner* in 'Buna' – could refer to different places. Again, even after the pronoun, the ambiguous syntax makes it unclear whether the inmates are depicted dreaming, or whether the narrator is 'under the heavy burden/ Of their dreams'. As in 'Buna', the ambiguities emphasise the difficulty, for Levi, of the guilty apostrophe. To put it bluntly, Levi is admitting that he does not know who is talking about; 'The Survivor' enacts Agamben's concern that it is impossible to witness properly for the 'shipwrecked', at the same time as the poem engages with the impossible necessity of trying to do so.

The abrupt switch to dialogue in line nine is also discomfiting in this context: the presumption must be that this is Levi or the survivor-figure speaking, but the diction could also constitute the imagined speech of the prosopopoeiac sleepers, as they reflect on their *own* guilt as current survivors in the camp. The verbs in the final

two lines can support this reading: the depiction of someone living but not surviving could appertain (paradoxically, given the title) to the narrator, but they could also refer to the pared-down existence of the inmates who merely 'Eat, drink, sleep and put on clothes'. The 'category disturbance' of the linguistic ambiguities indicates both the difficulty of representation for Levi in testifying about his companions (who – anonymous in the poem - may, or may not, have survived) and the moral slippages between the witness and the 'shipwrecked'. The testimonial poem may have been written, as the dedication suggests, against Vasari's concept of the inherently virtuous survivor, but it also warns against an opposition between the grey zone inhabited by the witness, and the supposed moral virtuousness of those who died.

These ambiguities surrounding the narrator and meanings of 'The Survivor' are similarly encountered in the Levi poem 'Sunset at Fossoli'. The narrator appears to be Levi, who, close to the second anniversary of the deportations from Fossoli (21 February 1944), remembers 'what it means not to return' (p.15). However, Carole Angier suggests that the poem might be a dramatic monologue spoken by Vanda Maestro, who accompanied Levi to Auschwitz, and subsequently died there.⁴⁷ The meanings of the first line above are also ambiguous. In a positivist reading, 'not to return' means not to go back to Turin from Fossoli, but it could also mean that the narrator felt *at the time* that he would not return home, as when the inmates 'took leave of their life in the manner which most suited them' in *If This is a Man* (p.21). The sentence could also mean that the narrator empathizes with those who did not return, or that he senses, psychologically, that some part of him did not return from the camps.

Such ambiguity highlights poetry's strength as a form of testimony. This compression of language allows the writer to testify in various ways simultaneously,

as in ‘Buna’, where the ambiguous diction means that the poem testifies to the poet witnessing both as a muslimann, and to the *Musulmänner*. Rather than lamenting its mimetic shortcomings, the critic should be aware of the poetic possibilities of ‘throttled’ testimony. Gubar uses the same example as Vice in her contention that poetry can only seem ‘to conflate poetry with testimony’: Radnóti’s ‘Picture Postcards’ are not ‘factual testimony’ or ‘mimetic representations of testimonies’, since ‘Razglednica 3’ calls attention to its own ‘constructedness’ as poetry.⁴⁸ The argument is seductively clear and simple: poetry cannot be testimony because it is not prose, and it does not enmesh itself in the facts of traumatic experience. However, as I have shown throughout this article, poetry and prose testimonies do much more than simply recount historical details. Elsewhere in the same essay, Gubar makes a compelling case for lyrical Holocaust poetry as ‘stymied testimony’, which is a critical step closer to arguing – as I have done here - that poems themselves can perform a testimonial function. After all, the genre of poetry is particularly adept at expressing ‘the phenomenological chaos of actual “experience”’, as Levi does when he supplements his prose testimony with poems about differing responses to traumatic events.⁴⁹

¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.1-56.

² Gary D. Mole, *Beyond the Limit-Experience: French Poetry of the Deportation, 1940-45* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp.18-19; Sue Vice, ‘Holocaust Poetry and Testimony’ (this is an essay which I commissioned, along with Eaglestone, for a forthcoming special edition of the journal *Critical Survey* on Holocaust poetry).

³ Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p.41.

⁴ Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man/ The Truce*, trans. S. Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987 [1958]), pp.48, 96.

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- ⁵ Elie Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration', in *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p.7.
- ⁶ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.1-2.
- ⁷ Eaglestone, p.38.
- ⁸ Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.45.
- ⁹ Agamben, p.12.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Mole, pp.11-12.
- ¹¹ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (London: Abacus, 1987 [1981]), pp.99-100.
- ¹² On the back cover of *Ad Ora Incerta*, Levi comments that 'There have been times when poetry has seemed to me more suitable than prose for transmitting an idea or an image' (Translated and quoted in Giovanni Tesio, 'At an Uncertain Hour: Preliminary Observations on the Poetry of Primo Levi', in *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist*, ed. Joseph Farrell (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp.160-70, p.163.
- ¹³ Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madaleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998 [1987]), p.xv.
- ¹⁴ Kofman, p.36.
- ¹⁵ Susan Gubar, 'The Long and Short of Holocaust Verse', *New Literary History*, 35: 3 (summer 2004), pp.443-69 (also available online at <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>).
- ¹⁶ Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Faber, 1988 [1984]), p.5.
- ¹⁷ The reference here is to the American edition of *If This is a Man, Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996): in the interview with Philip Roth, Levi says that the 'model (or, if you prefer, my style) was that of the "weekly report" commonly used in factories: it must be precise, concise, and written in a language comprehensible to everybody in the industrial hierarchy' (p.181).
- ¹⁸ Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.223.
- ¹⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989 [1986]), p.52.

²⁰ Jay Losey, “‘The Pain of Remembering’: Primo Levi’s Poetry and the Function of Memory’, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York: Macmillan, 2005), p.120.

²¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1961), p.53.

²² Primo Levi, *Ad Ora Incerta* (Garzanti, 1984), p.11.

²³ Agamben, p.13.

²⁴ Significantly, the phrase is not used in Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*: the female equivalents of the musulmann are described more compassionately than in Levi’s texts. This difference illustrates that the musulmann is located within a dialectic of masculinity between virility (both physically and intellectually) and emaciation.

²⁵ Sofsky quoted in Agamben, p.44; Joram Warmund, ‘The Grey Zone Expanded’, in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp.163-74, p.167.

²⁶ Primo Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, ed. Marco Belpoliti and trans. Sharon Wood (Malden/Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p.42.

²⁷ Quoted in Mole, p.103.

²⁸ Quoted in Mole, p.11.

²⁹ Quoted in Agamben, pp.166-7.

³⁰ Thomas Gray, ‘Elegy in a Country Churchyard’, in *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London and Harlow: Longman, 1969), pp.103-41, p.103.

³¹ Patricia Yaeger, ‘Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating’, in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp.25-51, p.41.

³² I am paraphrasing Yaeger here (p.46) in her description of distracted activities after someone reads an article about suffering in the *New York Times*.

³³ Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p.84.

³⁴ *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.628.

³⁵ ‘There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God.’ The quotation comes from Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1989 [1987]),

p.68. In his preface to Katzenelson's *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*, Levi states that 'There is no longer a God in the "void and empty" skies' (*The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p.23).

³⁶ *Shema: Collected Poems of Primo Levi*, ed. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: The Menard Press, 1976), p.13.

³⁷ Thomson, p.226; Agamben, p.58.

³⁸ In *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, Levi writes that the poem 'had been dancing around my head even while I was in Auschwitz, and which I had written down a few days after my return' (p.25).

³⁹ Antony Rowland, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp.25-6.

⁴⁰ J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Penguin, 1982 [1977]), p.236.

⁴¹ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: HarperCollins, 1987 [1986]), p.809.

⁴² Terry Eagleton, 'Material girl no more...', *THES*, February 16 2007, pp.16, 17, p.17. To be fair, Eagleton is (rightly) criticizing celebrities' obsession with alternative spiritual sources.

⁴³ Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin, 1967), p.22.

⁴⁴ Thomson, p.506.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Thomson, p.506.

⁴⁶ Emma Wilson, 'Material Remains: *Night and Fog*', in *OCTOBER*, 112 (spring 2005), pp.89-110, pp.95, 100.

⁴⁷ Carole Angier, *The Double Bond: Primo Levi, a Biography* (London/New York: Viking, 2002), p.445.

⁴⁸ See footnote 13.

⁴⁹ Ana Douglas and Thomas A. Vogler, 'Introduction', in *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.1-54, p.46.