

*Songs Beyond Mankind:  
Poetry and the Lager from Dante to Primo Levi*



**T**he translation of the original title of Primo Levi’s book known in the United States as *Survival in Auschwitz*<sup>1</sup> is “If this is a man,” a phrase that appears also in a poem by Levi inscribed as an epigraph on the first page of his book:

Consider if this is a man  
Who works in the mud  
Who does not know peace  
Who fights for a scrap of bread  
Who dies because of a yes or a no.  
Consider if this is a woman  
Without hair and without name  
With no more strength to remember,  
Her eyes empty and her womb cold  
Like a frog in winter.<sup>2</sup>

These lines ask a disturbing question: Is there a degree of suffering and degradation beyond which a man or a woman ceases to be a human being? A point beyond which our soul—or, if you prefer, our spirit—dies and what survives is pure physiology? And if yes, what resources can we deploy that may be capable of preserving the integrity of our humanity? These are some of the issues I want to reflect on in this paper with reference to two systems of suffering: the two hells described by Dante in his *Inferno* and Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*. First, however, I would like to mention a kind of suffering which usually, as far as I know, is not associated with either Dante or Levi.

1.

In a sermon celebrating Christian martyrs, the ninth-century Benedictine abbot Hrabanus Maurus enumerates some of the torments to which early Christians were subjected if they did not renounce their faith:

Alii vero virgis et flagellis diutissime sunt verberati, alii fustibus et plumbatis caesi, alii membratim laniati, alii gladio occisi, alii excoriati, pice et plumbo liquato perfusi, alii ardore prunarum cruciati, alii flammis exusti, alii in mare mersi, alii bestiis deputati, alii carcerum sunt horrore et fame necati. Quot enim poenarum et mortium genera hostis excogitare poterat, tot martyribus sine ulla miseratione infligebat; sed ipsi licet in aperto horrida paterentur, in occulto tamen ineffabiliter coronabantur.<sup>3</sup>

[Some are beaten at length with scourges and whips, others killed with sticks and scourges fitted with lead pellets, others torn apart limb from limb, others killed with swords; some flayed and covered with pitch and liquid lead, others made to die over burning coals, others burnt in flames, others submerged in the sea, others given for food to beasts, others murdered in the horror and starvation of prisons. How many kinds of tortures and deaths the enemy could think of, that many *he would inflict on the martyrs without any compassion. However, though on the outside they appeared to suffer horrendous pains, in secret they acquired inexpressible crowns.*]

Five centuries later and twelve years after Dante's death in 1321, the mystic Simone Fidati from the city of Cascia in Umbria invites his reader to "consider" (the same verb as in Levi's poem) the thousand ways in which Christian martyrs imitated Christ:

Or considera li màrtiri i quali si dispuosoro ad ogni pena e tormenti molto lietamente e di nulla generazione di morte ispaventarono per potersi assimigliare a Cristo in pene e in tormenti; non reputando sufficienti tutte le loro passioni per la eterna gloria. De' quali alcuni furono morti di ferro, altri arsi in fuoco e in fiamma; altri battuti con duri nerbi, altri perforati con bastoni, altri crucifissi, altri in acqua summersi,

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altri vivi scorticati, altri mancipati in crudeli ferri e catene, altri coricati nel letto dove era molto vetro rotto, altri strascinati da bestie, altri strascinati sopra molti sassi, altri lessati in olio, altri in pece e in solfo; altri messi in piombo bogliente, altri saettati, altri furono messi le stecche tra la carne e l'unghia, altri tagliato loro il capo, altri divelti loro i capelli e la barba; altri divelte loro le carni con uncini di ferro, altri vestiti di panziere di fuoco; altri battuti con palle di piombo, altri in martirii dilicati, cioè posti con femmine da sollicitarli a carnalità; altri coricati in piastre di ferro ardente, altri pettinati con pettini di ferro, altri morti abbavagliati, altri messi in acque ghiacce; altri missoro loro fuscellini per la natura, altri missoro loro bastoni noderosi per lo sesso, altri trassero loro le lingue; altri loro gli occhi; altri lapidati, altri afflitti in freddo, altri angosciati in fame, altri mozze le mani, altri i piedi, altri troncate le loro membra, altri steconati, altri attanagliati, altri isventrati, e le loro corpora fatte mangiare alle bestie; altri appiccati per gli capegli, altri appiccati per le mani, altri per li piedi, altri segati, altri schedionati a modo di bestie e posti ad arrostire, altri dati a divorare a bestie: a leoni ad orsi a leopardi; altri enfiati a modo d'otre, altri messi infra serpenti, altri piantati; altri ripiena la bocca loro di piombo strutto, altri tagliati minuto con coltello e poscia insalati, altri ferrati a modo di cavagli, altri rotto l'ossa con bastoni, altri posti a cavare metallo e pietre e rena, ed altri diversi martirii, i quali iscrivere sarebbe malagevole.<sup>4</sup>

[Now consider the martyrs, who accepted every pain and torment with great joy, and feared no kind of death in order to imitate Christ in pains and torments, deeming all their sufferings insufficient for eternal glory. Of all these martyrs, some were killed by sword, others were burnt in fire and flames; others were beaten with hard whips, others pierced with sticks, others crucified, others dunked in water, others flayed alive, others manacled with cruel irons and chains, others laid on beds of broken glass, others dragged by animals, others dragged over many stones, others boiled in oil, others in pitch and sulfur; others placed inside boiling lead, others pierced with arrows, others had small sticks inserted between flesh and nails, others had their head cut off, others had beard and hair uprooted; others had their flesh torn with iron claws, others were dressed

with burning waistcoats; others were beaten with lead balls, others were placed in delicate torments, that is, placed with women who would tempt them to carnal deeds; others laid upon red-hot iron plates, others combed with iron combs, others killed by gagging, others plunged in icy waters; others had twigs put up their sexual organ, others knotty sticks through their sex, others had their tongues extracted; others their eyes; others stoned, others afflicted with cold, others anguished with hunger, others had their hands cut off, others their feet, others had their limbs truncated, others were skewered, others tortured with pincers, others disemboweled and their bodies left for beasts to eat; others were hung by their hair, others hung by their hands, others by their feet, others sawed, others skewered like animals and put to roast, others given to beasts to devour: to lions, bears, and leopards; others blown up like wineskins, others placed among serpents, others planted in the ground; others had their mouths filled with molten lead, others were minutely cut with knives and then salted, others were shod like horses, others had their bones broken with clubs, others were put to dig metal, stones, and sand, and others given other torments, which it would be hard to describe.]

The mystic's fantastic creativity seems to surpass even the imagination of the pagan executioners in finding ever different ways of torturing their victims. What stimulates the mystic's mind is the elating sense that the greater the suffering, the greater the glory of the sufferer.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, as Simone states, the martyrs face all pains and torments "with great joy."<sup>6</sup> They seek to suffer, and long for pain. Martyrdom is for them the most direct way to imitate Christ and gain eternal glory. Saint Bernard de Clairvaux writes:

*Stat martyr tripudians et triumphans, toto licet lacero corpore; et rimante latera ferro, non modo fortiter, sed et alacriter sacrum e carne sua circumspicit ebullire cruorem.*<sup>7</sup>

[Here stands the martyr, jubilant and triumphant though his whole body is mangled; even while the steel is gashing his sides, he looks around with courage and elation at the holy blood pouring from his flesh.]

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The martyr's *passio*, or suffering, is active and brings salvation, as the suffering of Christ does.<sup>8</sup> Like Jesus upon the cross, in the extreme abjection of martyrdom the martyr finds victory. It is one of the most sublime paradoxes of the Christian faith.

It is widely known that, in the original Greek from which it derives, the word *martyr* means "witness"; witnesses in early Christianity were those believers who were ardent enough to sacrifice their lives in order to bear witness to their faith. The case of the Maccabee brothers is well known: seven brothers who, around 168 BCE, prefiguring the Christian martyrs, chose to suffer the most atrocious torments and die rather than eat pork meat. The second book of the Maccabees recounts how they were tortured and murdered one after the other, while their mother exhorted them to accept joyfully their torments, indeed to take them as their triumph. Not satisfied with being butchered like pigs, the seven boys mock and taunt the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphane and his henchmen, challenging them to find ever more excruciating torments. In a rewriting of the biblical story, Saint Ambrose describes the mother who, before being herself killed, watches as her children's bodies are slaughtered one by one:

Cadebant filii tormentis exulcerati, mortui super mortuos  
aduoluebantur, corpora super corpora uolutabantur, capita super  
capita exsecabantur, refertus locus erat cadaueribus filiorum:  
non fleuit mater, non lamentata est, non oculos cuiusquam  
pressit aut ora morientis, non lauit uulnera sciens gloriosiores  
esse, si euiscerati et concreti pariter puluere et sanguine  
uiderentur, quales solent de bello redire uictores, quales solent  
tropaea ex hostibus reportare.<sup>9</sup>

[Her sons fell, all wounded by the torments; in death they  
rolled upon the dead, bodies rolled on bodies, heads were cut  
off above heads, the place was filled with the corpses of her  
sons. Their mother did not weep or wail or close the eyes or  
mouths of any of them in death or wash their wounds. She  
knew that her sons would be in greater glory, if they appeared  
torn to pieces and jumbled together with dust and blood. In  
such a condition, generally, are conquerors on their return from  
war, when they bring back the trophies taken from the enemy.]

Such macabre scenes become common in Christian martyrology.<sup>10</sup> The thirst for martyrdom drives young and old, men and women, boys and girls to defy their executioners, and sneer at all the tools they use to inflict pain: ropes, scourges, knives, axes, claws, hooks, lead pellets, metal plates, pitch, and fire.<sup>11</sup> *The Martyrs' Crowns* by Prudentius—in the original Latin *Liber Peristephanon*—is a collection of hymns, not devoid of a blood-curdling, truculent beauty, which is meant to celebrate the heroism of Christian martyrs: for example, Eulalia, who counts her wounds while two slaughterers tear bits of flesh out of her breast and with a clawlike tool rip open her flank down to her bones; Vincent, whose joints are torn asunder and whose ribs are exposed to the point that his throbbing entrails become visible through the gaping wounds; Romanus, whose shoulders are beaten with leaden thrusts until they swell, his beard and skin are torn out in shreds, and a scalpel thrust again and again deep into his gaping throat; finally, the virgin Agnes, who, as she sees the furious headsman approach with weapon drawn, in transport of joy greets him as a lover:<sup>12</sup>

exulto talis quod potius venit  
 vesanus, atrox, turbidus armiger,  
 quam si veniret languidus ac tener  
 mollisque ephebus tinctus aromate,  
 qui me pudoris funere perderet.  
 hic, hic amator iam, fateor, placet:  
 ibo inruentis gressibus obviam,  
 nec demorabor vota calentia:  
 ferrum in papillas omne recepero  
 pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham.  
 sic nupta Christo transiliam poli  
 omnes tenebras aethere celsior.<sup>13</sup>

[Far happier am I that a swordsman comes,  
 A wild uncouth barbarian, fierce and grim,  
 Than that a languid suitor pays court to me,  
 A lovesick creature, scented with rare perfumes,  
 Who would destroy my soul with my chastity.  
 This butcher is the lover that pleases me:  
 His bold advances I shall go forth to meet

And will not try to hinder his ardent suit.  
I gladly bare my breast to his cruel steel  
And deep into my heart I will draw his blade.  
Thus as the bride of Christ I shall mount above  
The darkness of the world to the realms of light.]

Thus, martyrdom becomes a sacred ritual, sometimes charged with erotic connotations,<sup>14</sup> and performed with equal ardor by both victim and executioner-priest. This contest, together with the quality of tortures suffered in it, will forever define the character of the martyr more than the rest of his or her life. This is why the martyrs are grouped in a special category of saints by the Church, and the epithet “martyr” becomes an integral part of their names.

The era of early martyrdom ends when persecutions end and Christianity rapidly becomes the hegemonic religion of the Western world. At the same time, however, an unexpected development takes place in Christian culture: the old torments, once suffered by the martyrs, are reconfigured in the Christian imagination to become, on earth, the tortures to which criminals, infidels, and heretics (true or presumed) are subjected, and in hell the punishments for the eternally damned.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, many of the torments (*martiri* in Italian) described by Prudentius or listed by Simone da Cascia reappear in Dante’s *Inferno*, and Dante calls them just so: *martiri*.<sup>16</sup> Here, however, they no longer serve to prove the heroic steadfastness of the Christian believers, but to punish the hardened sinners or even those who, during their life on earth, were not faithful enough to God and the Church. Martyrs and damned souls end by sharing the same torments, with the difference that for the martyrs, all pains are temporary and lead to inexpressible bliss, whereas for the wicked, they are eternal and do not lead anywhere. Thus, while the martyrs were willing witnesses of their faith in Christ, the damned become martyrs *malgré soi*, unwilling witnesses of God’s justice.

2.

The idea of hell, and in particular Dante’s version of it, has been with us for so long that we have grown accustomed to it, with the result that we don’t pay much attention to what actually is the *raison d’être*

of hell, that is, inflicting physical pain on human beings. Foucault's sharp distinction between torture and *supplice*, or execution, can help us to get closer to what perhaps Dante had in mind. Both torture and *supplice* are forms of violence upon the body of the victim, but they are quite different. Torture is a practice, conducted in secret, in which corporal pain is not an end in itself; rather, pain is inflicted in order to extract a confession. *Supplice* is a special form of public torture which, while always ending in death, does not aim to kill, but to humiliate, degrade, and above all extract as much pain as possible from the body of the victim before he dies. The skill of the executioner consists in his ability to balance inflicting the highest pain with the risk of prematurely killing the victim, for, once the victim is dead, he or she escapes all pain and all revenge. So the skilled executioner will keep his victim alive as long as possible.<sup>17</sup>

Now, it would seem that Dante's *Inferno* portrays an ideal form of *supplice* as described by Foucault, in that, paradoxically, being already dead, Dante's damned can never escape their executioners by dying. From this narrow point of view Dante's punishments are in fact a never-ending *supplice*, in which the torture and degradation of the body of the condemned are protracted or repeated *ad infinitum*. Their purpose is to repay divine justice for the committed transgressions, but, given that the Creator is infinitely superior to the creature, the latter will never be able to satisfy the former, and the punishment will last forever.

The situation in Dante's purgatory is completely different. The torments of purgatory are freely chosen; indeed, they are joyfully sought for by the penitents, and therefore they have a beneficial role. Suffering in purgatory relieves the soul of the incrustations of sin, and makes it worthy of ascending to heaven. Just like the torment of the martyrs, the pain of purgatory is temporary and active, victorious and joyful; it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. This is why Dante calls it the "blessed sorrow that marries us once more to God."<sup>18</sup>

On the contrary, hell's pain does not redeem anybody, nor does it teach anything. It afflicts the shades without maturing or changing them. Indeed, there are sinners so hardened that they seem to find some perverse pleasure in provoking God's wrath. They sneer, taunt, and mock all the suffering that divine justice may invent and inflict upon them, just as the ancient martyrs did with their torturers. Among the most notable examples, Farinata degli Uberti is so proud that he seems to hold hell



in utter scorn (*Inf.* 10, 36); Capaneus challenges Jupiter to punish him as much as He likes—he will never give Him any reason to enjoy His revenge (*Inf.* 14, 60); and Vanni Fucci, shouting, raises his hands with both the fists aimed at God (*Inf.* 25, 2–3).

Once they have reached their destination, the souls of Dante's *Inferno* are in constant pain and they remain constantly vulnerable—indeed, they are constantly wounded. Like joy in paradise, pain in inferno is always fresh and young, it is never allowed to become old and tired, and many shades are portrayed in fear of the pain they anticipate. The squanderers always try to flee the black bitches that pursue them through the wood of the suicides, but they are always caught and torn to bits (*Inf.* 13, 109–29). The violent against God never cease to try and protect themselves with their hands against the falling flakes of fire, but the flakes keep coming, always fresh, always new, always scorching (*Inf.* 14, 40–42).

If we ask how it can be that bodiless souls have feelings as though they had flesh, muscles, and bones, Dante replies that the infernal shades have airy bodies that are exactly as sensitive as the bodies that they left behind on earth, and that will rejoin them after the last judgment.<sup>19</sup> At that point, Dante tells us, when body and soul will be reunited, the pains of hell, like the joys of heaven, will reach their most appropriate, perfect, and definitive intensity.<sup>20</sup> Dante conceives the human being as uninterrupted continuity and interaction of body and soul, a psychophysical unit that can never be broken, not even by, or after, death. For, without a body, the soul would not feel emotions, have feelings and ideas, and therefore it would not be able to suffer. For this reason, the individual body must survive, albeit in immaterial form, even in the interval of time between death and resurrection, for the body is an interface, a living frontier between the world of the living and that of the dead.<sup>21</sup>

The justice of Dante's God is implacable. Its sentences know neither pardon nor parole. Once begun, they will never end. Thus, hornets and wasps sting the neutrals to the point of making them bleed, and worms feed on the blood that trickles down from their wounds. The gluttonous wallow in mud, and a fetid rain drenches them. The murderers boil in the seething blood of the Phlegethon; the suicides have become thorn bushes that the repugnant Harpies lacerate; the squanderers are torn to bits by hounds. The flatterers are immersed in excrement; the simoniac popes are stuffed head first inside rocks; the barrators are kept under

boiling pitch by devils with grappling hooks; the thieves are assaulted and violated by reptiles; the fraudulent counselors are wrapped in fire, eternally burning without ever being consumed; the schismatics and sowers of discord are remorselessly butchered and mutilated by devils appointed to the task. The alchemists are disfigured by a revolting leprosy; a furious madness deranges the impersonators; dropsy swells the counterfeiters; an insatiable hunger drives Count Ugolino to gnaw forever at the skull of the archbishop Ruggieri.

There is nothing particularly fantastic about Dante's gallery of horrors. Not only are they standard in the existing vision literature, but they are all real and familiar to the world of Dante's readers, accustomed as they are to see human bodies devastated by disease and starvation, or mutilated by enemy swords, or quartered and burnt by executioners on the public square. It is the compelling familiarity with these torments that keeps the dead alive and credible in the imagination of the living. One of the most haunting passages of the *Inferno* is where the squanderer Lano is introduced, running, naked and torn, breaking straight through a thicket, pursued by black, ravenous bitches, and shouting, "Come, come quickly, death!" ("Or accorri, accorri, morte!").<sup>22</sup> Lano is already dead, of course, but his terror is such that he longs for *total* death. He is so terrified that he wants to cease existing altogether, but time and again he comes up against what is at once the most comforting and the most terrifying gift Christianity bestowed to its believers: the indestructibility of human existence.<sup>23</sup>

Now, the terror of Dante's readers is not, strictly speaking, part of the poem, but it certainly is its purpose. All works of art aim to achieve an effect on their users. Dante's *Inferno* aims to teach its readers—be they popes or paupers, kings or knaves—that their earthly sins will be punished, and in order to make that threat more effective it shows in great detail how real sinners, most of them contemporaries of, and known to, Dante's readers, are dealt with by God's justice. So Francesca is tossed in the storm; Ciaccio wallows in mud under a filthy rain; Farinata burns in an open grave; the dead tree that is Pier della Vigna is lacerated by Harpies; Lano is torn to pieces by black bitches; Brunetto is scorched by falling fireflakes; and so on and so forth. All these are mere names for us, but for the contemporary reader of Dante's *Inferno*, Francesca, Ciaccio, Farinata, Piero, Lano, Brunetto are real people, who until recently walked the streets of Ravenna, Florence, and Siena, where even now

their families, friends, and foes still reside and go about their daily business. By knowing what happened to these people in the afterlife, readers will be able to anticipate what awaits them if they indulge in lust, or food, or anger, or if they are heretics, or sin against nature, or kill themselves or others.

Once again, it is instructive to read Foucault on punishment. Besides affirming the immense power of the sovereign, public executions (*supplices*), writes Foucault, satisfied two other needs: the need to punish the alleged criminal, and the need to educate the spectators. By punishing the criminal, executions satisfied the spectators' thirst for justice (or revenge, as the case may be), while repressing their potential for transgression by showing the consequences that transgression entailed. In other words, public executions were live performances that gratified the spectators and taught them formidable lessons.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, the figures and scenes that, carved on the portals of medieval cathedrals, now delight busy scholars and crowds of vacationing tourists were meant to serve both as decoration and moral warnings. They reminded people that sooner or later everyone would die, and everyone would be judged according to his or her merits, eventually ending in hell or heaven, where they would experience the kind of torments or pleasures exemplified in the scenes before their eyes. These scenes were meant to affirm God's infinite power and instill people with both the fear of hell and the desire for paradise; they were a powerful tool in the manipulation of people's beliefs and behavior.

Dante's relationship with his reader is in fact quite ambiguous, in that his reader is, like and through Dante the character-narrator, both an observer of, and an accomplice in, Dante's own creation: the reader's reaction is a mix of horror and occasionally compassion, but also of relief and pleasure at the "sight" of both what is being done and how it is done. Dante does not feel, as perhaps we do, that there is anything problematic about making literature out of the terrifying reality of pain.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, the *Divine Comedy* justifies and authorizes the imaginary fears that are responsible for the creation and preservation of hell.

The astonishing novelty of the *Comedy* is that, while accepting the gravity of the sins and punishing them in the most horrific manner, Dante does not perpetuate the myth of the absolute and total depravity of the sinners. He accepts from the rhetoric of the Church that the heretics are punished forever inside flaming graves, and that the sodomites are

condemned to walking over burning sands under a rain of fire; but, far from reducing these sinners to anonymous objects, he enhances their individualities: ultimately, even in hell, Dante's sinners remain individuals with whom he, as character, and we as readers entertain a relationship that is not unlike the relationship we have with the living.

As they enter the gates of hell, Dante's damned are warned to abandon all hope: "Abandon all hope, you who enter here" (*Inf.* 3, 9: "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate"). Paradoxically, however, their loss of hope does not destroy nor diminish their passions. The harrowing torments of hell do not deprive the damned souls of their humanity, nor do they render them apathetic. The Christian idea of the indestructibility of the entire individual entails that passions and emotions after death become clearer and stronger than they ever were in life. This is what happens in Dante's *Inferno*, and what the critics mean when they speak of Dante's "realism."

## 3.

I want to turn now to Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. The extermination camps have often been compared to Dante's inferno, and Dante's inferno has often served as a literary model for the portrayal of the death camps.<sup>26</sup> In a famous essay, which appeared forty years ago, George Steiner wrote:

The camp embodies, often down to minutiae, the images and chronicles of Hell in European art and thought from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. It is these representations which gave to the deranged horrors of Belsen a kind of "expected logic." The material realities of the inhuman are detailed, endlessly, in Western iconography, from the mosaics at Torcello to the panels of Bosch; they are prepared for from the fourteenth-century Harrowings of Hell to *Faust*. It is in the fantasies of the infernal, as they literally haunt Western sensibility, that we find the technology of pain without meaning, of bestiality without end, of gratuitous terror. For six hundred years the imagination dwelt on the flaying, the racking, the mockery of the damned, in a place of whips and hellhounds, of ovens and stinking air. The literature of the camps is extensive.

But nothing in it equals the fullness of Dante's observations. Having no personal experience of the *Arschloch der Welt*—that hideously exact and allegoric German term for Auschwitz and Treblinka—I can make only approximate sense of many of Dante's notations. . . . The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century, wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are *Hell made immanent*. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface. They are the deliberate enactment of a long, precise imagining. Because it imagined more fully than any other text, because it argued the centrality of Hell in the Western order, the *Commedia* remains our literal guidebook—to the flames, to the ice fields, to the meat hooks.<sup>27</sup>

Steiner makes two points. First, there is a formal analogy between Dante's inferno and the Lager in terms of, to put it in Robert Pinsky's words, "magnitude, challenge to the imagination, degree of horror, terrifying questions it raises";<sup>28</sup> second, and more substantial, the Lager is the concrete realization of a fiction, deeply rooted and widespread in the Western world, of which Dante wrote the best example.

As to the first point, the differences seem to me to be more illuminating than the analogies, for the analogies concern the details, while the differences have to do with the substance. First, a major difference: unlike Dante's inferno, the Lager is not there to do justice by punishing the wicked and rewarding the virtuous. Nor is it there to teach anything to anyone. It has neither apparent external purpose nor connection with the outside world. As Levi puts it, it is a realm where right and wrong, good and evil, friends and foes, and even "us" and "them" are no longer clearly demarcated.<sup>29</sup>

Giorgio Agamben has argued persuasively that the extermination camps came into being under the Nazi regime, when the state of emergency became normal, that is, when it became legal for the Nazi State to do anything illegal.<sup>30</sup> The camps were portions of the national territory legally placed *outside* the ordinary legal system, that is, *outside* all the rules of the penal and prison codes. As in nightmares, within this space, everything was not just legitimate and permitted, but actually possible.<sup>31</sup> Terror is all-pervasive in the life of the camps. Not the ordinary, strategic terror employed by authoritarian regimes to intimidate people and keep the opposition under control, but what Hannah Arendt calls "total terror,"

the terror that is an end in itself<sup>32</sup> and coincides with “the extreme form of horror,”<sup>33</sup> the paralyzing horror that freezes all human reactions.

Thus, as prisoners arrive at Auschwitz after their long, debilitating journeys in cruel and humiliating conditions, they feel “on the threshold of the darkness and terror of an unearthly place.”<sup>34</sup> They step onto a land where the most elementary human rights have ceased to exist. They are not guilty of anything. The only reason they ended here is that they are alive, whereas an overwhelming power wants them dead and wiped off the face of the earth. If they have been brought here, it is so that they may be eliminated, and all the infinite, meticulous rules of the camp are there just to carry out their killing in a systematic, efficient, and orderly fashion. This is the only thing that seems clear in a setup that is otherwise totally incomprehensible and surreal.<sup>35</sup>

After going through the violent, terrifying rituals of the arrival, most prisoners are sent to the gas chambers. Some are temporarily kept alive as helpers or workers. Of this small minority, a tiny group—the lucky few, but often also the tough, unscrupulous, and cruel—will survive longer than others. The others—the unlucky, the passive, the meek, and obedient—will quickly, through forced labor, beatings, and starvation, be reduced to *Muselmann* status,<sup>36</sup> and be sent to the gas chambers.

The *Muselmann* is the non-man, the human being who cannot feel anything anymore, not even pain. It is the extreme expression of camp life,<sup>37</sup> the result of what Levi calls a methodic process of “demolition.” To demolish a human being means stripping him of his human individuality and uniqueness, reducing him to mere biological existence, to the state of “staggering corpse.”<sup>38</sup> This goal is achieved by depriving the inmate of everything that makes him who he is: family, friends, home, habits, clothes and shoes, even his hair and every other possession of his, including his name. The Lager reduces one to an empty shell, a being who only knows suffering and need, and has forgotten all dignity. Such a man will submit to any pain and indignity, because along with the ability to hope and feel anything, he will have lost all sense of his own selfhood, and with it the ability to fear.<sup>39</sup>

Hannah Arendt describes the Lager as a factory conceived for the purpose of producing corpses.<sup>40</sup> The manufacturing of corpses is preceded and prepared by a process in three steps: first, the killing of the juridical person in man, achieved “by placing the camp outside of the normal penal system and selecting the inmates outside of normal

judicial procedure”; second, the murder of the moral person in man, “through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible”; and third, the destruction of individual identity. Indeed, Hannah Arendt identifies the quintessential ontological horror of the extermination camp not in the mass killings, but in the complete demolition of individual uniqueness: its outcome she defines as a “living corpse,” a “ghastly marionette with human face.”<sup>41</sup> Such a being, precisely because he is no longer a human being, will be eliminated—shot, beaten to death, hanged, gassed—without any qualms, as a mosquito is squashed.

Now, compare this to that other late medieval penal colony, imagined by Dante Alighieri. Of course there are major differences. The “reality” Dante describes is a fictional creation in which the poet imagines that God’s judgment is implemented. In this vision, or nightmare, the wicked and unrepentant are punished, the weak and repented are cleansed and purified, and the pure and saintly are rewarded: this is a pretty positive picture of human history. It should also be noted that those who are punished in hell are, by and large, the wealthy, privileged, and powerful who are known to have wielded their power against the common good. It is true that inferno punishes its inmates ferociously, tormenting and torturing them unceasingly, but this treatment is not out of keeping with the standards of earthly justice prevailing in fourteenth-century Europe. Dante’s inferno is grounded on, and gives expression to, a culture and a society in which it is considered normal to punish sinners, torture and burn heretics and witches, starve traitors, and so on and so forth. We might find it repugnant, but it is not a perversion of justice.

On the contrary, Levi is a witness who asks that his readers be judges of what he reports.<sup>42</sup> The reality that he describes is historically documented, it is an experience that he lived personally, and which says to us: “This is what human beings have done, and are capable of doing, to each other in this life and in this world.” At the same time this reality tells us something that is very important about Dante’s realism.

Levi calls “drowned” (*sommersi* in Italian, literally “submerged”) the non-men, the mild, helpless *Muselmänner*, who took away with them their experiences of the death camps when they died there. For him, they are the only true witnesses, or to use a different word, the only true “martyrs,” who did not survive to tell their stories.<sup>43</sup> He calls “saved” the survivors, the strong, clever, or fortunate enough to emerge alive from

the Lager and, in some cases, bear witness. As is well known, the two terms (*sommersi* and *salvati* in Italian) are derived from Dante's *Inferno*,<sup>44</sup> where they designate respectively the damned, who are confined forever in hell, and the saved, who are already in heaven, or will eventually be there, once their penance is completed in purgatory. Thus, Levi turns Dante's nomenclature upside down, emphasizing with bitter irony how Nazi "justice" condemns the good and spares the wicked. The Lager is a perverse, grotesque parody of Dante's hell in that it employs infernal structures in order to punish the innocent and reward the guilty. "In history as in life"—Levi poignantly observes—"one sometimes seems to glimpse a ferocious law which states: 'to he that has, will be given; from he that has not, will be taken away.'"<sup>45</sup>

However, the real difference between the two "regimes" is even more profound. In Dante's hell, far from being deprived of their individualities, men and women fully realize, through suffering, the quintessence of their identities; they become more than ever who they actually are. Far from erasing their names and reducing them to anonymous numbers, Dante fills each soul with his or her historical and psychological character. These characters do not change with time, they neither progress nor regress. They are what they are. That state of being is their sentence, their ontological horror.

*Survival in Auschwitz* offers a very different testimonial on the effects of suffering. In the Lager, most inmates are annihilated as individuals well before their physical existence is reduced to a fistful of ashes.<sup>46</sup> Only those who successfully switch sides—those who know how to become Prominents, Kombinator, Organisations—manage to survive. One could argue, following Foucault's analysis, that in this premature extinction of the individual consists the "error" of the Nazi executioner, for such is the degree of suffering and degradation that he inflicts, that it completely snuffs out the victim's ability to feel, and the victim, suffering no more, escapes him. In fact, in the executioner's eyes, what escapes is no longer a human being, but a foul biological mass that must be wiped out as soon as possible. In the journey of those who have been sentenced to die, the Lager constitutes a stage unknown to Foucault's paradigm—the stage of the "non-man," in which men and women still exist physically, but, as they are no longer considered human, they can be eliminated in an orderly fashion without arousing any sense of guilt on the part of their murderers.<sup>47</sup> Unknown to ancient executioners, this



stage is perfectly functional to the Nazi genocidal project; it is a necessary point of transition toward the economical and efficient realization of the planned mass extermination.

This is something that Dante neither understood nor anticipated. He did not understand that pain, cruelty, and violence destroy all humanity in human beings. Humiliation, deprivation, abuse, and torture rupture man's psychophysical unit, they do not enhance, refine, and realize it.<sup>48</sup> Looking back at it from the vantage point of the death camp, Dante's realism, albeit poetically very effective, seems in reality naive. Just as the pot that boils on Pinocchio's fireplace does not cook anything, Dante's hell is a real work of art, but is not real.

4.

I would like to address now Steiner's second point, namely that the Lager is the concrete realization of a fiction of which Dante wrote the best example. Memories of Dante's *Inferno* are common in *Survival in Auschwitz*, but we must assume that they occurred to Primo Levi at the time of writing his account, rather than when he actually lived the events narrated in it.<sup>49</sup> However, there is one major exception to this rule—a case in which a canto of the *Inferno* becomes the protagonist of the actual story. It is the chapter entitled “The Canto of Ulysses,” a title which applies equally to the eleventh chapter of Levi's book and canto twenty six of Dante's *Inferno*.

You remember what happens in the eleventh chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz*. On a bright morning in June 1944, Primo and Jean, the Pikolo of Primo's kommando—an important position in the hierarchy of the camp's Prominents, are walking together on their way to fetch the soup from the camp's kitchen. Each one of them holds one of the two wooden poles with which, on their return, they will carry back the pot of soup. Jean is bilingual, French and German, but he wants to learn Italian too. So, there and then, Primo starts teaching him: *zup-pa, cam-po, ac-qua* (soup, camp, water), he says, and Jean repeats after him. Suddenly, however, the episode of Dante's Ulysses comes to Primo's mind, and Primo starts reciting it, translating into French and explaining to Jean the disconnected fragments he struggles to recall. In this episode, Ulysses tells Dante and Virgil how, after leaving Circe near

Gaeta in southern Italy, instead of sailing home to Ithaca, he pointed his ship westward in search of a new, uninhabited world. After passing beyond the Pillars of Hercules, now known as the Strait of Gibraltar, he continued sailing for five months on the open sea until, just as he and his shipmates cheered the sight of a brown mountain in the middle of the ocean, they all shipwrecked and drowned.

The memory of Dante's Ulysses moves Primo profoundly, but memory by itself is not enough to explain his excitement. What makes the difference is the sharing of that memory; that is, the recalling aloud of some powerful lines of poetry in the presence of an audience, the sense of reaching another person's mind with one's own words—a state of excitement teachers know well. This is what is so intellectually thrilling and energizing. It transforms the *Essenholen*—the menial chore of fetching the daily soup, into an exhilarating journey back to his true self, a journey which for a few moments cancels out the horrors of the Lager. The episode could hardly be more extraordinary. A few lines of poetry have the power to liberate Primo's mind from Auschwitz. Why? What happens?

We must assume that, imprisoned inside a flame that burns without consuming him, Dante's Ulysses suffers atrocious pains even if Dante does not mention them until the beginning of the following canto. However, Primo does not identify with the suffering Ulysses, but with the hero who, before anything else, including wife, son, home, and country, places his freedom to go and explore beyond every limit and barrier. It is the line “ma misi me per l'alto mare aperto” (So on the open sea I set forth) that at first rouses Primo's most intense emotion: it is the vision of that open sea without limits or borders, the idea of breaking a chain, of launching oneself “al di là di una barriera” (on the other side of a barrier). But there are other elements as well.

Here in the death camp Primo appreciates in Dante's text details he had never noticed before, not even at school. Details of vocabulary and syntax<sup>50</sup>—modest discoveries, that now move and excite him, as if he were a free man working at his desk at home, and not a *häftling* waiting to pass through the chimney at Auschwitz. But why do these details strike him so profoundly, if not because, in a strange way, they are about him, about his identity and his dignity as a human being? Because, in the very moment when he discovers them, he feels that he is breaking a chain and overcoming the barrier that thwarts his movements? What

happens here is truly remarkable: six centuries after their composition, a few lines of a medieval Christian poem raise a young Italian Jew above the evil power that wants to eliminate him as a human being.

Primo's memory is intermittent. He recalls some sections and fragments, not the entire passage. Now and again he comes to gaps that he is unable to fill. There is a point, however, that he recalls with absolute clarity. It is the most thrilling part of the story, the passage where Ulysses addresses his companions before sailing into the unknown:

Here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

Consider your origin:

you were not made to live like beasts,  
but to pursue virtue and knowledge.

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.<sup>51</sup>

What is it that Primo hears? What is the trumpet that wakes him from the inhuman nightmare in which he is actually immersed? It is that phrase, *Considerate la vostra semenza*—literally, “Consider your seed”—which today, as he translates it into French for his friend Jean, strikes him with a new energy, an overwhelming evidence. *Considerate la vostra semenza* means “Think who you are, where you come from, what you are made of,” in other words, think that you are men, and to be men means to live a life that chooses good over evil, virtue over vice, right over wrong; it means having an intellectual life, too, that is, a mind actively engaged in searching, questioning, analyzing, comparing, assessing, and judging in accordance with the rules of reason and logic.<sup>52</sup> This is what Primo hears today while Dante's words come to his lips. Thanks to those words, far from forgetting who he is and where he is, Primo rediscovers within himself the human being he feared dead;<sup>53</sup> he rises above his torturers asserting his irrepressible humanity. The gesture of “one who dares to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on *his* shoulders”<sup>54</sup> is a heady, daring gesture, analogous to that of Dante's Ulysses, who chooses the uninhabited world rather than Ithaca, and favors knowledge over ignorance.

As he comes to the point of the episode where Ulysses's ship sinks in the ocean, Primo's excitement reaches its climax:

“And three times round she went in roaring smother  
 With all the waters; at the fourth the poop  
 Rose, and the prow went down, as pleased Another.”

I keep Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this “as pleased Another” before it is too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, but still more, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today . . .<sup>55</sup>

Here, poetry displays its full power, it becomes revelation.<sup>56</sup> Primo identifies totally with a Ulysses who falls while affirming his dignity and freedom in the face of an unknown, but overbearing and envious god. In Ulysses’s tragic, unjust fall, he sees prefigured his own destiny, and the destiny of all persecuted peoples. As the waters of the ocean close, “as pleased Another,” over the body of the Greek hero, Primo intuits something he had never perceived before. That sudden, fretful shift from the first person singular (“I keep Pikolo back . . . I must explain to him . . . I myself have only just seen”) to the first person plural emphasized by the repetition (“the reason for *our* fate, for *our* being here today”) signals this abrupt, awesome intellectual leap—a true epiphany, which lets him catch a glimpse of the tragedy of an entire race, where before there was just an individual drama, and an unequal, unanticipated battle between a people and an alien, overwhelming power, where before there was a match between equals.

But what did Primo see? What is the “gigantic” idea that has struck him, the sudden intuition capable of explaining the “final solution” planned by the Nazi? In a footnote to this passage in the Italian school edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, published first in 1973, Levi writes:

the author thinks that he is catching sight of a disturbing analogy between Ulysses’ shipwreck and the destiny of the prisoners: both have been paradoxically “punished,” Ulysses for having broken the barriers of tradition, and the prisoners for having dared to oppose an overbearing power, as the fascist