Metaphor in the Writings of Primo Levi

Gemma Louise Briggs

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of Modern Languages and Cultures

June 2011

Intellectual Property and Publication Statements

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Claire Honess, for encouraging me to continue with doctoral research, and for suggesting the topic of metaphor to me. Special thanks are also due to Claire for her unwavering advice, guidance and support, both academically and personally, over the last few years.

In addition, I am grateful to Professor Brian Richardson for his helpful comments and suggestions at an early stage of my research. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr Charlotte Ross for allowing me access to her unpublished doctoral thesis on Levi.

I am gratefully indebted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding my PhD.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their continued support and encouragement throughout the ups and downs of the research and writing process.

Abstract

This thesis examines Primo Levi's use of metaphor. To date, there has been no in-depth study of Levi's figurative language. Despite the esteem in which Levi is held as a writer, critical studies have often tended to focus on content over form, and on those works in which he presents and examines his Auschwitz experience over his fictional output. This study is directed principally to more overtly linguistic and literary elements of Levi's work, and spans his whole career as a writer of both testimony and fiction.

The thesis is divided into four main parts; the first part provides background on Levi's use of figurative language and engages with critical theories regarding metaphor. Part II is dedicated to the Holocaust and begins by looking at polemical issues surrounding Holocaust literature, such as the appropriateness of the employment of metaphor within this genre. The discussion then concentrates on how Levi overcomes the ineffability of the Holocaust via the use of metaphor in his testimonial writing and his poetry.

In Part III, the themes of science, creation and writing are explored. Levi's writing transcends the 'two cultures' dichotomy, not only bringing together creative writing and writing about science, but also through sustained metaliterary reflections on the process of writing itself, whether fictional or autobiographical, creative or scientific. Part IV draws together the findings of this thesis, showing that metaphor is essential to what Levi is trying to achieve as a writer, who – in all his work, although in varying ways – deals with events which fall outside the range of normal human conceptualising experience.

Contents

Abbreviations

Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Levi's works are from the collection *Opere*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), and are given by volume number followed by page number, in the form *Op*, I and *Op*, II.

Where it is not obvious which text is being referred to from Levi's *Opere*, the following abbreviations are also given:

Se questo è un uomo – SQU

La tregua – T

Storie naturali – SN

Vizio di forma – VF

Il sistema periodico – SP

La chiave a stella – CS

La ricerca delle radici – RR

Lilít e altri racconti – L

Se non ora, quando? – SNOQ

Ad ora incerta – AOI

L'altrui mestiere – AM

I sommersi e i salvati – SES

Racconti e saggi – RS

Pagine sparse – PS

A Note on Terminology

Despite the problematics of the term Holocaust (which I deal with in chapter 6), it is employed throughout this thesis since it the most widely-used English-language term for the event. I have also used the German word Lager (camp) which has become commonplace in Italian as a way of referring to the concentration camps, and the Holocaust as a whole. At other times, the Hebrew term Shoah, also in common usage in Italian, is employed, as well as the French phrase *l'univers concentrationnaire*, which was coined by David Rousset.[1]

[1] David Rousset, *L'univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946). This term addresses both the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. I use the term in the more limited sense of the German Lager, as have many other commentators on the Holocaust.

Part I: Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Primo Levi: Survivor, Chemist and Literary Writer

Primo Levi (1919-1987) is widely regarded as one of the most eloquent voices to have emerged from the depths of the *univers concentrationnaire*. He is best known for his first, and perhaps greatest, work, *Se questo è un uomo*.[1] Unsurprisingly, it is this text (which has been translated into many languages) that receives most critical attention.[2] *Se questo è un uomo* is responsible for establishing Levi's reputation as a clear, direct and accessible commentator on the Holocaust. As Robert Gordon notes: 'For many, he has become *the* witness-

[1] *Se questo è un uomo* was first published in 1947 by De Silva, after it was rejected by Einaudi, who later published a revised version in 1958. For further details on the publication of *Se questo è un uomo*, see Marco Belpoliti, 'Note ai testi', in *Op*, I, 1373-469 (pp. 1381-91). For the differences between the De Silva and Einaudi editions, see Nicoletta Simborowski, '"Il ritegno": Writing and Restraint in Primo Levi', *Romance Studies*, 19, I (2001), 41-57.

[2] The most comprehensive bibliography of both Italian and English critical work on Levi is: James Tasato Mellone, 'A Bibliography of English and Italian Scholarly Writings on Primo Levi, 1985-2002', in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. by Stanislao Pugliese (London and New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005), pp. 233-66. This does not, however, include recent studies, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. by Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Lucie Benchouiha, *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005); Jonathan Druker, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz. Posthumanist Reflections* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Massimo Giuliani, *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Lanham: Lexington, 2004); Lina Insana, *Arduous Tasks: Primo Levi, Translation, and the Transmission of Holocaust Testimony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Charlotte Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Giuseppina Santagostino, *Primo Levi: metamorfosi letterarie del corpo* (Turin: Centro universitario di ricerche sul viaggio in Italia, 2004).

writer *par excellence*. Perhaps no other survivor has chronicled and considered these events with such accessible economy, elegant wit and humane power'.[3]

Levi's lucid style is often attributed to his career as a chemist, a connection which Levi himself has encouraged. As he tells the physicist Tullio Regge: 'ho sviluppato l'abitudine a scrivere compatto, a evitare il superfluo. La precisione e la concisione, […] mi sono venute dal mestiere di chimico. Come anche l'abitudine all'obiettività, a non lasciarsi ingannare facilmente dalle apparenze'.[4] Indeed, numerous critics attribute Levi's clarity of expression to his scientific background, for example, Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo notes:

> [...] una lingua precisa, chiara e distinta, trasparente verso il senso e la comunicazione, e il gusto della *brevitas* pregnante, dell'economia ed essenzialità linguistica, [...]. Il tutto, come è ben noto, si collega in Levi a professioni di intrepido razionalismo, e piú in particolare presuppone il parallelismo fra usi della lingua e procedimenti tecnico-scientifici, della chimica in primo luogo, caratterizzati appunto da precisione, sobrietà, adeguamento senza sbavature dei mezzi allo scopo attento dosaggio degli elementi in gioco.[5]

However, it is reductive to view Levi's clarity merely as a result of his scientific training. Although Levi himself maintains the importance of chemistry to his writing style, his decision to employ clear prose should not be viewed *solely* as a result of his biographical circumstances and professional training, rather it is a complex stylistic choice. One might cite, in complete contrast to Levi, the engineer-writer Carlo Emilio Gadda, who is a champion of obscurity despite his scientific background. Rather than employing clear, straightforward language,

---

[3] Gordon, 'Introduction', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. xvii-xxi (p. xvii).
[4] Tullio Regge, *Primo Levi e Tullio Regge: Dialogo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), p. 59.
[5] Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Lingua e scrittura in Levi', in Primo Levi, *Opere*, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), III, vii-lxxxiii (p. viii).

Gadda's writing is characterised by linguistic complexity, achieved, for example, through the use of 'plurilinguismo', a combination of different languages such as Latin, standard and archaic forms of Italian, foreign languages and dialects.[6] While it is clear that Gadda's plurilingual style enriches the text and contributes to the message conveyed, Levi seems to discount the possible value of obscurity in writing: 'a mio parere non si dovrebbe scrivere in modo oscuro, perché uno scritto ha tanto piú valore, e tanta piú speranza di diffusione e di perennità, quanto meglio viene compreso e quanto meno si presta ad interpretazioni equivoche' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 677). Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy note that Levi's 'critique is not straightforward, for obscurity may be not an extrinsic defect, but an essential feature of the message'.[7]

In fact, to a certain extent, it can be argued that Levi employs a 'plurilingual' technique, although much less sustained than that of Gadda, in *Se questo è un uomo*, where he deliberately inserts the many languages spoken in the Lager in the text without translating them into Italian.[8] By recreating the linguistic chaos of Auschwitz on the page, the reader is able to experience some

---

[6] See Robert S. C. Gordon, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Italian Literature*: *A Difficult Modernity* (London: Duckworth, 2005), pp. 168-70. Levi draws comparisons with himself and Gadda (along with the writers Sergio Solmi and Leonardo Sinisgalli), noting that they are split in two by their scientific and literary temperaments. He does not comment, however, on Gadda's literary style. See Edoardo Fadini, 'Primo Levi si sente scrittore "dimezzato"', in *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste 1963-1987*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 106-09 (p. 107).

[7] Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy, 'Primo Levi's languages', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 121-36 (p. 134).

[8] For example, in the Canto of Ulysses episode, Levi uses French and German words without offering a translation. Zaia Alexander notes that 'Levi does not decode the foreign sentences and this gesture, peppered throughout the book, reminds us that daily life in Auschwitz [...] consisted of untranslatable moments'. See Zaia Alexander, 'Primo Levi and translation', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 155-69 (p. 162).

of the confusion that Levi faced in the camp, albeit to a much lesser extent. So, here, Levi moved away from his 'signature' style of clarity since it would not have been able to achieve the desired disorientating effect. However, in his essay 'Dello scrivere oscuro', Levi criticises this technique: 'Non è vero che il disordine sia necessario per dipingere il disordine; non è vero che il caos della pagina scritta sia il miglior simbolo del caos ultimo a cui siamo votati (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 680).

As the above has briefly shown, Levi's style is not straightforward and is not influenced solely by his chemical background. These opening remarks point to a key concern of my thesis, which is to focus on the influences and literary choices which lie behind Levi's use of language, and particularly of figurative language. I build on these introductory comments throughout the thesis, particularly in chapter 3, where I analyse the impact of the Lager on Levi's writing style and in chapter 4, where I look at his poetic style. Chapter 7 explores the role of science in his writing and Levi's endeavours to narrow the gulf between science and literature, with chapter 9 attempting to draw Levi's key literary influences together. I discuss the aims of each individual chapter in more detail below in section 1.3.

Having seen how chemistry plays a part in Levi's language and style, it is also important to bear in mind its role in his survival. It is well documented, including by Levi himself, that being chosen to work in the chemical laboratory in the Lager afforded him a chance to escape the backbreaking physical labour of the work squads, and also gave him access to a myriad of goods which he

could 'procure' and exchange for extra food rations on the black market within the camp.[9] It is not surprising then that Levi dedicated his semi-autobiographical text *Il sistema periodico* to chemistry, and that the narrator of his novel *La chiave a stella* is a chemist (as well as a writer and Holocaust survivor). Interest in Levi's 'scientific' writing, including his 'science fiction' short stories, has increased in recent years, with the publication of a number of articles and texts dedicated to this aspect of his life and work.[10]

Levi also composed poems, short stories, essays, novels, and journalistic articles, as well as giving numerous interviews, on a whole range of themes including zoology, etymology, technology, storytelling, and ethics.[11] He was also a translator, an area of his work that until recently has been largely overlooked.[12] For instance, in 1976 Levi translated Jacob Presser's Dutch novella *De nacht der Girondijnen* (*La notte dei Girondini*) and in 1983, he completed the translation of Kafka's *The Trial*, a difficult process which he

---

[9] Levi discusses how the chemistry laboratory led to his survival in the chapter 'Die drei Leute vom Labor' in *Se questo è un uomo* (*Op*, I, 132-40), and in the chapter 'Cerio' of *Il sistema periodico* (*Op*, I, 860-66).

[10] See, for example: Giuseppe Borri, *Le divine impurità: Primo Levi tra scienza e letteratura* (Rimini: Luisé, 1992); Mirna Cicioni, 'Moral Snares and Parables: Between Science Fiction and Midrash', in *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, ed. by Roberta S. Kremer (Albany, NY: State University of Albany Press, 2001), pp. 75-87; Lucie Emmett, '"L'uomo salvato dal suo mestiere": aspects of *Se questo è un uomo* revisited in *Il sistema periodico*', *Italian Studies*, 56 (2001), 115-28; Nancy Harrowitz, 'Primo Levi's Science as "Evil Nurse": The Lesson of Inversion', in Kremer (ed.), *Memory and Mastery*, pp. 59-73; Charlotte Ross, 'Primo Levi's science-fiction', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 105-18; and Jonathan Usher, 'Primo Levi's Science Fiction and the Humanoid', *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*, 4 (1996), 199-216.

[11] The fullest bibliography of Levi's published works, including his interviews, can be found in *Op*, I, ciii-cxxvi.

[12] Critical engagements with Levi as translator include: Alexander, 'Primo Levi and translation'; Belpoliti, 'Primo Levi traduttore', in *Op*. II, 1582-89; and Insana, *Arduous Tasks*. For a full list of Levi's translations, see Alexander, pp. 167-68.

describes in his essay 'Tradurre Kafka' (*RS*, in *Op*, II, 939-41). He won various literary awards and prizes[13] and he wrote actively right up until his death in 1987.[14]

Despite his being a successful writer, critical studies on Levi have tended to focus on content over form. As we will see in chapter 3, there is a tendency to ignore the literariness of Levi's texts, especially those which deal with his Holocaust experience. As Lepschy and Lepschy note: 'Some readers may feel a sense of unease at treating Primo Levi's work (and particularly his writings about the camps) as literary objects, rather than texts crucial for their ethical, political and historical value'.[15] It is the aim of this thesis to contribute to a move away from the 'hagiographical' approach often associated with Holocaust witnesses such as Levi, and to give his work the literary investigation it deserves.

In the light of this fundamental aim, the present thesis examines Levi's work from an overtly linguistic and literary point of view, and spans his whole career as a writer of testimony, fiction, essays and articles. In particular this study analyses Levi's use of metaphorical language, an area of Levi's writing which has received little critical attention. To the best of my knowledge, there

---

[13] Literary prizes include the 1963 Premio Campiello for *La tregua*, the 1967 Premio Bagutta for *Storie naturali*, the 1975 Premio Prato for *Il sistema periodico*, and the 1979 Premio Strega for *La chiave a stella*.

[14] In fact, an unfinished manuscript, with the working title, *Il doppio legame*, was discovered after Levi's death. This text was apparently planned as a 'twin' book to *Il sistema periodico*. For further details, see Carole Angier, *The Double Bond: Primo Levi, a Biography* (London: Viking, 2002).

[15] Lepschy and Lepschy, p. 121.

has been to date, no in-depth study of Levi's figurative language.[16] The present thesis aims to go some way towards filling this gap. I will show that metaphor plays a central role in Levi's writing, appearing throughout his narrative output. As we will see, metaphor, in particular, is used to overcome the inadequacy of language in the face of indescribable phenomena such as Auschwitz, science and God, whilst at the same time being employed for literary effect. Examining this key feature of Levi's literary style will cast light on an important area of Levi's poetics that has been neglected by most critics and it will enrich our understanding of his writing.

1.2 Methodology

This study is not intended to provide an exhaustive enumeration of Levi's metaphors and for this reason I have used a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. Furthermore, in my opinion, a quantitative analysis would not be practical or beneficial due to the sheer number of metaphoric occurrences in Levi's *oeuvre* and the fact that metaphors are highly subjective; as we recognise and interpret metaphors differently, dependent on a number of factors such as

[16] However, the following have looked briefly at aspects of Levi's use of figurative language: Marco Belpoliti and Robert S. C. Gordon, 'Primo Levi's Holocaust Vocabularies', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 51-65; Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); Judith Kelly, *Primo Levi: Recording and Reconstruction in the Testimonial Literature* (Market Harborough: Troubador, 2000); and Vittorio Marchis, 'La meccanica come metafora. Alcune considerazioni intorno alla *Chiave a stella* di Primo Levi', *Studi piemontesi*, 31 (2002), 71-74. Insana's recently published monograph, *Arduous Tasks*, focuses on the theme of translation and notes examples of translation metaphors in Levi's writing.

our cultural and linguistic background.[17] In other words, what one person perceives as a metaphor, may not be perceived as such by someone else. It would therefore be impossible, and – from a literary perspective – unhelpful, to provide a definitive list of all the metaphors in Levi's writing.

Instead, I have chosen to analyse a selection of metaphors which, following a close reading of Levi's texts, I have identified as being illustrative of general trends and worthy of discussion. I have selected a range of examples which are representative of Levi's entire output, rather than just looking at one particular type of metaphorical expression or one aspect of his work, such as his Holocaust writing. I look at both individual brief metaphorical expressions and conceptual metaphors, which take a concept such as hell and apply it figuratively, often in a more sustained way, extending throughout a particular text or across a number of texts, to another concept such as the Lager. I discuss the differences between the two types of metaphor in more detail in the next chapter. I have based my selection on a number of factors such as the originality, forcefulness and effect of the metaphors, focusing on metaphors that have connections to key recurring themes in Levi's work such as the Lager and science, as we will see below.

As the title of the thesis indicates, this study is dedicated to Levi's use of metaphor. I have concentrated on metaphor as it is the most recurrent figurative device of Levi's writing and therefore it offers the most scope for analysis and

[17] A computer analysis of Levi's works has been conducted, which examines the occurrence of key words, see Jane Nystedt, *Le opere di Primo Levi viste al computer. Osservazioni stilolinguistiche* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993). However, a computer would not be reliable as an identifier of metaphors because, as I note above, they are often subjective.

discussion. It should be noted that the term 'metaphor' can refer to a group of tropes including simile, metonymy, synecdoche, and allegory.[18] This study, however, will use metaphor in its narrower sense, to refer to the individual trope, metaphor, where one term is used in place of another with literary effect (I provide a more detailed definition and description of metaphor in the next chapter). When talking specifically about other figures of speech, such as simile, I will use the appropriate individual term for the trope in question. Indeed, in some chapters, where relevant, I analyse metaphor alongside other tropes such as simile. I have not examined their occurrences separately since they are all *types* of metaphor. I discuss this further in the following chapter, which looks specifically at the theory of metaphor. There is the potential for future studies to focus on other forms of figurative language, or draw comparisons with metaphor and other types of imagery. However, since this has not been fully explored to date, I start with the most central and important type, which is metaphor.

As well as looking at metaphor theory, I also draw on other critical and theoretical discourses throughout the thesis. In chapter 3, I look at critical responses to Holocaust literature in general, including both testimony and fiction, and how these have changed over time. For instance, in the initial post war period, critics such as George Steiner and Theodor Adorno believed that Auschwitz could not be put into words, let alone in literary form. Adorno, however, later changed his opinion and withdrew his infamous statement on the

[18] David Cooper refers to this all-inclusive term as 'metaphor etc'. See: David E. Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 12-21.

impossibility of 'poetry after Auschwitz'.[19] I also engage with critical opinion on the use of metaphor in Holocaust narration. I disagree with Alvin Rosenfeld's assertion that figurative language betrays the truths of the Holocaust. Instead, I concur with James E. Young, and argue that metaphor is one of the key devices which allow for a coming to terms with and a narration of the Holocaust. I conceptualise the above critical debate in relation to Levi's writing and use of metaphor, making comparisons, where relevant with other Holocaust writers such as Elie Wiesel, Paul Celan and Jean Améry.

As previously stated, this thesis looks not just at Levi's testimonial writing but at his entire *oeuvre*, including the texts which deal with the world of science, such as *Il sistema periodico* and *La chiave a stella*. As hinted above, Levi sought to unite the realms of science and literature through his writing. In chapter 7, I contextualise Levi's position in light of the 'two cultures' debate, ignited by the literary author and scientist C. P. Snow following his 1959 Rede lecture in which he voiced concerns over the widening gulf between the two disciplines.[20] I engage with critical discussions surrounding the 'two cultures' debate, looking at key scholars such as Mary Hesse and Andrea Battistini, concentrating in particular on the differences between the language of science and that of literature.

Arguing against the common misconception that the two types of languages are completely different, with science being devoid of the slightest hint of the figurative, my contention is that the languages of science and

[19] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 362.
[20] C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

literature can be united via metaphor. Both languages make use of metaphor, as I show through an analysis of Levi's key 'scientific' texts.

1.3 Structure of thesis

The thesis is divided into four parts and consists of ten chapters. Part I includes the present introductory chapter, and chapter 2, which looks at the theory and practice of metaphor, in preparation for the in-depth study of Levi's use of figurative language. This chapter will help place Levi's use of metaphor in the wider literary and critical context.

Part II is dedicated to the theme of the Holocaust. It begins with chapter 3, which looks at Holocaust literature, and examines the legitimacy and use of metaphor within that genre, in preparation for the following chapter which analyses Levi's testimonial writing, principally *Se questo è un uomo*. Chapter 4 will explore how, for reasons of necessity, Levi employs metaphor to describe the indescribable world of the Lager. It will also look at the most common and striking imagery used by Levi to portray Auschwitz, including the conceptual and individual metaphors of hell, and the application of metaphors of inanimate objects and animals to human beings to describe the dehumanization process of the Lager.

Chapter 5 will explore a less well known and less frequently studied side of Levi's *oeuvre*: his poetry. It will continue with the theme of the Lager, and analyse the types of imagery used to describe Levi's experience of the Holocaust, drawing comparisons, where relevant, with his testimonial prose. I

show that Levi's poems are often based around a single or small number of conceptual metaphors, such as darkness and light and natural imagery.

Chapter 6 continues to focus on the Holocaust, analysing Levi's use of religious imagery taken from both the Jewish and from the Christian traditions, such as conceptual and individual metaphors of exile, exodus and baptism. As well as looking at the testimonial texts *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua*, this chapter will also analyse Levi's novel *Se non ora, quando?* In addition to examining the metaphorical connections between religion and the Holocaust, I will also illustrate how metaphors from other domains are employed to describe certain aspects of religion, in particular aspects which Levi finds difficult to portray in literal language.

Moving beyond the Holocaust, Part III looks at Levi's roles as scientist and writer, and his fascination with creation. Chapter 7 is dedicated to science. Despite the obvious differences between the two, science, like Auschwitz, is a difficult subject to describe, especially to those who have no direct experience of it. Consequently, Levi uses metaphors from familiar areas of life such as conflict and friendship, to describe his profession of chemistry to the reader. At the same time, science is also used as a metaphor for other phenomena, as seen most notably in *Il sistema periodico*, where the chemical elements are used to reveal insights into Levi's thinking on notions as diverse as friendship, war and history.

Chapter 8 is also linked to science, but more indirectly. It explores the theme of creation, an important part of science, but also of life in general.

According to Levi, 'l'uomo è artefice' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 760), and in this chapter I look at the various types of inventions and creations, both fictional and real, which Levi discusses throughout his *oeuvre*, and the metaphors he uses to describe them.

The penultimate chapter will revisit the key themes of witnessing, science and creation, where they will be analysed in terms of their status as metaphors for the process of writing. Levi uses these familiar themes to describe his 'second' profession of writing. Levi claimed not to be confident about his literary abilities, an insecurity which is reflected in the numerous apologies and disclaimers which can be viewed as metafictional elements of his narrative. However, this chapter will emphasise the originality and creativity to be found in his writing.

Finally, the findings of this study will be presented in the concluding chapter, which forms Part IV. It is hoped that by looking at Levi's metaphors, this thesis will cast light on Levi as the true literary writer that he was, highlighting the range, diversity and originality of his many writings, testimonial and otherwise. One of Levi's greatest literary skills was his command and inventive use of language, in particular his original and creative use of metaphor, which this thesis analyses.

Chapter 2: Metaphor: From Theory to Practice

2.1 Introduction

Theories of metaphor have changed over the years and the sheer number and interdisciplinary nature of these ideas means that defining metaphor is problematic. This chapter will offer some definitions of metaphor, and provide a theoretical framework for the in-depth study of Levi's use of metaphor, which forms the main focus of this thesis. As well as looking at the formal theoretical side of metaphor, this chapter will also examine the functions and uses of the trope.

A useful starting-point is to look at the etymology of metaphor since this influences the way in which the trope is defined and used. The term 'metaphor' comes from the Greek noun *metaphora*, meaning 'transference', with the preposition *meta* indicating a change of condition. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, metaphor is 'a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is *transferred* to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applied' (emphasis added).[1] The idea of transference, as the above definition suggests, plays an important role throughout metaphor theory, beginning with that of Aristotle.

Aristotle was one of the first and most influential commentators on metaphor. The *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* (both c. 350 BCE) offer the most detailed accounts of metaphor in antiquity. Although Aristotle was writing about

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (2001); online version <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 14 May 2011].

ancient Greek politics, rhetoric and poetry, his views are still relevant in the modern world. Indeed, as this chapter will show, until the twentieth century there was relatively little change in the theory of metaphor since the time of Aristotle. The discussion of metaphor in this chapter will therefore concentrate on Aristotelian and twentieth-century theories, although it will touch on the various changes in the way metaphor was viewed and used throughout the Classical period, the Middle Ages and the early modern periods. Elements of all these theories can help us better to understand and more fully to analyse Levi's use of metaphor, as we will see later.

2.2 The 'comparison' and 'interaction' theories of metaphor

In the *Poetics*, one of the main theories of metaphor put forward by Aristotle involved viewing metaphor as a *transfer of meaning*, a theory which has obvious links to the trope's Greek etymology noted above. According to Aristotle, metaphor involves the transference of a word from one semantic field to another totally unrelated semantic field: 'A metaphor is the application of a noun which properly applies to something else. The transfer may be from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy'.[2] Aristotle gives the following examples to illustrate his theory:[3]

> (i) To show transfer from genus to species: '"Here stands my ship"; lying at anchor is one kind of standing'. In other words, a general term can be used in place of a specific term.

[2] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 1457b, p. 34.
[3] All the examples are from the *Poetics*, 1457b, p. 34.

> (ii) To show transfer from species to genus: '"Odysseus has in truth performed ten thousand noble deeds"; ten thousand is a large number, and is used in place of "many"'. Here, a specific term replaces a general term.
>
> (iii) To show transfer from species to species: '"Drawing off the life with bronze" and "cutting off water with edged bronze"; here "drawing off" means cutting, and "cutting" means drawing off – each is a kind of removal'. So in this case, the two terms are interchangeable.
>
> (iv) To show transfer by analogy: 'I mean cases where *B* stands in a similar relation to *A* as *D* does to *C*; one can then mention *D* instead of *B*, and vice versa'.

So, in all of these examples, one word is substituted for another, in a type of borrowing; hence this theory is sometimes called the 'substitution view' because it implies that one word (or type of word) is replaced with another. As Paul Ricoeur notes:

> metaphor constitutes a displacement and an extension of the meaning of words; its explanation is grounded in a theory of substitution. Aristotle [...] defined metaphor for the entire subsequent history of Western thought, on the basis of a semantics that takes the word or the name as its basic unit.[4]

The significance of the word or noun in metaphorical expression is one of the most important differences between Aristotelian and modern metaphor theory. Unlike Aristotle, modern theorists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson maintain that metaphor is based on *concepts* not single words.[5] The distinction between the two theories will be discussed in more detail in section 2.6.

Aristotle described the borrowed word as 'alien', believing that it did not form part of ordinary, everyday usage (*Poetics*, 1458a, p. 36). However, there

---

[4] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation and Meaning in Language*, trans. by Robert Czerny (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 3.

[5] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

are arguments against viewing metaphor as a special form of language. As David Gibbons notes:

> the definition of metaphor as transference, or deviance or impropriety or any of the other terms that the rhetoricians so regularly used, suggests its departure from the normal use of language, which is literal. To see metaphor as the exception rather than the rule in this way is to ignore the fact that all language, every language, is riddled with metaphor.[6]

An early challenge to Aristotle came from Giambattista Vico, according to whom, of all the tropes 'la piú luminosa e, perché piú luminosa, piú necessaria e piú spessa è la metafora'.[7] Vico's *Scienza nuova* (first published in 1725) put forward a theory of language which suggested that the use of metaphor was not something 'alien' or unusual. Instead, Vico believed that metaphor was at the heart of normal human conceptualising practice, thus anticipating later twentieth-century theories, as we will see. He argued that all abstract language is made up of metaphors drawn from the human body, senses or passions: '[i]n tutte le lingue la maggior parte dell'espressioni d'intorno a cose inanimate sono fatte con trasporti del corpo umano e delle sue parti e degli umani sensi e dell'umane passioni'.[8]

Furthermore, Vico maintained that these metaphors, through continual use, lose their figurative quality until they become the accepted literal term for the objects or concepts in question. Levi himself discusses this phenomenon in *Il sistema periodico*, noting: 'tutti i linguaggi sono pieni di immagini e metafore la cui origine si va perdendo' (*Op*, I, 869). This concept, which is now known as

[6] David Gibbons, *Metaphor in Dante* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), p. 11.
[7] Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova*, ed. by Fausto Nicolini, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1928), II, ii, 2 (I, 164).
[8] Vico, II, ii, 2 (I, 164).

'dead metaphor', raises problems for transference-based metaphors, because, as Gibbons notes, 'if all language is fundamentally metaphorical, there are effectively no words which have not been transferred from somewhere else; at which point a feature that was supposed to be a defining characteristic becomes meaningless'.[9] However, dead metaphors, which include commonplace phrases such as 'to lend a hand' and 'long in the tooth', are no longer classed as metaphor since they form part of everyday lexicon, and since the original significance of their figurative meaning is unknown or overlooked by language users. Vico's theory then, as Catherine O'Rawe comments, 'did little to displace the hegemony of the rhetorical [i.e. Aristotelian] approach to metaphor.'[10]

It was I. A. Richards, in his foundational essay *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), who dispelled the opinion, which had been prevalent since Aristotle, that metaphor was a special or deviant form of language. Instead, he maintained that metaphor formed part of ordinary, everyday language: 'the […] worst assumption [is] that metaphor is something special and exceptional in the use of language, a deviation from its normal mode of working, instead of the omnipresent principle of all its free action'.[11]

Richards made another important breakthrough in the study of metaphor; he was the first to name the two units of metaphor, calling them 'tenor' and 'vehicle'. According to Richards 'the tenor [is] the underlying idea or principal

---

[9] Gibbons, p. 12.
[10] Catherine O'Rawe, *Authorial Echoes: Textuality and Self-Plagiarism in the Narrative of Luigi Pirandello* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), p. 21.
[11] I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 90.

subject which the vehicle or figure means'.[12] In other words, the tenor is what is being spoken about, and the vehicle is what is being said metaphorically about the tenor. For example, in 'Achilles is a lion', Achilles is the tenor, and lion is the vehicle.[13]

Richards also pioneered the claim that the meaning of metaphor is not produced by individual words (as Aristotle's theory based on the substitution of words maintained) but by the way the words *interact* in the discourse: 'when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction.'[14] This theory later became known as the 'interaction view' of metaphor. According to Richards, metaphor does not merely involve a transfer but 'a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts'.[15] For example, in the metaphor 'Achilles is a lion', two contexts are joined together: Achilles and lion. The vehicle, 'lion', obtains a new meaning due to its juxtaposition with the tenor, 'Achilles'. In other words, in metaphor, it is not just the vehicle which tells the reader something about the tenor, the tenor also sheds light on the vehicle.

Despite Richards' revolutionary ways of looking at metaphor, he reverts to the traditional Aristotelian view in his claims that metaphor is based on *resemblance*. As well as suggesting that metaphor involved a transfer of

---

[12] Richards, p. 97.
[13] Example given by Eva Feder Kittay in, *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 24-25.
[14] Richards, p. 93.
[15] Richards, p. 94.

meaning (which, as Gibbons notes, is common to all figurative language),[16] Aristotle's main theory was that the transfer is based on a perceived *similarity* between the two semantic fields in question. He wrote that the creation of metaphor involved being able to identify likeness, which is an innate and highly skilled quality: 'the most important thing is to be good at using metaphor. This is the one thing that cannot be learnt from someone else, […] for the successful use of metaphor is a matter of perceiving similarities' (*Poetics*, 1459a, p. 37). The two most prominent Latin rhetoricians and commentators of metaphor, Cicero, in his *De inventione* (c. 50 BCE) and *De oratore* (c. 55 BCE), and Quintilian, in his only surviving work, *Institutio oratoria* (95 CE), also maintained that metaphor involved the transference of a word from one semantic field to another, and that this substitution was based on similarity.[17] For example, according to Cicero, 'when something that can scarcely be conveyed by the proper term is expressed metaphorically, the meaning that we desire to convey is made clear by the *resemblance* of the thing that we have expressed to the word that does not belong' (emphasis added).[18]

As already mentioned, even Richards' theory, centuries later, involved the idea of similarity, as David Miall writes: 'Richards' theory of metaphor sometimes looks more like a comparison view, dependent on already known semantic properties […] than an interaction view in which two contexts that

[16] Gibbons, p. 11.
[17] See Gibbons, pp. 10-11.
[18] Cicero, *De oratore*, trans. by H. Rackham, 2 vols (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), III, xxxvii (II, 119).

come together determine the new meaning or novel effect of the metaphor'.[19] Like Aristotle, Richards was interested in the similarities between the tenor and vehicle, which he named the 'ground'. However, unlike Aristotle, Richards points out that the differences or 'tension' between the tenor and vehicle are also important; as he writes: 'We must not […] suppose that the interactions of tenor and vehicle are to be confined to their resemblances. There is disparity action too'.[20] This 'tension' theory, which involved a move away from the idea that metaphor is based solely on similarity, was an important breakthrough in metaphor theory. Indeed, the most striking and instructive metaphors are often those which deal with diverse ideas or themes, as we will see in the section on transcendental imagery, and in Levi's own imagery, particularly that relating to the Holocaust.

The idea of similarity, or lack of it, also features in the later theory of Max Black, who continues and adapts Richards' interaction view of metaphor. In his essay 'Metaphor' (first published in 1954), Black rejects the traditional 'comparison view'. He believes that the claim that metaphors are comparisons is insufficient: 'it suffers from a vagueness that borders upon vacuity'.[21] Black also disagrees with the long-standing 'substitution view' of metaphor, which maintains that a metaphorical expression is used in place of an equivalent literal phrase ('Metaphor', p. 31). Instead, Black believes that a 'metaphorical statement is not a substitute for a formal comparison or any other kind of literal

[19] David S. Miall, 'Introduction', in *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. by David S. Miall (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. xi-xix (p. xii).
[20] Richards, p. 127.
[21] Max Black, 'Metaphor', in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 25-47 (p. 37).

statement, but it has its own distinctive capacities and achievements' ('Metaphor', p. 37). Like Richards, Black sees metaphor as an interaction of concepts. Black claims that the two components of metaphor, the tenor and vehicle, which he renames 'principal subject' and 'subsidiary subject', are systems of ideas and not just ideas ('Metaphor', p. 44). According to Black, 'the metaphor works by applying to the principal subject a system of "associated implications" characteristic of the subsidiary subject' ('Metaphor', p. 44). This anticipates Lakoff and Johnson's contemporary view of metaphor, which is discussed below. Black uses the example 'Man is a wolf' to explain his theory (man being the principal subject and wolf being the subsidiary subject). Metaphor is a type of 'filter' through which ideas of the principal subject are presented and understood via the subsidiary subject ('Metaphor', p. 39). When man is referred to metaphorically as a wolf, the 'associated implications', or traits, of wolves are passed onto man. As Black writes: 'this involves shifts in meaning of words belonging to the same family or system as the metaphorical expression' ('Metaphor', p. 45). So, Black argues, new meaning is created: 'metaphor *creates the similarity*' (emphasis added) rather than formulating 'some similarity antecedently existing' ('Metaphor', p. 37). By creating similarity between two concepts which are not similar, metaphor creates a meaning which did not previously exist, and this is where the strength of metaphor lies.

2.3 Metaphor, simile and other figures of speech

As I outlined in chapter 1, the thesis will focus on metaphor. However, I believe it is necessary to look briefly at other uses of figurative language, such as metonymy, synecdoche and simile. Metonymy and synecdoche are commonly classed as types of metaphor. Metonymy is a function that involves using one object to stand for another object which is directly related to it or closely associated with it in some way.[22] Synecdoche is a form of metonymy, which involves the 'substitution of part for whole, genus for species, or vice versa'.[23] The figure of speech most closely related to metaphor is simile, and as such it is rarely discussed in its own right; it is usually discussed alongside metaphor, as in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.[24] In particular, Aristotle addressed the important question of the differences between metaphor and simile, a subject which still provokes arguments today. He believed that simile was virtually the same as metaphor. Both are figurative comparisons: 'the simile is also a metaphor, as it is only slightly different'.[25] Grammatically, the only difference between the two is that the comparison is implied in the metaphor, whereas it is expressed explicitly in the simile. Aristotle argued that the simile 'like a lion [he] leapt', and the metaphor 'a lion leapt', both convey the same message, that of courage and boldness, irrespective of the presence or absence of the term 'like'

[22] See Lakoff and Johnson for further discussion, pp. 35-40.
[23] Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969), p. 97. See also Lakoff and Johnson, p. 36.
[24] Theoretical studies on metaphor greatly outnumber those on simile and other figures of speech, which tend to be subsumed in texts dedicated to metaphor. One possible reason for this is that simile, metonymy and synecdoche are widely viewed as being merely types of metaphor.
[25] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1991), 1406b, p. 224.

(*Rhetoric*, 1460b, p. 224). Although the two tropes can be used interchangeably, Aristotle conceded that sometimes metaphors have more rhetorical impact, due partly to their brevity (the absence of 'like'): 'the simile is, as has been said before, a metaphor differing in one addition only; hence is it less pleasant, as it is more drawn out' (*Rhetoric*, 1410b, p. 235).

It is widely accepted that simile differs from metaphor in that it contains words such as English 'like' or 'as'. Some critics, such as Sam Glucksberg and Boaz Keysar, argue that this grammatical difference is significant.[26] Metaphor is believed to be a more powerful linguistic tool than simile, since there is greater rhetorical force in suggesting that something *is* something else than in suggesting that it *is like* something else. For example, Glucksbeg and Keysar claim that 'though many metaphors can be paraphrased as similes, the simile form seems weaker. Similes can always be intensified by putting them in metaphor form, whereas the reverse does not hold'.[27]

Other writers,[28] however, maintain that the presence of the terms 'like' or 'as' is irrelevant, it does not minimise the effect of the intended message, as Cooper notes: 'it [is] hard to envisage that a plausible account would register differences so general and strong that we should be obliged to treat simile as a quite distinct phenomenon from metaphor. Simile, after all, performs the same

---

[26] Sam Glucksberg and Boaz Keysar, 'How Metaphors Work', in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. by Andrew Ortony, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 401-24. See also, John M. Kennedy and Daniel L. Chiappe, 'What Makes a Metaphor Stronger than a Simile?', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 14 (1999), 63-69.
[27] Glucksberg and Keysar, p. 406.
[28] See for example, Andrew Ortony, 'Why Metaphors Are Necessary and Not Just Nice', *Educational Theory*, 25 (1975), 45-53 (p. 52).

range of jobs that metaphor does'.[29] Indeed, Janet Martin and Rom Harré point out that a simile such as Flaubert's 'La parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles', from *Madame Bovary* (Part II, Chapter II), would not be improved by omitting the word 'like', thus turning it into a metaphor.[30] So, simile can be just as effective and powerful as metaphor, as I will show in relation to Levi's writing. However, it is difficult to draw generalisations as the strength of a metaphor, simile or other rhetorical figure depends on a number of factors, such as the subject matter and context, as well as the quality of the writing itself.

2.4 Metaphor – ornamental or utilitarian?

In this section I will move away from the more formal theoretical discussion of metaphor and turn to look at the functions of metaphor. In particular, I will analyse the question of whether metaphor, as some suggest, is just an ornamental extra in language, or a necessary linguistic tool, or both. This will be particularly important in my analysis of Levi's use of metaphor, especially in his writing on the Holocaust. For example, does Levi use metaphor in his testimonial writing for decoration or out of necessity? Is it legitimate to describe the Holocaust in figurative language? Or, is metaphor the only way of being able to describe the indescribable events of Auschwitz? These questions will be

[29] Cooper, p. 187.
[30] Janet Martin and Rom Harré, 'Metaphor in Science', in Miall (ed.), *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, pp. 89-105 (p. 101).

explored in the next chapter which looks specifically at Holocaust literature and the roles of metaphor within that genre.

I will now return to Aristotle, who praised and encouraged the use of metaphor and simile for two main reasons: decoration and utility. In particular, he commended the decorative quality of metaphor, its ability to create wonder and pleasure. Figurative language, associated in particular with poetry (as we will see in chapter 5), was viewed as superior to 'ordinary' language; its beauty created a sense of awe and delight, as Malcolm Heath writes: 'the Greeks habitually talked of the intense pleasure to be derived from poetry [or metaphor], and of the bewitching enchantment it could work'.[31] Beauty and decoration were essential to metaphor, as Aristotle commented: 'metaphors should be drawn from words that are beautiful either in sound or in effect or in image' (*Rhetoric*, 1405b, p. 221). For example, as Aristotle stated: 'there is a difference […] in saying "rose-fingered dawn" rather than "purple-fingered dawn" or, even worse, "red-fingered dawn"' (*Rhetoric*, 1405b, p. 221). At the same time, Aristotle warned, the metaphor's level and type of ornament must be appropriate: 'one must consider what it is that suits an old man as a red coat suits a young one (for the same garment is not appropriate), and if the orator wishes to ornament the subject, he must draw the metaphor from the best species in the same genus' (*Rhetoric*, 1405a, pp. 219-20).

Like Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian praised metaphor's enchanting decorative quality; indeed Quintilian classed metaphor as 'the most beautiful of

[31] Malcolm Heath, 'Introduction', in Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. vii-lxxi (p. xi).

tropes'.[32] Kittay notes the ornamental importance of metaphor in the Roman period: 'to its champions, […] its sheer capacity to delight, was the reason for its privileged place in language'.[33] Miriam Taverniers argues that the Latin rhetoricians viewed metaphor *solely* as an ornament.[34] However, this is not entirely true since both Cicero and Quintilian acknowledged the utility of metaphor, even if decoration was considered the trope's most important virtue. Indeed, Cicero wrote that metaphors are employed to 'make the meaning clearer'[35] and 'to achieve brevity'.[36] Similarly, Quintilian wrote that metaphor 'adds to the resources of language by exchanges or borrowings to supply its deficiencies, and (hardest task of all) it ensures that nothing goes without a name […]. We do this either because it is necessary or because it expresses the meaning better'.[37]

Like his successors, Aristotle did not value metaphor solely for its adornment, as he wrote: 'metaphor […] involves […] pleasantness *and* unfamiliarity' (*Rhetoric*, 1405a, p. 219, emphasis added). The aspect of unfamiliarity was just as important as beauty to the effect of metaphor.[38] The unknown or exotic also created the sense of wonder for which Aristotle praised

---

[32] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. by Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), VIII, 6 (p. 427).
[33] Kittay, p. 1.
[34] Miriam Taverniers, *Metaphor and Metaphorology: A Selective Genealogy of Philosophical and Linguistic Conceptions of Metaphor from Aristotle to the 1990s* (Gent: Academia Press, 2002), p. 10.
[35] *De oratore*, III, xxxix (II, 123).
[36] *De oratore*, III, xxxix (II, 125).
[37] *The Orator's Education*, VIII, 6 (pp. 427-29).
[38] Unfamiliarity can also be viewed as beautiful. However, in the case of Aristotle, unfamiliarity is generally associated with the pedagogic function of learning a hitherto-unknown fact rather than with ornament or beauty.

metaphor so highly, as Hugh Lawson-Tancred notes: 'The stress is […] on the charm of unfamiliarity. There lies behind Aristotle's whole account of style the unargued assumption that the essence of literary pleasure is the combination of the familiar with the exotic'.[39] And Aristotle himself wrote: 'the discourse must be made to sound exotic; for men are admirers of what is distant, and what is admired is pleasant' (*Rhetoric*, 1404b, p. 218).

Unfamiliarity was achieved by juxtaposing two totally unconnected ideas, by substituting a metaphorical word or phrase for a standard word, and creating a link (or likeness) between the two: 'For an unusual replacement of the word makes the style seem the more lofty' (*Rhetoric*, 1404b, p. 218). The process of working out the previously unknown relationship could create delight, since what initially seemed an impossible union is suddenly made clear, as Taverniers writes in her discussion of Aristotle: 'metaphor might be described as "instruction – through bewilderment − through elegance and liveliness"'.[40] Moreover, Ricoeur notes that it is in the context of elegance and liveliness that Aristotle first refers to the instructive quality of metaphor.[41] So, metaphor, as well as being ornamental, had an important pedagogical value; it combined the classical ideals of beauty and utility.

In the *Metaphysics* (c. 350 BCE), Aristotle wrote that human beings by nature desire knowledge; it is a fundamental part of being human.[42] According

---

[39] Hugh Lawson-Tancred, 'Introduction', in Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, pp. 1-61 (p. 40).
[40] Taverniers, p. 9.
[41] Ricoeur, p. 33.
[42] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 2004), 980a, p. 4.

to Aristotle, obtaining information was a source of pleasure; searching for understanding created wonder and delight. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle outlined metaphor's cognitive pleasure: 'to learn easily is naturally pleasant to all, and words mean something, so that those words that produce knowledge for us are most pleasant. […] and […] it is metaphor that particularly has this effect' (*Rhetoric*, 1410b, p. 235). Metaphor stimulates the mind; unlike literal language and explanation, metaphor requires thought, which is one of the reasons why it is so powerful. However, metaphor also involves the use of intuition; metaphors are often understood immediately without thinking, as Aristotle noted: 'recognition occurs as soon as they are spoken' (*Rhetoric*, 1410b, p. 235).

Understanding metaphor for Aristotle involved a process of recognising the common links between the two components of the metaphor, of 'finding similarities within differences'.[43] The reader has to solve an essentially impossible or unfamiliar comparison, working out what the two diverse entities or discourses have in common. Indeed, Aristotle compared metaphor to a puzzle, since in some ways it resembles a riddle (*Rhetoric*, 1405b p. 220). What at first seems bewilderingly paradoxical is surprisingly found to make perfect sense. Aristotle praised the element of surprise, which is another virtue of metaphor since it makes the comparison striking and memorable.

As already seen, gaining knowledge from metaphor involved recognising and understanding similarity, as Aristotle noted: 'For when the poet calls old age a reed, he produces understanding and recognition through the generic

[43] Lynne Cameron, 'Operationalising "metaphor" for applied linguistic research', in *Researching and Applying Metaphor*, ed. by Lynne Cameron and Graham Low (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3-28 (p. 24).

similarity; for both have lost their flower' (*Rhetoric*, 1410b, p. 235). According to Aristotle, the notion of similarity was an imperative part of metaphor, both for the genesis and for the use of the trope. Aristotle believed that making and examining likenesses were part of human nature since they formed part of humankind's innate desire for knowledge.[44] By uniting two very different things through similarity, new understanding and knowledge is produced. Aristotle stressed the efficacy of comparison as a tool that can reveal universal truths (*Poetics*, 1451b, p. 16).[45] Although Levi's more questioning approach to life precludes any attempt to approach 'universal truths', his metaphors inform and enlighten the philosophical questions which he asks, accessing deeper levels of meaning with regard to certain themes that are important to him, such as creation, science and the understanding of matter, as seen in the introduction and in the chapters that follow. [46]

Furthermore, Aristotle wrote that metaphor could fill a semantic gap; it can express something for which there is no equivalent existing word, for example: 'scattering seed is "sowing", but there is no noun for the scattering of fire from the sun; but this stands in a similar relation to the sun as sowing does to seed; hence the expression "sowing the god-created fire"' (*Poetics*, 1457b, p. 35).

However, metaphor has not always been viewed in such a positive light. For example, the empiricists, most notably Hobbes and Locke, disapproved of

[44] See Heath, p. xiii.
[45] See also Kittay, p. 3.
[46] For Levi's position on universal truths, see Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment*: 'He sought not to infer universal truths, or to make grandiose claims, since these serve only to provoke more uncertainties' (p. 66).

metaphor, maintaining that the trope had no use whatsoever. As Paul Avis writes:

> Metaphor, for Hobbes, is at best an aberration, at worst pathological. A metaphor is a word used in a sense other than the intended or ordained one and is therefore deceptive. Rhetorical figures such as metaphors usurp the function of 'words proper' and lead us astray.[47]

Locke, who draws on Cartesian notions of clarity and precision, stresses that 'men should use their words constantly in the same sense and for none but determined and uniform ideas':[48] clearly an indirect attack on figurative language. Such arguments against metaphor were also prevalent in the 'Age of Reason', with late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rhetoricians opposing the use of figurative language, seeing it as merely an ornamental extra in language, which carried no truth.[49] Conversely, the Romantic poets Shelley and Coleridge defended metaphor, believing that it was a fundamental and unique part of language, which in fact created truth or reality.[50]

In 'A Defence of Poetry', written in 1821 and published posthumously in 1840, Shelley claimed that poetry was both ornamental and useful: it 'apprehend[s] the true and the beautiful'.[51] According to Shelley, the language

---

[47] Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 19.
[48] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1961), II, 106.
[49] Taverniers, p. 16.
[50] For analysis of Shelley's view of metaphor, see: Cooper, p. 210; Kittay, pp. 4-5; James Edwin Mahon, 'Truth and metaphor: a defence of Shelley', in *Metaphor and Rational Discourse*, ed. by Bernhard Debatin, Timothy Jackson and Daniel Steuer (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), pp. 137-46; and Taverniers, pp. 16-17. For analysis of Coleridge's view of metaphor, see: Kittay, p. 6; Ricoeur, pp. 249-50; and Taverniers, pp. 16-18.
[51] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (Portland, ME: Mosher, 1910), p. 10.

of poetry is 'unmeasured language'; it is the expression of the imagination, and the most important aspect of poetry is metaphor:

> Their language [that of poets] is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts, instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.[52]

So, Shelley believed that metaphor is essential since it can alter the way we look at the world and create new understanding. Shelly's assertion that language is *vitally* metaphorical can, however, be interpreted in another way. Vitality suggests that language, or rather, metaphor, is alive. This sense of metaphor being a living entity is particularly interesting when discussing Holocaust literature. The 'living' quality of metaphor stands in complete contrast to the 'dead' subject matter of Auschwitz. It is ironic that it is through metaphor, something imbued with life and vitality, that writers such as Levi, can describe something as lifeless as the Lager. I will return to this idea of vitality in chapters 4 and 5, in relation to *Se questo è un uomo* and Levi's poetry.

Coleridge, like Shelley, maintained that poetry is the medium for the expression of the imagination, and he defined the imagination as 'the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others and by a sort of fusion to force many into one […] combining many circumstances into one moment of thought to produce […] unity'.[53] This unity is achieved by metaphor.

---

[52] Shelley, pp. 9-10.
[53] Quoted in Kittay, p. 6.

According to Coleridge, metaphor creates links between concepts and so it has an important cognitive function.

Coleridge and other Romantic poets, used metaphor above all to describe the sublime – the sublime here referring to the indescribable entities of God, the natural world and the human mind.[54] One particular metaphor which is widely used by the Romantic poets, is that of the sea. This powerful image is adopted as a metaphor to represent the unknown psyche, as Avis notes:

> For the Romantics [...] the wonders of natural scenery were simply an analogue of the landscapes of the mind and provided a hermeneutical key to mapping them. [...] The Romantics' love-fear relationship with the sea supports this interpretation. Coleridge in 'The Ancient Mariner', Shelley in dicing with death on the fickle waves of the Gulf of Spezia and Byron in swimming in the Hellespont, respectively knew by instinct that [...] the sea is one of the primary symbols of the unconscious.[55]

Although Levi does not necessarily use the sea as a metaphor, he does however use Coleridge's seafaring character, the Ancient Mariner as a metaphor for his compulsive need to bear witness to the Holocaust. Like the Ancient Mariner, Levi has an urgent need to tell people his tragic story. I will return to this Coleridgean comparison in chapter 4. The idea of the sea as a metaphor for the unknown psyche raises the question of transcendence, which is discussed in the next section.

[54] See Avis, p. 96.
[55] Avis, p. 96.

2.5 Metaphor and transcendental literature

The use of metaphor was predominantly justified in the Middle Ages for reasons of necessity, rather than ornament.[56] The medieval period looked back to Aristotle, who had hinted centuries earlier that metaphor was employed when literal language could not adequately convey an image or concept. Perhaps the archetypal example of such a concept is God. Fervent debate surrounded the appropriateness and type of language used to convey transcendental issues. How could God, the Almighty, be described or possibly understood? The most common way to try to comprehend spiritual concepts was by analogy, that is, comparing the unknown with something familiar. Consequently, metaphor was frequently used by medieval poets and writers, particularly theologians, to describe religious subjects.[57]

Dante, who has been described as a 'poeta metaforicissimo',[58] was one of the most successful writers to portray God using metaphor, as his *Commedia* testifies. Dante was influenced indirectly by Aristotle, mainly via Christian readers and commentators, such as the philosopher and theologian St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas, in his *Summa theologiae*, wrote that it was permissible to use metaphor and other figurative language to describe aspects of the divine.[59] In particular, Aquinas believes that the most effective metaphors are human corporeal metaphors such as the 'arm of God' since they are familiar

[56] Gibbons, p. 44.
[57] Taverniers, p. 11.
[58] This definition was used by the sixteenth-century scholar Vincenzio Borghini; see Gibbons, p. 1.
[59] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. by Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1964), I. q. I, art. 9; and for commentary on Aquinas, see, Gibbons, pp. 45-54, and Ricoeur, pp. 273-80.

to us and 'because all our understanding has its origin in the senses'.[60] Dante similarly shares this view, believing that understanding is best achieved by using anthropomorphic metaphors as shown by Beatrice's words in *Paradiso* IV, 40-45:

> Cosí parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,
> però che solo da sensato apprende
> ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno.
> Per questo la Scrittura condescende
> a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano
> attribuisce a Dio, ed altro intende.[61]

However, Aquinas warned that the comparison of God to humans should not be taken literally, we must not grant ourselves divine qualities. In order to preserve the Lord's divinity we must maintain the distance between us and the Almighty. So, as Taverniers notes: 'people can only partially know God through metaphors, […] metaphor can only attempt to describe what has to remain indescribable'.[62] This idea of metaphor providing an insight – but only a partial one – into an entity or experience that cannot be fully known, is also relevant to Holocaust writing. Metaphor allows those who did not witness the Lager first hand to have some limited insight into these events; but at the same time, the reader has to accept and understand that his/her knowledge can only ever be partial (like the Christian knowledge of God for Aquinas).

---

[60] *Summa theologiae*, I. q. I, art. 9.
[61] Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).
[62] Taverniers, p. 11.

2.6 The contemporary view: conceptual and linguistic metaphor

Contemporary theory of metaphor has drastically moved away from the traditional view. Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), pioneered a revolutionary theory known as the 'cognitive linguistic view of metaphor', which has changed the way we understand metaphor today.[63] Although other writers and critics, such as Michael Reddy and Ricoeur advanced similar views before them, Lakoff and Johnson were the first to put forward the new view in a comprehensive and systematic way.

According to traditional theories, metaphor was a matter of language; Lakoff and Johnson, on the other hand, maintain that metaphor also belongs to thought: 'metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words […]; on the contrary, […] metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action'.[64] So, according to Lakoff and Johnson, the way we think and act is metaphorical: 'our conceptual system […] is fundamentally metaphorical in nature'.[65] Metaphor is therefore not based on words but on concepts: 'the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another'.[66]

Lakoff and Johnson propose that there are two levels of metaphor: conceptual metaphor and linguistic metaphor. Conceptual metaphor involves thinking of one thing in terms of another: one conceptual domain or experience

---

[63] For commentary and analysis of Lakoff and Johnson, see: Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. viii-x and 3-9; and Taverniers, pp. 105-39.
[64] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 3.
[65] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 3.
[66] George Lakoff, 'The contemporary theory of metaphor', in Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, pp. 202-51 (p. 203).

(the target domain) is understood in terms of another (the source domain).[67] Unlike traditional metaphor theory, Lakoff and Johnson believe that metaphorical understanding is not necessarily achieved via similarity, but via 'correspondences in our experiences'.[68] This recalls Black's idea (seen above) of the transfer of 'associated implications' between his principal and subsidiary subjects.[69] In other words, according to Lakoff and Johnson, elements of the target domain are 'mapped' onto the source domain. Conceptual metaphors take the form 'target domain is source domain'. For example, 'argument is war' and 'life is a journey' are common conceptual metaphors. The highly abstract concept of life is understood in terms of the more concrete concept of the journey. Similarly, as we will see, Levi describes the abstract target domain of the Holocaust in terms of more familiar and easily understandable source domains such as hell, plants and animals. So, as Lakoff claims, metaphors are useful cognitive devices: 'Our metaphor system is central to our understanding of experience and to the way we act on that understanding'.[70] Metaphors can help us understand an abstract idea in terms of a more concrete and familiar concept.

However, the metaphor system does not just involve conceptual metaphors, linguistic (or individual) metaphors are also important. Linguistic metaphors are linguistic manifestations of conceptual metaphors. For example,

---

[67] For analysis of conceptual metaphor, see Richard Bailey, 'Conceptual Metaphor, Language and Pedagogy', in *Journal of Language and Learning*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2003), 59-72.
[68] Lakoff, p. 245.
[69] Black, pp. 39-44.
[70] Lakoff, p. 245.

'my life is going nowhere', is a linguistic metaphor based on the conceptual metaphor of 'life is a journey'. Here, the linguistic metaphor takes the notion of direction ('going nowhere'), which is associated with a journey, to describe life. In my discussion of Levi, I will look at his use of both conceptual and linguistic metaphor.

Finally, another type of metaphor which will be useful in my analysis of Levi's figurative language, is 'composite metaphor'. As its name suggests, a composite metaphor joins together two or more different conceptual metaphors to produce an unusual and striking metaphorical expression.[71] For example, where there may be more than one conceptual metaphor for a given target domain (such as 'life'), a composite metaphor could combine these different metaphors (such as 'life is a precious possession' and 'life is a journey') in the same passage or even in the same sentence. Lakoff and Mark Turner comment that the effect of this is 'to produce a richer and more complex set of metaphorical connections, which gives inferences beyond those that follow from each of the metaphors alone'.[72]

2.7 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the use of metaphor in literature and in everyday language has been of interest to thinkers and writers from a variety of disciplines since the time of Aristotle, with much debate and discussion as to its precise definition and function. For centuries metaphor was viewed as a linguistic

[71] George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 70-72.
[72] Lakoff and Turner, p. 71.

transfer of meaning based on a perceived comparison, as implied by its Greek etymology. However, modern theorists such as Black, Lakoff and Johnson have denied that metaphor is based on similarity: disparity is also involved. In fact, metaphors are often more forceful when dissimilarity is the connection between the two subjects.

Similarly, the long-standing 'substitution theory' of metaphor has also been criticised by modern writers. Metaphors are not mere paraphrases of literal language but a special type of figurative language, which create meaning and aid understanding. Metaphor is a useful cognitive tool, but it is also revered for its decorative quality: it creates wonder and delight whilst simultaneously instructing. Metaphor fulfils the classical ideals of utility and beauty. However, can metaphor, with its elements of artifice, be applied to highly sensitive issues such as the Holocaust? This question will be addressed in the next chapter which will look at Holocaust literature and debates as to the appropriateness or otherwise of the use of metaphor within this genre.

.

Part II: The Holocaust

Chapter 3: Holocaust Literature and Metaphor

3.1 The Problematics of Narrating the Holocaust

In the previous chapter we saw that metaphor is ubiquitous: it forms part of our everyday understanding and use of language. Metaphor can even be found, to varying degrees and in different forms, in writing on the Holocaust.[1] However, as this chapter will show, its presence in Holocaust literature is highly controversial, and raises questions which will be relevant to my reading of metaphor in Levi's testimonial writing.

Due to the extreme and unique nature of the Holocaust, it has been argued that it is inappropriate to write about the horrific events at all, let alone to write about them in a literary or figurative way, such as via metaphor. As seen in the previous chapter, alongside utility, metaphor is associated with decoration, and this is one of the primary reasons why critics such as Alvin Rosenfeld, oppose its use in Holocaust narration. Elements of artifice are seen as being completely at odds with the mass destruction of humankind. This chapter will explore the main reasons against the use of figurative language in works on the

[1] For critical writing on Holocaust literature see, for example: Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. by Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1992); Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation. Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); and Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

Holocaust, looking at both Holocaust testimony and fiction. It will also examine the reasons why writers, including survivors, such as Levi, actually turn to metaphor to describe the atrocities of Auschwitz.

Before analysing the more specific question of how the Holocaust is narrated, and, in particular, how metaphor is used in the narration of this event, I will examine the more general, fundamental question of whether the Holocaust should be narrated at all. This is a question which Levi himself would have had to confront before making his decision to write and publish his own testimony. Looking at this important issue will shed light on why and also how Levi wrote *Se questo è un uomo*. It will thus prepare the ground for the following chapter, which will examine, through close textual analysis, the types of metaphors used by Levi to describe his Holocaust experience.

3.2 In the Beginning there was Silence

As already suggested, Holocaust literature is a highly sensitive and contentious topic. The very existence of the literature itself is one of the most fundamental polemics surrounding the debate. In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, even talking about the shocking and unbelievable events was considered by many to be inappropriate and too distressing. How could the mechanised and bureaucratised murder of six million innocent people be expressed in words? The Holocaust was seen as ineffable. Consequently, in the immediate post war years, silence was widely viewed as the only acceptable form of representation, as Tim Cole points out: ‘silence was a shared reaction to the trauma of the

events which were "too close, too painful to be confronted"'.[2] Post-war Europe was in a state of chaos and ruin; it was not ready or able to deal with such a serious and incomprehensible problem, as Levi writes in the appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*: 'in quel tempo di aspro dopoguerra, la gente non aveva molto desiderio di ritornare con la memoria agli anni dolorosi appena terminati' (*Op*, I, 173). Zoë Waxman notes that 'the destruction of European Jewry was a relatively ignored topic for the first twenty years after the war. This was partly due to the inability both to understand the scale of the destruction and to place what had happened to the Jews within the context of the Second World War'.[3] This collective silence even extended to some survivors themselves, who were unable or unwilling to talk about their painful past. Remaining silent was just one of the many and varied ways in which survivors dealt with their traumatic experiences. I will look at trauma theory in more detail later in the chapter.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust silence also prevailed among the Germans, the Occupied countries, and even the Allies, as a result of guilt at not reacting to, or trying to prevent the atrocities. As Edward T. Linenthal notes: 'the motivation to forget was too strong for survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders, the implications of what had happened were too threatening for public analysis, and the underlying guilt for not having done more was too great

---

[2] Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the 'Shoah Business'* (London: Duckworth, 1999), p. 2. Cole quotes L. A. Jick, 'The Holocaust: Its Use and Abuse within the American Public', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 14 (1981), 303-18. However, as Zoë Waxman notes, seventy-five testimonies were published between 1945 and 1949; see Zoë Waxman, 'Testimony and Representation', in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. by Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 487-507 (pp. 493-94).

[3] Waxman, 'Testimony and Representation', p. 493.

among [...] Jews and non-Jews alike'.[4] It was not until the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, which was broadcast throughout the world, that the silence and taboo surrounding the Holocaust began to break, thus leading to an increased awareness of and interest in the subject.[5]

In the initial post war period, just as there was opposition to talking about Auschwitz, there was even greater opposition to rendering the Holocaust in literary form. It was argued by some survivors and critics that the Holocaust could not, and should not be represented artistically. For example, Adorno famously declared in his essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society', which was written in the late 1940s and published in the early 1950s that: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[6] According to Adorno, it was morally wrong and unacceptable to gain aesthetic pleasure from the horrific sufferings of the victims of the Nazi death camps. Furthermore, in writing about the Shoah, there is the fear of trivialising the tragedy; the fear that by describing the totally unfamiliar events in familiar words, the Nazis' evil and hideous crimes are somehow justified, as James E. Young notes: 'many writers were plagued by the fear that the narrative act itself, which imposed a sense of order and purpose on

---

[4] Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: the Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 7.

[5] See for example, Robert S. C. Gordon, 'Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy', *Italian Studies*, Volume 61, Number 1 (2006), 85-113 (p.87) and Alan L. Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 9-16. Mintz also attributes increased awareness of the Holocaust to the publication of the English translation of Anne Frank's diary in 1952 and its subsequent adaptation into a play and film in 1956 and 1959 respectively (see pp. 17-20).

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. by Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 280-81 (p. 281).

human actions, would betray what seemed to be the completely inchoate experience of the ghettos and camps'.[7] However, as time passed, general opinion changed and the consensus was that silence would cause more injustice to the victims than speaking out. Indeed, Adorno later wrote in *Negative Dialectics* (first published in 1966) that 'perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems'.[8] By not writing the history of the Final Solution, Hitler would posthumously have been granted the victory he desired: that of the victims not being listened to or believed, and their stories going untold.[9] The millions who perished must be remembered, and therefore the experience must be put into writing.

Indeed, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust in writing became a kind of religious obligation for some; witnesses believed that they had a moral duty to inform the world of the atrocities. As the ghetto diarist Chaim A. Kaplan noted, the act of writing was seen as *melekhet hakodesh*, a holy task analogous to the construction of the Tabernacle.[10] In fact, there is a longstanding Jewish tradition of remembering tragedies through literary responses, as the Jewish Scriptures, the Talmud, and the Midrashic and Hasidic tales testify.[11] Andrea Reiter writes, 'in the beginnings of Judaism, historiography and testimony about

---

[7] James E. Young, 'Literature', in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. by Walter Laqueur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 393-98 (pp. 393-94).
[8] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362.
[9] In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi describes how the Nazis cruelly taunted the prisoners, saying that even if they were to survive, no one would believe them (*Op*, II, 997-98).
[10] See David G. Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), p. 385.
[11] Young, 'Literature', p. 393.

persecution already overlapped with each other'.[12] However, the need to bear witness is not an exclusively Jewish tradition; as Levi writes in the preface to *La vita offesa*, it is a basic human trait: 'il desiderio di parlare, di trovare un ascoltatore attento e partecipe, [è] antico' (*PS*, in *Op*, II, 1349). Overwhelmingly though, Jewish history is distinctly marked by a number of catastrophes, namely the destructions of the First and Second Temples (referred to in Hebrew as *churban*), the subsequent dispersion and exile of the Israelites in Egypt, the attacks on the Jewish people in the Crusades of the Middle Ages, and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. All these individual tragedies were dutifully documented by Jewish historians, scribes, or storytellers, and became archetypes for subsequent disasters, such as the Holocaust, which itself has controversially become an archetype for other tragedies. This use of past catastrophes as archetypes for understanding present events is analogous to the employment of metaphors in narrating and transmitting knowledge of the Holocaust, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

3.3 Holocaust testimony versus fiction

The task of commemorating the victims through literature is extremely problematic. Firstly, the question of which literary form – testimony or fiction – is used by a particular author has to be considered. In general, critical preference has been testimony, as it is based on first-hand eyewitness experiences. As Petra Rau comments: 'the discursive rules surrounding the representation of the Shoah

[12] Andrea Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London & New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 62.

privilege testimony. By no means an unproblematic genre, it can escape the charge of the aestheticization of horror more easily'.[13] It is believed by many – by survivors, authors and critics alike – that in fictional or imaginary works, the events of the Holocaust are betrayed, they are manipulated and distorted for aesthetic purposes. The survivor and Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel questioned the use of the Lager as a subject of fiction; he asked, 'wouldn't that mean, then, that Treblinka and Belzec, Ponar and Babi Yar all ended in fantasy, in words, in beauty, that it was simply a matter of literature?'[14]

Critical opinion, however, changed over time. As noted above, by the 1960s, public awareness of the Holocaust was widespread, due, in large part, to the publication of Anne Frank's diary and the extensive media coverage of the infamous Eichmann trial.[15] This increased awareness, coupled with the passing of time, meant that the initial shock of hearing about the events was lessened. The events of the Holocaust were perceived as less immediate and urgent. Consequently, the Holocaust was no longer considered a taboo subject and writers began to experiment with it as a literary topic. Fictional works about the Holocaust began to be viewed as acceptable and valuable representations of the event. Indeed, critics came to realise that the realms of testimony and fiction are not necessarily two distinct forms of representation. By definition, testimony is

---

[13] Petra Rau, 'The war in contemporary fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. by Marina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 207-19 (p. 215).

[14] Elie Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration', in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University by Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, Robert McAfee Brown* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1977), pp. 4-19 (p. 7).

[15] Gordon, 'Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy', p.87.

based on fact, and fiction is invented. However, as Langer notes, testimony is never wholly factual and fiction is rarely entirely imaginary, rather both are a mixture of historical fact and imaginative truth.[16] Similarly, Andrew Leak and George Paizis identify a 'relationship of *mutual implication*' between Holocaust fact and fiction.[17]

Holocaust fiction tends to be heavily documented and based on true events, using evidence from the surviving victims of the camps and archival material. As Leak and Paizis comment, 'imaginative artists who take the Holocaust as their subject are not as unfettered in their creation as might seem to be the case: they are not free to invent *any* meaning'.[18] Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* (1967) and D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) offer particularly faithful depictions of camp life thanks to using real eyewitness accounts.[19]

Survivors themselves, including Levi and Wiesel, wrote Holocaust fiction as well as testimony, drawing on their own experiences and those of others. It is interesting to note, however, that survivors tend to write testimonial accounts first, and to turn to fiction later, 'as if to establish the historicity of the subject before admitting it to the imagination'.[20]

Another important debate concerns the status or authority of the writer. Holocaust fiction is deemed more reliable and acceptable if it is written by a survivor. As Vice notes, '"authority" appears to be conferred on a writer if they

---

[16] Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 8.
[17] Andrew Leak and George Paizis, 'Introduction', in *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Andrew Leak and George Paizis (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 1-16 (pp. 6-7).
[18] Leak and Paizis, p. 9.
[19] See Young, 'Literature', p. 394.
[20] Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, p. 22.

can show to have a connection with the events they are describing'.[21] However, although Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella* (1998) is historically researched and based on Benigni's father's experience of imprisonment, it has been criticised for its lighthearted, even comic portrayal of Auschwitz.[22] As Millicent Marcus writes, the film is 'reviled by its detractors as historically inaccurate and as an immoral appropriation of the Shoah to stage an exercise in comedic virtuosity'.[23] It must be noted, however, that fictional works such as *La vita è bella* do not profess to give factual accounts of the Holocaust; they are not created for the purpose of providing hard historical evidence of the camps. Rather they seek to offer a different way of narrating events, as Vice writes: 'we cannot dismiss or outlaw Holocaust fiction, since it is simply a different genre from survivor testimony. It approaches the subject in its own way, rather than aiming to "add" to or to "go beyond" the survivor record'.[24] Fictional works use the realm of the imagination to attempt to draw the reader into the alien world of Auschwitz, to try to make the unimaginable imaginable. Metaphor also makes use of the imagination to describe the indescribable, as we shall see later.

At the same time, critics have pointed out the need to be aware that every individual's experience of the Holocaust was different, based for example on the

---

[21] Vice, p. 8

[22] For commentary and analysis of *La vita è bella* see, Millicent Marcus, *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 268-84; Marla Stone, 'Primo Levi, Roberto Benigni, and the Politics of Holocaust Representation', in Pugliese (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 135-46; and Maurizio Viano, '"Life is Beautiful": Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 17 (1995), 155-71.

[23] Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007), p. 75.

[24] Vice, p. 8.

victim's age, gender, education, social background, country of origin, and time of deportation. Survivors themselves stress the individual nature of their experience in their writing. For example, Levi states ironically in the preface to *Se questo è un uomo* that he was 'lucky' to be sent to Auschwitz in 1944, 'cioè dopo che il governo tedesco, data la crescente scarsità di manodopera, aveva stabilito di allungare la vita media dei prigionieri da eliminarsi, concedendo sensibili miglioramenti nel tenor di vita e sospendendo temporaneamente le uccisioni ad arbitrio dei singoli' (*Op*, I, 5). Furthermore, survivors can only describe their own experiences, as Levi writes in the appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*: 'i miei libri non sono libri di storia: nello scriverli mi sono rigorosamente limitato a riportare i fatti di cui avevo esperienza diretta' (*Op*, I, 186). Gila Ramrus-Rauch notes the limits of testimony, writing that 'only some of this problematic situation [the Holocaust experience] is reflected in literature; the reflection is never adequate to the entirety, which is why we see the continued struggle on the part of writers to formulate their differing visions of the whole'.[25] One way that some survivors attempt to make sense of their experience is through the use of their imagination, by writing fiction. They are not restricted to reporting what they witnessed; they use other people's experiences to create a 'bigger picture' of Auschwitz, a picture that would be impossible to paint if it was based solely on their own first-hand experiences.

Holocaust testimonies tend to be more subjective than fictional works written by those who were not in the camps. Those who did not witness the

[25] Gila Ramrus-Rauch, 'The Holocaust and the Fantastic: A Negative Revelation?', in *Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 11, ed. by R. A. Collins and H. D. Pearce (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 33-42 (p. 40).

atrocities first-hand have the advantage of being able to distance themselves from the highly emotional events of the Holocaust, as they did not personally live through the horrors. As a result, they are more likely to be able to assume an objective voice. It is extremely difficult for victims of trauma to be completely free from emotion and judgement, due to the severity of their experience, and the pain and anger that is provoked in recalling the events, as trauma expert Dori Laub writes: 'no observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity − a wholeness and a separateness − that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing'.[26] Jean Améry's survivor memoirs are particularly subjective; they are full of hatred and anger.[27] It is clear that Améry has not forgiven his oppressors; he explicitly condemns them, and seeks revenge for their despicable actions, as he writes: 'The horsewhip lacerated me; for that reason, even if I do not dare demand that the now defenceless thug be surrendered up to my own whip-swinging hand, I want at least the vile satisfaction of knowing that my enemy is behind bars'.[28]

Even fictional works by survivors, which are not directly about their personal experiences, are often characterised by anger. Similarly, second generation writers, that is children of Holocaust victims and survivors, may be just as subjective, since they are personally linked to the events. They may view

---

[26] Dori Laub, 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 61-75 (p. 66).
[27] See, for example, Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (New York: Schocken Books, 1991).
[28] Améry, p. 69.

their writing as revenge for the crimes committed against their loved ones, and hence express hatred and use very bitter language in their narratives.[29]

Levi, however, aims at objectivity in his testimonial accounts of the Holocaust, opting for the sober voice of witness not judge, as he notes explicitly in the appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*: 'ho assunto deliberatamente il linguaggio pacato e sobrio del testimone, non quello lamentevole della vittima né quello irato del vendicatore' (*Op*, I, 175). Many readers, including Améry, believed inaccurately that Levi had forgiven his persecutors due to his apparently detached, rational style of writing (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1098). On the contrary, Levi had not forgiven, nor did he intend to, as he notes in *I sommersi e i salvati*: 'Non ho tendenza a perdonare, non ho mai perdonato nessuno dei nostri nemici di allora, [...] perché non conosco atti umani che possano cancellare una colpa' (*Op*, II, 1098-99). Indeed moments of emotion and anger are found in Levi's testimonial and fictional writing, but he cleverly disguises them to make his message more reliable and credible.[30]

Another problem with testimony is that it is founded on memory, which is not a wholly reliable source as both critics and survivors acknowledge. For example, Levi himself writes in *I sommersi e i salvati* that 'la memoria umana è uno strumento meraviglioso ma fallace' (*Op*, II, 1006). The most obvious problem with memories is that they fade with time and become blurred, leaving a false impression of events. This defect affects all types of memory. The

[29] For an insight into the life of a child of Holocaust survivors, see Anne Karpf, *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* (London: Heinemann, 1996).
[30] For analysis of Levi's moments of anger, see for example, Simborowski, and Judith Woolf, *The Memory of the Offence* (Hull: Hull Italian Texts, 1995), pp. 65-78.

memory of trauma, however, is plagued by other, more serious, problems as Levi analyses in *I sommersi e i salvati*, in the chapter dedicated to memory, 'La memoria dell'offesa'. Most survivors doubt the reliability of their memory and voice these fears in their testimonies. Due to the extreme conditions of the camps, and the atrocious events witnessed, many survivors even doubted that the horrors actually occurred. As Levi notes in *Se questo è un uomo*: 'oggi, questo vero oggi in cui io sto seduto a un tavolo e scrivo, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose sono realmente accadute' (*Op*, I, 99). Similarly, Wiesel writes: 'even while jotting down these words, the event seems incredible to me. I seem to be writing a horror novel'.[31]

Furthermore, according to trauma theory, there is the tendency for some survivors to block out the most traumatic events, or even the entire Holocaust experience itself, thus creating a more tolerable but unrealistic past, as Levi notes 'molti reduci da guerre o da altre esperienze complesse e traumatiche tendono a filtrare inconsapevolmente i loro ricordi: […] preferiscono soffermarsi sulle tregue, sui momenti di respiro, […] e sorvolare sugli episodi piú dolorosi' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1013). These so-called 'false recovered memories', as Cathy Caruth writes, are typical of unique and incomprehensible traumas such as the Holocaust, where the memories 'seem to be false simply because they do not appear in easily recognisable forms'.[32] Consequently, she continues, there is an 'urgency of creating new ways of listening to and recognising the

[31] Elie Wiesel, 'Death Train', in *Anthology of Holocaust Literature*, ed. by J. Glatstein (New York: Atheneum, 1977), pp. 6-7.
[32] Cathy Caruth, 'Preface', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. vii-ix (p. viii).

truth of memories that would, under traditional criteria be considered to be false'.[33] For example, some survivors use metaphor as a way of dealing with their incredible memories; they compare their memories to something familiar in order to make them credible, and also psychologically 'manageable', as will be discussed later in this chapter.

However, other survivors, like Levi, felt an urgent need to tell their story, despite the difficulties associated with remembering the past, as he notes in the appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*: 'ho scritto il libro appena sono tornato, nel giro di pochi mesi: tanto quei ricordi mi bruciavano dentro' (*Op*, I, 173). Similarly, Wiesel writes: 'And yet, having lived through this experience, one could not keep silent no matter how difficult, if not impossible, it was to speak'.[34] Communicating their experience was therapeutic, it helped them to rid themselves of an unbearable burden and to attempt to come to terms with their past, as Levi writes in *Il sistema periodico*: 'scrivendo trovavo breve pace e mi sentivo ridiventare uomo, uno come tutti, né martire né infame né santo, uno di quelli che si fanno una famiglia, e guardano al futuro anziché al passato' (*Op*, I, 871). Wiesel also notes that: 'having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival'.[35] Paul Celan also voiced a similar reason for bearing witness: 'I have written poems so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was, and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself'.[36] It is no coincidence that

[33] Caruth, 'Preface', p. viii.
[34] Elie Wiesel, 'Preface to the New Translation', in *Night* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. vii-xv (p. x).
[35] Wiesel, 'Preface to the New Translation', p. viii.
[36] Paul Celan, quoted in Shoshana Felman, 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 13-60 (p. 32).

Levi quotes the Yiddish proverb 'È bello raccontare i guai passati' on more than one occasion in his writings.[37] Laub writes that testimony is a necessary part of survival: 'repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation'.[38]

The true witnesses of the Nazi annihilation are those who did not survive, as Levi writes in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*Op*, II, 1055-56). The 'drowned' made up the vast majority of the camp but their terrible stories can only be told by the survivors. The minority who survived did not experience the true horrors of the Lager. Most belonged to the small number of 'privileged' prisoners who, either by luck or by 'compromising' themselves, or a combination of the two, managed to survive. Survivors, therefore, cannot fully do justice to those who perished, as they can only provide a partial, or personal, account of the camps. Nonetheless, as Woolf rightly notes about Levi, although he only recounted events he personally witnessed, 'it is precisely through such detail that we are enabled to understand something of the whole'.[39] Knowing just part of an experience or event helps us understand the larger situation in the same way that metaphor gives an – albeit partial – insight into 'true' experience.

Perhaps the most reliable form of Holocaust writing is the diary. Diaries were not typically intended as works of literature for the public; diarists tended simply to report the facts without worrying about technique or style. In addition,

---

[37] Levi uses this quote as the epigraph to *Il sistema periodico*, and he also mentions it in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*Op*, II, 1109).
[38] Laub, 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', p. 70.
[39] Woolf, p. 16.

diaries were not written with hindsight, which can cause an alteration of judgement; they were composed at the time of the events. Thus, Young notes that diaries, 'because they were written from within the whirlwind, suggest themselves rhetorically as literal remnants of events'.[40] Consequently Barbara Foley, in her 1982 essay 'Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narrative', maintains that the diary is the least corrupted form of writing about the Holocaust.[41] Similarly, according to Roskies, the 'scribes of the ghetto', the diarists who endangered their lives by recording their experiences, provide an invaluable account of events.[42] However, the reliability of diaries is also problematic. Some were written for posterity, for an intended future audience, as many of the ghetto diaries were, such as that of Chaim A. Kaplan, who wrote: 'my utmost concern is for hiding my diary so that it will be preserved for future generations'.[43] Indeed, many diaries were hidden within the ghettos or smuggled out in the hope that they would be used as evidence after the event.

In other cases diaries may be edited before publication. The editing process may subtly change emphases in ways that the original authors – were they able to read them – might not have wanted. For example, the published version of Anne Frank's diary was edited by her father, Otto Frank, into a shorter version which omitted 'unnecessary' and 'inappropriate' details such as references to Anne's sexuality and passages where Anne criticised her mother

[40] Young, 'Literature', p. 394.
[41] Barbara Foley, 'Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives', in *Comparative Literature*, 34 (1982), 330-60 (pp. 333 and 337).
[42] See Roskies, pp. 379-464.
[43] Quoted in Waxman, 'Testimony and Representation', p. 488.

and the other people in hiding.[44] This undoubtedly affects the way the diary is read and interpreted.

Paradoxically, while increasing their temporal proximity to the events described, the fact that diaries were written in the midst of events can indeed reduce their reliability. According to survivors, the events they witnessed were not fully comprehended until years later, due to the extreme gravity and horrendous nature of the inhumanities they experienced. In fact, Levi believed that 'per una conoscenza dei Lager, i Lager stessi non erano sempre un buon osservatorio: nelle condizioni disumane a cui erano assoggettati, era raro che i prigionieri potessero acquisire una visione d'insieme del loro universo' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1001). Laub also writes that the nature of the Holocaust precluded the victims from bearing witness at the time of the atrocities, which was a deliberate ploy of the Nazis: 'the very circumstances of being inside the event […] made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanising frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed'.[45] So, diarists, who were writing at the time of the Holocaust, may not have fully understood what they were witnessing, due to propaganda and other factors such as a lack of broader knowledge. In this sense then, hindsight is beneficial to the reliability of Holocaust writing. As Young notes, 'the memory we find in memoirs is often darkened by the knowledge that the worst was indeed possible. At the same

[44] 'Foreword' in Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, translated by Susan Massotty (London: Puffin, 1997), pp.1-5 (pp.1-3).
[45] Laub, 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', p. 66.

time, the memoirs can suggest a sense of coherence and sequence to events that is often missing in diaries'.[46] In the following chapter I will discuss how metaphor helps to underline the coherence of Levi's account of the Holocaust, and to enhance its realism and believability.

3.4 The 'literariness' of Holocaust testimony

The majority of Holocaust testimonial writers, including Levi, had no prior formal writing experience. Levi himself openly stressed his lack of literary credentials in his writing, in order to ask the reader not to judge his work as a literary piece but as testimony, as he notes in the preface to *Se questo è un uomo*: '[m]i rendo conto e chiedo venia dei difetti strutturali del libro. […] Il bisogno di raccontare agli "altri" […] aveva assunto fra noi, […] il carattere di un impulso immediato e violento […]: il libro è stato scritto per soddisfare a questo bisogno' (*Op*, I, 5-6). For this reason, but above all because of the extreme and sensitive nature of the Holocaust, critics, until relatively recently, have been wary of analysing Holocaust testimony from an overtly literary point of view. It was feared that by examining the techniques used by testimonial writers, the message of the texts would be undermined, as Young comments: 'too much attention to critical method or to the literary construction of texts threatens to supplant not only the literature but the horrible events at the heart of [the] inquiry'.[47] And, George Steiner wrote that 'these books and the documents that have survived are not for "review". Not unless "review" signifies, as

[46] Young, 'Literature', p. 394.
[47] James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 3.

perhaps it should in these instances, a seeing-again, over and over'.[48] Testimonies tend to be considered as sacred, due to the force and grave nature of their message. Indeed, Levi describes the stories of the victims as 'semplici e incomprensibili come le storie della Bibbia. Ma non sono anch'esse storie di una nuova Bibbia?' (*Op*, I, 60).[49] Therefore, it was widely viewed as inappropriate or immoral to criticise the literary technique of works of testimony, since the message is more important than the form or style.

However, survivor accounts, such as those of Levi, Charlotte Delbo and Wiesel, are undoubtedly 'literary' pieces of work. Indeed, Belpoliti notes of Levi that 'i suoi libri, anche quelli testimoniali […] sono opere fortemente letterarie'.[50] Even Levi himself admits in an interview with Germaine Greer that *Se questo è un uomo* 'è colmo di letteratura'.[51] Critics including Langer and Vice have stressed that Holocaust testimonies adhere to the same literary conventions as Holocaust fiction. For example, most works (both factual and fictional) follow the same plot, from Nazi capture or arrest, to deportation, imprisonment and then liberation. They also deal with similar themes. The destruction of humankind is perhaps the most powerful and distressing topos of the works. The cruel and inhumane strategies used by the oppressors to reduce the prisoners to beasts form the main part of the writings. The humiliation, the

---

[48] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber, 1967), pp. 204-05.
[49] Chapter 6 returns to this reference and explores Levi's use of religious imagery to describe the Holocaust.
[50] Marco Belpoliti, 'Io sono un centauro', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. viii-xix (p. xiv).
[51] Germaine Greer, 'Colloquio con Primo Levi', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 65-76 (p. 66).

degrading backbreaking work, the squalid living conditions, the immense hunger and fatigue, and strained communication are all highlighted in the texts. It can therefore be said that Holocaust literature forms a 'genre' of its own, but that it shares characteristics with other genres.

In fact, Vice has pointed out that one of the most striking literary features of Holocaust literature is intertextuality.[52] Jeanine Parisier Plottel, in *Intertextuality: New Perspectives in Criticism* writes: 'intertextuality is the recognition of a frame, a context that allows the reader to make sense out of what he or she might otherwise perceive as senseless. This seems quite obvious when dealing with the corpus of an unfamiliar culture'.[53] Nothing is more alien to human nature than the destruction of humankind: the Holocaust. It is a totally unique event that is beyond understanding and explanation. Holocaust writers therefore turned to existing and familiar texts to aid them in the portrayal of the unimaginable, as Langer writes, to ease the readers into the 'unfamiliar world through familiar literary devices'.[54] Similarly, metaphor allows us to make sense of things that fundamentally do not make sense.

At the same time, it must be noted that testimonies contain elements of artifice. Although, on the face of it, they appear simply to report what it was like in the Lager, they do make use of imagery and figures of speech, for the same reason they refer to other texts, which is to engage the reader, and to try to make the *univers concentrationnaire* imaginable. Levi was one of those who, despite

---

[52] Vice, p. 2.
[53] Cited in Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 11.
[54] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 19.

noting the dangers of aestheticising the Holocaust, did make use of figurative language, as Risa Sodi notes: 'throughout his memoir Levi veers inescapably toward the side of simile, metaphor, […] and embellishment, in other words, all the accoutrements of the literary enterprise',[55] as will be seen in the next chapter.

Consequently, applying literary criticism to Holocaust testimony is now viewed as acceptable, since it helps us to understand the writers themselves and how they viewed and coped with their horrific experiences. Indeed, Young comments that critical analysis allows the reader to 'understand more deeply the cause and effect relationship − the reciprocal exchange − between events and their interpretations as they unfolded, as well as the ways Holocaust narrative reflects, creates, and leads us toward particular meanings in events afterwards'.[56]

3.5 Metaphor and the Holocaust

All Holocaust writers are faced with the same problem of how to represent such an incomprehensible atrocity. How do you explain the unexplainable? The paradox of the necessity and impossibility of writing about the destruction of humankind is one of the central debates of Holocaust literature. Language, the tool of communication, seems to be unable to convey the horrendous and unimaginable atrocities of the Third Reich, as Levi writes in *Se questo è un uomo*: 'la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo' (*Op*, I, 20). Similarly, Wiesel writes: 'while I had

[55] Risa Sodi, 'The Rhetoric of the "Univers Concentrationnaire"', in Kremer (ed.), *Memory and Mastery*, pp. 35-55 (p. 41).
[56] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 4.

many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language'.[57] Steiner shares this opinion, as he writes in *Language and Silence*, 'the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason'.[58] However, as Gordon notes, 'to say that aspects of the Lager lie beyond expression in language is more rhetorical topos, more a form of hyperbole, than a moral topos or a watertight statement of a truth'.[59] Indeed, Levi later wrote in *I sommersi e i salvati* that communication is always possible: 'Negare che comunicare si può è falso: si può sempre' (*Op*, II, 1060).

This bold statement contradicts Levi's earlier assertion that our language has no words to describe the horrors of Auschwitz. However, this contrast is not as paradoxical as it may appear and does not necessarily indicate a definitive shift in Levi's thinking, as I shall show. The Holocaust is difficult or impossible to describe if we limit ourselves to 'normal' words, to the vocabulary of free people. Communication is possible but it has to be a special sort of communication suited to this unique experience. As I will show below and in chapter 4, one of the most successful ways of overcoming this linguistic difficulty is via the use of metaphor.

The American philosopher Berel Lang succinctly resolves the discourse, claiming that 'the Holocaust is speakable, has been spoken, will be spoken, and,

---

[57] Wiesel, 'Preface to New Translation', in *Night*, pp. viii-ix.
[58] Steiner, p. 123.
[59] Robert Gordon, *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 76.

most of all, ought to be'.[60] Nonetheless, there is still the difficult question of what kind of language should be used.

As already seen, the use of the imagination in the realm of the Holocaust is a problematic and controversial issue, with fiction generally being viewed as inferior to testimony, as Reiter comments: 'distrustful of literary innovation, which they [Holocaust writers] identify with imagination (that is, with untruth), they are not prepared to make use of its potential for conveying information to the reader'.[61] However, as already noted, some survivors, notably Levi and Wiesel, did turn to their imagination and indeed to fiction, in order to try to make sense of their experiences and to narrate them. As Sara Horowitz notes: 'the uniqueness of the Holocaust, its historical unprecedentedness, propelled both Shoah survivors and later thinkers toward imaginative literature, myth, and symbolic representation'.[62] Moreover, Sarah Kofman, a second-generation writer, believes that the only way of dealing with the Holocaust is through the use of the literary imagination and art: 'Comment un témoignage peut-il échapper à la loi idyllique du récit? Comment parler de "l'inimaginable", […] sans avoir recours à l'imaginaire?'.[63]

Similarly, the use of figurative language in Holocaust writing is also surrounded by debate. Many writers used analogy, metaphor and simile to express figuratively the camp atrocities, to try to describe the indescribable. But certain critics, notably Rosenfeld fervently oppose the employment of metaphor

---

[60] Berel Lang, 'Holocaust Genres and the Turn to History', in Leak and Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text*, pp. 17-31 (p. 18).
[61] Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 194.
[62] Horowitz, p. 19.
[63] Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 43.

in Holocaust writing.[64] Just as language in general was deemed to 'betray' the facts of the Holocaust, metaphor was further seen as improper because it was associated with decoration and frivolity, elements which are totally incompatible with the subject matter. The diarist Chaim A. Kaplan understood the danger of using ornament to describe the sufferings inflicted during the Holocaust, and tried to avoid figurative language at all costs, as he wrote: 'we made a conscious effort that the course of events […] would come across simply and faithfully. Every superfluous word, every literary turn of language or embellishment grates on the ear and evokes resentment'.[65] The aim of Kaplan and other ghetto diarists was, as he writes, to 'convey the whole truth, no matter how bitter, and [to] present […] faithful unadorned pictures'.[66] Reiter highlights the negative use of ornamental metaphors in Holocaust writing, giving the example of the Austrian writer Erich Schweinburg: 'Schweinburg's eloquence on the subject of death can have an irritating effect, especially when he uses extended metaphor not in its cognitive function but for purely ornamental ends. It is a style that sometimes risks descending into the depths of banality'.[67]

Metaphor was also viewed as inappropriate since it moved thought away from the events themselves, through comparison and analogy with totally unrelated subjects, thus threatening to undermine the uniqueness and extremity of the events. Rosenfeld writes: 'there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, […] the burnings do not lend themselves to metaphor, simile, or symbol – to likeness or

[64] Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, p. 27.
[65] Quoted in Waxman, 'Testimony and Representation', p. 488.
[66] Quoted in Waxman, 'Testimony and Representation', p. 488.
[67] Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 107.

association with anything else. They can only "be" or "mean" what they in fact were: the death of the Jews'.[68] Rolf Hochhuth also expresses reservation over the use of figurative language in Holocaust narration, stating that: 'metaphors [...] screen the infernal cynicism of what really took place – a reality so enormous and grotesque that even today [1963] the impression of unreality it produces conspires with our natural strong tendency to treat the matter as a legend, as an incredible apocalyptic fable'.[69] Viewing the Holocaust as mythical or unreal is dangerous since it supports the negationists' arguments that the Holocaust was a 'staging of events' or a 'hoax'.

The survivor and writer Améry also argues against the use of figurative language, believing that it cannot express the very particular nature of the Holocaust, specifically the pain of torture, as he writes in *At the Mind's Limits*: 'it would be totally senseless to try to describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. […] One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn in the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was'.[70] However, pain, like the entire Holocaust experience is almost impossible to describe, as Elaine Scarry notes, 'there is no language for pain, […] it resists verbal objectification'.[71] She also writes that 'the very temptation to invoke analogies […] is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about […] this absolute split

[68] Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, p. 27.
[69] Rolf Hochhuth, *The Deputy*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Grove, 1964), p. 223.
[70] Améry, p. 33.
[71] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 12.

between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons'.[72] It is extremely difficult to imagine the pain suffered by another person, as Levi writes, we have a 'difficoltà o incapacità di percepire le esperienze altrui, che è tanto piú pronunciata quanto piú queste sono lontane dalle nostre nel tempo, nello spazio o nella qualità' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1116). So, language in general, including metaphorical language, is defied by certain extreme experiences.

The debate about the singularity or uniqueness of the Holocaust is pertinent to the discussion of metaphor. As well as the dangers of using figurative comparisons to describe the Final Solution, and of comparing the Holocaust to past events, problems also arise when the Holocaust is used as a metaphor for other tragedies. The Holocaust itself has become a metaphor, as Young writes: 'It is ironic that once an event is perceived to be without precedent, without adequate analogy, it would in itself become a kind of precedent for all that follows: a new figure against which subsequent experiences are measured and grasped'.[73] Levi believes that it is dangerous for the Holocaust to be used as a subject of comparison since it belittles the events, as shown by the tendency to compare banal experiences to those of the Lager, as Levi writes: 'come se la fame di Auschwitz fosse quella di chi ha saltato un pasto, o come se la fuga da Treblinka fosse assimilabile alla fuga da Regina Coeli' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1116). Indeed, Levi has stated on numerous occasions that although there have been terrible tragedies before and after Auschwitz, the Holocaust is unique: 'il sistema concentrazionario nazista rimane tuttavia un

[72] Scarry, p. 4.
[73] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 99.

unicum, sia come mole sia come qualità. In nessun altro luogo e tempo si è assistito ad un fenomeno cosí imprevisto e cosí complesso' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1005).

The use of metaphor by the Nazis themselves raises questions for the appropriateness of metaphor in Holocaust literature. The Nazis abused the figure of metaphor in their evil murder campaign, comparing Jews with vermin, who were physically 'exterminated' with Zyklon-B, a chemical used in pesticide. Auschwitz truly witnessed a 'literalisation' of metaphor; metaphor became reality.[74] As Terence Des Pres writes: 'It is as if amid the smoke of burning bodies the great metaphors of world literature were being "acted out"'.[75]

Furthermore, the Nazis used metaphor and euphemisms such as 'Transfer', 'Final Solution', and 'Special Treatment', to carry out their actions in secret, to conceal the hideous truth from the victims and the outside world, as Levi notes: 'i ben noti eufemismi […] non servivano solo ad illudere le vittime ed a prevenirne le reazioni di difesa: valevano anche, […] ad impedire che l'opinione pubblica […] venisse […] a conoscenza di quanto stava accadendo in tutti i territori occupati dal Terzo Reich' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1012-13). At the same time, the 'ordinary' Germans were able to deny having any knowledge of the awful atrocities because the Nazis used such euphemisms to hide their actions. In other words, they did not make the effort to 'read' the metaphors, to see the

[74] For analysis of the Nazi 'literalisation' of metaphor, see, Arlene Fish Wilner, '"Happy, Happy Ever After": Story and History in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*', in *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor Tale" of the Holocaust*, ed. by Deborah R. Geis (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), pp. 105-21; Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, pp. 99-100; and Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, pp. 91-94.

[75] Quoted in Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 95.

underlying meaning. But how could they not know or understand what was occurring? Levi writes that 'la maggior parte dei tedeschi non sapevano perché non volevano sapere, anzi, perché volevano non sapere' (Appendix to *SQU*, in *Op*, I, 179).

The perpetrators themselves argued that they were unaware of the nature of their actions since they did not understand the true meanings of euphemisms such as 'Special Treatment'. They tried to exculpate themselves, claiming that they were simply 'following orders'. Furthermore, Holocaust revisionists and deniers claim that euphemisms such as 'Transfer' had no other meaning but their literal one: Jews were merely 'transferred' to the East where they were re-housed in Jewish settlements, and where they were free to carry out their cultural and religious practices. So, in this case it is important to recognise metaphor as metaphor, not to mistake it for literal truth

Despite the many problems associated with metaphor outlined above, survivors turned to figurative comparisons in an attempt to both comprehend and narrate their suffering. They employed metaphor as a matter of utility. As seen in the previous chapter, metaphor can help express something alien. Victims looked to past events, such as the tragedies of the Destruction of the First and Second Temples, which were already symbols or metaphors for Jewish suffering, to try to make sense of their situation, and to describe their experience to others. Comparing their situation to familiar events helped the victims deal with the horrors of the Holocaust, as Reiter notes: 'The highest priority for concentration camp prisoners was to lessen the alien character of their

experience. They were helped in this if they could name new things with their existing vocabulary and thus include them in the horizon of the familiar'.[76] As Aristotle wrote, making comparisons is part of human nature, and is central to understanding and transmitting information (*Poetics*, 1451b, p. 16). This idea is echoed in more recent times by Norma Rosen in her 1987 essay 'The Second Life of Holocaust Imagery', where she writes that we are 'an analogy-making species', and 'what we connect and how we connect it are vital keys to our understanding'.[77] Furthermore, modern theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson believe that creating metaphors is a natural human process, as shown by the unconscious use of figures of speech in everyday language. So, using metaphor in response to an event, especially a trauma, which is difficult to express in everyday literal language, is a natural phenomenon.

Reiter also points out that the non-literality of figures of speech makes the Holocaust experience seem less painful for the survivors, and therefore easier to talk about and discuss with others: 'the hypothetical character of the metaphorical statement makes it more bearable for the witness to recall the horrors through which he or she lived'.[78] Figurative language not only helps the survivors make sense of their past and express their suffering, but also helps us learn and understand the reality of the *univers concentrationnaire*. Thus metaphor has a useful, cognitive role. It is therefore not surprising that Young comments that:

---

[76] Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 99.
[77] Cited in Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 33-34.
[78] Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 43.

> to leave Auschwitz outside of metaphor would be to leave it outside of language altogether: it was known, understood, and responded to metaphorically at the time by its victims; it has been organised, expressed, and interpreted metaphorically by its writers; and it is now being remembered, commented upon, and given meaning metaphorically by scholars and poets of the next generation.[79]

3.6 Conclusion

Metaphor cannot and must not be viewed solely as a frivolous, demeaning, and inappropriate literary tool for representing the Holocaust. It is inevitable and natural that we view events and experiences in relation to the past, especially those as unique and extreme as the Holocaust. Indeed, victims responded to the Holocaust through metaphor, and at the same time, our knowledge of the Holocaust is based on the tropes used by survivors. Furthermore, figurative language tends to be much more striking and memorable than factual information; metaphors tend to create a visual image in our minds, which is especially important for keeping the memory of the camps alive. As Reiter comments: 'symbolisation serves to impress the narrated event more firmly in the memory', with the effect that figurative language can come to be seen as playing an important part in the memorialisation of the Holocaust for future generations.[80]

As my next chapter will show, Levi felt very keenly this need to commemorate his Holocaust experience in his testimonial writing and to make his account as accessible as possible to his readers. Chapter 4, therefore, will explore the way in which Levi used metaphor to describe the indescribable, that

---

[79] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 91.
[80] Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 93.

is how for reasons of necessity rather than pure ornamentation, he conveyed figuratively his Auschwitz experience.

Chapter 4: Metaphor in *Se questo è un uomo*

4.1 Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, the Holocaust is often viewed as ineffable due to the severity and extreme nature of the atrocities that occurred. Even Levi voiced such concerns in his writing, despite his lifelong commitment to writing about his own Auschwitz experiences. This chapter will show that affirmations of inexpressibility form part of Levi's rhetorical technique, which is accompanied by the use of figurative language. Levi frequently expresses, either directly or indirectly, the impossibility or difficulty of describing the events of his Holocaust experience; however, as I will show, these affirmations are overturned by the ensuing use of metaphor. In other words, Levi manages to overcome the very linguistic abyss that he laments via the use of metaphorical language. Thanks to metaphor, Levi is able to transmit, albeit partially, the indescribable reality of the *univers concentrationnaire* in a clear and accessible manner to those who did not witness the camps.

4.2 Expressing the inexpressible: Levi and metaphor

Levi did not explicitly voice the need to use figurative language to convey his experience of the Lager, nonetheless, he did make extensive and effective use of metaphor in his testimonial writing. Despite Levi being one of the most eloquent and lucid commentators of the Holocaust, he expressed fears of the incommunicability of the Final Solution throughout his writing. One such

instance occurs in *Se questo è un uomo*, where he writes that our language, that of 'free' humanity, is not capable of expressing the anti-world of Auschwitz: 'Noi diciamo "fame", diciamo "stanchezza", "paura", e "dolore", diciamo "inverno", e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case' (*Op*, I, 119). Instead, 'un nuovo aspro linguaggio' would have to be created in order to describe the atrocities of the Lager (*Op*, I, 119).

However, it is not a question of creating a new 'lingua', an entire new language *per se* as many critics, such as Reiter, Waxman and Frederic Homer have implied,[1] but of employing a new 'linguaggio', a *new way of using language*, which takes our existing language and applies it in innovative ways.[2] Levi achieves this in his testimonial writing, as Gordon notes: 'To combat the ghost of the "bitter new language" almost born from the Lager, Levi reinvents or stretches our own language to accommodate a new awareness of horror'.[3] Kelly

---

[1] Reiter claims that 'survivor witnesses such as Levi [...] stress the need for *a new language* to express the unprecedented experience [of Auschwitz]' (emphasis added). See Andrea Reiter, 'Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation', *Mortality*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2008), 91-93 (p. 92). Homer notes: 'even words like cold, hunger and pain need *new words* to describe what the prisoners went through' (emphasis added). See Frederic D. Homer, *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 97. Similarly, Waxman writes: 'Levi believes that the concentration camps demand a *new language*' (emphasis added). See Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 180.

[2] 'Lingua' and linguaggio' are both commonly translated into English as 'language', but this does not take into account the difference in meaning of the two terms in Italian. 'Lingua' is a language, or a language system (for example the English language), and 'linguaggio' is a *way* of using language. The Zingarelli offers the following definitions of the two terms, which highlight the difference in meaning: *lingua*: 'sistema grammaticale e lessicale per mezzo del quale gli appartenenti ad una comunità comunicano tra loro', and *linguaggio*: 'particolare modo di parlare di determinati individui e ambiente'.

[3] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 78.

praises Levi's creativity, citing it as one of the main strengths of his testimony: 'It is the *poetic inventiveness* of Primo Levi's testimonial writing which allows it to be not simply exact in his description of personal historical experience, but also to evoke fully and communicate the effect of that experience' (emphasis added).[4]

I argue that Levi's use of metaphor forms an important part of this new 'linguaggio', this new way of using language to describe the alien world of the Lager. Although critics have analysed Levi's use of language,[5] they have not looked in depth at Levi's figurative language. The present chapter will attempt to fill this important gap. I will show that Levi takes well-known images and adapts them in inventive ways, for example, by using them in unusual or unlikely contexts, or by pushing them to the extreme, so that they reveal insights into Auschwitz. Kövecses notes that literary writers 'make heavy use of conventional, everyday metaphors, and that their creativity and originality actually derive from them'.[6] By comparing the events of the Holocaust to something familiar, something recognisable and expressible in our existing language, readers can gain an understanding of the *univers concentrationnaire* through the use of their imagination.

---

[4] Kelly, p. 97.

[5] For example, Belpoliti and Gordon have looked at what they describe as Levi's 'Holocaust vocabularies'. They write: 'far from stalling at hackneyed paradoxes of "saying the unsayable", Levi developed in his written work [...] a series of flexible and interrelated vocabularies for probing and transmitting to others the reality and idea of genocide' (Belpoliti and Gordon, 'Primo Levi's Holocaust Vocabularies', p. 52). They identified three vocabularies: animal sciences, visual symmetries and asymmetries, and ethics. See also Lepschy and Lepschy for discussion on the role of language in Levi's writing.

[6] Kövecses, p. 46.

However, it must be noted that, unlike some writers, Levi's Holocaust imagery is not obscure, even when he uses highly original or unusual metaphors his message is clear. He does not, on the whole, recreate the linguistic chaos of the Lager to portray his experiences, as he writes in his essay 'Dello scrivere oscuro': 'Neppure è vero che solo attraverso l'oscurità verbale si possa esprimere quell'altra oscurità di cui siamo figli, e che giace nel nostro profondo' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 680). In this essay, Levi is critical of writers such as Celan, whose use of metaphor, especially in his later writing, confuses rather than clarifies events surrounding the Holocaust. Numerous writers and critics have similarly expressed difficulty in understanding Celan's poetry, which has been described as indecipherable, mainly due to its 'coded metaphors'.[7] John Felstiner notes that Celan's 'metaphors became barely recognisable',[8] and Levi writes that Celan's poetry (with the exception of his greatest work, *Todesfuge*) 'non è una comunicazione, non è un linguaggio, o al piú è un linguaggio buio e monco' (*Op*, II, 680).

Levi strives to write clearly, as Kelly notes: 'the vocabulary and imagery that he uses are neither complex nor exotic. He uses lexical structures in such a way that the event can be interpreted by readers in terms of what is readily comprehensible'.[9] Levi employs relatively 'simple', easily understandable figures of speech, which are more appropriate and useful to his subject matter,

---

[7] See for example: Adrian Del Caro, *The Early Poetry of Paul Celan: in the Beginning was the Word* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); and Bianca Rosenthal, *Pathways to Paul Celan: A History of Critical Responses as a Chorus of Discordant Voices* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
[8] Felstiner, p. 219.
[9] Kelly, p. 61.

as Kelly writes, 'The simplicity of the metaphorical expression gives greater validity to the testimony of Levi. In this context complexity of speech would simply divert the attention away from the urgency of the narrative'.[10] However, as already stated, Levi's comprehensibility does not mean that he is not linguistically inventive. But how can Levi's imagery be both clear and linguistically inventive?

In order to answer the above question, this chapter will analyse four key experiences of Levi's imprisonment in Auschwitz, as portrayed in *Se questo è un uomo*, each of which he describes as ineffable. However, despite expressing the incommunicability of the events he witnesses, in each case Levi overcomes the linguistic challenge by using comprehensible yet inventive metaphors and similes. The first experience to be analysed is Levi's arrival at Auschwitz, where he is immediately faced with the complete ineffability of the *univers concentrationnaire*. He is stunned into silence and he expresses this initial response to the Lager via the use of simile, as we will see.

The second experience I will look at involves how Levi manages to conceptualise and articulate the upturned world of the Lager. Levi and his fellow prisoners felt as if they were in another world, and in order to describe this, Levi used imagery of hell. Despite using this conventional trope, Levi does so in original and varied ways as we will see.

The third ineffable experience that Levi manages to describe through the use of figurative language, is the dehumanisation of the *Häftlinge* into inanimate objects. Imagery of inert objects is used to highlight the loss of humanity

[10] Kelly, p. 62.

amongst the prisoners. Similarly, the fourth experience is linked to the process of dehumanisation, in particular the bestialisation of the prisoners. Animal imagery proliferates in *Se questo è un uomo*, to convey the unimaginable destruction of humanity in the camps. Whilst animal imagery is an obvious and widely-used tool to describe aspects of the Lager experience in both testimonial and fictional accounts, Levi uses it in original ways, to make a series of important moral points, as well as to convey effectively his actual experience. As we will see, Levi adopts a number of different types of metaphor to resolve the problem of ineffability, and each section will analyse these techniques, showing that Levi narrates the Holocaust via imagery that is at the same time clear, comprehensible and inventive.

4.3 Arrival in Auschwitz − facing ineffability

As already stated, Levi explicitly voiced the complete incomprehensibility and ineffability of the Lager in his writing, yet he nonetheless manages to express his horrific experience to the reader. One such instance appears in the opening chapter of *Se questo è un uomo*, in 'Il viaggio'. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, after a nightmarish journey in a sealed cattle truck, Levi and his Italian companions enter an upturned world which they cannot comprehend at all; they are completely dumbfounded, language fails them, as Levi states: 'Noi ci guardavamo senza parola. Tutto era incomprensibile e folle' (*Op*, I, 15). They cannot understand, let alone put into words, the chaos that surrounds them.

Cesare Cases refers to this as 'lo choc del non capire'.[11] At the same time, immense fear paralyses their thoughts and their ability to speak, as Levi writes: 'avevamo paura di rompere quel silenzio' (*Op*, I, 13). Consequently silence prevails.[12] Levi describes the particular nature of this silence, which is unique to that moment of arriving in Auschwitz, by turning to figurative language; he uses a composite simile: 'Tutto era silenzioso come in un acquario, e come in certe scene di sogni' (*Op*, I, 13).[13] It is interesting that Levi uses not just one, but two similes to convey the situation. Giving us two (apparently different) comparisons suggests that Levi himself is unsure about how to define the silence, which reinforces the incomprehensibility of the event.

Rather than explicitly comparing Auschwitz to an aquarium, the first simile implies that the prisoners are analogous to fish. Just as fish are unable to make any noise, the prisoners remain silent. Even if they did speak, it would be useless – like talking under water – since nobody would listen to them, as Levi notes: 'se parleremo, non ci ascolteranno' (*Op*, I, 20). So, the process of

---

[11] Cesare Cases, 'L'ordine delle cose e l'ordine delle parole', in *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica*, ed. by Ernesto Ferrero (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 5-33 (p. 17).

[12] Valerio Ferme discusses the silence that Levi and his fellow prisoners faced upon arrival at Auschwitz. He writes: 'The language they know does not help to make sense of this new reality, as their world of signification is silenced by the chaos of "ordini stranieri, *barbarici ululati*" [...]. The camp itself silences as much as it despoils them'. See Valerio Ferme, 'Translating the Babel of Horror: Primo Levi's Catharsis through Language in the Holocaust Memoir *Se questo è un uomo'*, *Italica*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2001), 53-73 (p. 55).

[13] To English readers the aquarium comparison may seem unusual, however this is not the case in Italian. For instance, the poet Vincenzo Cardarelli (1887-1960) compares silence to an aquarium in his poem 'Estiva' (first published in his 1949 collection *Poesie*): 'Distesa estate, / stagione dei densi climi / dei grandi mattini / dell'albe senza rumore / ci si risveglia come in un acquario'. Cited in *Contemporary Italian Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. by Carlo L. Golino (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 72.

dehumanisation, here, in the form of a loss of communication, is evident from the start of Levi's Auschwitz experience. As Ferme notes: 'The initial treatment of the prisoners leads to a loss of communicative functions and, metaphorically, to a diminution of their 'human-ness', so that they are led to question their representation as human beings, the first step in the march toward death'.[14]

It is not just the most obvious correspondences of the target and source domains that are transferred in a metaphor and simile. As seen in chapter 2, figurative language is polysemous; it can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example in the simile above, the prisoners do not just have silence in common with fish; both the *Häftlinge* and fish are enclosed by a physical barrier – barbed wire in the case of the Lager and glass in an aquarium. So, just as fish cannot escape from the tank, the inmates are unable to escape from the Lager; they are prisoners in an alien world.[15] The simile can be taken even further. Fish would not be able to survive outside the tank; ironically the alien environment protects them. Despite being a death camp, the Lager was in some respects 'safer' than the outside world (I use the term 'safer' very cautiously here for obvious reasons). For example, if the prisoners escaped (or tried to escape) from the camp (which was extremely rare) they would not have survived.[16] Even after

[14] Ferme, p. 56.

[15] Levi uses the image of the aquarium for a second time in *Se questo è un uomo*, to describe the way Pannwitz looked at him during the chemical examination: 'quello sguardo non corse fra due uomini; e se io sapessi spiegare a fondo la natura di quello sguardo, scambiato come attraverso la parete di vetro di un acquario tra due esseri che abitano mezzi diversi, avrei spiegato l'essenza della grande follia della terza Germania' (*Op*, I, 101-02).

[16] Levi explains that escape was very dangerous since the prisoners did not possess the means to survive in the outside world. They were 'indeboliti, [...] avevano i capelli rasi, abiti a strisce subito riconoscibili, [...] non avevano denaro, e in generale non parlavano

liberation, the camps were viewed as a place of 'protection', as Levi states, he and his fellow survivors 'non eravamo piú protetti, eravamo usciti di tutela' (*T*, in *Op*, I, 232). Moreover, some prisoners, such as Elias and Henek, flourished in Auschwitz, as Levi writes: 'In Lager, Elias prospera e trionfa' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 94) and 'Il Lager, trappola mortale, "mulino da ossa" per gli altri, era stato per lui [Henek] una buona scuola: in pochi mesi aveva fatto di lui un giovane carnivoro pronto, sagace, feroce e prudente' (*T*, in *Op*, I, 217).[17] Nonetheless, the Lager was ultimately a place of death and destruction.

The Nazis' plan to dehumanise the prisoners began immediately, and the feeling of disorientation, which forms part of this cruel process, is conveyed in the second simile above, which likens the silence of the arrival to that of dreams: 'Tutto era silenzioso […] come in certe scene di sogni' (*Op*, I, 13). The experience of entering Auschwitz does not seem real to Levi, it is like a dream or a nightmare. In order to come to terms with the Holocaust, the whole Auschwitz experience is often viewed metaphorically by survivors as a dream, as unreal. As Langer notes, 'To establish an order of reality in which the unimaginable becomes imaginatively acceptable exceeds the capacities of an art devoted entirely to verisimilitude; some quality of the fantastic, whether stylistic or descriptive, becomes an essential ingredient of *l'univers concentrationnaire*.

---

il polacco, che era la lingua locale, né avevano contatti nella zona, che del resto neppure conoscevano geograficamente' ('Appendice' in *SQU*, *Op*, I, 181).

[17] This recalls Levi's statement that Auschwitz was his university: 'Una mia amica, che era stata deportata giovanissima al Lager femminile di Ravensbrück, dice che il campo è stata la sua Università: io credo di poter dire altrettanto, e cioè che vivendo e poi scrivendo e meditando quegli avvenimenti, ho imparato molte cose sugli uomini e sul mondo' ('Appendice' in *SQU*, *Op*, I, 200).

[…] Inevitably, writers […] would turn to […] the world of dreams'.[18] For example, Wiesel, like Levi, cannot believe what he is witnessing upon arriving at Auschwitz, as he writes in *Night*, 'Was I still alive? Was I awake? […] All this could not be real. A nightmare perhaps … Soon I would wake up with a start, my heart pounding, and find that I was back in the room of my childhood'.[19]

Although it is easier for the survivors to pretend, at the time and afterwards, that the Lager was merely a dream, they are aware of the painful truth: that the Lager was real. Yehoshua Gitay discusses the importance of the dream in relation to the Holocaust, noting that 'after Auschwitz there is no normality any more, and a dream is not an illusion'.[20] Levi describes this harsh realisation at the end of *La tregua*, where he recounts the recurring dream he has after liberation of waking up and being back in Auschwitz. The Lager is not a dream, it is an eternal reality as Levi writes: 'sono di nuovo in Lager, e nulla era vero all'infuori del Lager. Il resto era breve vacanza, o inganno dei sensi, sogno' (*Op*, I, 395).

4.4 Overcoming the ineffable with the infernal

One of the most common metaphors used in Holocaust literature to convey the incomprehensible atrocities is the comparison of Auschwitz with hell, as Woolf

[18] Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, pp. 43-44.
[19] Wiesel, *Night*, p. 32.
[20] Yehoshua Gitay, 'Uri Zevi Greenberg: A Poem from the Forest: A Laughing Animal...The Poetics of Hebrew Poetry of the Holocaust', in *Literary Responses to the Holocaust 1945-1995*, ed. by Yehoshua Gitay (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998), pp. 41-53 (p. 46).

writes: 'For all concentration camp prisoners […] the idea that the camp was a living version of hell provided an analogy which helped to give an imaginative context to experiences which would otherwise have been incomprehensible in their reasonless brutality'.[21] The prisoners, including Levi, would have viewed the Lager metaphorically as hell at the time of their imprisonment and also afterwards in writing about their experience. Images of Dante's *Inferno* also appear in numerous narratives of the Holocaust. Levi makes extensive use of Dante throughout his testimonial writing, and indeed whilst he was in the camp, as the 'Canto di Ulisse' chapter shows. Dantean images are particularly easily recognisable and meaningful for Italian readers, since the *Commedia* is widely studied at school.[22]

Analogies with the *Inferno* are made early on in *Se questo è un uomo*, for example Levi refers to the guard escorting the prisoners to the camp by lorry as '[il] nostro caronte' (*Op*, I, 15), an implicit reference to the ferryman Charon who transports Dante and Virgil across the river Acheron in Canto III of the *Inferno*. The prisoners are taken to the gates of Auschwitz, which bear the famous words 'Arbeit Macht Frei', an ironic echo of the inscription over the entrance to Dante's hell: 'Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate' (*Inf.* III, 9). Further implicit references to hell appear throughout *Se questo è un uomo*, most famously in the Ulysses chapter, but Levi's first explicit comparison occurs immediately after entering the gates of Auschwitz, in the portrayal of his

[21] Woolf, p. 51.
[22] Many critics have highlighted the links between Levi and Dante. The most extensive work on the subject is Risa Sodi's *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

initiation into the camp. 'Questo è l'inferno', he writes, 'oggi, ai nostri giorni, l'inferno deve essere così, una camera grande e vuota, e noi stanchi stare in piedi, e c'è un rubinetto che gocciola e l'acqua non si può bere, e noi aspettiamo qualcosa di certamente terribile e non succede niente e continua a non succedere niente' (*Op*, I, 16). Although Levi uses a clichéd and stereotypical metaphor (and not, at this point, an explicitly Dantean one) its message is very striking and evocative, which helps the reader to imagine the unimaginable.

Furthermore, by using a metaphor and not a simile, Levi highlights the force or truthfulness of his message; the Lager is not merely *like* hell, it *is* hell. The reader is left with the impression that Auschwitz truly is hell on earth, and is forced to question whether this is indeed a metaphor or a literal statement. However, unlike in hell − at least from a Judeo-Christian and Dantean perspective − the prisoners are punished for no reason; they have not committed a sin. Suffering from unbearable thirst after their journey, they are locked in a room and teased by a dripping tap of water, above which is a sign forbidding them to drink. As Kelly points out, the prisoners, like Tantalus in the underworld, are placed with the object of their desire, but it is unattainable.[23] There is also an echo here of Dante's lovers Paolo and Francesca, who are placed together in hell as a form of additional torment, not consolation.

Although Levi has used a general or commonplace metaphor, 'questo è l'inferno', which is clear and easily comprehensible, he has also provided scope for further interpretation, as the Tantalus, and Paolo and Francesca examples

[23] Kelly, p. 66. An explicit reference to Tantalus appears later on in *Se questo è un uomo*, in the chapter 'Le nostre notti' (*Op*, I, 56-57), and will be discussed below.

show, which is where his poetic inventiveness lies. As Levi writes, 'Non è detto che un testo chiaro sia elementare; può avere vari livelli di lettura, ma il livello piú basso, secondo me dovrebbe essere accessibile ad un pubblico vasto' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 847). The reference to hell evokes a whole series of other points of comparison, some of which Levi makes explicit (Ulysses, Charon), some of which he leaves to the reader's imagination, thus making the comparison with hell a particularly effective and sustained one. Levi's use of metaphor gets its point across clearly, to the largest possible audience, whilst at the same time inviting deeper meditation, thus stimulating cognitive activity, which is one of the most important roles of metaphor.

Linked to the metaphor of hell quoted above, Levi uses a simile which reinforces the analogy with the underworld. Again he hints at the ineffability of his experience, by asking 'Come pensare?' and he continues, 'Non si può piú pensare, è come essere già morti' (*Op*, I, 16). The prisoners can no longer think; they are so consumed by thirst and fear that they feel as if they are already dead: it is as if they are in hell.

However, the prisoners are not dead, they are awaiting their destiny in the antechamber of hell, but nothing happens: 'noi aspettiamo qualcosa di certamente terribile e non succede niente e continua a non succedere niente (*Op*, I, 16). Time too is torturing the prisoners, they are waiting for what seems like eternity. Levi uses a metaphor to describe the slow passage of time, which reflects the cruel thirst of the men in a room full of water: 'Il tempo passa goccia a goccia' (*Op*, I, 16). Levi cleverly juxtaposes the two elements causing

suffering for the prisoners in a single metaphor. This shows the economic quality of figurative language, especially metaphor, which unlike simile does not contain the words 'like' or 'as'. As Dr Johnson said, metaphor gives you two ideas for one.[24] Levi always strove to be concise, the aim of his writing was to provide '[il] massimo di informazione con il minimo ingombro' (*AM*, in *Op*, II p. 847). Levi's metaphor is both clear and economic whilst at the same time being original.

As shown above, Levi writes that even upon arrival at the camp the prisoners felt as if they were already dead. The immense degradation infected them in such a way that they no longer felt that they belonged to the world of the living. As elsewhere, Levi states the inexpressibility of the Lager: 'ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo' (*Op*, I, 20).[25] Levi overcomes the inexpressible by using a simple and powerful metaphor: 'In un attimo, con intuizione quasi profetica, la realtà ci si è rivelata: siamo arrivati al fondo' (*Op*, I, 20). Levi could have used a more imaginative trope here, but it would not have got its point across as directly and clearly. He continues, using the same image of being 'at the bottom': 'Piú giú di cosí non si può andare: condizione umana piú misera

[24] Quoted in Richards, p. 93.

[25] It is interesting to note that Levi's term '[l']offesa' has itself become a metaphor for the Holocaust. For instance, Levi uses the term as the title of a chapter in *I sommersi e i salvati*, 'La memoria dell'offesa'. Other writers have also adopted the term, and acknowledge their indebtedness to Levi, such as Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow. Or the Nature of the Offence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), who writes: 'My alternative title was *The Nature of the Offence* − a phrase of Primo Levi's. The offence was of such a nature that perhaps we can see Levi's suicide as an act of ironic heroism, an act that asserts something like: My life is mine and mine alone to take' (p. 176); and Gillian Banner, *Holocaust Literature: Schulz, Levi, Spiegelman and the Memory of the Offence* (London, Portland, Or.: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000).

non c'è, e non è pensabile' (*Op*, I, 20). However, this is ironic since it is just the beginning of camp life, it will (and does) get worse. The prisoners who truly are 'sul fondo' are those who are dead, whom Levi calls 'i sommersi'. The drowned (or the damned)[26] have been completely submerged by the cruel and intolerable existence of the *univers concentrationnaire*. The 'sommersi' recall the damned souls of *Inferno*, as Dante wrote (*Inf.* XX, 1-3):

> Di nova pena mi conven far versi
> e dar matera al ventesimo canto
> de la prima canzon ch'è d'i sommersi

Interestingly, Nicholas Patruno has pointed out that 'the word *trasumanar*,[27] intended by Dante in the positive meaning of going *above* and *past* human boundaries, can be replaced, in Levi's case, by the term *subumanar*, which conveys the meaning of going *below* the boundaries of human recognition'.[28] Unlike Dante who, in the *Paradiso*, has to overcome the ineffability of writing about *transcendence*, Levi is faced with the opposite problem of trying to describe the reduction to a state of being that is less than human (although in the *Inferno*, Dante also has to convey the experience of 'i sommersi'). Levi uses imagery of submersion throughout *Se questo è un uomo*, with frequent references being made to the world 'laggiú' or 'quaggiú'. Levi re-uses the

---

[26] The term 'i sommersi' is problematic. In the English translation by Stuart Woolf, 'i sommersi' is translated as 'the drowned', but the literal translation would be 'the submerged'. However, Levi appears to take the term from Dante's *Inferno*, where it means 'the damned'. See Maurizio Catani, '"Even if we were to tell it, we would not be believed": A Lesson from the Work of Primo Levi', *Current Sociology*, 43 (1995), 137-60, (p. 140).

[27] Dante uses the term in *Paradiso* I, 70.

[28] Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 12.

somewhat prosaic metaphor of being 'sul fondo' in inventive ways, to describe the condition of the *Häftlinge*. This section has shown that although Levi uses obvious metaphors such as hell, his imagery has multiple interpretive possibilities, which engages the reader and strengthens his message.

4.5 Dehumanisation − describing the inanimate

As already seen, the Lager was an upturned debased world. The camps were created to exterminate the Jews and other 'undesirables' such as gypsies and homosexuals, who were viewed as subhuman by the 'master race', the Nazis. The prisoners were treated as non-humans by their captors, in order to degrade and humiliate them, and to make it easier for the Nazis to kill them; the degradation formed part of what Levi, in *I sommersi e i salvati*, calls the 'violenza inutile' of the Third Reich. The process of 'subhumanisation' is imposed on the prisoners in order to 'make true' the Nazis' belief that these people are *already* subhuman. Even before their arrival at Auschwitz the Jews were treated as non-living 'things'; at Fossoli the SS officer in charge of the deportation of Levi's convoy referred to the Jews as 'Stücke', that is 'pieces' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 10).[29] The Nazis believed that if the prisoners did not resemble humans, it would be less difficult emotionally for the perpetrators to carry out their hideous task, as Levi writes in *I sommersi e i salvati*: 'prima di morire, la vittima dev'essere degradata, affinché l'uccisore senta meno il peso della sua

[29] Santagostino discusses the reduction of the prisoners to inert matter as part of a cycle of human degradation, see *Primo Levi: metamorfosi letterarie del corpo*, pp. 23-40.

colpa' (*Op*, II, 1090). The prisoners are turned into a living metaphor. They are treated as non-humans so they become (in the eyes of the Nazis) inhuman.

The prisoners were pushed to the limits of humanity both physically and mentally. Levi viewed Auschwitz metaphorically as a kind of sick experiment to dehumanise and exterminate the inmates, as Levi notes, the Lager was 'una gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 83). But, this is more than a mere metaphor; the camp was *literally* a giant laboratory, as it tested the limits of normal human characteristics and concepts, including language, as this chapter demonstrates. Human morality was compromised or even destroyed. To survive was virtually impossible, it involved a constant emotional and physical struggle. Those who managed to resist the squalor of the camp, who lived through the cruel experiment were, in Levi's words, 'i salvati'. On the other hand, those who failed to last the duration of the experiment, that is those who could no longer fight for their survival, were called 'i sommersi', as seen above. Levi uses these two terms as metaphors for the two types of prisoners in Auschwitz; they effectively and economically express the inexpressible. As soon as we see the words we know what Levi means, he does not have to go into detail. This is linked to what Andrew Ortony refers to as the 'compactness' of metaphor. Metaphor allows large 'chunks' of information to be conveyed, metaphor 'is quick, concise and effective'.[30] The power of Levi's account lies, to some extent, in his ability to overcome the 'alien' nature of the Holocaust experience by giving his readers a series of 'shorthand' terms which help them

[30] Ortony, 'Why Metaphors Are Necessary and Not Just Nice', p. 48.

to conceptualise and to understand it. The compactness of metaphor is what enables this process to be enacted with such efficiency.

As well as the Lager experience being viewed as an experiment, systematic 'medical' experiments were carried out on the prisoners in the camps by Nazi doctors such as the infamous Dr Mengele, who was known as the Angel of Death.[31] These experiments were both cruel and unnecessary, and symbolic of the Nazis' opinion of the Jews as subhuman. The human body was treated like a laboratory animal, or, as Levi writes in *I sommersi e i salvati*: 'come di un oggetto, di una cosa di nessuno, di cui si poteva disporre in modo arbitrario' (*Op*, II, 1088).

In order to describe the indescribable experience of being treated like an object, Levi uses a striking, straightforward and original trope, which recurs throughout *Se questo è uomo*. He compares the prisoners to puppets: 'Non c'è ove specchiarsi, ma il nostro aspetto ci sta dinanzi, riflesso in […] cento pupazzi miserabili e sordidi' (*Op*, I, 20). Levi has metamorphosed into a non-living being, a puppet, like the innumerable mass of dehumanised prisoners in the camp. The prisoners no longer control their own bodies; they are like puppets on a string, under the influence of the Nazis.[32] A few pages later, Levi uses another puppet simile to describe the loss of free will of the camp inmates, which

[31] Levi describes these sick experiments in the chapter 'Violenza inutile' of *I sommersi e i salvati* (*Op,* II, 1088-90).

[32] The loss of freedom is echoed in Levi's fictional short story 'La bella addormentata nel frigo' of *Storie naturali*, which contains implicit references to the Holocaust. The protagonist Patricia, who is cryogenically frozen, is under the influence of her 'masters', the Thörl family, who control when she is defrosted and refrozen. She is raped when she is half-frozen, when she is unable to react; she is reduced to the status of a dummy or mannequin, which recalls the 'puppets' of Auschwitz.

portrays the march of the prisoners returning from work: 'camminano con un'andatura strana, innaturale, dura, come fantocci rigidi fatti solo di ossa' (*Op*, I, 24). The prisoners are controlled by the beat of the infernal music which commands the march; the music, like the Nazis, controls their movements. Like the aquarium simile, the puppet imagery involves a number of related qualities being transferred from the source domain (the puppet) to the target domain (the prisoners).

It is interesting to note that Roberto Benigni also uses puppet imagery in *La vita è bella*.[33] The protagonist Guido pretends to be a puppet when he is being taken away by the Fascists and later the Nazis, which forms part of his attempt to make Auschwitz seem like a game, in order to protect his son Giosué from the true horrors of the camp. He marches like a puppet, accompanied by wooden percussion music, which is reminiscent of Levi's image of the prisoners marching in Auschwitz. The marches are part of the Nazis' cruel plan to weaken and destroy the prisoners, as Levi writes, 'saranno l'ultima cosa del Lager che dimenticheremo: sono […] l'espressione sensibile della sua follia geometrica, della risoluzione altrui di annullarci prima come uomini per ucciderci poi lentamente' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 45).

The puppet imagery is linked to Levi's sense of the camp being unreal, being a fantasy, like that of the dream imagery seen above in section 4.3. Upon arrival, Levi did not believe that the *Häftlinge* were real; he felt he was witnessing a macabre play: 'Ci pare di assistere a qualche dramma pazzo, di

[33] See Robert S. C. Gordon, 'Real Tanks and Toy Tanks: Playing Games with History in Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*/*Life is Beautiful*', *Studies in European Cinema*, Volume 2, Number 1 (2005), 31-44 (pp. 42-43).

quei drammi in cui vengono sulla scena le streghe, lo Spirito Santo e il demonio' (*Op*, I, 19). Directly after Levi's puppet metaphor, he writes: 'Eccoci trasformati nei fantasmi intravisti ieri sera' (*Op*, I, 20). Levi too has become part of the freak show, he is now one of the phantoms or puppets. Like puppets, the prisoners are used as entertainment for the Nazis; they are cruelly mocked and jeered at as if they are in a play or a game, as Levi writes: 'tutto questo è una grande macchina per ridere di noi e vilipenderci' (*Op*, I, 18).

However, the Nazis did not just use the prisoners for entertainment purposes, they also used them for material gain as slaves. In this sense the prisoners recall golems, another type of puppet under the control of a master.[34] The prisoners, like a golem, were programmed by their 'masters', the Nazis to work for them; they had to obey their every command like robots. Levi uses a simile to describe the marching of the prisoners to and from work which highlights the robotic nature of the prisoners: 'Quando questa musica suona, noi sappiamo che i compagni […] partono in marcia come automi; le loro anime sono morte e la musica li sospinge, come il vento le foglie secche, e si sostituisce alla loro volontà' (*Op*, I, 45). As mentioned earlier, the music drives the prisoners who can no longer think, they are dead like 'le foglie secche'. The Nazis force the prisoners to march, not out of Teutonic love for discipline, but to exercise their control over their slaves. The SS are always present at the

[34] The golem features in Levi's fictional short story 'Il servo' of *Vizio di forma*, which is based on the legend of the Golem of Prague. The short story is discussed in further detail in Chapter 8. Interestingly, Levi appears as a character (a ghost) in the novel *The Golems of Gotham* by Thane Rosenbaum (first published in 2002). Levi is resurrected from the dead along with other Holocaust survivors including Améry and Celan, to help a struggling author overcome his writer's block and produce a Holocaust novel.

ceremonial marches, as Levi writes 'Chi potrebbe negare loro il diritto di assistere a questa coreografia da loro voluta, alla danza degli uomini spenti, squadra dopo squadra, via dalla nebbia verso la nebbia? quale prova piú concreta della loro vittoria?' (*Op*, I, 45). Jonathan Usher has pointed out a striking Dantean echo in this scene, as he writes, 'Where else had there been a description of vulgar music and an absurd parade? In the last lines of the Malacoda episode, when Malacoda noisily farts a military fanfare and the devils fall into step':[35]

> ma prima avea ciascuno la lingua stretta
> coi denti verso lor duca, per cenno;
> ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta. (*Inf.* XXI, 137-39)

Dante is also evoked in Levi's leaf imagery noted above ('come [...] le foglie secche'), which unlike most of the examples described in this chapter can be seen as an ornamental use of simile. Levi's simile recalls the episode in the *Inferno* where the damned souls gather on the bank of the river Acheron (*Inf.* III, 112-17):

> Come d'autunno si levan le foglie
> l'una appresso de l'altra, fin che 'l ramo
> vede a la terra tutte le sue spoglie,
> similemente il mal seme d'Adamo
> gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
> per cenni come augel per suo richiamo

However, unlike Dante's sinners, it is not Divine Justice that forces the prisoners on, it is the infernal music of the Lager.[36] The music and the Lager are described

[35] Jonathan Usher, '"Libertinage" Programmatic and Promiscuous Quotation in Primo Levi', in, *Primo Levi the Austere Humanist*, ed. by Joseph Farrell (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 91-116 (p. 95).
[36] Kelly also notes the similarity of Levi's simile and that of Dante, see p. 66.

in metaphorical terms, as Levi writes, the songs 'sono la voce del Lager' (*Op*, I, 45). The Lager has a voice, the voice of the Nazis, which the prisoners must follow. Here, Levi implicitly anthropomorphises the Lager to show that the camp is more alive than the prisoners.

By using a series of metaphors and similes related to puppets, an image that is striking, easy to imagine and remember, Levi has managed to describe the indescribable dehumanisation of the prisoners to inanimate objects in a clear yet inventive manner. The puppet metaphor functions in a similar way to that of the 'sommersi', helping the reader to understand the apparently passive and submissive behaviour of the prisoners. Like puppets, their free will and ability to react is totally in the hands of others, and what may appear to be a passive acceptance of their fate is revealed, though this metaphor, to be actually the unwilling but inescapable (since the alternative is death) submission to a power whose control is absolute.

4.6 Bestialisation − describing the animale-uomo

As seen above, the aim of the Nazis was to dehumanise the prisoners before killing them. The *Häftlinge* were reduced to inert objects, like the mechanical puppets discussed in the previous section. Similarly, the prisoners were reduced to the level of animals, as Levi writes: 'il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie' (*Op*, I, 35).[37] The Lager is a dehumanising machine, as this powerful

[37] The sick and arrogant plan of the Nazis also appears in Levi's short story 'Angelica Farfalla' of *Storie naturali*, where a Nazi 'scientist' carries out inhuman experiments on Jewish prisoners in the hope of turning them into angels. He does succeed in creating winged creatures: not angels, but hideous featherless beasts.

metaphor shows. Levi uses figurative rather than literal language to describe this process of bestialisation, because it is completely unimaginable. It can even be argued that the use of such language is not metaphorical as the prisoners really were treated as animals. Animal imagery in particular is used throughout *Se questo è un uomo*. One of the earliest examples appears in the first chapter, in the portrayal of the train journey to Auschwitz. The inmates are transported to the camp 'come merce di dozzina' (*Op*, I, 11). The Nazis intended the process of bestialisation to begin even before the prisoners arrived at the Lager.[38]

Levi frequently compares the prisoners to beasts of burden, starting with their arrival at the camp in cattle trucks. The shaving of their hair and the tattooing are also part of the process of bestialisation; they are sheared and branded with a number, just as cattle or sheep are. The prisoners behave instinctively like animals as they enter the barracks, as Levi shows with the following simile: 'noi ultimi venuti ci raduniamo istintivamente negli angoli, contro i muri, come fanno le pecore per sentirci le spalle materialmente coperte' (*Op*, I, 32). They are frightened and confused and flock together for protection like a herd of sheep. Later on, when he enters the chemical laboratory in Buna, Levi uses another animal simile to describe his feeling of terror and disorientation: 'siamo entrati in laboratorio timidi, sospettosi e disorientati come tre bestie selvagge che si addentrino in una grande città' (*Op*, I, 135). The prisoners start not only to behave like animals, but they also physically resemble animals, as Levi notes and again shows with striking imagery: 'avevano gli occhi come le bestie impaurite' (*Op*, I, 150).

[38] See Santagostino's cycle of degradation, pp. 23-40.

Elsewhere Levi uses animal metaphors to show the complete transformation of the prisoners into animals; they are not merely *like* beasts, they *are* beasts. In this case, it is questionable whether this is actually a metaphor. The process of dehumanisation is so complete that at times it is difficult for the reader to work out whether Levi is using metaphor or not. For example, while discussing the backbreaking labour enforced on the prisoners Levi writes 'noi non siamo che bestie stanche' (*Op*, I, 38). The Lager has given birth to the 'animale-uomo' (*Op*, I, 83). As Levi writes in the chapter 'L'ultimo', the Nazis have succeeded in destroying them: 'Eccoci docili sotto i vostri sguardi: da parte nostra nulla piú avete a temere: non atti di rivolta, non parole di sfida, neppure uno sguardo giudice' (*Op*, I, 146).

One of the ways to destroy the prisoners, both physically and spiritually, was by depriving them of food. Food was needed both as physical sustenance and as nourishment for their minds. The prisoners suffered immense hunger in the camp. Levi writes that there are no words to describe the chronic hunger, it is ineffable. Levi overcomes this inexpressibility through the use of animal imagery, by drawing comparisons from the animal world and applying them to the *univers concentrationnaire*. For example, Levi writes that 'tutti abbiamo una fretta animalesca di perfonderci i visceri con l'intruglio caldo' (*Op*, I, 63). The little food that the prisoners received was eaten ferociously, like animals. Indeed, Levi writes that in the camps, the word 'to eat' was rendered by the German term 'fressen', which refers to the way animals eat, and not 'essen', the term used to describe the way humans eat (*Op*, I, 71).

The prisoners were constantly plagued by hunger, it even invaded their sleep. They often dreamt of eating, which Levi metaphorically calls 'il sogno di Tantalo' (*Op*, I, 56). Although Levi uses the well-known myth of Tantalus, he uses it in original ways with striking results. During their sleep, the prisoners' mouths would open and close as if they were eating. Like Tantalus, they can see the food but when they try and put it in their mouths they wake up, and the dream starts all over again. It is a never-ending cycle of pain for them, just as it was for the mythical Tantalus in the underworld.

Due to 'la rabbia quotidiana della fama' (*Op*, I, 146), the prisoners were always on the search for food, like wild animals looking for their prey, or rather stray animals rummaging for scraps. Levi uses a striking and imaginative simile from the animal kingdom to describe the amazing capability of one of his fellow prisoners for sniffing out food: 'Templer […] ha per la zuppa dei Civili una sensibilità squisita, come le api per i fiori' (*Op*, I, 70).[39] Another inmate, Henri, also has a talent for finding food, but unlike Templer, he does so by immoral means. Henri is a sly and calculating individual who has been corrupted by the Lager. Levi cannot understand him because on the one hand he is intelligent and capable of human contact, but on the other, he abuses his wit and uses his fellow inmates for his personal gain. Levi describes Henri using a simile from the animal world, he is 'tutto alla sua caccia […] inumanamente scaltro e incomprensibile come il Serpente della Genesi' (*Op*, I, 96). Although Levi writes that Henri is incomprehensible (like the whole of the Auschwitz experience), he does succeed in describing him to the reader by the use of the

[39] 'Useful' insects also appear in Levi's short story 'Pieno impiego' of *Storie naturali*.

archetypal simile of the serpent of Genesis. As well as using this traditional comparison, Levi uses an original and striking animal simile to further try to describe the indescribable Henri. Levi writes: 'Come l'icneumone paralizza i grossi bruchi pelosi, ferendoli nel loro unico ganglio vulnerabile, cosí Henri valuta con un'occhiata il soggetto, "son type"; gli parla brevemente, […] e il "type" è conquistato' (*Op*, I, 95). Levi compares Henri to one of the most disliked and 'evil' insects: a wasp. He is to be avoided since he uses, or preys on people, as Levi himself experiences: 'Da tutti i colloqui con Henri, […] sono sempre uscito con un leggero sapore di sconfitta; col sospetto confuso di essere stato anch'io, […] non un uomo di fronte a lui, ma uno strumento nelle sue mani' (*Op*, I, 96). It is interesting to note that Levi describes Templer, whom he speaks of fondly, as a bee, and Henri as a wasp. Levi's choice of insect reflects the individual's character. Henri, is dangerous and selfish like wasps, whereas Templer is useful, he supplies food for the benefit of the *Kommando*, for the community as a whole, like bees in a hive. Even when Levi's imagery seems obvious and straightforward, there is often scope for further interpretation as this example shows.

The lack of food, water and sanitation, coupled with the exhausting labour all formed part of the Nazis' plan to destroy the prisoners. However, as Steinlauf tells Levi 'appunto perché il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie, noi bestie non dobbiamo diventare; che anche in questo luogo si può sopravvivere, e perciò si deve voler sopravvivere, per raccontare, per portare testimonianza' (*Op*, I, 35). Steinlauf tells Levi the importance of maintaining one's human

dignity even amidst the degradation of the Lager; one must not become a savage in order to survive and to inform the world of the horrors of Auschwitz. Levi teaches his friend Jean 'il Pikolo' the same lesson, but in doing so he chooses to use the highly metaphorical language of Dante's *Inferno*, in particular the figure of Ulysses, who is a metaphor for Levi and Jean.

The 'Canto di Ulisse' chapter can be read as an extended metaphor of the importance of not becoming a beast, which is shown by the following lines from Dante, which contain an animal simile (*Inf.* XXVI, 118-20): 'Considerate la vostra semenza / Fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza' (*Op*, I, 109). In particular Levi pays attention to the significance of communication in retaining one's dignity, a specifically human characteristic, as he discusses in the chapter 'Comunicare' of *I sommersi e i salvati*. According to Levi 'tutte le razze umane parlano; nessuna specie non-umana sa parlare' (*SES*, in *Op*, II, 1060).[40] By communicating Dante's words to Jean, Levi realises that the prisoners must not, as Cicioni writes, 'be submerged by the animal-like struggle for physical survival',[41] but strive to keep their mind alive, which in turn will help them on their infernal journey in Auschwitz. As Levi writes, using a string of similes: 'Come se anch'io lo sentissi per la prima volta: come uno squillo di tromba, come la voce di Dio. Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono' (*Op*, I, 109). The words of Dante have helped Levi, and in turn, Levi desperately seeks to convey this message to Jean, paying particular

[40] Ironically a number of Levi's short stories contain animals which can communicate with humans, such as the insects in 'Pieno impiego', and the tapeworms in 'L'amico dell'uomo', which have established a sophisticated system of communicating with their human hosts in *terza rima*.
[41] Cicioni, *Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 34.

attention to the metaphors and similes of the passage, since they are the most illuminating (*Op*, I, 108). However, it must be noted, as Levi also points out, that Ulysses dies, 'come altrui piacque', which is relevant to the situation in the Lager, where the prisoners are killed at the whim of the Nazis. Like Ulysses they are destined to drown, which echoes the metaphor of submersion noted above: 'Infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi rinchiuso' (*Inf*. XXVI, 142).

4.7 Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the experience of the Lager is frequently presented as an ineffable one – one so far removed from any other human experience (including from 'normal' human experiences of pain and suffering), that human language itself is unfit to describe it. Despite this, Levi did manage to describe the indescribable world of the Lager; indeed, he saw the achievement of such a description as being his inescapable duty as a survivor, and the only way in which he could justify his survival and honour the memory of those who died.

One of the most effective and creative ways in which Levi achieves this was through the use of metaphor, by means of which an experience that would simply be inexpressible in direct language is rendered comprehensible through the use of *in*direct, figurative language. In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi uses a mixture of original and conventional figurative language to convey his inexpressible experience of the Holocaust to the reader. Levi's tropes form an

important part of the new 'linguaggio', the new way of using language, which he presents as being necessary to communicate the reality of Auschwitz.

Levi's account of his period of imprisonment in *Se questo è un uomo* is, as we have seen, often praised for the lucidity and comprehensibility of its prose. This chapter has shown the extent to which this clarity and accessibility is dependent on the use of metaphor. The following chapter will explore how metaphor is used by Levi to convey this same experience but in a medium which is often seen as the 'rightful place' of metaphor: poetry.

Chapter 5: 'Dopo Auschwitz non si può piú fare poesia se non su Auschwitz': Metaphor in Levi's Poetry

5.1 Introduction

Metaphor, as seen in the previous chapter, played an important part in *Se questo è un uomo*, allowing readers an insight into the alien world of Auschwitz. Figurative language, however, is most commonly associated with poetry, as the critic Cleanth Brooks notes: 'In our time metaphor has come to seem to be the very core of poetry'.[1] In the specific context of Holocaust poetry, metaphor has a particularly heightened importance, as Langer points out: 'because metaphor is the heart of verse, finding similitudes for the incomparable becomes not only a challenge for the [Holocaust] poet, but often a condition of the internal dynamics of the poem itself'.[2] This chapter will explore the types of metaphors which Levi uses in his poetry, focusing in particular on poems in which the Holocaust is evoked either directly or indirectly and on the metaphors used to convey the Holocaust experience, and, where relevant, making comparisons with his testimonial prose.

Although there are obvious textual links between Levi's poetry and his prose, such as the use of similar themes and images,[3] I will show that poetry offers a different kind of testimony, which complements Levi's clear and straightforward prose. One of the main differences between these two genres lies

[1] Cleanth Brooks, 'Metaphor, Paradox and Stereotype', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 5/4 (1965), 315-28 (p. 315).
[2] Lawrence Langer, *Art from the Ashes: a Holocaust Anthology* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 555.
[3] Lucie Benchouiha gives an excellent account of the intertextual links between Levi's poetry and prose, in *Primo Levi Rewriting the Holocaust*, pp. 120-31.

in the use of metaphor. As seen in the previous chapter, in *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi's metaphors are, with some exceptions, easy to understand, in part due to the contextual clues which surround them. However, in his poetry, which does not come with such contextual pointers, his figurative language tends to be more cryptic, with much more effort being placed on the reader to deconstruct the metaphors and similes. Sophie Nezri-Dufour has noted this aspect of his work, stating that in his poetry, Levi moves away from clear language and uses more symbolic or figurative structures: 'accanto alla necessità che Levi avvertiva di testimoniare con chiarezza e semplicità, coesisteva una voglia di trasmettere in modo più allegorico e più simbolico, talvolta più violento, un'angoscia e una disperazione assillanti'.[4] Antony Rowland suggests that Levi, and other survivors such as Delbo, turned to poetry in response 'to a worry that prose accounts may be all too understandable, leaving readers unaffected as they turn to the next book'.[5] Levi chose to write with often affecting simplicity, but also wanted to ensure that his readers treated his words with the seriousness that they deserved. Moreover, he often combined poetry with prose – as with 'Shemà as the epigraph to *Se questo è un uomo* – to bring together these two effects.

Nonetheless, Levi's poetic metaphors are far from being impenetrable like those of the Holocaust survivor and poet Celan;[6] rather they evoke a plurality of meanings. It is the ambiguity of poetic metaphor (which stems in large part from poetry's lack of contextual clues) that separates Levi's poetry

[4] Sophie Nezri-Dufour, *Primo Levi: una memoria ebraica del Novecento* (Florence: Giuntina, 2002), p. 110.
[5] Antony Rowland, 'Poetry as Testimony: Primo Levi's Collected Poems', *Textual Practice*, 22.3 (2008), 487-505 (p. 489).
[6] See chapter 3 above.

and prose, and makes his poetry so powerful. Before looking in detail at examples of Levi's use of figurative language, it will be useful to outline Levi's views on poetry and to look at some of the reasons why, on occasion, he turned to poetry to narrate his Holocaust experience.

5.2 Poetry after Auschwitz

Levi experimented with poetry *before* embarking on *Se questo è un uomo*, writing his first poem about his experience of the Lager in December 1945, just a few months after returning home to Turin.[7] He continued to write poetry, on the topic of Auschwitz as well as on a range of other subjects, right up until his death in 1987. Levi was clearly undeterred by Adorno's famous injunction against writing poetry after Auschwitz.[8] In fact, in an interview with Giulio Nascimbeni, Levi claimed that 'dopo Auschwitz non si può piú fare poesia se non su Auschwitz'.[9] In the same interview, Levi also stated that poetry was a more suitable and 'natural' literary form than prose for conveying his horrific experience of the Lager: 'mi sembrò che la poesia fosse piú idonea della prosa per esprimere quello che mi pesava dentro. [...] Mi sembrò nuovamente naturale aprire la via a un linguaggio poetico'.[10] However, this is not, as he continued,

---

[7] According to Ian Thomson, Levi started to write *Se questo è un uomo* sixteen weeks after his return to Turin, with the first draft of the text being dated February 1946. See Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 229.

[8] See chapter 3 above.

[9] Giulio Nascimbeni, 'Levi: l'ora incerta della poesia', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 136-41 (p. 137). Levi also expressed this idea, using virtually the same words, in an interview with Luca Lamberti, entitled, 'Vizio di forma: ci salveranno i tecnici', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 110-17 (p. 111).

[10] Nascimbeni, pp. 137-38.

'senza imbarazzo, lo confesso, perché sono ignorante in fatto di poesia: conosco male le teorie della poetica, leggo poca poesia, e neppure credo che questi miei versi siano eccellenti'.[11]

Why did Levi, who claimed to have no knowledge of poetic practice or theory, maintain that poetry was more effective than prose for portraying his Holocaust experience? Perhaps one reason is because of the way in which poetry lends itself to the use of metaphorical language. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, survivors, including Levi, found it difficult to express the Holocaust in normal, everyday language. Paradoxically, it is metaphor, a tool which actually takes thought away from the subject, that allows Levi and other survivors to speak to us directly and forcefully about the Lager. As the Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld noted in relation to Auschwitz, himself using metaphor: 'One does not look directly into the sun'.[12]

One of the key characteristics common to both poetry and metaphor in general is that they are a form of *indirect* communication. John Peck and Martin Coyle note that 'poetry is an art of indirect statement, and, in order to appreciate poetry, we have to appreciate the logic of imagery, how it allows a poem to suggest things a bald statement might not'.[13] It is the indirectness of metaphor that gives poetry its force, as Peck and Coyle explain, metaphor 'enables the poet to achieve complexity and force in his or her verse through associating an

[11] Nascimbeni, p. 138.
[12] Cited in Berel Lang, 'Holocaust Genres and the Turn to History', p. 21.
[13] John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 39.

object or idea with other areas of life'.[14] This indirectness is particularly important in relation to the Holocaust. Auschwitz, which lies beyond the boundaries of normal conception, was experienced metaphorically by the survivors as something external or indirect. It is believed by trauma theorists such as Laub, that it is easier and less traumatic for survivors to talk about the events indirectly rather than directly. Laub explains that in order to come to terms with trauma, there is the need for a 're-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim'.[15] Survivors tended to compare their horrific experiences to other events, and one of the most effective ways in which this was achieved was via metaphor, and by extension, poetry.

Another reason why poetry is so effective, particularly in relation to the Holocaust, is that it allows the writer to create a completely self-contained work, one that stands alone in its own right, without having to follow on chronologically, or thematically, from what has gone before, as in traditional narrative. Poetry can convey a single moment, scene, image or thought taken in isolation from the description of the whole experience. As Susan Gubar comments: 'the poet provides spurts of vision, moments of truth, baffling but nevertheless powerful pictures of fragmentary scenes unassimilated into an explanatory plot'.[16] This may have been one of the reasons why Levi wrote poetry before *Se questo è un uomo*. Perhaps it was less daunting for him to write

[14] Peck and Coyle, p. 39.
[15] Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 57-74 (p. 69).
[16] Susan Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 7.

individual poems about one or more aspects of his horrendous experience, rather than trying to produce a book-long systematic and carefully thought-out piece of work about his experience as a whole. As he himself states in *Il sistema periodico*: 'Scrivevo poesie concise e sanguinose, raccontavo con vertigine, a voce e per iscritto, tanto che a poco a poco ne nacque poi un libro' (*Op*, I, 871).

Elsewhere, Levi notes that he found it difficult to create a coherent narrative out of the atrocious memories which burned so strongly and urgently within him. In fact, he claims that the chapters of *Se questo è un uomo*: 'sono stati scritti non in successione logica, ma per ordine di urgenza' ('Prefazione' to *SQU*, in *Op*, I, 6). Moreover, his entire *oeuvre* (except, perhaps, for the novel, *Se non ora, quando?*) can be viewed as individual snapshots of reality, as Gordon notes:

> For Levi, it was not the 'book' that constituted the core unit in which he thought, wrote and conceived of his work as a writer. Rather, the essential source of the intellectual flexibility and articulation of his work, […], was his investment in short forms of writing. His core units were the short-story, the anecdote, the reflection, the short essay, review or article, *the poem* (emphasis added).[17]

Perhaps this is linked to the fact that Levi's individual poems are often based around a single (or very small number of) metaphor(s) rather than a large number of different metaphors, as we will see. I will suggest that in his poetry about the Holocaust, Levi uses a small number of conceptual metaphors, adopting and adapting them in a variety of ways, thus creating networks of metaphors which individually, but also as a whole, provide important insights into Levi's experience of the Lager. The most significant and recurring networks

[17] Gordon, 'Introduction', p. xix.

of metaphors in my opinion are imagery of darkness and light and to a lesser extent, plant and machine imagery. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, these metaphors, in the naturally more polyvalent genre of poetry, are used in a way which is less obvious or straightforward than the metaphors in Levi's prose, often lending themselves to a variety of possible overlapping meanings. As Nezri-Dufour points out, Levi's poems are characterised by 'parole-simboli, dense, polisemiche'.[18] I will analyse Levi's poetry in light of this polysemy, drawing links, where appropriate with *Se questo è un uomo*, to show how, via the use of metaphor, the reader of Levi's poetry is given tools to imagine, at least in part, some of the horrors of the *univers concentrationnaire* and its legacy.

5.3 Darkness and Light

Imagery of darkness and light is one of the most striking and frequent metaphors Levi uses in his poetry to describe Auschwitz. The concept of darkness, or the colour black, is traditionally used to denote evil, in all its various forms, so it is a particularly obvious and apt metaphor for the Lager. However, rather than using this common conceptual metaphor in clichéd or hackneyed ways, Levi adapts it to create unusual and striking metaphorical expressions, as we will see below. Levi often juxtaposes and contrasts darkness, or blackness, with another conceptual metaphor, that of light, in particular sunlight, which, I associate with the colour white. In Levi's poems, light generally stands for normality, or the world outside the Lager.

[18] Nezri-Dufour, p. 109.

The use of darkness and light as conceptual metaphors for reality belongs to a long-standing tradition. For example, the Bible uses the concept of darkness to represent evil, and the concept of light to represent God, and goodness, as seen in 1 John 1.5: 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all'. Avis discusses the biblical use of light imagery, noting that: 'God, life and knowledge of the truth are symbolised by light, and their opposites – evil, death and ignorance – by darkness'.[19]

This tradition also played an important part in the medieval period, especially amongst Christian writers, for whom ethical issues lay at the very heart of the purpose of poetry. Dante, whose hell is dark, while his heaven is entirely constructed of light, is a prime example. However, metaphors of darkness and light are not just used in a religious or moralistic context. The term the 'Dark Ages', used to describe the Early Middle Ages, draws on the connotation of darkness as backwardness, or cultural impoverishment. Similarly, yet conversely, the term 'Enlightenment' draws on the notion of light as human progress and knowledge.

Due to this long-standing tradition, it is not surprising that metaphors of darkness and light feature prevalently in Holocaust testimony.[20] Indeed, as seen in chapters 3 and 4, survivors turned to familiar and existing images and metaphors to describe their experiences. For example, Auschwitz is frequently compared to hell, or it is viewed metaphorically as a nightmare, both of which are associated with darkness. However, there is another reason why metaphors

[19] Avis, p. 54.
[20] Langer notes, for example, that darkness and light are key themes in the Holocaust poetry of Celan and Nelly Sachs, see: *Art from the Ashes*, p. 600.

of darkness and light are so widely used. Reiter attributes this to the importance of nature for the prisoners in the Lager. She writes that the 'varying natural conditions made a great impression upon them: they enjoyed the dramatic sight of a sunrise or sunset, as welcome distraction from an everyday existence that offered no aesthetic pleasure'.[21] Indeed, Levi himself notes one such instance in the aptly-titled chapter 'Una buona giornata' of *Se questo è un uomo*. In the camp, the sun played a dual role, providing both well-being and aesthetic pleasure:

> Oggi per la prima volta il sole è sorto vivo e nitido fuori dell'orizzonte di fango. È un sole polacco freddo bianco e lontano, e non riscalda che l'epidermide, ma quando si è sciolto dalle ultime brume un mormorio è corso sulla nostra moltitudine senza colore, e quando io pure ho sentito il tepore attraverso i panni, ho compreso come si possa adorare il sole. (*Op*, I, 66)

Conceptual metaphors of sun and light, or the absence of light, appear throughout Levi's poetry, in an attempt to give the reader an insight into his Holocaust experience. The metaphors can be interpreted on numerous levels, as we will see. Levi's first poem, 'Crescenzago', composed in February 1943, refers to the period of time he spent working in 1942-43 for a Swiss-owned company in Crescenzago, Milan, before deportation to Auschwitz.[22] Although this poem is not explicitly about the Holocaust, it sets the scene prior to the horrific event, so it is worthy of discussion. Levi also writes about everyday life under Mussolini's dictatorship in his later work *Il sistema periodico*, and in the chapter 'Fosforo' he narrates his experience at Crescenzago. Even amidst the

[21] Reiter, p. 118.
[22] Thomson gives some useful biographical and historical information about Levi's time at Crescenzago, see *Primo Levi*, pp. 117-28.

uncertainties and difficulties of the anti-Semitic war years in Italy, some ounce of normality was still possible, or, rather, one could pretend that life was normal. As Levi comments in *Il sistema periodico*: 'Ciascuno di noi faceva il suo lavoro giorno per giorno […]. Andavamo a teatro ed ai concerti, che qualche volta si interrompevano a mezzo perché suonavano le sirene dell'allarme aereo […]. La nostra ignoranza ci concedeva di vivere' (*Op*, I, 850-51).

This sense of ordinariness and relative safety is portrayed in the opening lines of the poem by what can be classed as a metaphor of light, in particular that of the sun rising: 'Tu forse non l'avevi mai pensato, / Ma il sole sorge pure a Crescenzago' (*Op*, II, 519). At Crescenzago, in other words, before Auschwitz, there is the security that the sun will always rise, bringing with it renewed hope and a new day. Life will go on in a constant cycle. However, in the first chapter of *Se questo è un uomo*, we are presented with a very negative sunrise. The rising of the sun at Fossoli is portrayed in cynical terms, it is anthropomorphised as a traitor: 'L'alba ci colse come un tradimento; come se il nuovo sole si associasse agli uomini nella deliberazione di distruggerci' (*Op*, I, 10). The rising of the sun does bring a new day, but unlike at Crescenzago, it does not bring life, instead it brings death, since the prisoners are to be sent to Auschwitz. Levi's final night in Italy is depicted in a similar way in the poem 'Il tramonto di Fossoli', which will be discussed in detail below.

In the poem 'Crescenzago', Levi juxtaposes the scene of normality with one that shows the real dangers of the period, a premonition of things to come.

In the second stanza, the imagery of blackness can be read as a metaphor representing the threat of Fascism:

> Dai monti il vento viene a gran carriera,
> Libero corre l'infinito piano.
> Ma quando scorge questa ciminiera
> Ratto si volge e fugge via lontano
> Ché il fumo è cosí nero e attossicato
> Che il vento teme che gli mozzi il fiato. (*Op*, II, 519)

The poisoned black smoke (although literally referring to the smoke from the factories in Crescenzago) is an apt metaphor for Fascism, not least because of the regime's association with the colour black. Like the black smoke Levi describes, Fascism is poisonous, dangerous and frightening.[23] Just as the wind, which is anthropomorphised in the poem, fears that the black smoke will take away its breath, the Jews feared that Fascism would take their lives. Consequently, many Jews, like the wind in Levi's poem, fled from the 'black' enemy in order to seek safety. One such Jew who fled was the infamous Anne Frank, whom Levi memorialises in his poem 'La bambina di Pompei'. Interestingly, poisonous black air also features in this later poem, written in 1978, however, it acts as a metaphor for the destruction caused by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius rather than relating explicitly to the Holocaust:

> Poiché l'angoscia di ciascuno è la nostra
> Ancora riviviamo la tua, fanciulla scarna
> Che ti sei stretta convulsamente a tua madre
> Quasi volessi ripenetrare in lei
> Quando al meriggio *il cielo si è fatto nero*.

[23] In the chapter 'Ferro' of *Il sistema periodico*, Levi uses similar imagery to describe Fascism. He writes about 'il puzzo delle verità fasciste che ammorbava il cielo' (*Op*, I, 775). Although he does not use images of blackness, and he is talking about smell rather than smoke, his description of Fascism tainting the skies implies a dark, dangerous enemy.

> Invano, perché *l'aria volta in veleno*
> È filtrata a cercarti per le finestre serrate
> Della tua casa tranquilla dalle robuste pareti
> Lieta già del tuo canto e del tuo timido riso.
> (*Op*, II, 549, emphasis added)

Again, Levi uses the colour black to portray danger and annihilation. The disaster at Pompeii can by extension be seen as a metaphor for Auschwitz. In particular, the phrase 'l'aria volta in veleno' recalls the poison used in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. However, it must be noted that what happened at Pompeii was a natural disaster, whereas Auschwitz was an unnatural, man-made tragedy.

We do not know whether Levi intended the black smoke in the poem 'Crescenzago' to be read as a metaphor for Fascism. In fact, we can never know exactly what the poet intended, and this is one of the strengths of poetry. As Oswald Hanfling notes, 'the awareness of alternative interpretations is [...] part of the charm of reading poetry'.[24] Indeed, each text (poetry or prose) has multiple layers and meanings, and, authorial intention is not the only way to interpret a piece of writing, as seen most forcefully by Barthes who declared the 'death of the author' and Foucault who questioned 'what is an author?'.[25]

Nonetheless, we do know that Fascism influenced Levi to write poetry during the period before deportation, as he explains in *Il sistema periodico*:

---

[24] Oswald Hanfling, 'Paradoxes of Aesthetic Distance', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43/2 (2003), 175-86 (p. 183).

[25] See Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-48, and Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 101-20.

> tutti scrivevamo poesie […]. Scrivere poesie tristi e crepuscolari, e neppure tanto belle, mentre il mondo era in fiamme, non ci sembrava né strano né vergognoso: ci proclamavamo nemici del fascismo, ma in effetti il fascismo aveva operato su di noi, come su quasi tutti gli italiani, estraniandoci e facendoci diventare superficiali, passivi e cinici. (*Op*, I, 849-50)

Although it is not an explicit poem about the Holocaust, 'Crescenzago' does serve as a warning of things to come. It can be discussed alongside 'Buna', an explicit Holocaust poem, written soon after Levi's return home, in December 1945. The chimney and smoke in 'Crescenzago' are a chilling foreshadowing of the landscape of Auschwitz, which is evoked in 'Buna', a poem about Levi's experience as a slave labourer at the rubber plant in Monowitz. Levi, however, would have had no idea of the significance of chimneys at the time of writing 'Crescenzago'. It is only after the Holocaust that the reader interprets the poem in this way. After Auschwitz, our thinking has been changed irrevocably, as Rosenfeld comments: 'The nature and magnitude of the Holocaust were such as to mark, almost certainly, the end of one era of consciousness and the beginning of another. [...] The human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same as it was before'.[26] Consequently, innocuous images such as chimneys, and piles of shoes, suitcases and hair have become metonyms for Auschwitz. They have assumed a new, symbolic (and often clichéd) meaning in the post-Holocaust era.

This raises the question of reading with hindsight. Reader response theory shows that it is inevitable that the reader uses his or her existing knowledge to interpret a text. Terry Eagleton, for example, points out that 'all readers are

---

[26] Alvin Rosenfeld, 'The Problematics of Holocaust Literature', in Rosenfeld and Greenberg (eds), *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, pp. 1-30 (pp. 1-2).

socially and historically positioned, and how they interpret literary works will be deeply shaped by this fact'.[27] This is particularly pertinent to poetry, since, in general, much more involvement on the part of the reader is required to decipher the high levels of imagery which poetry employs. Furthermore, Eagleton comments that:

> Poetry is a language which comes without [...] contextual clues, and which therefore has to be reconstructed by the reader in the light of a context which will make sense of it. And such contexts are in [...] plentiful supply. Yet they are not just arbitrary either: on the contrary, they are shaped in turn by the cultural contexts by which the reader makes sense of the world in general.[28]

It is very difficult for post-Holocaust readers not to identify the chimneys and smoke of 'Crescenzago' with what happened at Auschwitz. Indeed, Wallace Martin suggests that the success of poems lies in their ability of 'remain[ing] open to varied interpretations governed by needs and expectations that could not have been imagined when they were written'.[29] Steven Mailloux identifies two possible ways of interpreting poetry: 'historicizing' and 'allegorizing'. The former involves looking at the text in the historical context of its production, while the latter looks at the 'second, more universal level of meaning beyond its particular historical reference'.[30] Mailloux suggests that while both methods are

---

[27] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 72.
[28] Eagleton, *How To Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 109.
[29] Wallace Martin, 'Interpretation', in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 614-19 (p. 617).
[30] Steven Mailloux, 'Interpretation', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd edn (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 121-34 (p. 124).

equally valid, it is beneficial to adopt both techniques for a comprehensive and enlightened understanding of the text.

Returning to the poem 'Buna', it is interesting to note that although Levi uses imagery of chimneys and smoke in the poem, the smoke is not black as in 'Crescenzago', but grey:

> Piedi piagati e terra maledetta,
> Lunga la schiera nei grigi mattini.
> Fuma la Buna dai mille camini,
> Un giorno come ogni giorno ci aspetta. (*Op*, II, 521)

Indeed, everything about the Lager is grey, Levi even describes the prisoner in the poem as a 'compagno grigio'. Similar imagery appears in *Se questo è un uomo*, in the chapter 'Una buona giornata', where Levi describes the camp and the prisoners in terms of greyness: 'tutto è grigio intorno, e noi siamo grigi' (*Op*, I, 66).

Whilst both the poem and prose use the colour grey as a metaphor, they do so in different ways, which are equally striking and effective. In the above quote from *Se questo è un uomo*, the greyness of the Lager is summed up in one neat sentence, by two individual (but interrelated) metaphors. They are explicit, one-off metaphors, whereas in the poem, greyness is used both as a series of individual, explicit metaphors ('nei grigi mattini' and 'compagno grigio') but also as an extended metaphor. This is typical of the differences between Levi's poetry and prose. His prose generally follows a 'scientific' pattern, neatly and purposefully moving from one point to another. On the other hand, his poetry is more haphazard and circular; it is not progressive, as shown by the mixture of individual and extended metaphors on the theme of greyness in 'Buna'. Levi

often repeats the same theme or image in a poem, whereas his prose contains a number of different images, as seen in the previous chapter, where Levi moved from the aquarium simile to the metaphor of hell in *Se questo è un uomo*.

In 'Buna', greyness is evoked throughout the poem, for example in the imagery of emptiness ('compagno vuoto'). Grey is a non-colour, which could be associated with a void, or nothingness. Not only are the prisoners grey, but they are empty and lifeless. The camp has metaphorically, and literally, taken the life, or colour, out of them. This metaphor of emptiness is carried across his poetry; it also appears, for example, in the generally non-metaphorical poem 'Shemà':

> Considerate se questa è una donna,
> Senza capelli e senza nome [...]
> Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
> Come una rana d'inverno. (*Op*, II, 525)

The prisoners do not possess anything of their former existence; they have been stripped of their identity as individual human beings. Levi tends to repeat metaphors such as those of emptiness to highlight the importance of the image or experience he is describing.

In 'Buna', Levi juxtaposes life in the camp with that of the outside world, and the latter is portrayed by a metaphor of light. At the end of the poem Levi directs a question to his 'compagno grigio', asking:

> Se ancora ci trovassimo davanti
> Lassù nel dolce mondo sotto il sole,
> Con quale viso ci staremmo a fronte? (*Op*, II, 521)

This question is also aimed at the reader; we have to imagine what Levi and his companion would look like, or more generally, what sort of people they would

have become after the horrors of the Lager. Would they be full of colour and life, or would the evil shadow of Auschwitz still haunt them?

At the same time, the question hints at whether the survivors would be able to look one another in the eye after their horrific experience: would they be overwhelmed with shame? This brings to mind another metaphor involving the colour grey: 'la zona grigia', which Levi uses to refer to the blurring of morals in the Lager. In order to survive, it was necessary to adapt to the harsh and base environment of the Lager, and this often involved some sort of moral compromise. Levi stresses, however, that those who survived cannot be judged by our normal moral codes; they belong to a 'grey area', which is unique to Auschwitz. Nonetheless, many survivors were plagued by shame and guilt for having survived. Levi writes about this in his poem 'Il superstite' (composed in 1984), where the colour grey appears yet again. Here, it is used to describe the ghosts of Auschwitz who haunt those who survived:

> Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni
> Lividi nella prima luce,
> Grigi di polvere di cemento,
> Indistinti per nebbia, […].
> 'Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa,
> Andate. Non ho soppiantato nessuno...' (*Op*, II, 576)

As with metaphors of blackness, Levi juxtaposes greyness with light. However, in 'Il superstite', light does not refer to life outside the Lager, instead it refers to life inside the camps. Light is illuminating the faces of Levi's dead companions, it is highlighting the grey cloud of Auschwitz which looms constantly over Levi.

So, the greyness of survival is almost more bleak than the greyness of being in the Lager itself.

Levi writes about this constant reminder of his painful past in two other poems, 'Il canto del corvo' (written in January 1946) and 'Il canto del corvo II' (written in August 1953). As the titles suggest, both poems are told from the point of view of the raven, which is indicated by the presence of speech marks, and the use of the first-person singular (except in the final stanza of the first poem, where a third-person narrator is used). Ravens are generally associated with the colour black, and Levi explicitly makes a reference to blackness in both poems: 'le ali nere' (*Op*, II, 524) in the first poem, and 'la mia piccola ombra nera' in the second (*Op*, II, 538). As mentioned earlier, black is usually used as a metaphor for evil, and in the two poems the black raven creates a sense of malevolence.[31] In fact, the raven can be read as a metaphor for the Lager, which comes back to haunt the survivors. In the poems, the raven is the bearer of bad news,[32] who seeks out its victim from far away, and who will follow him 'ai

[31] In *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1990) Sara Lipton comments that 'the raven was linked in a general way with evil in many Christian exegetical texts' (p. 44). She cites the example of the raven who failed to return to Noah's ark after being sent in search of land. She also discusses how the Jews were depicted negatively as ravens in medieval Christian writings. For example, according to *The Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc: originally written in 1210-11*, trans. by George Claridge Druce (Ashford, Kent: Printed for private circulation by Headly brothers, 1936), the night raven 'indicates Jews who rejected God […] [and] are in darkness / And see not the truth' (lines 615, 653-54).

[32] The opening lines of 'Il canto del corvo' read 'Sono venuto di molto lontano / Per portare mala novella' (*Op*, II, 524). This recalls one of the most powerful passages of *Se questo è un uomo*, where Levi writes that: 'Nessuno deve uscire di qui, che potrebbe portare al mondo, insieme col segno impresso nella carne, la *mala novella* di quanto, ad Auschwitz, è bastato animo all'uomo di fare dell'uomo' (emphasis added, *Op*, I, 49).

confini del mondo'. The raven, like the Lager, will always be with the survivors, like a black shadow, or a nightmare.

The following section will continue the discussion of metaphors of darkness and light, looking in particular at the notion of the extinguishing of light, which is used as a metaphor for death in Levi's poetry.

5.4 'Quando la breve luce è spenta'

As well as being used as a metaphor for evil, darkness is also associated traditionally with death. Light, on the other hand, is commonly used as a metaphor for life, and the process of dying is frequently expressed by images such as the burning out of a flame. This extinguishing of life is referred to in Italian by the verb 'spegnere'. Levi uses this as a metaphor throughout his poetry and prose to describe death, and it is especially prevalent in poems relating to the Holocaust. One of the most striking examples is found in 'Il tramonto di Fossoli' (written in February 1946), which recounts Levi's final night at the Fossoli detention camp, before deportation to Auschwitz. Here, Levi uses imagery of a sunset to reflect the situation he found himself in:

> Io so cosa vuol dire non tornare.
> A traverso il filo spinato
> Ho visto il sole scendere e morire;
> Ho sentito lacerarmi la carne
> Le parole del vecchio poeta:
> 'Possono i soli cadere e tornare:
> A noi, quando la breve luce è spenta,
> Una notte infinita è da dormire' (*Op*, II, 531)

The setting sun is a metaphor for Levi's exit from the normal world to the *univers concentrationnaire*. Just as the sun descended, or 'died', at Fossoli, Levi

and his companions died spiritually, or metaphorically, on that final night in the land of the living. At the end of the poem, Levi quotes the poet Catullus to reinforce the idea of death: 'A noi, quando la breve luce è spenta, / Una notte infinita è da dormire'.

But, as we saw earlier, the sun *does* rise at Fossoli, as Levi describes in *Se questo è un uomo*. So, here we have an example of Levi using imagery of the sun differently in his poetry and prose. In his poetry we know that the sun did not literally die at Fossoli, it is a metaphor for Levi's entry to the *univers concentrationnaire*, which is marked by a metaphorical dying.

As seen in the previous chapter, the notion of night, which is associated with darkness, is another common metaphor for death. Although Levi did not die at Auschwitz, he was haunted by it for the rest of his life, as the previously mentioned poems 'Il canto del corvo' and 'Il canto del corvo II' show. Auschwitz and its aftermath were, in the words of Catullus, one perpetual night to be endured. As Nezri-Dufour notes: 'Ne 'Il tramonto di Fossoli' [...] il persistere di Levi nell'universo indicibile e infernale della deportazione è suggerito attraverso l'incubo della notte eterna, di un universo senza speranza né avvenire'.[33] It was only in the physical act of dying that Levi was finally freed from the darkness of the Lager.

Levi also discusses the 'darkness' of life in the much later poem 'Via Cigna', composed in 1973. Once again, light, in particular that of the sun, appears as a metaphor for life. Although it is not directly about Auschwitz, the poem can be read as an allegory for the post-Holocaust era. Levi's inspiration

[33] Nezri-Dufour, p. 113.

for this rather pessimistic poem is the busy Via Cigna in Turin. Levi uses the somewhat unlikely metaphor of 'i semafori' to contemplate the future:

> Forse non esiste piú il sole.
> Forse sarà buio sempre: eppure
> In altre notti ridevano le Pleiadi.
> Forse è questa l'eternità che ci attende:
> Non il grembo del Padre, ma frizione,
> Freno, frizione, ingranare la prima.
> Forse l'eternità sono i semafori. (*Op*, II, 545)

Levi suggests that the future will be dark, the sun will no longer exist, and the only source of light will come from traffic lights. Our future, like traffic lights, will be a continuous cycle of stopping and starting ('Freno, frizione'); we will go nowhere. Levi is hinting that life, or specifically post-Holocaust life, is futile. Our future is bleak, in fact, dark. In the short story 'Lumini rossi' of *Vizio di forma* (1971), composed before the poem 'Via Cigna', Levi also uses traffic lights to comment on human life. The language used is strikingly similar to the poem 'Via Cigna', as the following extract shows: 'Freno, frizione, dentro la prima. Acceleratore, frizione, seconda, acceleratore, freno, prima, freno ancora, il semaforo è rosso. Sono quaranta secondi e sembrano quarant'anni, chissà perché: non c'è tempo piú lungo di quello che si passa ai semafori' (*VF*, in *Op*, I, 627).

Perhaps Levi is using the repetitive and never-ending cycle of traffic lights as a metaphor for the monotonous and futile daily routine of the Lager, as described in *Se questo è un uomo*: 'Tale sarà la nostra vita. Ogni giorno, secondo il ritmo prestabilito, Ausrücken ed Einrücken, uscire e rientrare; lavorare, dormire e mangiare; ammalarsi, guarire o morire' (*Op*, I, 30). If this is the case,

then the line from 'Via Cigna' which reads 'Forse l'eternità sono i semafori', could be referring to the eternal nature of the Lager. This is a recurrent theme of Levi's poetry as seen above, and it is often portrayed by a metaphor of the absence of light. The everlasting nature of the Lager is also seen in the poem 'Alzarsi' and at the end of *La tregua*, as discussed in the previous chapter.

5.5 Dehumanisation and death

As we have seen, survivors found it difficult to come to terms with and express the horrors of Auschwitz. The dehumanisation of the victims is one of the most indescribable phenomena of the *univers concentrationnaire*. As seen in chapter 4, survivors such as Levi used animal and puppet imagery in an attempt to convey the loss of humanity in the camps. For example, imagery of beasts of burden, sheep and dogs appear throughout *Se questo è un uomo* to describe the dehumanisation of the prisoners. In stark contrast, in his poetry, Levi tends to move away from animal metaphors and adopts the more unusual imagery of plants and trees to describe the prisoners. At first it may seem strange to use plant imagery, however, biologically, plants are even further away from humans than animals, which highlights the extent of the dehumanisation of the prisoners. In fact, a hierarchy of living and non-living entities can be detected in Levi's Holocaust writing, with humans at the top, followed by animals, then plants, and finally inanimate entities such as machines.[34]

The dehumanisation of the prisoners was part of the Nazis' plan to kill those incarcerated, and death is another of the main themes of Levi's Holocaust

[34] See Santagostino's cycle of degradation.

poetry. We have already seen how Levi uses the traditional metaphors of darkness and light to describe the difficult and emotional subject of death in Auschwitz. Another way of overcoming the descriptive problems associated with death in the camps is to compare it to the dying of plants. Whilst some may argue that this creates a false sense of reality, it does allow survivors such as Levi to express the horrific nature of the killings in a more manageable way. Moreover, death has long been portrayed in this manner, as Old Testament writers such as Isaiah proclaim: 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall'.[35]

'Agave' is an example of one of Levi's poems which deploys plant imagery to describe death. Despite being written in 1983, nearly forty years after Levi's imprisonment in Auschwitz, and telling the tale of a yukka-like plant, echoes of the Lager can be detected. The agave can be seen as a metaphor for the 'mussulmani' of the camps. Like the plant, which is described in the poem as being neither 'utile né bella', and which is 'muta' (*Op*, II, 571), the 'mussulmani' are similarly useless, pitiful and mute: 'i Muselmänner, i sommersi, il nerbo del campo; loro, la massa anonima, continuamente rinnovata e sempre identica, dei non-uomini che marciano e faticano in silenzio' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 86).[36] Both the agave and the 'mussulmani' are destined to die, and both give out clear signs of their imminent death. The plant flowers only once, and as the agave (who is the speaker of the poem) notes, this is 'il nostro modo di gridare che / Morrò domani' (*Op*, II, 571). The flower grows tall towards the

[35] Isaiah 40.6-8.
[36] For further discussion on the 'mussulmani', see Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005), pp. 37-80.

sky: 'Ho aspettato molti anni prima di esprimere / Questo mio fiore altissimo e disperato, / Brutto, legnoso, rigido, ma teso al cielo' (*Op*, II, 571). The 'mussulmani', however, are incapable of standing up tall, and their demise is signalled by the drooping of their heads: 'se potessi racchiudere in una immagine tutto il male del nostro tempo, sceglierei questa immagine, [...]: un uomo scarno, dalla fronte china e dalle spalle curve' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 86). The 'mussulmani' wither away until they literally drop dead, falling like the heads of dead flowers. This recalls what Job says about the death of man: 'He springs up like a flower and withers away, like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure'.[37]

Interestingly, in *La tregua* Levi explicitly uses plant imagery to describe one of the prisoners who has been particularly affected by the dehumanising effects of the Lager: 'Nessuno di noi sapeva chi fosse costui, perché non era in grado di parlare. Era una larva, un ometto calvo, nodoso *come una vite*, scheletrico, accartocciato da una orribile contrattura di tutti i muscoli' (*Op*, I, 213; emphasis added). This plant imagery, especially that of twisted roots, also appears in the poem 'Cuore di legno', which Levi wrote in 1980 about his 'vicino di casa', a horse-chestnut tree:

> Non vive bene. Gli calpestano le radici
> I tram numero otto e diciannove
> Ogni cinque minuti; ne rimane intronato
> E cresce storto, come se volesse andarsene. (*Op*, II, 554)

The life of the tree has been hard, which is reminiscent of life in the Lager, and this harsh existence has affected the appearance of the tree, just as the camps affected the prisoners physically, as the above example of the anonymous

[37] Job 14.2.

Häftling shows. Despite the ravages of daily life, the tree still has hope for the future: 'nel suo tardo cuore di legno / Sente e gode il tornare delle stagioni' (*Op*, II, 554). It knows it will flower again the following year.

Levi uses the metaphor of flowering to describe the prisoners' return to life after Auschwitz. They died metaphorically in the Lager but will blossom again, as Levi notes about himself: 'Paradossalmente, il mio bagaglio di memorie atroci diventava una ricchezza, un seme; mi pareva, scrivendo, di crescere come una pianta' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 873). Levi's memories of Auschwitz are like seeds, and he is sowing these seeds by bearing witness. In doing so, Levi hopes to achieve something positive out of the atrocious experience of the Lager. As he writes: 'Noi siamo infatti persuasi che nessuna umana esperienza sia vuota di senso e indegna di analisi, e che anzi valori fondamentali, anche se non sempre positivi, si possano trarre da questo particolare mondo di cui narriamo' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 83). One poem which conveys such positivity, despite being one of Levi's most bitter pieces of writing on the Holocaust, is 'Per Adolf Eichmann'. Hope for the future is evoked in this poem through the use of natural imagery. Freedom is represented by imagery of the wind (as in the poem 'Crescenzago'), and Levi again uses the metaphor of flowering to demonstrate optimism and rebirth:

> Corre libero il vento per le nostre pianure,
> Eterno pulsa il mare vivo alle nostre spiagge.
> L'uomo feconda la terra, la terra gli dà fiori e frutti:
> Vive in travaglio e in gioia, spera e teme, procrea dolci figli.
> (*Op*, II, 549)

Despite the Nazis' aim of destroying the prisoners and all memory of the camps, this poem defies their hideous actions. Both the physical act of Levi's testimony and the message it contains are victories for the human spirit. However, Eichmann, the 'creatura deserta, uomo cerchiato di morte' will be haunted forever by his inhuman crimes. Levi condemns him to a life of eternal suffering, which is represented by a metaphor of darkness, one of the most common metaphors of Levi's poetic output:

> O figlio della morte, non ti auguriamo la morte.
> Possa tu vivere a lungo quanto nessuno mai visse:
> Possa tu vivere insonne cinque milioni di notti,
> E visitarti ogni notte la doglia di ognuno che vide
> Rinserrarsi la porta che tolse la via del ritorno
> Intorno a sé farsi buio, l'aria gremirsi di morte. (*Op*, II, 549)

An interesting contrast to imagery from the natural world is mechanical imagery. Whilst this is more common in Levi's prose, as we will see in chapters 7 and 8 on science and creation, it nonetheless plays an important role in Levi's Holocaust poems. Whereas the underlying concern in Levi's 'scientific' short stories is the danger of treating machines as if they are human, in Levi's Holocaust poems, the main theme is the danger of treating humans as machines.[38] In the Lager, the prisoners lost their autonomy and behaved mechanically, which formed part of the Nazis' plan to dehumanise and ultimately destroy them. This 'mechanisation' is portrayed in the poem 'Lunedí', which has obvious links to the Lager and which was composed shortly

[38] In *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment*, Ross argues that the dangers inherent in a failure to distinguish properly between the human and the mechanical (both in the sense of humans treated as machines and in that of machines treated as humans) forms a key recurring theme in Levi's short stories.

after Levi's return home, in January 1946, when the memory of the camp was still fresh:

> Che cosa è piú triste di un treno?
> Che parte quando deve,
> Che non ha che una voce,
> Che non ha che una strada.
> Niente è piú triste di un treno
> O forse un cavallo da tiro.
> È chiuso fra due stanghe,
> Non può neppure guardarsi a lato.
> La sua vita è camminare.
>
> E un uomo? Non è triste un uomo?
> Se vive a lungo in solitudine
> Se crede che il tempo è concluso
> Anche un uomo è una cosa triste. (*Op*, II, 527)

The train in the first stanza can be read as a metaphor for the prisoners in the camp. In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi describes how trains were used to transport the heavy material needed for work in Buna (*Op*, I, 53). However, the prisoners themselves were also used to carry backbreaking material in the camps. One such prisoner who, like the train in 'Lunedí' behaves mechanically, without any hesitation, is Null Achtzehn:

> Eseguisce tutti gli ordini che riceve [...]. Non possiede la rudimentale astuzia dei cavalli da traino, che smettono di tirare un po' prima di giungere all'esaurimento: ma tira o porta o spinge finché le forze glielo permettono, poi cede di schianto, senza una parola di avvertimento, senza sollevare dal suolo gli occhi tristi e opachi (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 37).

Null Achtzehn is completely 'vuoto'. He cannot even be considered on the same level as a draught horse, which also appears as a metaphor for the prisoners in the second stanza of the poem, since he does not try to avoid the crippling labour. He has been reduced to a mere machine, incapable of thinking or acting

independently. As a result he can no longer be classed as a 'uomo', as described in the final stanza of the poem. He is the epitome of the 'mussulmani', that is those whose 'scintilla divina' is 'spenta' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 86). He has decided that his 'tempo è concluso'.

In contrast, in *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi describes how the machines are more 'alive' than the prisoners: 'nulla è vivo se non macchine e schiavi: e piú quelle di questi' (*Op*, I, 67). The digger in Buna, for example, is anthropomorphised; it 'eats' soil: 'La benna, sospesa ai cavi, spalanca le mascelle dentate, si libra un attimo come esitante nella scelta, poi si avventa alla terra argillosa e morbida, e azzanna vorace, mentre dalla cabina di comando sale uno sbuffo soddisfatto di fumo bianco e denso' (*Op*, I, 69). Unlike the train and horse in the poem 'Lunedí', which are metaphors for the prisoners, the digger seems to be able to think. In the Lager the roles have been reversed, the machines are more 'human' than the prisoners, and the prisoners are more machine-like than the machines. As in the poem 'Shemà', Levi asks us in 'Lunedí' to consider if this is a man, concluding that 'Anche un uomo è una cosa triste', with 'triste' being a euphemism for the degradation of humankind in Auschwitz.

5.6 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, despite some opinions to the contrary, not only is it possible to write poetry after Auschwitz, but it is possible to write poetry *about* Auschwitz. Through the indirectness of poetry and metaphor the reader is able

to imagine the unimaginable. Levi's poetry presents us with some of the most striking and forceful insights into the workings of the *univers concentrationnaire*. He achieves this by using a number of key images which come to stand as metaphors for Auschwitz. Among these images are darkness and light, nature, in particular plants, and machines. Levi takes these commonplace images and adapts them in inventive ways to express figuratively the horrors that he witnessed in the Lager.

Although these images also appear in his prose, they often have a heightened impact in his poetry, since they are more open to interpretation. The reader has to make more of an effort to decode the metaphors in poetry because they do not come with the contextual clues which narrative generally provides. For this reason it is interesting to consider the use of metaphor in Levi's poetry alongside and in comparison with the way in which figurative language is used in his prose, and this process enables a much fuller picture to be drawn of the techniques which he adopts in his writing generally in the face of the inexpressible experience of Auschwitz.

As we have seen, Levi's poetry makes use of a powerful combination of individual and extended metaphors, with a small number of metaphors, such as the rising and setting of the sun, appearing across different poems and forming a sort of *leitmotif* in his poetic output. This re-use of key images across and within works of both prose and poetry, testimony and fiction, is a characteristic part of Levi's writing as a whole, it is not limited to his poetry. The penultimate chapter

of this thesis will analyse further Levi's recycling of themes and metaphors as part of its exploration of metafiction in Levi's works.

My next chapter, however, will bring to a close my analysis of the employment of metaphorical language in Levi's treatment of the Holocaust, looking at Levi's use of religious imagery to describe this event, and concentrating in particular on *La tregua* and *Se non ora, quando?*

Chapter 6: Metaphors of a New Bible: Religious and Figurative Language

6.1 Introduction

The history of the Jewish people, as mentioned in chapter 3, is characterised by tragedy, notably the destruction of the First and Second Temples (*churban*) and the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt.[1] Levi himself expresses the catastrophic nature of Jewish history, which is imprinted indelibly on the memory of its people:

> La memoria ebraica è una memoria sofferta, memoria di una catena di eventi tragici persi nelle pieghe della storia. Ma sempre vivi. È una memoria che ha tesaurizzato, cumulato la tragedia. La memoria italiana si ferma al Risorgimento e a Garibaldi. [...] La memoria ebraica va invece fino al Mar Rosso o ancora più indietro ai tempi di Abramo e dell'impero assiro-babilonese.[2]

Adolf Rudnicki comments that 'no other nation has so many synonyms for suffering as have the Jews [...]. Everyone knows that what the Germans did during the Second World War has no equivalent in history, yet it was all contained within the Jews' ancient vocabulary'.[3] This recourse to the vocabulary of past suffering appears in the testimonial accounts of Holocaust survivors including Levi. Survivors turned to the archetypal tragedies described in the Hebrew Bible and used them as metaphors for their own horrific experiences. As Young writes, 'ancient biblical legends – like the destruction of Sodom and

[1] The term *churban* is also used by some to denote the events of the Holocaust.
[2] From a 1982 interview with Fiona Diwan entitled 'Corriere medico', cited in Marco Belpoliti, *Primo Levi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), pp. 71-72.
[3] Adolf Rudnicki, *Ascent to Heaven*, trans. H. C. Stevens (London: Dobson, 1951), p. 23; cited in Sidra Ezrahi, 'The Holocaust Writer and the Lamentation Tradition: Responses to Catastrophe in Jewish Literature', in Rosenfeld and Greenberg (eds), *Confronting the Holocaust*, pp. 133-49 (p. 134).

Gomorrah, the Akedah or the Exodus – [...] all become archetypal events by which new disasters are measured and understood'.[4] Survivors saw in the suffering of their ancestors, parallels with their own situation. In fact, Levi describes the stories of Auschwitz as 'storie di una nuova Bibbia' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 60). As Levi states, the stories of the Lager are much more tragic and incomprehensible than those of the Bible. Furthermore, it can be argued that the events of the Holocaust present even greater representational difficulties for the writer aiming to present their true nature to the reader. Nonetheless, the Bible provides useful conceptual metaphors for describing the indescribable world of the Holocaust.

The aim of this chapter is to show that despite Levi proclaiming not to be religious, religion played an important part in his writing, as illustrated by the use of biblical imagery in his testimony. This chapter will examine the main biblical metaphors that Levi used to describe the Holocaust, in order to look at how and why he used certain religious images to reveal insights into his experience of the Lager. One of the most important and recurrent religious metaphors used by Levi to describe the Holocaust is that of exile, and this often appears alongside the associated metaphor of exodus. In fact, conceptual metaphors of exile and exodus are used to structure both *La tregua* and *Se non ora, quando?*, which are, incidentally, the most religiously-informed texts of Levi's output. This chapter will therefore concentrate on these two 'journey stories', but will also make reference to *Se questo è un uomo* and Levi's other Holocaust writing such as the 'Passato prossimo' section of *Lilít*. I will examine

[4] Young, *Writing and Rewriting*, p. 95.

how Levi uses the religious metaphors of exile and exodus to describe his own experience of the Holocaust, but also that of others, either real people or imaginary characters. As well as exploring the conceptual metaphors of exile and exodus, I will also discuss other religious metaphors which form part of Levi's biblical vocabulary, and which are linked implicitly to the themes of exile and exodus, such as the Fall, and Christian ideas of baptism. The links between these apparently unconnected religious motifs will be explained below.

6.2 Levi and religion

Before analysing the use of religious imagery in Levi's writing, it will be useful to look at Levi's Jewish background and his views on religion, since these in turn condition how and why Levi uses religious imagery.[5] Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it should be noted that Levi's relationship with religion is problematic. His opinions on the subject are often ambivalent, as shown in his writing, and also in the numerous interviews he gave throughout his career. According to Nancy Harrowitz:

> the origins of some aspects of the complexity in Levi's relation to his Judaism are to be found in his embracing of so-called "secular" or "cultural" Judaism, most commonly defined as a bond with Jewish tradition and culture that creates a Jewish identity for which religious observation is a matter of choice rather than of spiritual conviction.[6]

Another factor affecting Levi's problematical attitude to Judaism is Christianity. Levi grew up and was educated in predominantly Roman Catholic Italy, so he

---

[5] For analysis of Levi's Judaism see: Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, pp. 67-73; Nancy Harrowitz, 'Primo Levi's Jewish Identity', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 17-31; and Nezri-Dufour.

[6] Harrowitz, 'Primo Levi's Jewish Identity', p. 17.

would have been undoubtedly influenced by Christianity. In the chapter 'Argon' of *Il sistema periodico*, Levi discusses both his Jewish and Catholic influences: there were even *goyim* within his own family.[7]

However, amidst Levi's somewhat complex relationship with religion, one fundamental point is abundantly clear and consistent: he does not believe in God. He voices this explicitly on numerous occasions, such as in his interview with Ferdinando Camon, where he famously declares that 'C'è Auschwitz, quindi non può esserci Dio'.[8] Furthermore, he tells Giuseppe Grieco:

> Per me le cose stanno cosí: Dio è onnipotente o non è Dio. Ma se c'è ed è quindi onnipotente, perché permette il male? Il male esiste. Il male è il dolore. Dunque se Dio, a suo arbitrio, può ribaltare il bene in male, o soltanto lasciare che il male dilaghi sulla Terra, vuol dire che è un Dio cattivo. E quella di un Dio cattivo è un'ipotesi che mi ripugna. Cosí mi attengo all'ipotesi che mi pare piú semplice; lo nego.[9]

Despite this, he does not reject his Jewish background altogether. For example, Levi famously describes himself as four-fifths Italian and one-fifth Jewish, stressing that this Jewishness is a vital part of his identity.[10] Indeed, in 'Itinerario d'uno scrittore ebreo', written in 1982, Levi reflects on the importance of Jewishness to his secular family:

> la coscienza del proprio ebraismo non era spenta. Si manifestava nella conservazione di alcuni rituali familiari (soprattutto le feste di Rosh-Hashanà, di Pesach e di Purim), nell'importanza che veniva riconosciuta allo studio ed all'educazione, ed in una modesta ma interessante differenziazione linguistica. (*PS*, in *Op*, II, 1214)

---

[7] For example, one of Levi's uncles (Grassiadiô) married a Christian (Ausilia) (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 745).
[8] Ferdinando Camon, *Conversazione con Primo Levi* (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), p. 72.
[9] From Levi's interview with Giuseppe Grieco, 'Io e Dio', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 282-90 (p. 286).
[10] See Marco Belpoliti, 'Io sono un centauro', p. xvii.

Similarly, in the interview with Grieco, he notes: 'L'essere ebreo, per me, è una questione di "identità": una "identità" della quale [...] non intendo spogliarmi'.[11] Jewishness is clearly part of Levi's make-up. However, this 'identity' is purely cultural rather than religious, and only came to be felt strongly by Levi after his experience in Auschwitz, as he explains to Greer:

> Poiché i miei genitori sono ebrei, mi sono costruito una cultura ebraica, ma molto tardi, dopo la guerra. Quando sono ritornato, mi sono trovato in possesso di una cultura supplementare e ho cercato di svilupparla. Ma non è mai stato cosí per la religione. È come se il mio senso religioso sia stato amputato. Non ne ho mai avuto uno.[12]

So, whereas Levi's Jewish cultural identity blossomed after Auschwitz, his 'senso religioso' was destroyed. In the Greer interview, Levi's comments seem contradictory. On the one hand he says that it was as if his sense of religion had been amputated, but he then adds that he had never had any religious feelings at all. How can something that has never existed be amputated? Levi is clearly uncertain about his views on religion. For example, despite proclaiming that he had never been religious, Levi admits that after making his Bar Mitzvah he felt compelled to 'find' God.[13] Although this period of spirituality was short lived, it is evidence that Levi did have some sort of 'senso religioso'.[14]

Indeed, Levi does not shun religion entirely; he is interested in it above all from a cultural and intellectual point of view. He is fascinated by Jewish traits such as 'l'indipendenza spirituale [...]. Anche la tradizione talmudica della

[11] Grieco, p. 284.
[12] Greer, p. 72.
[13] Grieco, p. 284.
[14] Grieco, p. 284.

discussione appassionata ma precisa, e quella della religione del Libro'.[15] Levi incorporates all these aspects in his writing. Brian Cheyette neatly sums up Levi's 'religious' status, describing him as 'a secular humanist who, nonetheless, uses the language of the Hebrew Bible in his writing'.[16] However, Levi also uses (although less frequently) the language of the Christian Bible in his writing, as we will see in the final section below. Levi's mix of Christian and Jewish influences makes his writing, and particularly his metaphors, interesting, striking and memorable.

6.3 Holocaust as exile

One of the most important (and recurring) events in Jewish history which is frequently used as a conceptual metaphor for the Holocaust, is that of exile (described in Hebrew as *Galut*). In fact, the concept of exile, in all its various forms, is at the heart of Judaism. As Robert P. Carroll comments, 'The Hebrew Bible is the book of exile. It is constituted in and by narratives and discourses of expulsion, deportation, and exile'.[17] This theme of exile begins with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden,[18] and continues with the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt, and the Babylonian exile, enforced upon the Israelites by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. Despite the obvious differences between the

[15] See Levi's interview with Edith Bruck, 'Ebreo fino a un certo punto', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 269-73 (p. 270).
[16] Brian Cheyette, 'Appropriating Primo Levi', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 67-85 (p. 78).
[17] Robert P. Carroll, 'Deportation and Diasporic Discourses in the Prophetic Literature', in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. by James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 63-85 (p. 64).
[18] The theme of the Fall will be discussed below in section 6.5.

events, Holocaust survivors, including Levi, compare their 'exile' in Auschwitz, to these well-known biblical exiles. An explicit example of this occurs in 'Itinerario d'uno scrittore ebreo', where Levi describes the Holocaust as 'una condanna, una ricaduta, un rivivere le storie bibliche di esilio e di migrazione' (*PS*, in Op, II, 1218-19). However, the Holocaust was a heightened version of the exiles narrated in the Bible. The critic, Yehoyada Amir notes that:

> The Holocaust constitutes the cruelest and most definitive essence of exile in its widest sense. [...] The actual deportation to the ghettos and the transports to the concentration and death camps, as well as the death marches, are distinct symbols of an exile that has no redress, [...] a return to chaos, so to speak.[19]

The Holocaust was much more than an exile, it involved not only the loss of home, but a loss of one's identity; it was the spiritual and physical destruction of a people. At the same time, it must also be noted that traditionally, exile is seen as a punishment for sins against God. As Amir notes: 'Exile, with all its horrors, is the decisive expression of the estrangement between the sinful nation and God'.[20] However, the Jews, and other victims of the Holocaust were totally *innocent*; they had done nothing to merit their suffering. Nonetheless, one of the main Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust is that Auschwitz is punishment for the sins of Israel. As Steven T. Katz explains: 'The classical Jewish theological doctrine of "mi-penei hata 'einu" ("because of our sins we were punished"), which was evolved in the face of earlier national calamities

[19] Yehoyada Amir, 'The Concept of Exile as a Model for Dealing with the Holocaust', in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, ed. by Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 304-17 (p. 316). The reference to 'a return to chaos' brings to mind the Fall, which will be discussed below.
[20] Amir, p. 309.

can also be applied to the Holocaust. According to this account, Israel was sinful and Auschwitz is her just retribution'.[21] Levi refutes this belief openly,[22] and he touches upon it indirectly in his novel *Se non ora, quando?*. The narrator Mendel does not agree that the Holocaust is punishment for the sins of the Jews. He believes that the Jews are unjustly treated as sacrificial scapegoats, and he criticises the Jewish biblical tradition of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which advocates this sacrifice:

> Un tempo, nel giorno dei perdoni, gli ebrei prendevano un caprone; il sacerdote gli premeva le mani sul capo, gli enumerava tutte le colpe commesse dal popolo e glieli imponeva addosso: il colpevole era lui e solo lui. Poi, carico dei peccati che non aveva commesso, lo cacciavano via nel deserto. Cosí pensano anche i gentili, anche loro hanno un agnello che si porta via i peccati del mondo. Io no, io non ci credo. (*Op*, II, 328)

This idea of sacrifice as propitiation has implicit links with the term Holocaust, itself originally a metaphor. Levi, among others, did not like the word Holocaust because of its implications of religious sacrifice.[23] It comes from the Greek *holokaustos*, a compound made up of *holos*, meaning 'whole', 'entire', or 'complete in all its parts', and *kaustos*, meaning 'burnt'.[24] In other words, it means 'total destruction by burning'. The religious, sacrificial

---

[21] Steven T. Katz, 'Jewish Faith After the Holocaust: Four Approaches', *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972), 1-17 (p. 2).

[22] Levi angrily comments in an interview with Marco Vigevani: 'Mi irritano [...] i tentativi di alcuni estremisti religiosi di interpretare lo sterminio alla maniera dei profeti: una punizione per i nostri peccati. No! questo non l'accetto: il fatto di essere insensato lo rende piú spaventoso', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 213-222 (p. 219).

[23] See Levi's interviews with Vigevani, p. 219; and Milvia Spadi, 'Capire e far capire', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 242-59 (pp. 243- 44).

[24] See Zev Garber and Bruce Zuckerman, 'Why do we call the Holocaust "The Holocaust"? An Inquiry into the Psychology of Labels', *Modern Judaism*, 9 (1989), 197-211 (pp. 198-99).

connotation of the term derives partly from the fact that *holokaustos*, and various forms of the term, appeared in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) to denote the word *'olah*, meaning a sacrifice to God.[25] Many believe that applying this religious term, albeit in a figurative form, to the massacre of the Jews is inappropriate, as Anna-Vera Sullam Caliman notes:

> To consider these people [the victims of the Nazis] martyrs and call their murder a sacrifice is a falsification of history. 'Holocaust' is a mystification, a euphemism that alters the meaning of mass murder, making it appear less violent and more acceptable by giving what was [...] a brutal massacre a mythical-religious [...] connotation.[26]

Similarly, Garber and Zuckerman note that 'to turn the Jewish genocide into a sacrifice makes it a "biblical" event rather than an event of our time – a myth rather than a reality'.[27]

The religious metaphor of exile first appears at the beginning of *Se questo è un uomo*, where Levi implicitly compares his deportation to the Lager, to the biblical exile of the Israelites: 'ci discese nell'anima, nuovo per noi, il dolore antico del popolo che non ha terra' (*Op*, I, 10). This sense of exile is 'new' to Levi because, as he writes in the chapter 'Argon' of *Il sistema periodico*, he is very deeply rooted in Piedmont, his ancestors having moved there from Spain as early as the 1500s. As Levi leaves Italy in the cattle truck, he contemplates the return journey, which to him seems impossible, since he and his companions are being exiled to death: 'mi stava nel cuore il pensiero del ritorno, e crudelmente mi rappresentavo quale avrebbe potuto essere la inumana gioia di quell'altro

[25] See Garber and Zuckerman, p. 199, and Anna-Vera Sullam Caliman, 'A Name for Extermination', *Modern Language Review*, 94/4 (1999), 978-99 (p. 986).
[26] Sullam Caliman, p. 989.
[27] Garber and Zuckerman, p. 197.

passaggio […] e mi guardai intorno, e pensai quanti, fra quella povera polvere umana, sarebbero stati toccati dal destino' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 12). The feeling of despair, of not returning home, appears throughout *Se questo è un uomo* as Levi and the prisoners are systematically worked to death, which recalls the bondage of the Israelites in exile in Egypt:

> non ritorneremo. Noi abbiamo viaggiato fin qui nei vagoni piombati; noi abbiamo visto partire verso il niente le nostre donne e i nostri bambini; noi fatti schiavi abbiamo marciato cento volte avanti e indietro alla fatica muta, spenti nell'anima prima che dalla morte anonima. (*Op*, I, 49)

Imagery of biblical slavery proliferates in *Se questo è un uomo*, and is also a feature of *Se non ora, quando?*. For example, when the members of Dov's camp, who are in grave danger of being caught by the Gestapo, contemplate the Nazis' so-called 'amnesty' (the promise that if they return to the ghetto they would not face severe reprisals, but would be made to work), Mendel is reminded of Exodus 14:

> Tornò a mente a Mendel una voce terribile di tremila anni prima, la protesta che avevano rivolta a Mosè gli ebrei incalzati dai carri del Faraone – [...] Servire gli Egizi era per noi sorte migliore che morire nel deserto –. Il Signore nostro Dio, il Padrone del Mondo, aveva diviso le acque del Mar Rosso, e i carri erano stati travolti. Chi avrebbe diviso le acque davanti agli ebrei di Novoselki? Chi li avrebbe sfamati con le quaglie e la manna? Dal cielo nero non scendeva manna, ma neve spietata. (*SNOQ*, in *Op*, II, 281)

Although Mendel does not believe in God, he frequently uses biblical references to describe his circumstances and those of his fellow partisans. In the example above, Mendel compares his situation to the biblical story of Exodus in order to highlight the absence of divine intervention: God did not save the

condemned Jews in the Holocaust. Isabel Wollaston writes that this is a common theme in Holocaust writing: 'The emphasis in the Exodus narratives on the presence of God with His Chosen People is juxtaposed against the victim/survivor's experience of God's silence or absence'.[28]

Levi also employs biblical imagery in his testimonial writing to demonstrate the absence of God. Although this is apparently paradoxical, it is typical of Levi's *modus operandi* when it comes to religion. For example, in *Il sistema periodico*, Levi explicitly compares his own oppressors, the Fascists and Nazis, to Nebuchadnezzar, the oppressor of the Jews in the sixth century BCE who brought about the destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent Babylonian exile (*Op*, I, 783). Here, albeit indirectly, Levi is again using the religious notion of exile as a metaphor for the Holocaust. But, in the same passage, Levi reaffirms his lack of religious belief, by noting that he could not recognise God, the redeemer of the Jews, amid the atrocities: 'Ma dov'era Kadosh Barukhú, "il Santo, Benedetto sia Egli", colui che spezza le catene degli schiavi e sommerge i carri degli Egizi? [...], il cielo sopra noi era silenzioso e vuoto' (*Op*, I, 783). Mendel uses strikingly similar language in *Se non ora, quando?* to describe his own despair and lack of belief in God: 'E l'Eterno, benedetto Egli sia, perché se ne stava nascosto dietro le nuvole grige della Polessia invece di soccorrere il Suo popolo?' (*Op*, II, 277). The Jews of the Holocaust were alone, they had no God to save them, unlike their Biblical ancestors.

---

[28] Isabel Wollaston, '"What can – and cannot – be said": Religious Language after the Holocaust', *Journal of Literature and Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1992), 47-56 (p. 52).

Exile is frequently associated with salvation and return, as seen in the archetypal Exodus story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt back to their homeland after a long journey in the wilderness. There was, however, no liberation or return home for those who perished in the Nazi camps or on the infamous death marches. Nonetheless for the survivors, the story of Exodus, which is a story of hope and rebirth, is frequently adopted as a metaphor to describe their freedom and return, as we will see below.

6.4 Metaphors of Exodus and the Promised Land

Just as *Se questo è un uomo* begins with a metaphor of exile, so too does *La tregua*. The epigraph of *La tregua*, the poem 'Alzarsi', contains images of returning home ('Tornare; mangiare; raccontare. / [...] Ora abbiamo ritrovato la casa'), and in the first chapter of *La tregua* Levi writes about the 'dolore dell'esilio, della casa lontana' (*Op*, I, 209).[29] As already mentioned, *La tregua* is a story of return, of Levi's much longed-for homecoming. Levi's return is a long journey composed of circuitous roaming and periods of interminable delays, which, to a certain extent, echoes the Israelites' trials during their period of wandering in the wilderness.[30] In fact, Levi uses the biblical metaphor of the

[29] Gordon also discusses the themes of exile and return in *La tregua* and *Se non ora, quando?*, in his article: '"How Much Home Does a Person Need?" Primo Levi and the Ethics of Home', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 19 (2001), 215-34 (pp. 229-31).

[30] Levi's journey home, away from the hell of Auschwitz, is also reminiscent of that of Dante in *Purgatorio*. As in Dante's *Purgatorio*, which describes a dangerous and difficult journey, the risks and obstacles are made bearable by the fact that there is a sort of 'promised land' at the end − for Dante the Earthly Paradise, for Levi his home, Turin − and this 'promised land' is also a place of 'return', since for Dante the Earthly Paradise is humanity's 'true' home, lost thanks to Adam and Eve's original sin, but re-discovered by souls after death.

Exodus to describe his situation: 'la libertà […] non ci aveva portati alla Terra Promessa. Era intorno a noi, ma sotto forma di una spietata pianura deserta. Ci aspettavano altre prove, altre fatiche, altre fami, altri geli, altre paure' (*T*, in *Op*, I, 230).

Levi is metaphorically, not physically, in 'the desert', although the conditions he faces are, to some degree, similar. The newly liberated Levi finds himself in the vast deserted plains of war-ravaged Eastern Europe. He has to overcome many trials on his journey, which, at the time cause him immense despair and frustration; he longs simply to return home after his harsh and horrific period of imprisonment in Auschwitz. He later realises, however, that his tortuous journey was 'una parentesi di disponibilità illimitata, un provvidenziale ma irripetibile regalo del destino'.[31] Levi's 'tregua' was a necessary period of spiritual and physical growth, similar to the educative nature of the Israelites' period of wandering in the desert. This journey of learning and discovery is also a feature of *Se non ora, quando?*.

At the same time, the journeys described in *La tregua* and *Se non ora, quando?* are also reminiscent of the period after the flood, that is, of rebirth.[32] In *La tregua* Levi gradually becomes 'human' again. He is reborn, ready to face the new world after the deluge of Auschwitz. Levi notices his own transformation when he is faced by an acquaintance from his painful past. At

[31] Cited in Philip Roth, 'L'uomo salvato dal suo mestiere', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 84-94 (p. 89).
[32] For analysis of flood imagery, see Jean-Philippe Bareil, *Exil et voyage littéraire dans l'œuvre de Primo Levi* (Paris: Editions Messene, 1998); and Nezri-Dufour.

Staryje Doroghi, Levi by chance comes across Flora, an Italian prostitute whom he knew in Buna. In the Lager, in the presence of Flora (and the few other women in the camp), Levi was painfully ashamed of his emaciated appearance. However, following liberation, Flora has not changed, she is enslaved to a brute, who beats and takes advantage of her; she is still the same person that she had been in the Lager. Levi, on the other hand has been transformed, or reborn, as he writes: 'mi sentivo cambiato, intensamente "altro", come una farfalla davanti a un bruco. Nel limbo di Staryje Doroghi mi sentivo sporco, stracciato, stanco, greve, estenuato dall'attesa, eppure giovane e pieno di potenze e rivolto verso l'avvenire' (*T*, in *Op*, I, 353). Interestingly, Levi uses an analogous simile to describe the transformation of the female character Line in *Se non ora, quando?*: 'saltò fuori dallo spogliatoio una creatura inedita, come una farfalla da un bozzolo' (*Op*, II, 500). This recalls the creation of new species following the Flood in the fictional tale 'Quaestio de Centauris', which is discussed in detail in chapter 8 on the theme of creation.

Not all the journeys after the war are as positive. Levi is particularly struck by the image of the Ukrainian women who are returning home from 'voluntary' labour in Germany. Again, Levi describes their journey as an 'esilio' (*T*, in *Op*, I, 310). However, their exile was different from his; they chose to leave their country, to go to Germany to work, lured by Nazi propaganda. They are returning full of shame and humiliation since they abandoned their 'patria' and willingly worked for the Nazis. The Russians are unforgiving and treat the women with contempt, forcing them to return like beasts in overcrowded cattle

trucks, an image which recalls the deportation of the Jews to Auschwitz, an all too familiar sight and experience for Levi, who feels immense sympathy for the women and sadness at the destruction of Europe. Whilst in this case the metaphor of exile is not overtly religious, the language used by Levi, especially the term 'pestilenza', is reminiscent of biblical language, such as that of Exodus and the prophets: 'noi soli assistevamo con pietà e tristezza al loro passaggio, nuova testimonianza e nuovo aspetto della pestilenza che aveva prostrato l'Europa' (*Op*, I, 310).

The term pestilence is used in particular to describe the Plagues of Egypt, a turning point in the exile of the Israelites. For example, in Exodus 5:3, it is written that: 'The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the Lord our God; lest he fall upon us with *pestilence*, or with the sword' (emphasis added). Following the Ten Plagues sent by God to demonstrate his power and free his people, Pharaoh summoned Moses and ordered the Israelites out of Egypt. Levi's poem 'Pasqua' loosely describes the liberation of the Children of Israel from bondage. The final line of the poem is an adaptation of the concluding words of the Haggadah (the book which tells of the Israelites' experience in Egypt) which are recited at the festival of Passover. Instead of the words 'next year in Jerusalem', Levi universalises the message by changing it to: 'L'anno venturo in virtú e giustizia' (*Op*, II, 564).

In *Se non ora, quando?* Levi describes a fictional journey across war-torn Europe of a group of east European Jewish partisans, which, like the journey of

Levi, is compared, to some extent, to the exile of the age-old Jewish diaspora.[33] The novel opens with the theme of exile, where the protagonist Mendel describes the immense pain and anger of having lost his wife, friends, and home, following the destruction of his village by the Nazis. Mendel's village seems to belong to a different time, and he uses a biblical metaphor to portray this: 'adesso a pensarlo mi sembra il Giardino dell'Eden' (*Op*, II, 212). Mendel has been expelled from his home like his ancient predecessor Adam, and like Eden after the Fall, there can be no going back. Mendel's home, like that of the other partisans, no longer exists: 'il rimpianto delle loro case non era una speranza ma una disperazione […]. Le loro case non c'erano piú' (*Op*, II, 319). Their journey to Palestine, via Italy, is not one of return, rather it is an exodus to a new home, which mirrors that of the young Zionists of *La tregua*. The partisans want to escape from the destruction and despair of Europe, which, as Gedale notes has been turned into a Lager: 'in Europa per noi non c'è piú posto. La guerra contro gli ebrei, Hitler l'ha vinta, e anche i suoi allievi hanno fatto un buon lavoro. Il suo vangelo lo hanno imparato tutti' (*Op*, II, 414-15). However, unlike the Zionists of *La tregua*, the partisans are going to Palestine fundamentally because they have nowhere else to go. They are sceptical about the advantages of the 'Promised Land', especially Mendel who frequently voices his doubts: 'dalla terra promessa non gli veniva alcun richiamo, forse anche laggiú avrebbe dovuto camminare e combattere. Bene, è il mio destino, lo accetto, ma non mi scalda il cuore' (*Op*, II, 482).

[33] Cicioni also notes this in *Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 123.

Before they can reach Palestine, the partisans have to overcome numerous trials, just as Levi did before he returned home. Once again, there are echoes of the exodus, as Nezri-Dufour writes: 'devono ripercorrere il simbolico percorso intricato degli ebrei dopo l'uscita dall'Egitto, attraverso un viaggio iniziatico dove gli ostacoli e le prove non mancano. Poiché si trovano ancora in un periodo di riflessione e di iniziazione, devono errare prima di giungere alla terra di Sion'.[34]

We do not see Mendel and the partisans arrive in Palestine, since the novel ends in Italy. By the time they get to Italy, the partisans have grown spiritually. The group is now ready to face the world and the future, as Mendel notes using a simile of growth from the natural world, they are 'pront[i] a vivere, a crescere come un seme: ci sono semi che attecchiscono in tutte le terre, anche in Terra d'Israele, e Line è un seme di questa specie, ed anche tutti gli altri' (*Op*, II, 484). At the end of the journey the group is reborn, mirroring the image of Ròkhele Bianca and Isidor's newborn baby. However, just as Italy turns out not to be Levi's hoped for 'paradise' since the Lager still haunts him, the partisans in *Se non ora, quando?* discover that it is also not the land where 'ogni straniero viene accolto come un fratello' (*Op*, II, 482). Indeed, just as Levi feared that people would not listen to or believe his 'ghastly tale',[35] the partisans in *Se non ora, quando?* face the disbelief of the bourgeois Italian Jews whom they meet in Milan. Like Levi's journey, that of the partisans ends with uncertainty about the future. The birth of Ròkhele Bianca and Isidor's baby, which is a sign of hope,

[34] Nezri-Dufour, p. 159.
[35] See *Se questo è un uomo* (*Op,* I, 54-55); and *La tregua* (*Op*, I, 245).

of a new beginning, is undermined by the devastating news of Hiroshima, an image of death and destruction. By ending their journey in Italy and not Palestine, Levi is able to remain undecided as to the 'promised-ness' of the land to which they are travelling,[36] and reinforces the ambivalence of the group's destiny, echoing the precariousness of his own future and that of humanity in general, hinting that there will be more suffering and exile in the future.

6.5 The Fall

As stated earlier, the earliest example of exile can be found at the beginning of Genesis, in the story of the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24). It is argued that this is the most important exile of all time because 'in a single moment [it] made the entire human race an exile from its original home. [...] This banishment [...] is the starting point of every subsequent human story – the backdrop to all that is recorded in the Bible'.[37] However, the expulsion from the Garden is not widely considered as exile, or exile in the physical sense; instead it is viewed as a mythical, or metaphorical exile since it happened in 'a timeless past'.[38] Nonetheless, imagery of the Fall is used by Levi to describe the Holocaust in both his testimonial writing, and in the fictional *Se non ora, quando?*.

---

[36] However, overall in *Se non ora, quando?*, Levi is implicitly sceptical about Palestine, and elsewhere he openly voices his cynicism about the 'promised land', see, for example Levi's interview with Edith Bruck, pp. 269-73.

[37] 'Exile', in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopaedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech, Literary Patterns and Universal Images of the Bible*, ed. by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), pp. 250-51 (p. 250).

[38] See Carroll, p. 65.

For example, the poem 'Shemà' can be read as an allegory of the Fall. The 'uomo' and 'donna' of the poem can be viewed as Adam and Eve who are thrown into Chaos following their exile from Eden. As Nezri-Dufour comments: 'Questa coppia emblematica, incarnazione di una creazione torturata, ricorda anche la tragedia di un'umanità cacciata simbolicamente dal Paradiso Terrestre, e tuffata, suo malgrado, nel turbine di una Storia feroce'.[39] The *Häftlinge*, like Adam and Eve after the Fall, are exiled to a completely inhospitable world where daily survival is a constant battle. This image of a hostile landscape is present in *Se non ora, quando?*, in the form of the sprawling forests of Russia and Poland which are home to the exiled partisans. Paola Valabrega notes that 'L'esilio è uno stato di prigionia, di assenza: tale condizione si riflette particolarmente nello sfondo naturale del bosco, della foresta. [...] La foresta è intesa come "regno dell'esilio", soprattutto nel romanzo *Se non ora, quando?*'.[40] Indeed, Mendel, like his fellow partisans, is forced to live in the woods after the destruction of his village by the Nazis. Like Adam and Eve, Mendel must adapt to his harsh new environment, as he tells Leonid: 'Neanche io sono nato in mezzo ai boschi, ma poi ho imparato' (*Op*, II, p. 221).

Although, as Mendel says, the forest can be 'un amico' (*Op*, II, 221), it can also be a dangerous enemy. Levi discovers this on his return home when he becomes lost in the woods near Staryje Doroghi (*T*, in *Op*, I, 334-35). There are obvious allusions here with the opening lines of the *Commedia*, where Dante's pilgrim finds himself lost in a dark and pathless forest. The 'selva oscura' is a

[39] Nezri-Dufour, p. 148.
[40] Paola Valabrega, 'Primo Levi e la tradizione ebraico-orientale', in Ferrero (ed.), *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica*, pp. 263-68 (p. 273).

symbol of sin and exile, which has its root in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden.[41] Just as the movement of the *Commedia* is seen as a movement towards the recovery of that which is lost, Levi's journey, which is narrated in *La tregua*, is also a movement towards what he lost: his home, or more generally his life. Levi manages to navigate his way out of the wood and he does indeed return home. However, he is not free from the pain of exile he suffered in Auschwitz: this will remain with him forever. He lives constantly in the shadow of the Lager, which, like Dante's Hell, is a place of eternal exile.

6.6 Baptism imagery – Christian or Jewish?

So far, the majority of the discussion has been on Jewish religious imagery. This section will look at the links between the Holocaust and Christian images. Firstly, it is interesting to note that the term 'holocaust' (as opposed to the 'Holocaust') has links with Christianity. Sullam Caliman points out that the term was used, at least in France, to denote the Crucifixion.[42] According to Sullam Caliman, François Mauriac refers to this link in his foreword to Wiesel's *La Nuit*, where he explicitly compares Wiesel to Christ on the Cross: 'Mauriac creates an analogy between the two events, making the whole of the Jewish people a metaphor for Christ'.[43] Indeed, there is a dominant Christian interpretation of the Holocaust which views the Jews as Christ-like sacrificial lambs, led to the slaughter for the sins of the world. Sullam Caliman writes that

[41] Claire E. Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City: the Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), pp. 24-25.
[42] Sullam Caliman, p. 988.
[43] Sullam Caliman, p. 988.

'this "Christological" interpretation of the persecution [...] enjoyed a certain success in the Catholic world because it helped give some kind of meaning to such a terrifyingly senseless event'.[44] Although this is controversial, it does recall how the Jewish world related the Holocaust to past Jewish events such as the Destruction of the First and Second Temples, and the Exodus. The Crucifixion is the central motif of Christianity, so it is not surprising that Christians turn to it for guidance and hope in the face of adversity such as the Holocaust. Even Jewish Holocaust survivors themselves use the Christian image of the Crucifixion in their responses to Auschwitz.[45] However, there is a fundamental paradox in comparing the Jews of Auschwitz to Christ on the Cross. As Katz points out: 'the Crucifixion [...] is indissolubly linked to the deicidal activity of the "chosen people" – the Jews'.[46] In other words, the Jews are seen as both Christ and the killers of Christ. Katz goes on to hint that this may not be as paradoxical as it first appears, because 'whether the Jew is conceived [...] as Jesus or as Judas, his end is the same: ritual slaughter as sacrificial victim'.[47] However, as I have shown earlier in the chapter, the image of sacrifice is problematic.

As noted already, Levi uses metaphors from Christianity in his Holocaust writing to overcome the ineffability of his experience. One of the most notable examples is the metaphor of baptism, which appears in both *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua*. It must be noted, however, that baptism is not a uniquely

[44] Sullam Caliman, p. 988.
[45] See Reiter, p. 174.
[46] Katz, 'Jewish Faith After the Holocaust', p. 5.
[47] Katz, 'Jewish Faith After the Holocaust', p. 5.

Christian tradition. Other cultures and religions, such as Hinduism and Judaism, use variations of the idea of baptism in their own rituals. Baptism generally involves the use of water, which symbolises purification and rebirth, as seen in the traditional Christian baptism. Moreover, it is believed by some, such as Beasley-Murray, that Christian baptism is in fact based on Jewish tradition. Examples of washing, or cleansing, which form part of Jewish purification rituals against sin, appear throughout the Old Testament, such as in Leviticus 13 and Numbers 19. Furthermore, the practice of Jewish proselyte baptisms, which formed part of the initiation rite for Gentiles converting to Judaism, is believed to have influenced Christian baptism.[48]

Levi uses the image of baptism in his testimonial writing to denote the various stages of his 'exile'. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, Levi and the other prisoners are forced to have a communal shower, which, rather than washing them for practical reasons, serves to humiliate them; it marks the beginning of the process of the destruction of the spirit (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 17-18). Interestingly, Levi does not portray this initiation rite in terms of a baptism. Instead, he describes the tattooing of the registration number on his left arm as his 'baptism', which recalls the traditional link between baptism and naming: '*Häftling*: ho imparato che io sono uno *Häftling*. Il mio nome è 174 517; siamo stati battezzati' (*Op*, I, 21-22). This transformation from a man into a *Häftling* is an anti-baptism, a baptism in reverse. Rather than an act of purification, the

[48] For discussion and analysis of Jewish proselyte baptism, see, for example: *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), pp. 55-56; and George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 18-44.

process of tattooing indelibly inflicts the degradation of the Lager onto Levi and his fellow inmates: 'porteremo finché vivremo il marchio tatuato sul braccio sinistro' (*Op*, I, 21).

However, this degradation is partly removed by a second baptism, by the shower Levi receives from the Russians in Auschwitz following liberation, as described in *La tregua* (*Op*, I, 212-13). This symbolises Levi's entry into the wilderness. Although Levi does not explicitly describe it in such terms, the description of the landscape is reminiscent of the wilderness: 'Il tutto era deserto, silenzioso, schiacciato sotto il cielo basso, pieno di fango e di pioggia e di abbandono' (*Op*, I, 212). He is still not free; he must undergo a further baptism before he can reach his 'Promised Land'. He finally achieves this in Austria, just before he enters Italy. The shower administered by the Americans (*Op*, I, 390) marks his entry back into normal society; it is the beginning of his new life.

6.7 Conclusion

Although Levi professed not to believe in God, the experience of the Lager meant that he could not ignore his Jewish identity. As Levi himself admits, Auschwitz made him Jewish. Indeed, Levi became fascinated with Jewish history and culture, and this interest is reflected unmistakably in his later writing. This newly found identity helped Levi come to terms with the Holocaust and to narrate it to others. Well-known religious metaphors, from both Judaism and Christianity, such as conceptual metaphors of exile, exodus,

and baptism, allowed Levi to overcome the ineffability of his painful experience. However, rather than using the Bible as a support for faith, Levi employed archetypal religious images in his Holocaust writing to highlight the absence of any hope of salvation in the stories of the 'nuova bibbia'. Unlike in the case of the tragedies described in the Bible, there was no God at Auschwitz. As Levi writes in 'Shemà', it is up to human beings never to forget the immensity of this human-made tragedy, otherwise it may happen again.

Having seen in Part II of the thesis how the use of metaphor enables Levi to convey this tragedy to his readers in order to fulfil his strongly-held belief that to remember this 'offence' is essential for the future of humanity in general, Part III will move beyond the Holocaust – as Levi's own writing did, following the publication of his earliest testimonial works – to examine the other central and recurrent theme of Levi's *oeuvre*: that of his own dual identity as a scientist and a writer. In exploring the relationship between these two elements of his post-Holocaust existence, the thesis will analyse in particular his use of metaphors of science, creation and, finally, the narrative act itself.

Part III: Science, Creation, Writing

Chapter 7: Ménage à trois: Science, Literature and Metaphor

7.1 Introduction

Whereas Part II (chapters 3-6) concentrated on Levi's use of metaphor in his Holocaust writing and poetry, this Part (chapters 7-9) will proceed to look at the use of metaphor in his writing on themes other than the Holocaust, and in particular that which deals with scientific issues or which moves into the genre of science fiction.

Despite the obvious differences between his experience in the Lager and his experience as a scientist, Levi faced similar linguistic problems in his representation of the two areas of his life. For example, just as Levi found the Lager to be ineffable and incomprehensible, he also struggled to describe certain aspects of science, in particular chemistry, as we will see. In both cases, he overcame this linguistic difficulty by using figurative language. However, just as the use of metaphor has been viewed as inappropriate in Holocaust literature, its presence in scientific writing has similarly been contested. Some scientists and philosophers of science have claimed that metaphor, which, in their opinion, belongs to the realm of the literary imagination, has no place in the concrete and exact world of science.[1] But, Levi, as we will see, did not view any incompatibility between science and literature, and he used metaphor to great effect in his scientific writing, as this chapter will show.

[1] The following texts discuss this opposition to metaphor in science: Theodore L. Brown, *Making Truth: Metaphor in Science* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), and Carol Reeves, *The Language of Science* (London: Routledge, 2005).

7.2 Science, Literature and Metaphor – One Culture?

Traditionally, science and literature have been viewed as two distinct disciplines. Widespread debate about the literature-science divide was ignited in the late 1950s following C. P. Snow's 'two cultures' lecture in 1959. Snow, like Levi, was a man of science and of letters.[2] He was becoming increasingly preoccupied by what he called a 'gulf of mutual incomprehension − sometimes […] hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding' between scientists and literary intellectuals.[3] Snow explicitly sought to unite the two disciplines, as he states: 'the major theme of what I set out to say [is that] it is dangerous to have two cultures which can't or don't communicate'.[4]

I believe that one of the main causes of this mutual lack of understanding and communication between the scientific and literary worlds involves the role and importance of *language*. For example, according to Snow, science pays little attention to 'the language of words'.[5] Although the process of writing, such as writing reports and papers, is an integral part of science, it is generally viewed by scientists as a tedious task. Unlike literary writers, scientists do not tend to pay particular attention to style or language, they are merely concerned with getting their results down on paper. As Collini notes: 'In many forms of experimental science, writing plays no really creative role: it is not itself a

---

[2] Snow wrote a series of novels on the academic world entitled 'Strangers and Brothers', which included the award-winning novels *The Masters* (1951) and *The New Men* (1954). However, some, most notably the literary critic F. R. Leavis, have questioned Snow's literary ability, stating that 'as a novelist he [Snow] does not exist'; see Stefan Collini, 'Introduction', in Snow, *The Two Cultures*, pp. vii-lxxi (p. xxxiv).
[3] Snow, 'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution', in *The Two Cultures*, pp. 1-51 (p. 4).
[4] Snow, 'The Two Cultures: A Second Look', in *The Two Cultures*, pp. 53-100 (p. 98).
[5] Snow, 'The Two Cultures: A Second Look', p. 63.

process of discovery, as it is in the humanities, but an after-the-event report – "writing up", as the idiom revealingly has it'.[6] Science aims to reveal the truths of nature and the universe, to provide answers with the help of proven facts and figures.

On the other hand, literature generally relies on the imagination and is characterised by polyvalence, subjectivity, and novelty. Andrea Battistini points out that literature 'uses a connotative lexicon; it seeks multiple meanings, the ambiguity of the poetic word, suggestions, indefinite elements'.[7] However, as the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has argued, science and literature cannot be distinguished by the 'application of the classic dichotomies between, for example, the world of value and the world of fact, the subjective and the objective, or the intuitive and the inductive'.[8] Such distinctions are generalisations and, moreover, can be inaccurate.

Another widespread misconception is that the languages of science and literature are completely different. For example, science tends to use highly specialised and technical language, including the language of mathematics with its coded signs and symbols. Non-scientists can become alienated in the face of such language since they do not share this linguistic patrimony. However, at the same time, scientific language is regarded as being exact and objective, a reflection of science itself. As Battistini notes, 'the scientific message,

---

[6] Collini, p. lix.
[7] Andrea Battistini, 'Comparing Two Constructs: Literature and Science', in *Literature and Science*, ed. by Dino S. Cervigni (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina, 2005), pp. 15-30 (p. 22).
[8] Thomas Kuhn, *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 340.

denotative by nature, aspires to be precise, stable, rigid, precise in making one term and only one correspond to each concept'.[9] On the other hand, literature is seen by scientists to use 'flowery' language, mainly in the form of figures of speech. One of the most common misconceptions of literature, held somewhat superciliously by scientists, is that it is characterised by rhetorical excess, that it uses unnecessary figurative language for mere ornament, which confuses and alienates the reader. Cynthia Ozick demonstrates this stereotypical view in *Metaphor and Memory*, in which she describes the reception she, as a literary writer, received whilst telling a story 'drenched […] in metaphor' to a group of medics: 'They were appalled by metaphor […]. They protested, they repudiated, the writer's instruments and devices as arcane, specialist, oracular, technical. Before the use of metaphor they felt themselves stripped and defenseless'.[10]

Indeed, scientists and philosophers of science throughout the ages have argued that metaphor should not be used in science. Metaphor has been viewed as superfluous and misleading by some scientists and thinkers, most notably those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Hobbes and Locke (as seen in chapter 2), but also those of today.[11] For Locke, 'all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, […] mislead the judgment, […] and, therefore, […] they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to

[9] Battistini, pp. 22-23.
[10] Cynthia Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 268.
[11] Brown, pp. 14-15.

be avoided'.[12] More recently, in 1914, the French physicist and philosopher, Pierre Duhem, voiced his disapproval of the use of metaphor and models in science. Mary Hesse writes: 'Duhem's main objection to mechanical models is that they are incoherent and superficial and tend to distract the mind from the search for logical order'.[13] According to Brown, even today, scientists and philosophers of science downplay the importance of metaphor in science.[14]

However, science too uses metaphor, as George Levine asserts: 'scientific language, with its claims to univocality and precision of correspondence, is […], like literature itself, metaphorical'.[15] In fact, I will argue that figurative language is one of the main elements that bridges the so-called 'two cultures', since both science and literature make extensive use of metaphor. It is maintained by a number of thinkers, such as Hesse, that scientists, like literary writers and 'ordinary' people, understand the world largely in terms of metaphorical concepts.[16] Metaphor impinges on every aspect of science. For instance, mathematics, which is the language of science *par excellence*, is fundamentally a metaphorical system used to represent reality.[17] The chemist and writer Theodore L. Brown highlights the central importance of figurative language in

---

[12] Cited in Sabine Massen, 'Metaphors in the Social Sciences: Making Use and Making Sense of them', in *Metaphor and Analogy in the Sciences*, ed. by Fernand Hallyn (Dordrecht: Klewer Academic Press, 2000), pp. 199-244 (p. 202).
[13] Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 3.
[14] Brown, p. 15.
[15] George Levine, 'One Culture: Science and Literature', in *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, ed. by George Levine (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 3-32 (p. 17).
[16] See also: Brown; W. H. Leatherdale, *The Role of Analogy, Model and Metaphor in Science* (Amsterdam; Oxford: North-Holland Publishing Company: 1974); David Locke, *Science as Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); and Reeves.
[17] David L. Wilson and Zack Bowen, *Science and Literature: Bridging the Two Cultures* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001), pp. 112-13.

science: ‘metaphorical reasoning is at the very core of what scientists do when they design experiments, make discoveries, formulate theories and models, and describe their results to others – in short, when they do science and communicate about it’.[18]

Indeed, metaphor is ubiquitous in science. Reeves comments: ‘scientists cannot escape metaphor. Either they employ metaphors intentionally, to explain and illustrate natural phenomena or they use them unconsciously because some metaphors are so firmly entrenched that they go unnoticed’.[19] The ‘plum pudding model’ of the atom[20] is an example of a metaphor employed consciously in science, since it is obviously metaphorical. However, other metaphors, such as the wave models of light and sound, are used unconsciously because they have become part of our everyday language. They have lost their metaphoricity; in other words, they are dead metaphors. There is the danger of not recognising such models as metaphoric, as Brown notes, some models ‘have become so commonplace in scientific explanation, and they can be so beautiful, that it is easy to succumb to the idea that they are literal descriptions’.[21]

Nonetheless, it is widely conceded that metaphor plays a central role in the scientific world. Metaphor is used in science for utilitarian purposes, to describe abstract concepts and make them comprehensible. Scientists employ metaphors as a linguistic tool to portray the unseen or the unknown, or as Arthur

[18] Brown, p. 14.
[19] Reeves, p. 36.
[20] See Brown, pp. 78-81. This model, proposed by J. J. Thomson in the late nineteenth century, is used to portray the nature of the atom. The pudding represents the positive charge, and the plums stand for the electrons, which make up an atom. There is no mistaking that this model is a metaphor and not a literal representation.
[21] Brown, p. 24.

I. Miller puts it, metaphors 'are a means for extending our intuition into realms beyond sense perceptions'.[22] This recalls the use of metaphor to describe the Holocaust, as seen in the previous three chapters, where out of necessity, writers, such as Levi, turned to figurative language to express the inexpressible. As Battistini writes, both science and literature 'have recourse to analogical processes that are often useful for making visible even the most intangible phenomena'.[23] The theme of overcoming the ineffability of science via metaphor will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to the scientific writing of Levi.

Metaphor is thus one of the most important links between science and literature; it helps create a *single culture*. Kerstin Pilz supports this view, claiming that: 'metaphor is a common denominator of the different languages in which each branch of knowledge tells its story'.[24] She continues: 'metaphors can be seen as central to the interdisciplinary exchange which constitutes *culture*, given the reciprocal relationship existing between our conceptual frameworks and the metaphors we use to visualize and describe them' (emphasis added).[25] In the section below, I will present Levi's views on the science-literature divide, and his views on the use of metaphor in scientific writing. In doing so, I will demonstrate that for Levi, science and literature are not two disparate fields, but

[22] Arthur I. Miller, 'Metaphors and Scientific Creativity', in Hallyn (ed.), *Metaphor and Analogy in the Sciences*, pp. 147-64 (p. 163).
[23] Battistini, p. 28.
[24] Kerstin Pilz, *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005), p. xviii.
[25] Pilz, p. xviii.

that, in fact, they are fused together in his writing. My analysis will point to the vital role that metaphor plays in realising this coming-together.

7.3 Levi, Metaphor and Science

Levi frequently described himself metaphorically as a 'centaur' since he was both a chemist and a literary writer.[26] Rather than viewing his two professions, or 'mestieri' as polar opposites, Levi believed that they in fact complemented each other.[27] For example, in *L'altrui mestiere* Levi comments that 'scrivo proprio perché sono un chimico: il mio vecchio mestiere si è largamente trasfuso nel nuovo' (*Op*, II, 643). Consequently, Levi does not view any difference between the language he uses in his job as chemist and the language he uses in his other 'mestiere' of writing: both are characterised by clarity, concision and objectivity. As seen in chapter 1, Levi comments, 'ho sviluppato l'abitudine a scrivere compatto, a evitare il superfluo. La precisione e la concisione, […] mi sono venute dal mestiere di chimico. Come anche l'abitudine all'obiettività, a non lasciarsi ingannare facilmente dalle apparenze'.[28] Levi frequently notes that his literary writing is influenced by chemistry; in fact, chemistry has probably influenced Levi's writing more than literature itself, as he comments: 'è

[26] See for example, Fadini, p. 107; and Levi's interview with Grassano, 'Conversazione con Primo Levi', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 167-84 (pp. 179-80). The narrator in *La chiave a stella*, who is an alter-ego of Levi, similarly describes himself as being split between his two professions of chemist and writer.

[27] Critical work on science and literature in Levi includes: Pierpaolo Antonello, *Il ménage a quattro: scienza, filosofia, tecnica nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2005), especially the chapter, 'La materia, la mano, l'esperimento: il centauro Primo Levi', pp. 79-123 and Borri, *Le divine impurità: Primo Levi tra scienza e letteratura*.

[28] Regge, p. 59.

probabile che il mio scrivere risenta piú dell'aver io condotto per trent'anni un mestiere tecnico, che non dei libri ingeriti' ('Prefazione' to *La ricerca delle radici*, in *Op*, II, 1361).

Above all, chemistry has provided Levi with 'un vasto assortimento di metafore'.[29] This explicit link between chemistry and metaphor shows that Levi himself believed that science and writing are indeed interrelated. Levi takes words and phrases from the chemical world and uses them as metaphors to aid and enrich his literary writing, as he states: 'ho avuto per le mani dei materiali di uso non corrente, con proprietà fuori dell'ordinario, che hanno servito ad ampliare proprio in senso tecnico il mio linguaggio'.[30] For example, chemistry helps Levi describe concepts, experiences and people via the use of similes, as he writes:

> anche solo sul piano delle comparazioni il chimico militante si trova in possesso di una insospettata ricchezza: 'nero come…'; 'amaro come…'; vischioso, tenace, greve, fetido, fluido, volatile, inerte, infiammabile: sono tutte qualità che il chimico conosce bene, e per ognuna di esse sa scegliere una sostanza che la possiede in misura preminente ed esemplare (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 642).

Being able to perceive similarities is the key to the successful use of metaphor as Aristotle wrote in the *Poetics* (1459a, p. 37).

At the same time, while describing science in his writing, especially abstract and ineffable scientific phenomena, Levi uses his literary skills and creates metaphors to describe the indescribable. Levi compares science to familiar events and experiences via the use of figurative language, in an attempt to make it comprehensible for the reader, just as he did with the Holocaust. In

[29] Regge, p. 59.
[30] Regge, p. 59.

fact, Levi believes that science is, in some respects, more difficult to describe than other events or experiences such as the Holocaust, as he tells Ian Thomson: 'I'd say that our everyday language is more inadequate when it comes to describing scientific phenomena: the planets, the galaxy, the world which is invisible to the naked eye'.[31] According to Levi the only modern writer in Italy to have succeeded in describing the ineffable world of science is Calvino, whom he admired greatly: 'Italo Calvino was the only Italian writer to have bridged the gap between our earth-bound language and a science-fiction language adequate to describe the stars'.[32] Calvino belongs to a tradition of writers for whom there is no division between science and literature, a heritage which includes the canonical figures of Dante, Leonardo da Vinci and Galileo, who respectively made great achievements in the all-embracing culture of 'philosophy'. It is interesting to note Calvino's opinion that Galileo 'meriterebbe d'essere famoso come felice inventore di metafore fantasiose quanto lo è come un rigoroso ragionatore scientifico'.[33] Science, in particular revolutionary science such as that of Galileo, uses metaphor to describe the unknown or the abstract. As Battistini notes, 'revolutionary science […] tends to be closer to the procedures of literature − as it wishes to upset hardened truths − to see phenomenon in a new way with different eyes'.[34]

---

[31] Ian Thomson, 'Primo Levi in Conversation', in *Primo Levi: The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti and Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp. 34-44 (pp. 41-42).
[32] Thomson, 'Primo Levi in Conversation', p. 42.
[33] Cited in Battistini, p. 17.
[34] Battistini, pp. 16-17.

In my opinion, Levi also belongs to this prestigious tradition, as he too manages to combat this 'insufficienza del comune linguaggio' via metaphor. Although Levi does not admit this of himself, he is one of the gifted minority who 'sa trovare ed esprimere poesia anche parlando di stelle, di atomi' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 660). So, literature and science are inextricably linked in Levi's writing, in particular by metaphor, which is not only a unifying element, but which brings mutual advantages to both discourses.

The work in which such figurative language features most prevalently, is undoubtedly *Il sistema periodico*. This text, which Levi describes as 'una microstoria, la storia di un mestiere' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 934), uses the chemical elements (which are themselves part of a metaphorical system − the periodic table of elements) to structure the text, naming each chapter after a certain element. Although the text is based on Levi's relationship throughout his life with chemistry, he claims that it is not an autobiography and, indeed, it also contains fictional stories.[35] His aim is to reveal certain key aspects of human nature through the metaphor of chemistry because 'ogni elemento [dice] qualcosa a qualcuno (a ciascuno una cosa diversa), come le valli o le spiaggie visitate in giovinezza' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 934). Levi wants to show that scientists are not, as many wrongly assume, 'unaware of man's condition'.[36] Peter Forbes comments: 'Levi demonstrated − and this is rare among modern scientific

[35] For discussion on the differences between autobiography and fiction, see Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', in *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin and trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) pp. 3-30. First published as *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).
[36] Snow, 'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution', p. 5.

writers – that a scientific worldview does have moral implications'.[37] Through metaphor Levi bridges the 'two cultures', as Patruno notes: 'to assert his belief that science and literature are fortified by an interdependence, Levi uses the chemist's periodic table to create a metaphoric interplay throughout the narrative'.[38]

At the same time, *Il sistema periodico* fulfills Levi's wish to narrate the trials and tribulations of the chemist, a trade which, he laments, is not the subject of literature. Levi explained to Pier Maria Paoletti in 1963 (twelve years before the publication of *Il sistema periodico*) that he longed to fill this literary niche, to 'raccontare cioè al pubblico il significato della ricerca scientifica, una documentazione fantastica, ma non poi tanto, di ciò che avviene nel chiuso dei laboratori […]. C'è tutta una tradizione narrativa […] sulla vita dei minatori, o dei medici, o delle prostitute: quasi niente sulle avventure spirituali di un chimico'.[39] In Levi's metafictional[40] short story 'Nel Parco', the protagonist James Collins notes that in the world of the 'Parco Nazionale', which is home to the most famous and successful literary characters, 'non troverà un panettiere né un contabile; [...] c'è un unico lattivendolo, un solo ingegnere navale e un solo filatore di seta. Cercherà invano un idraulico, un elettricista, un saldatore, un aggiustatore, *un chimico*, e mi domando proprio il perché' (*VF*, in *Op*, I, 676; emphasis added).

---

[37] Peter Forbes, 'Introduction', in Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. vii-xvi (p. viii).
[38] Patruno, p. 57.
[39] Pier Maria Paoletti, 'Sono un chimico, scrittore per caso', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 101-05 (p. 103).
[40] I discuss Levi's metafiction in more detail in chapter 9.

Levi succeeds in telling the tale of his trade as chemist, as well as that of literary writer in *Il sistema periodico*. This is achieved in great part by his immense skill at using and creating metaphor. The dual role of metaphor − the use of science as a metaphor to describe aspects of Levi's life and that of humanity in general, and the use of metaphor to communicate the ineffability of science − will be discussed via close reading and analysis of *Il sistema periodico* and the dialogue between the narrator and the protagonist Faussone in *La chiave a stella*.

7.4 Metaphor of battle

In *Il sistema periodico* Levi frequently describes chemistry metaphorically as a battle or a war.[41] Chemistry, like everything else in life, involves a constant struggle, as the Greek of *La tregua* memorably declares: 'guerra è sempre' (*Op*, I, 242). The enemy of chemistry is Matter, which according to Levi is incomprehensible. In order to describe this 'materia incomprensibile' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 804), Levi turns to metaphor. Levi sees himself as a 'chimico militante', in a constant battle with Matter, which he refers to metaphorically as 'la Materia-Mater […] la madre nemica' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 771). Gordon notes that the imagery of chemistry as a struggle with the unknown is one of the fundamental aspects of Levi's philosophy of science.[42] It also forms part of Levi's general philosophy of life. As Fabio Moliterni writes: 'Ne *Il sistema periodico* […] il rapporto *corpo a corpo* con la materia […] diventa correlativo oggettivo

[41] See Benchouiha, pp. 75-79. Levi also describes chemistry as a struggle or war in *La chiave a stella*.
[42] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, pp. 137-38.

dell'universo morale delle esperienze, dei valori etici e dei codici di comportamento che sono alla base dell'umanesimo leviano'.[43] Levi gives his personal struggles with chemistry a general meaning, so that they apply to a universal audience, not just chemists. He achieves this through the use of metaphor, by comparing chemistry to something familiar, such as conflict or war. One of the most striking and memorable examples of the metaphor of battle appears in the chapter 'Ferro' of *Il sistema periodico*.

The chapter begins in the chemistry laboratory, where Levi and his classmates are given the task of identifying an unknown substance, which turns out to be iron. Immediately Levi uses a battle metaphor to describe the chemical conundrum he has to solve: 'il rapporto con la Materia […] era una scherma, una partita a due. Due avversari disuguali: da una parte, ad interrogare, il chimico implume, inerme, […] dall'altra, a rispondere per enigmi, la Materia con la sua passività sorniona, vecchia come il Tutto e portentosamente ricca d'inganni, solenne e sottile come la Sfinge' (*Op*, I, 772). It is an unequal war, Levi feels inferior to his enemy Matter, which he compares to the wise, strong and incomprehensible Sphinx. In order to overcome his sly and enigmatic adversary, Levi must use an iron will and wit. Levi also uses the Sphinx simile in *Se questo è un uomo*, to describe how he felt when he had to undergo the impossible and surreal chemical examination in the Lager: 'io mi sento come Edipo davanti alla Sfinge' (*Op*, I, 101).

---

[43] Fabio Moliterni, 'Primo Levi. Dell'a-topia letteraria', in Fabio Moliterni, Roberto Ciccarelli and Alessandro Lattanzio, *Primo Levi. L'a-topia letteraria. Il pensiero narrativo. La scrittura e l'assurdo* (Naples: Liguori, 2000), pp. 3-61 (p. 40).

At first it may be surprising that Levi uses the same commonplace image from Greek mythology to describe these two distinct confrontations with chemistry because on the surface, the two experiences seem unrelated: the first refers to what is essentially a trivial experiment in class, where failure would merely mean receiving a bad mark, whilst the second refers to a much more important event, an exam that plays a deciding factor in Levi's fate – the chance of surviving the Lager or of becoming one of the 'sommersi'. However, although both events explicitly involve a struggle against chemistry, the real underlying enemy is Fascism, the toughest and most dangerous enemy of all. This is most obvious with the chemical examination in the Lager because Levi has to physically face the imposing Nazi functionary, Dr Pannwitz. But even Levi's confrontation with iron involves a struggle with Fascism, not least because it takes place at the time of the racial laws. According to Levi, practicing chemistry was a form of rebellion against Fascism, a battle against the prohibitions and propaganda of the Fascist regime: 'la chimica e la fisica di cui ci nutrivamo, oltre che alimenti di per sé vitali, erano l'antidoto al fascismo che […] cercavamo, perché erano chiare e distinte e ad ogni passo verificabili, e non tessuti di menzogne e di vanità, come la radio e i giornali' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 775).

Levi frequently uses chemistry as a metaphor to describe Fascism, to try to express the inexpressible. Fascism is even more incomprehensible than chemistry. Although Levi believes that Matter is supreme and indomitable, chemistry is governed by rational laws that can be solved through knowledge and trial and error; it can be conquered. Fascism, on the other hand, is

completely different; it is illogical and absurd. However, even Fascism can be beaten, as Levi testifies. The struggles against each enemy are described throughout the chapter 'Ferro' using the friendship between Levi and his classmate Sandro Delmastro as a starting point for the discussion.

Sandro shows Levi that the battle against chemistry can be won, that Matter can in fact become an ally rather than an enemy. Sandro achieves this by taking Levi on dangerous and testing excursions in the mountains near Turin. At this moment in his life, mountaineering becomes a way of conquering chemistry; it is portrayed as a struggle, a battle against the elements; elements in their 'real' raw form of snow, wind, rock and ice, not in their artificial form like the sample of iron they have to analyse in class. Gordon notes the importance of mountaineering, stating that it 'becomes a powerful life-lesson for Levi, inculcating in him the value of risk, of challenging the physical, natural world and emerging unscathed (or indeed, emerging scathed, which brings its own lessons)'.[44] Sandro teaches Levi that in order to overcome Nature you have to be acquainted with it first hand: 'lui [Sandro] aveva un'altra materia a cui condurmi, un'altra educatrice: non le polverine di Qualitativa, ma quella vera, l'autentica Urstoff senza tempo, la pietra e il ghiaccio delle montagne vicine' (*Op*, I, 775-76). To describe to the reader the invaluable lessons Sandro teaches him, Levi uses the element iron and exploits its metaphorical characteristics. Iron has, as Cicioni points out, 'multiple metaphorical meanings: philosophical, historical, and personal'.[45] As seen throughout this thesis, Levi tends to take

[44] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, pp. 128-29.
[45] Cicioni, *Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 11.

commonplace metaphors and use them in original and innovative ways to shed light on his own personality and that of others.

For example, Levi compares the strength and resilience of Sandro to iron: 'Sandro sembrava fatto di ferro, ed era legato al ferro da una parentela antica: i padri dei suoi padri […] erano stati calderai ("magnín") e fabbri ("fré") delle valli canavesane' (*Op*, I, 776). Sandro is so familiar with iron that 'quando ravvisava nella roccia la vena rossa del ferro, gli pareva di ritrovare un amico' (*Op*, I, 776). He knows nature like the back of his hand thanks to testing himself and pitting himself against the toughest of natural elements. Sandro teaches Levi the importance of testing oneself, which Levi explains in metaphorical terms based on iron: 'Gli importava conoscere i suoi limiti, misurarsi e migliorarsi; piú oscuramente, sentiva il bisogno di prepararsi (e di prepararmi) per un avvenire di ferro, di mese in mese piú vicino' (*Op*, I, 778).

Mountaineering is also used as a metaphor for overcoming Fascism. Sandro was aware of the dangers that lay ahead for both him and Levi. Levi believes that the lessons Sandro taught him helped him later in the Lager, as he writes: 'sono grato a Sandro per avermi messo coscientemente nei guai […] e so con certezza che queste [imprese] mi hanno servito piú tardi' (*Op*, I, 781).[46] But they did not help Sandro; he was killed whist fighting in the Resistance. All that remains of Sandro is Levi's words. But, as Levi laments, 'è un'impresa senza

[46] Levi ascribes his survival of Auschwitz to mountaineering (albeit in a small way) in the appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*: 'Il fatto che io sia sopravvissuto, e sia ritornato indenne, secondo me è dovuto principalmente alla fortuna. Solo in piccola misura hanno giocato fattori preesistenti, quali il mio allenamento alla vita di montagna, ed il mio mestiere di chimico, che mi ha concesso qualche privilegio negli ultimi mesi di prigionia' (*Op*, I, 201).

speranza rivestire un uomo di parole, farlo rivivere in una pagina scritta: un uomo come Sandro in specie' (*Op*, I, 781). Levi does succeed in describing his friend, and he achieves this via metaphor, in particular the metaphor of iron, to which Sandro had a metaphysical link. Although iron is a commonly used metaphor, it is very powerful and poignant in the specific case of Sandro since it captures the strength of his spirit and his resilience. Levi uses both science and literature to describe the indescribable Sandro, as Patruno writes: 'It is through a metaphorical fusion of science and literature that Levi immortalises Sandro as a literary figure'.[47] Levi's descriptions of the ineffable Sandro, as well as his trials or battles with chemistry and Fascism, are testament to his skill as a writer, and in particular to his ability to unite science and literature through metaphor.

7.5 Metaphor of friendship

In contrast to the battle metaphor, which involves an 'enemy', Levi also uses friendship as a metaphor to describe chemistry. Certain chemical elements are not viewed as an adversary but as a friend. Friendship is a key theme of all Levi's writing,[48] and *Il sistema periodico* is no exception. Levi portrays his relationship with chemistry as a friendship in order to make it comprehensible and familiar to his readers, since friendship is a fundamental part of life. As Cicioni notes: 'Elements and compounds are often characterised

[47] Patruno, p. 62.
[48] Many critics have discussed the importance of friendship in Levi's writing. See, for example, Robert Gordon, 'Primo Levi: On Friendship', in *Sguardi sull'Italia: miscellanea dedicata a Francesco Villari dalla Society for Italian Studies*, ed. by Gino Bedani and others (Leeds: Maney, 1997), pp. 184-94. Gordon also dedicates an entire chapter to friendship in *Ordinary Virtues*, pp. 219-36.

anthropomorphically [by Levi], in order to be made more accessible to the readers, and to be personified as friends or opponents'.[49] Friendship is especially important to Levi as it played a decisive role in his survival of Auschwitz.[50]

The chapter 'Stagno' depicts Levi's friendship with both Emilio and the element tin. Immediately Levi declares that 'Ci sono metalli amici e metalli nemici' (*Op*, I, 898). Tin is 'un amico' because it provided a living for Levi and Emilio; they made stannous chloride from tin, which they sold to mirror makers. Moreover, tin is viewed as a friend because it is reactive and readily forms bonds with other elements and compounds: 'si sposa al ferro, trasformandolo nella mite latta, e […] si allega col rame per dare il bronzo' (*Op*, I, 898). Tin is a 'friendly' or 'sociable' element unlike the rare/inert gases such as argon, which do not mix with other elements. In the first chapter of *Il sistema periodico*, entitled 'Argon', Levi describes the inert gases in terms of human relationships, and in particular he compares them to his ancestors. Like the inert gases, Levi's relatives are a minority group and do not form bonds easily with those who are different, mainly the Christians: 'una parete di sospetto, di indefinita ostilità, di irrisione, deve averli tenuti sostanzialmente separati dal resto della popolazione fino a parecchi decenni dopo l'emancipazione del 1848' (*Op*, I, 742). Levi's ancestors remained segregated, they occupied specific areas of Piedmont, just as the inert gases belong to a certain part of the periodic table, on the edge away

[49] Cicioni, *Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 73.
[50] Levi's friendship with Lorenzo and Alberto led in part to him surviving the Lager. His friendships before (e.g. with Sandro) and after the Lager (e.g. with Mordo Nahum and Cesare) also played a crucial role in Levi's life.

from the other elements: 'il rifiuto era reciproco: da parte della minoranza, una barriera simmetrica era stata eretta contro l'intera cristianità' (*Op*, I, 743).

The theme of friendship amongst Jews and Christians also appears in the chapter 'Zinco'. Whereas in 'Argon', Levi used the metaphor of friendship to describe the inert gases, in 'Zinco', he uses chemistry as a metaphor to describe his friendship with Rita. Unlike his inert ancestors, Levi is the active reagent in forming bonds. He is drawn to the aloof and reserved Rita, with whom he strives to make contact: 'Non era amica di nessuno, nessuno sapeva niente di lei, parlava poco, e per tutti questi motivi mi attraeva' (*Op*, I, 769). Levi is the only one in his class to get close to Rita, and he achieves this thanks to a combination of chemistry and literature. They are both assigned the same experiment of transforming zinc into zinc sulphate, they are metaphorically 'cooking' the same dish as Levi writes. They are also linked by the fact that Rita is reading Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, one of Levi's favourite novels (*Op*, I, 769). Thanks to these fortuitous circumstances, Levi observes that: 'fra Rita e me esisteva in quel momento un ponte, un ponticello di zinco, esile ma praticabile' (*Op,* I, 769).

Levi uses chemical imagery to describe how he achieves his friendship with Rita. Zinc in its pure form does not react with anything else, but impure zinc does. Levi also utilises the metaphor of impurity to describe his own 'impurity' (and that of all Jews) in the eyes of Fascism. He writes: 'Perché la ruota giri, perché la vita viva, ci vogliono le impurezze, […] il fascismo non li vuole, li vieta, e per questo tu non sei fascista; vuole tutti uguali e tu non sei

uguale' (*Op*, I, 768). Belpoliti notes the importance of the theme of impurity in Levi's work: 'la chimica è la chiave d'accesso a una questione centrale per Levi, sia scrittore che chimico, quella dell'impurità, di cui tesse l'elogio nel *Sistema periodico*, dove collega questi due aspetti della sua vita − chimica e scrittura − con l'ebraismo […]'.[51] Through metaphor, Levi shows that Fascism is absurd and unnatural.

Levi compares himself, a Jew, to the impure zinc which reacts and forms bonds: 'sono io l'impurezza che fa reagire lo zinco, sono io il granello di sale e di senape' (*Op*, I, 769). Levi physically forms a bond with Rita, by linking arms with her as he accompanies her home. However, true friendship is not achieved because their differences are too great. This is demonstrated by their varying interpretations of Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. For Levi the debates between the secular humanist Settembrini and the Jewish Jesuit Naphta are the most important aspects of the text, but Rita is only interested in the romance between Hans Castorp and Madame Chauchat (*Op*, I, 769). In contrast, Levi and Sandro are drawn together exactly because of their differences, as Levi shows by using a chemical simile: 'eravamo come un catione e un anione' (*Op*, I, 774).

Levi's use of science as a metaphor to describe himself and his identity as a Jew is extremely striking and powerful. In doing so, Levi is overturning the Nazis' use, or rather misuse, of science to describe their 'racial theories' about the Aryan and Jewish races. The Nazis claimed that Jews were biologically inferior to the Aryan 'master race' on the grounds of impurity. The Jews were viewed as contaminating or threatening this pure race. Levi admits that as a Jew

[51] Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, pp. 46-47.

he is different, that he is 'impure', but he turns these characteristics into an advantage. Diversity, like impurity is needed in life. Levi proves that the Nazis' absurd claims were wrong. The scientific theories of the Nazis will be explored in more detail in the next chapter on creation.

Levi's overturning of the Nazis' impurity metaphor is reminiscent of Art Spiegelman's use of mice to depict the Jews in *Maus*. Although some critics have viewed this as reductionist and inappropriate, it serves to highlight the cruelty and the absurdity of the Nazis' beliefs.

7.6 Metaphor of chemistry, rigging, and writing

Finally, I will return to the initial theme of the unification of the 'two cultures' by looking at Levi's explicit comparison of science and literature. As already seen, Levi uses chemistry as a metaphor to describe writing, and he also uses writing as a metaphor to describe chemistry: he believes his two professions cannot be separated from one another. This is shown in *La chiave a stella*, in particular through the figure of the unnamed narrator, who like Levi is a chemist and a writer (and a Holocaust survivor). Parallels are also set up in the novel between chemistry, writing and rigging, the latter being the occupation of the protagonist Faussone. The relationship between the narrator and Faussone echoes, to some degree, that of Levi and Sandro; they are very different from one another and as a result they both have knowledge and experience to pass on to one another, which they do in the form of stories.[52] The following

[52] It is interesting to note that just as Levi portrays Sandro in terms of the element iron, due to his ancestors being blacksmiths, he describes Faussone in terms of copper,

metaphorical description of Levi and Sandro could in fact refer to Faussone and the narrator: 'Non era affatto l'amicizia fra due affini: al contrario, la diversità delle origini ci rendeva ricchi di "merci" da scambiare, come due mercanti che si incontrino provenendo da contrade remote e mutuamente sconosciute' (*SP*, in *Op*, I, 773).

Storytelling plays a central part in *La chiave a stella*, indeed, the novel is structured around the various stories Faussone and the narrator tell each other (and the reader) about their respective occupations. Faussone likes to tell stories about rigging because not many people know about it: 'È ben per questo che io ho caro a raccontare i miei montaggi: è perché tanti non si rendono conto' (*Op*, I, 965). This recalls Levi's reason for writing about chemistry in *Il sistema periodico*: to inform others of his beloved 'trade'. Levi also wanted to raise awareness of technical work, as Cicioni notes: 'Just as *Il sistema periodico* conveys aspects and meanings of the work of a chemist to non-chemists, *La chiave a stella* aims to convey aspects and meanings of technical work to readers unfamiliar with skilled manual labour'.[53] However, as this chapter has shown, Levi's main reason for giving literary form to chemistry is to show how his trade carries deeper, metaphorical implications, which can be meaningful for others.

---

because his father was a coppersmith. Faussone uses battle imagery to describe his relationship with copper, which is reminiscent of Sandro and iron: 'aveva col rame una lunga dimestichezza, trapunta di amore e di odio, di battaglie silenziose ed accanite, di entusiasmi e stanchezze, di vittorie e sconfitte' (*CS*, in *Op*, I, 1012).

[53] Cicioni, *Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 85. See also Levi's 1979 interview with Giorgio De Rienzo, 'Lavorare piace', *Famiglia Cristiana*, 21 January 1979.

Levi presents the technical world of work through Faussone. Unlike Levi, however, Faussone is not a very good storyteller. He tends to use clichés, to digress frequently and to use drawn-out explanations, as the narrator laments: 'Non è un gran raccontatore […]. Ha un vocabolario ridotto, e si esprime spesso attraverso luoghi comuni che forse gli sembrano arguti e nuovi' (*Op*, I, 945). However, Faussone does occasionally use original and effective metaphors. Indeed, *La chiave a stella* opens with the advice of Faussone to the narrator about the art of storytelling. The technique of writing is metaphorically compared to that of panel-beating, which is the profession of Faussone's father. Both 'crafts' are described as involving a process of grinding, hammering and polishing: 'Lei poi, se proprio lo vuole raccontare, ci lavora sopra, lo rettifica, lo smeriglia, toglie le bavature, gli dà un po' di bombé e tira fuori una storia' (*Op*, I, 945). As Cicioni writes: 'The initial statement represents narration in terms of a craft, a shaping of facts akin to the filing and welding of metals'.[54] The technique of writing also has parallels with chemistry, as the narrator explains, using an eloquent and innovative metaphor based on sewing: 'Del resto, non è detto che l'aver trascorso più di trent'anni nel mestiere di cucire insieme lunghe molecole […] non insegni nulla sul modo di cucire insieme parole e idee' (*Op*, I, 1076).[55] Similarly, in *Il sistema periodico*, Levi explicitly compares writing to chemistry: '[il] mio scrivere diventò un'avventura diversa, […] un'opera di

[54] Cicioni, *Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 95.

[55] In Classical literature, tapestry/embroidery/weaving are associated with storytelling, such as in the tales of Penelope, and Philomela and Procne. See for example, Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susqehanna University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2001).

chimico che pesa e divide, misura e giudica su prove certe, e s'industria di rispondere ai perché' (*Op*, I, 872-83). Through the various metaphors used by Faussone, the narrator, and Levi, we see that writing is not merely an intellectual pursuit reliant on the imagination but it is a practical and logical activity.

Nonetheless, the imagination does play an important role in writing. In fact, one of the advantages storytelling has over both rigging and chemistry is the chance to invent freely. There are no rules that govern storytelling. The narrator tells Faussone that it does not matter if the metaphorical 'towers' writers build fall down, in fact writers are praised for exceeding tolerance levels, that is, for making unlikely comparisons (or metaphors): 'Noi, al contrario dei montatori, quando riusciamo una tolleranza a sforzarla, a fare un accoppiamento impossibile, siamo contenti e veniamo lodati' (*Op*, I, 989). However, Faussone inventively uses a simile and compares pylons (typical structures that he rigs) to books, as they do not cause humans harm if they are 'faulty': 'gli elettrodotti sono un po' come i libri che scrive lei, che saranno magari bellissimi, ma insomma se viceversa fossero un po' scarsi, parlando con licenza non muore nessuno' (*Op*, I, 1064). But, as the narrator warns, you must be careful with similes since they can be misleading: 'con le similitudini bisogna stare attenti, perché magari sono poetiche ma dimostrano poco: perciò si deve andare cauti nel ricavarne indicazioni educative-edificanti' (*Op*, I, 1013).

Despite the narrator's warning, he nonetheless uses simile to describe his respective professions, especially chemistry, since figurative language is sometimes the best way of expressing the unseen or the unknown. For example,

the narrator tells Faussone that chemistry is similar to rigging via the use of a simile: 'noi montiamo e smontiamo delle costruzioni molto piccole. Ci dividiamo in due rami principali, quelli che montano e quelli che smontano, e gli uni e gli altri siamo come dei ciechi con le dita sensibili. Dico come dei ciechi, perché appunto, le cose che noi manipoliamo sono troppo piccole per essere viste' (*Op*, I, 1077). By using a simile, the narrator manages to express, in accessible language, the essence of chemistry to Faussone and the reader. Like Levi, the narrator uses figurative language for utility, not for decoration; he has exploited the educative role of simile.

7.7 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, for Levi there is no clear divide between science and literature, and the 'two cultures' debate is, in his writing, largely seen as irrelevant. Rather, through the use of figurative language he metaphorically and literally creates bridges between the two realms of knowledge. According to Faussone in *La chiave e stella*, building bridges 'è il piú bel lavoro che [ci sia]' (*Op*, I, 1039), and, as we have seen, both *Il sistema periodico* and *La chiave a stella* are testament to Levi's skill at using metaphor and simile to unite and explain his respective professions of chemistry and writing to the layperson, the reader. In doing so, Levi shows that science is not only the domain of the specialist, of those with the relevant training and technical knowledge, but that it is also able to provide the non-specialist with insights into deeper and more general aspects of human life, such as conflict and friendship.

The following chapter will take up the findings of this one and, taking for granted that science and literature, far from being mutually exclusive, can work together to bring added enlightenment to the reader, will focus on one particular concept which is equally relevant to both realms and which (perhaps precisely because of this) represents an important recurring theme in Levi's writings: the concept of creation.

Chapter 8: Metaphors of Creation, Invention and Destruction

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on creation and invention, which are, according to Levi, defining characteristics of humanity.[1] Levi frequently uses the concepts of creation and invention as metaphors to reveal insights into the human condition, which is one of his most obsessive preoccupations.[2] Indeed, Gordon notes that '[w]hat makes up man can be told as a story of origins, an *Entstehungsgeschichte*, […] and as a story of what man makes, of the man-made'.[3] As Lakoff and Johnson maintain, we use our knowledge of familiar events or phenomena to conceptualise more abstract issues. Creation and invention are key elements of human life; we all, to some degree, make things in our everyday lives, which is why Levi uses creation and invention in particular as conceptual metaphors to define humankind.[4]

As well as looking at the figure of the creator and inventor, this chapter will also concentrate on the various creations and inventions of Levi's fictional short

[1] I explore this idea in more detail in the next section.
[2] Critics such as Gordon, Ross and Usher also analyse Levi's concepts of creation and invention. See for example, Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, pp. 55 and 84-88; Gordon's chapter 'Invention, or First Things', in *Ordinary Virtues*, pp. 173-94; and Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment*.
[3] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 194.
[4] The themes of creation and invention will be discussed alongside each other, although the subtle differences between the two terms will be observed wherever possible. For instance, creation will be used to refer to the action or process of creating animate entities such as humans, animals and hybrid creatures. It will also be used to denote the divine act of Creation, the creation of the universe as told in Genesis, which frequently appears in Levi's writing as a metaphor for a variety of events and experiences. Invention, on the other hand, will refer to the act of inventing inanimate objects, most notably machines.

stories, most notably centaurs, monsters and machines, and show how they reflect aspects of their makers and humankind in general.

Although these stories are fictional they are not just frivolous flights of the imagination; they contain a deeper underlying message. For example, Levi uses metaphors of creation and invention to discuss the folly of humankind's desire to play God. Creations such as books, the atomic bomb and Auschwitz itself are explored in this chapter to highlight the dangers of the manmade. In Levi's short stories, creation and invention are often accompanied by the antithesis, destruction. Levi's interest in destruction can be traced back to his imprisonment in Auschwitz, where the Nazis tried to destroy the *Häftlinge*. The Lager was formed for the sole purpose of destruction and Levi compared the *univers concentrationnaire* to a dehumanising, or destroying, machine, as we have already seen: 'il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, p. 35). Machines, such as the duplicating machine (the 'Mimete') in 'L'ordine a buon mercato' and 'Alcune applicazioni del Mimete', the poetry-making machine in 'Il Versificatore', the beauty-measuring machine (the 'Calometro') in 'La misura della bellezza', and the 'Torec' virtual reality machine in 'Trattamento di quiescenza', are often the protagonists of Levi's invention stories. Science and technology helped humankind build these inventions, but the machines Levi describes are generally used for negative effect, for individual profit at the expense of others. Levi uses the machine as a metaphor to portray a misuse of science, which recalls the perverse and corrupt exploitation of science by the Third Reich. The Nazis employed science for destruction; they invented

the 'gran macchina' of Auschwitz to eliminate the Jews and other 'undesirables', in their sick quest to achieve a 'master race'. This destruction is echoed in some of Levi's short stories, most notably 'Angelica Farfalla' and 'Versamina'. As seen in chapters 3 and 4, the destruction of humanity is very difficult to describe in ordinary language. The figurative nature and poetic force of metaphor allow the unspeakable to be told in a comprehensible and accessible way. This chapter will look at metaphors of both creation/invention and destruction, which often appear together in Levi's writing, and it will also explore how Levi manages to describe the often dark and disturbing details of these two themes, by his skillful use of metaphor.

8.2 Man as maker (of containers)

According to Levi, the ability to create is one of the defining characteristics of humankind. For example, in his tale 'Il sesto giorno' (*Storie naturali*), which is a parody of the biblical Creation story, being able to make things with one's hands is a prerequisite of man. The team of bureaucrats in charge of creating 'l'Uomo' maintain that he must possess a 'particolare attitudine a creare ed utilizzare strumenti' (*Op*, I, 532). Levi also takes up this theme in *Il sistema periodico*, where he discusses his feelings of inadequacy as a man because he cannot make things with his hands:

> Cosa sapevamo fare con le nostre mani? Niente, o quasi. Le donne sí: le nostre madri e nonne avevano mani vive ed agili, sapevano cucire e cucinare […]. Ma noi, e i nostri padri? Le nostre mani erano rozze e deboli ad un tempo, regredite, insensibili: la parte meno educata dei nostri corpi. Compiute le prime fondamentali esperienze del gioco,

> avevano imparato a scrivere e null'altro. […] Se l'uomo è artefice, non eravamo uomini. (*Op*, I, 759-60)[5]

In the essay 'Una bottiglia di sole', Levi defines humankind in particular as a maker of containers: 'l'uomo è costruttore di recipienti; una specie che non ne costruisce, per definizione non è umana' (*RS*, in *Op*, II, 958).[6] The image of the container is used throughout Levi's work as a metaphor for the creativity, or inventiveness of humankind.[7] Furthermore, as we will see below, containers themselves can be used as a conceptual metaphor to describe a diverse range of inventions and creations, including books, bombs and even the human body. Lakoff and Johnson explore the vast range of possibilities of the use of the container metaphor in their study *Metaphors We Live By*. According to them,

> [w]e are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside.[8]

Levi believes that making containers is a specifically human activity because it shows an awareness of the future (of the need to store material) and the ability to predict the properties of materials (creating suitable containers). After a discussion of the various types of containers that have been created over the

---

[5] For commentary on the theme of 'man as maker' in Levi's work, see Pierpaolo Antonello, 'Primo Levi and "man as maker"', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 89-103.

[6] This recalls Levi's statement in *I sommersi e i salvati* about communication, which he believes is another defining characteristic of humankind: 'Tutte le razze umane parlano; nessuna specie non-umana sa parlare' (*Op*, II, 1060). Again, this highlights Levi's obsession with the question of defining humankind.

[7] Ross also discusses the container metaphor in *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment*. In particular see the chapter 'Containers and Their Contents', pp. 23-40.

[8] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 29. Ross quotes a slightly shorter version of this passage in *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment* (p. 27).

years, mainly innocuous everyday items such as bottles, bowls and jars, Levi concludes the essay on a more sinister note. He writes that the key to our future lies in our ability to make containers, and that: 'Nella nostra qualità di costruttori di recipienti, abbiamo in mano la chiave del massimo beneficio e del massimo danno' (*Op*, II, p. 961). Here, Levi is using the container metaphor to hint at the destructive possibilities of invention. Not all inventions are useful, in fact some are designed and used specifically for immoral or destructive purposes, such as the atomic bomb. Levi is referring implicitly to the nuclear bomb in the essay, as the title 'Una bottiglia di sole' suggests (the nuclear bomb being composed of hydrogen like the sun). Humankind invented nuclear weapons 'dal nulla (quasi dal nulla: dall'idrogeno dell'acqua)' (*Op*, II, 961). When unleashed, the contents of these nuclear creations have devastating effects, as Hiroshima has shown.[9] It is not just technology that Levi warns against, he also warns against words, in the form of doctrines and philosophies. The written word can be just as powerful as a weapon, as Levi states: '[a]vere la biro in mano, avere la macchina da scrivere in mano è come avere un mitra'.[10]

---

[9] Levi voiced his fears about nuclear weapons in his writing, see for example the striking and forceful poem 'La bambina di Pompei', and the ending of *Se non ora, quando?*.

[10] See the appendix to Charlotte Ross, 'Representations of Science, Literature, Technology and Society in the Works of Primo Levi' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2004), pp. 320-33 (p. 325). This quote comes from Levi's 1985 interview with Germaine Greer, however, it has not been included in any of the published versions of the interview. The interview was conducted in Italian, but was first published in English (translated by Greer) as 'Germaine Greer talks to Primo Levi' in *The Literary Review*, November 1985 (pp. 15-19). This has been translated into Italian by Erminio Corti, and appears in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 65-76. In the appendix to her thesis, Ross provides a number of excerpts from the original interview which have not been published.

Containers can be used as a metaphor for a number of creations, including words and books. Michael Reddy's 'conduit metaphor' involves the theory that words are containers. He believes that in the process of communication, the speaker/writer puts ideas (viewed metaphorically as objects) into words (containers) and these are sent (along a conduit) to a hearer/reader who takes the idea/objects out of the word/containers.[11] If we look at the book as a container, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is a prime example of a creation which contains dangerous ideas, and which was used for negative and destructive purposes. Indeed, the very origins of Auschwitz, the ideology that led to the creation of the camps, can be found in his text. In *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi notes the danger of *Mein Kampf*, not just for the Hitlerian generation but also for the future. The words will survive even after the fall of Nazism, they are embodied, or contained in the text; the evil message will live on and may be adopted and adapted by other dangerous individuals:

> Dopo la disfatta, la silenziosa diaspora nazista ha insegnato le arti della persecuzione e della tortura ai militari ed ai politici di una dozzina di paesi […]. Molti nuovi tiranni tengono nel cassetto la 'Battaglia' di Adolf Hitler: magari con qualche rettifica, o con qualche sostituzione di nomi, può ancora venire a taglio. (*Op*, II, 1151)

It can be said that Hitler's evil doctrine is like a nuclear weapon, it will live on just as a nuclear bomb has damaging effects after its explosion, in the form of radioactive fallout. This is just one example, albeit very extreme, of how the container metaphor (in this case, of words in a book) can end in destruction. It also highlights 'just how closely related to each other the forces of creation and

[11] Michael Reddy, 'The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language', in Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, pp. 164-201.

destruction can be'.[12] This theme will be explored in more detail in the following section, looking in particular at the metaphor of the hybrid.

8.3 Dangerous hybrids

Levi's stories of creation and destruction can be read as morality tales about the dangers of the misuse of science and the arrogant desire of humanity for progression. Levi himself stated that some of his stories 'si riconnettono […] alla tradizione Midrashica del racconto morale'.[13] Raniero M. Speelman notes that 'Midrashim are not just stories, but have a deeper meaning as well, which may invite the reader to think about them. It is this *double nature* that we should always keep in mind when examining the particular character of Primo Levi's narrative work' (emphasis added).[14] Similarly, Belpoliti has noted that 'sta al lettore cogliere dietro le parole dei suoi trascrittori la sanzione di verità che vibra nelle parole di Levi e che spesso si mostra sotto *il duplice aspetto*: [...] "Io sono un centauro"' (emphasis added).[15] To some extent, the interpretation of Levi's short stories is analogous to the interpretation of metaphor. Metaphor is also characterised by duality since it is composed of two distinct units: the tenor and the vehicle. Metaphor associates an object or idea with another area of life, and

---

[12] Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, 'Literature and Culture After Auschwitz: An Introduction', in Levi and Rothberg (eds), *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, pp. 273-76 (p. 275).

[13] Levi discussed the Jewish aspects of his writing in a conference paper in 1982, published as 'Itinerario d'uno scrittore ebreo', in *Pagine sparse*, in *Op*, II, 1213-29 (p. 1222). For a discussion of Levi and midrashim, see Mirna Cicioni, 'Moral Snares and Parables', pp. 75-87; and Raniero M. Speelman, 'Primo Levi's Short Stories: A Modern Midrashim', in Pugliese (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 23-32.

[14] Speelman, p. 23.

[15] Belpoliti, 'Io sono un centauro', pp. xvii-xix.

it is up to the reader to make the connection between the two. Furthermore, the most successful metaphors often unite two very different, even opposing, concepts or ideas. These so-called 'tension' metaphors (see chapter 2) encourage the reader to think more deeply about what is being communicated since the links between the tenor and vehicle are not obvious. As a result, the metaphor is often more striking and memorable.

It is no coincidence that Levi was fascinated with duality; as we saw in the previous chapter, this fascination can be attributed to his own hybrid identity as a practitioner of two very different, and traditionally opposing disciplines, those of letters and of science.[16] In order to resolve the problem of defining his double identity, Levi used the image of the centaur to represent himself metaphorically. Levi was particularly interested in the mythical figure of the centaur, and it appears most notably in 'Quaestio de Centauris' of *Storie naturali*, where it is used as a conceptual metaphor for the human condition, in particular the twofold nature of humankind: the spirit and the flesh. Gordon notes the importance of the figure of the centaur in Levi's work: 'the notion of the split self goes to the heart of Levi's conception both of himself and of what it

[16] Levi was fascinated immensely by Rabelais, another hybrid man of letters and science (in fact a man of many disciplines) precisely for his range of interests, but also for his sense of humour. Levi pays homage to Rabelais in *La ricerca delle radici*, and in the epigraph to *Storie naturali*, where he quotes Chapter VI of *Gargantua*, about 'des enfantements estranges et contre nature' (*Op*, I, 399). Indeed, many of Levi's short stories in *Storie naturali* feature humorous and strange births (hence the irony of the title *Storie naturali*). Whilst *Storie naturali* deals with creation stories of living beings, *Vizio di forma* deals more with stories of invention, as its title suggests (the words 'vizio di forma' refer to a structural defect associated with machines and technology as opposed to animate beings).

is to be human, contained in the recurrent image of the centaur'.[17] 'Quaestio de Centauris' opens with a description of the origins of centaurs, in other words, it begins with a creation story (or in fact, a rewriting of the Creation story, and also a re-creation story, as we will see). So, via the use of an extended metaphor, Levi fuses together two of his most important topoi: creation and the hybrid figure of the centaur.

According to Levi's fictional story, centaurs date back to the time immediately after the universal flood, when, in order to repopulate the earth, cross breeding among the limited number of species saved by Noah occurred:

> Fu un tempo mai piú ripetuto, di fecondità delirante, furibonda, in cui l'universo intero sentí amore, tanto che per poco non ritornò in caos. Furono quelli i giorni in cui la terra stessa fornicava col cielo, in cui tutto germinava, tutto dava frutto. Ogni nozza era feconda, […] né solo ogni nozza, ma ogni contatto, ogni unione anche fugace, anche fra specie diverse, anche fra bestie e pietre, anche fra piante e pietre. […] Perché il delfino è simile ad un pesce, eppure patorisce ed allatta i suoi nati? Perché è figlio di un tonno di una vacca. Di dove i colori gentili delle farfalle, e la loro abilità al volo? Sono figlie di una mosca e di un fiore. E le testuggini sono figlie di un rospo e di uno scoglio. (*Op*, I, 506)[18]

The protagonist, the centaur Trachi, believes that this tale of the mixing of species was in fact the definitive creation: 'Fu questa seconda creazione la vera creazione' (*Op*, I, 506). Out of the chaos (or destruction) of the flood, new hybrid species were created to repopulate the earth and restore order, in a process Levi calls 'panspermía'.

To some extent, this act of creation recalls what, according to Irving Greenberg, can be the only possible Jewish response to the Holocaust, that of

[17] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 183.
[18] The theme of cross fertilisation also appears in Levi's short story 'Disfilassi' of *Lilít*, where trees and humans reproduce, creating hybrid offspring.

reasserting faith in humanity through reproduction, of creating new life. As Greenberg writes: 'In the silence of God and of theology, there is one fundamental testimony that can still be given – the testimony of human life itself. […] Each act of creating a life, […] becomes multiplied in its resonance because it contradicts the mass graves of biblical Shinar – or Treblinka'.[19] So, just as after the disaster of the universal Flood, order was restored by repopulating the earth, one way of reversing the destruction of the Holocaust, is by creating a new Jewish population. However, the comparison between the two events must be used judiciously; there is an oppositional relationship between them. The Biblical Flood was created by God as a punishment for human wickedness. The Jews and other victims of the Holocaust had done nothing to deserve the destruction that was brought down on them. Furthermore, the Holocaust was a man-made atrocity, a creation of human wickedness. It was aided by the misuse of science and technology, mainly in the form of the invention of the gas chamber. Interestingly, in the biblical story, 'invention' allows Noah to build the Ark and thus to safeguard humanity and other species. Levi, did, however, use the metaphor of drowning (specifically, the metaphor of the submerged – 'i sommersi') to describe those who perished in the Lager, perhaps hinting at a link between Auschwitz and the Flood.[20] Despite the obvious differences, both the story of the Biblical Flood (and the fictional story

[19] Irving Greenberg, 'Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust', in *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, ed. by Michael L. Morgan (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 102-15 (p. 110).

[20] To my knowledge, this possible link has not yet been explored. I hope to develop this in a future study.

of the creation of centaurs), and Greenberg's response to the Holocaust, use the conceptual metaphor of creation to reveal the importance of new life, of creating order from disorder.

Another link is made metaphorically between the creation of the centaurs and the Holocaust. To some extent, Trachi's statement in 'Quaestio de Centauris' that the period of 'panspermía' (cross-fertilisation) after the Flood was 'the true creation', is reminiscent of Levi's statement in *Il sistema periodico* (mentioned in the previous chapter) that diversity and impurity is needed in order for life to flourish, with impurity being a metaphor for Jewishness (*Op*, I, 767-68).[21] Levi uses the metaphor of the impurity of the Jew to shed light on creation, in particular his own genesis:

> sono io l'impurezza che fa reagire lo zinco, sono il granello di sale e di senape. […] Per vero, fino appunto a quei mesi non mi era importato molto di essere ebreo: […] avevo sempre considerato la mia origine come un fatto pressoché trascurabile ma curioso. (*Op*, I, 769-70)

This diversity and impurity is best epitomised by Levi's self-identification as a centaur. The metaphor of the centaur not only represents Levi the individual, but the Jewish people as a whole. Indeed, Belpoliti writes that 'il popolo ebraico è per Levi un centauro'.[22] In the chapter 'Argon' of *Il sistema periodico* Levi describes the origins (to some extent, another 'creation' story) of the Piedmontese Jews, including his own family. He discusses the various problems they faced in settling into a new country (the majority came from Spain in the 1500s), such as choosing between adhering to Judaism and adopting the non-

[21] Gordon also points out this association, see his *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 185. See, also, chapter 7 above.
[22] Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, p. 41.

Jewish culture of the native population. Levi believes that this tension, which is typical of the Diaspora, is in fact what makes the Jews stronger: they have learnt to abstract order from chaos: 'l'uomo è centauro, groviglio di carne e di mente, di alito divino e di polvere. Il popolo ebreo, dopo la dispersione, ha vissuto a lungo e dolorosamente questo conflitto, e ne ha tratto, accanto alla sua saggezza, il suo riso' (*Op*, I, 746). So, the myth of the creation of centaurs can be read as a metaphor for the importance of Jewishness in particular, and diversity in general; for, as Trachi explains, the unions 'fra specie diverse, anche fra bestie e pietre, anche fra piante e pietre' occurred so that the universe would not return to chaos (*Op*, I, 506).

However, duality can be dangerous and can, in fact, lead to chaos. The centaur is the metaphorical symbol of the hybridity of man, of the dangerous mix of brain and brute. Usher also highlights this, explaining that '[t]he common thread running through all [Levi's] accounts of the new man, whether a mechanical or a genetic construct, is the problem of dual nature, of higher and lower faculties'.[23] In 'Quaestio de Centauris', the centaur Trachi is portrayed as a noble and intelligent creature. He falls in love with a human girl named Teresa; it is a highly noble and delicate form of love, not a physical 'animal' attraction: 'tutta la sua metà umana era gremita di sogni, di fantasie nobili, gentili' (*Op*, I, 512). Trachi's human side realises that his love for Teresa will never be reciprocated, and he resigns himself to writing songs about his

[23] Usher, 'Levi's Science Fiction', p. 206.

unattainable beloved, like a courtly love poet.[24] However, this human tenderness disappears when Trachi discovers that his best friend and keeper, the human narrator of the story, has had a sexual encounter with Teresa. Enraged with anger and jealousy, the once civilised Trachi turns to his baser animal side. He becomes uncontrollably violent and seeks sexual satisfaction, which he achieves by rampaging across Italy and brutally raping mares. Sex here is destructive, unlike that at the beginning of the story, which led to the creation of new species.

As Usher notes 'the moral is clear, the potential for good and bad is in everyone'.[25] Levi analyses the hybridity of humankind in the chapter 'La zona grigia' of *I sommersi e i salvati*, with particular reference to the Holocaust: 'pietà e brutalità possono coesistere, nello stesso individuo e nello stesso momento, contro ogni logica' (*Op*, II, 1033). Levi cannot comprehend the Nazis, but by looking at fictional, or metaphorical creatures such as the centaur Trachi, Levi is able to shed some light on the 'grande follia della terza Germania' (*Op*, I, 102). Just as the domesticated Trachi became a ferocious monster, the civilised people of Germany embraced Nazism and turned into violent brutes. But, as Levi points out, although the SS behaved like monsters, they were in fact human: 'bisogna ricordare che questi fedeli, e fra questi anche i diligenti esecutori di ordini disumani, […] non erano (salve poche eccezioni) dei mostri: erano uomini qualunque' ('Appendice' in *SQU*, in *Op*, I, 198). Belpoliti writes

[24] Trachi is not the only creature capable of creating poetry. In the short story 'L'amico dell'uomo' of *Storie naturali*, we come across tapeworms that communicate with their human hosts by using *terza rima*, in a parody of the poetry of Dante.
[25] Usher, 'Levi's Science Fiction', p. 206.

that 'Per Levi, etologo del comportamento umano, il mostro non esiste, sostituito invece dall'ibrido'.[26] However, Levi uses the monster as a conceptual metaphor, as we will see later in the chapter.

Another hybrid creation, or 'creature' is used as a conceptual metaphor for humankind in the short story 'Il servo' of *Vizio di forma*. In particular, Levi employs metaphor in the story to deal with the questions of unethical creation and the dangers of hybridity. Here, as in 'Quaestio de Centauris', Levi evokes the Genesis story of Creation, but whereas he uses the mythological figure of the centaur in the latter, he turns to the Talmudic figure of the Golem in the former. 'Il servo' is essentially a creation story; it is a tale about a Golem (the servant of the title) which is created in a manner resembling that of the creation of Adam. It is created by a sixteenth-century rabbi of Prague named Arié, in order to help him in his old age and to help protect the Jewish population of the city. The Golem is a hybrid creature made out of clay, it is 'poco piú che un nulla: è una porzione di materia, ossia di caos, racchiusa in sembianza umana o bestiale, è insomma un simulacro' (*Op*, I, 710-11). It is brought to life by placing a scroll containing the name of God in its mouth, and this scroll must be removed every Friday night to disable the Golem so that it does not break the holy law and work on the Sabbath.

The creation process is not easy; Arié is faced by a number of 'design' problems, which involve the form, appearance and qualities of the Golem.[27]

---

[26] Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, p. 83.

[27] These design problems recall those faced by the team of experts in 'Il sesto giorno' (*Storie naturali*) who are in charge of creating humankind. I will discuss this short story in detail later in the chapter.

Above all, Arié must not create his servant in the image of man since this would be a sin, for only God can create human life: 'Arié non era un bestemmiatore', he did not want to be '"come Dio" e creare il secondo Adamo' (*Op*, I, 711).[28] However, this is difficult because Adam and his descendents are all golems, originally created from clay: 'Il Vitello d'Oro era un Golem; lo era Adamo, ed anche noi lo siamo' (*Op*, I, 711). The theme of a Golem created from clay is also explored in the short story 'Lilít', which appears in the collection of the same name. In this story, Levi recounts an episode from Auschwitz, in particular a conversation with one of his fellow prisoners called 'il Tischler', the carpenter. 'Il Tischler' tells Levi the Jewish story of Lilith, the first wife of Adam. According to legend, the two accounts of the Creation in Genesis I and II are two separate events, and not two versions of the same story, as is generally believed. The first account, as 'il Tischler' explains to Levi, actually refers to the creation of Lilith, whilst the second refers to that of Eve. Lilith, unlike Eve who was created from Adam's rib, was supposedly created at the same time as Adam, from the same piece of clay: 'la prima storia è che il Signore non solo li fece uguali, ma con l'argilla fece una sola forma, anzi un Golem, una forma senza forma. Era una figura con due schiene, cioè l'uomo e la donna già congiunti' (*Op*, II, 21). So, according to Jewish legend, Lilith, the first woman

[28] The Nazis, however, did want to be all-powerful, like God. They wanted to defy the limits of nature as shown by the creation of Auschwitz. One striking example of the Nazis' arrogance and desire to play God is shown by the construction of the Carbide Tower in the Buna rubber works at the camp. Levi and the other prisoners despised the Nazis' plan, and in *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi explicitly compared the Carbide Tower to that of the biblical tower of Babel: 'noi la chiamiamo: Babelturm, Bobelturm; e odiamo in essa il sogno demente di grandezza dei nostri padroni, il loro disprezzo di Dio e degli uomini, di noi uomini' (*Op*, I, 68).

on earth, was also a Golem like Adam, and they were equal. God, however, separated the two forms, much to the displeasure of Adam. He longed to be reunited with his 'other half', and he tried to force Lilith to lie down on the ground, but she protested: 'perché io di sotto? Non siamo forse uguali, due metà della stessa pasta? (*Op*, II, 21). Initially Lilith managed to fight Adam off because they were equal in strength, until God intervened, taking the side of Adam. Lilith rebelled against God and became a she-devil intent on causing harm wherever she went. The theme of the dangers of two opposing natures within one entity is also explored in 'Il servo', using the conceptual metaphor of the Golem, as we will see.

Rabbi Arié carefully chooses his servant's qualities and characteristics so as not to make it 'too human', thereby avoiding the danger of mimicking God. For example, he decides not to give him blood because this is associated with 'tutte le passioni della bestia e dell'uomo' (*Op*, I, 713). Furthermore, the Golem (like the centaur Trachi) is only human in form from the waist up, it is a hybrid creation: 'al di sotto della cintura il Golem era veramente Golem, cioè un frammento di caos' (*Op*, I, 713).

He does, however, give the golem the virtues of the most important Jewish biblical role models since it must be brave and strong in order to protect the Jewish people: 'gli donò la collera di Mosè e dei profeti, l'obbedienza di Abramo, la protervia di Caino, il coraggio di Giosuè' (*Op*, I, 713). Arié also gives some of his own characteristics to his creation, for example, he models the

Golem's hands on his own, because 'aveva voluto firmarsi' (*Op*, I, 713).[29] As stated at the beginning of the chapter, hands play an important part in Levi's discussions of creation, since ultimately it is the hands that make the various creations. Gordon also notes this importance:

> [t]he work of the rabbi, the work of the Golem, and even the 'genetic' bond of similarity between them are all […] channelled through their hands. Their hands define their dignity, their capacity to invent or to make, their very autonomy as 'human' beings.[30]

The Golem serves Arié and the Jewish community of Prague faithfully for many years, until one Friday night when Arié forgets to remove the scroll from his servant's mouth. The Golem is confused by the contradictory orders; the presence of the scroll dictates that the Golem must serve his master, whilst at the same time he must obey the commandment of not working on the Sabbath. Consequently the Golem goes mad, like a robot that short circuits. However, the Golem is not entirely a robot, it is a hybrid of man and machine. It is this hybridity, this conflict of natures that makes it destroy everything in sight, until it eventually destroys itself. Torn between its duty as a robot to serve, and its human desire of adhering to the commandment of keeping holy the Sabbath, the Golem descends into chaos. Its non-human nature takes control, the nether regions of chaos prevail, which is reminiscent of Trachi's animal side (again, the lower regions) taking over and causing destruction. Hybridity is dangerous and uncontrollable, yet we are all, to some extent hybrids, and must control our competing urges. As the narrator of *La chiave a stella* proclaims: 'essendo un

[29] In *La chiave a stella*, Faussone also describes how he likes to put his signature on his creations, to make them his own: 'A me piace lavorare da solo, cosí è come se sotto al lavoro finito ci mettessi la mia firma' (*Op*, I, 1001).
[30] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 180.

chimico per l'occhio del mondo, e sentendomi invece sangue di scrittore nelle vene, mi pareva di avere in corpo due anime, che sono troppe' (*Op*, I, 989).

As well as providing a warning about duality, 'Il servo' also uses the metaphor of the Golem as a warning about creating, in particular about the dangers of playing God. By creating a Golem, Arié emulates (albeit unintentionally) the creation of Adam. Just as Adam was made in the image of God, the Golem is made in the image of Arié. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant note that in Jewish legend, '[t]he Golem symbolizes human creativity aping God by creating a being in its own image, but only making a servile creature with a propensity to evil, a slave to its own passions'.[31] Indeed, on the ill-fated eve of the Sabbath, Arié's Golem refuses to work, 'era un servo che non voleva essere un servo' (*Op*, I, 716). It turns against his creator and finally self-destructs. Although Arié wanted to create a servant, a faithful helper, he ended up creating a dangerous monster. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant explain:

> True life proceeds from God alone […] the Golem is no more than an image of its creator […]. Lastly, its significance is that of the creation which passes out of the control of its creator. It demonstrates that humanity is no more than a sorcerer's apprentice.[32]

The theme of playing God and creating life is explored in the next section, where I will look specifically at metaphors of the monstrous.

---

[31] Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. by John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 445.
[32] Chevalier and Gheerbrant, p. 445.

8.4 Monstrous metaphors

At this point, it would be useful to reiterate the main issues which Levi raises through his use of creation metaphors. According to Gordon, Levi's

> fascination with the myths and metaphors of creation and invention […] [displays an] ethical concern with the nature of the human, its hybridity and impurity, the nature and limits of human artifice […], how to live (well) through making and renewing, making something from nothing (making it useful).[33]

I have already looked at the theme of hybridity and impurity in Levi's creation metaphors, and I have touched on Levi's use of creation metaphors to discuss the limits of human artifice. This section will look in more detail at the limits and dangers of artificial creation, focusing in particular on metaphors of monstrous creations.

As seen above, according to Belpoliti, monsters do not exist for Levi, only hybrids do.[34] Although Levi does not create true monsters in the traditional sense of the word, his hybrid creations can be viewed as monstrous, since they often turn into dangerous and frightening creatures, as seen with the centaur Trachi and Arié's Golem. Levi's monstrous creations are not frivolous fictional inventions; he often bases them on real events, experiences, and people, which gives them a deeper meaning. By looking at these monstrous figures Levi reveals truths about humankind, as Keala Jewell explains 'monster myths are linked indissolubly to the definition of the "human"'.[35] In particular, Levi's

---

[33] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 194.
[34] Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, p. 83.
[35] Keala Jewell, 'Introduction: Monsters and Discourse on the Human', in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. by Keala Jewell (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 9-24 (p. 12).

monster stories deal with the dangers associated with humankind's pride and arrogance, and their fascination and obsession with trying to defy nature and play God.

The metaphor of the monster appears in the story 'Angelica Farfalla' of *Storie naturali*. This chilling tale has explicit references to the Holocaust, in particular to the unethical and inhumane experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on Jews, the disabled and others classed as 'subhuman' in the eyes of the Third Reich. Set in post-war Berlin, it tells the fictional story of an Allied investigation into the work of a Nazi scientist called Professor Leeb who, like many Nazis, disappeared at the end of the war. Indeed, Leeb[36] is based partly on the notorious 'Angel of Death', Dr Josef Mengele (who fled after the war to South America where he lived as a free man until he died of natural causes in 1979) and partly on Alfred Rosenberg, the main theoretician of Hitler's racial purity campaign. The story also has links with Dante, as shown by the title, which is taken from canto X of *Purgatorio*. Here, Dante rebukes those who, blinded by pride, fail to acknowledge that human beings only reach a state of angelic perfection after death, in the presence of God. Dante thus compares humans to caterpillars, which will only turn into 'angelic butterflies' in Heaven:[37]

---

[36] Ironically, the name Leeb resembles the German 'Leben', meaning 'life'.

[37] Levi also refers to Dante in his discussion of the imperfection of caterpillars and the perfection of butterflies in his essay entitled 'Le farfalle' of *L'altrui mestiere*: 'Come le farfalle sono belle per definizione, sono il nostro metro della bellezza, così i bruchi ("entòmata in difetto", li diceva Dante) sono brutti per definizione: […] sono a loro volta simbolici, il simbolo del rozzo, dell'incompiuto, della perfezione non raggiunta' (*Op*, II, 753).

> non v'accorgete voi che noi siam vermi
> nati a formar l'angelica farfalla,
> che vola a la giustizia sanza schermi?
> Di che l'animo vostro in alto galla,
> poi siete quasi entomata in difetto,
> sí come vermo in cui formazione falla? (*Purg*. X, 124-29).

The team of Allied investigators finds a manuscript of Professor Leeb's work in his apartment/laboratory which contains the aforementioned reference to Dante. Leeb, however, takes Dante's metaphor literally. He believes that humans are neotenic, that they are imperfect and exist on earth merely at their larval stage, and that with the intervention of science they can metamorphose into the final stage of development, into their perfect 'angelic' form. Nancy Harrowitz has pointed out that 'instead of understanding the message in Dante's text, Leeb takes on the role of the *creator*, unproblematically embracing the very hubris that Dante's text calls into question' (emphasis added).[38] Leeb uses the quotation from Dante to justify his lofty ambitions of playing God and creating new life. But Leeb does not only wish to create new life, he arrogantly wants to go one step further and create perfection, an echo of the Nazis' racial purity campaign. Leeb's experiment is ultimately destructive rather than creative, it is a metaphor for the destructive nature of Nazi medical experimentation in particular, and Nazism in general.

At the same time, it can be argued that Leeb's misreading of Dante's metaphor represents the Nazi abuse or 'literalisation' of metaphor, as seen in chapter 3. For example, in the eyes of the Nazis, the Jews were viewed as vermin. The Nazis took the metaphor literally, partly because they believed that

[38] Nancy Harrowitz, '"Mon maître, mon monstre": Primo Levi and Monstrous Science', in Jewell (ed.), *Monsters in the Literary Imagination*, pp. 51-64 (p. 57).

the Jews were not human, and partly in an attempt to make exterminating them 'easier' or less traumatic. If the Nazis believed that the Jews were merely pests or vermin, and not human, it was thought that the perpetrators would suffer less guilt when they killed them.[39]

Leeb, however, seems to have had no qualms about experimenting on and ultimately killing the four (presumably Jewish) prisoners in his arrogant and unethical quest to defy nature and play God. Leeb's macabre experiment succeeds to a certain degree because his human specimens do indeed undergo a metamorphosis. But, rather than turning into angelic butterflies, they are transformed into hideous vulture-like birds, with featherless wings, as Gertrud, a witness of the experiment explains to the Allies:

> C'erano quattro […] bestiacce […]. Quattro uccelli: sembravano avvoltoi […] Erano spaventati, e facevano dei versi terrificanti. Sembrava […] che si sforzassero di prendere il volo, ma con quelle ali…
> – Come avevano le ali?
> – Ali per modo di dire, con poche penne rade. Sembravano…sembravano le ali dei polli arrosto, ecco. Le teste non si vedevano bene […] ma non erano niente belle e facevano molta impressione. Assomigliavano alle teste delle mummie che si vedono nei musei. (*Op*, I, 439-40)[40]

[39] Similarly, in *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi writes that 'prima di morire, la vittima dev'essere degradata, affinché l'uccisore senta meno il peso della sua colpa' (*Op*, II, 1090).

[40] Interestingly, in the essay 'Le farfalle', Levi describes how butterflies do not appear to be beautiful when viewed under a microscope. The head of the butterfly is particularly ugly and repulsive, and Levi's description is strikingly similar to that of the monstrous human-bird hybrids in 'Angelica Farfalla'. Indeed Levi describes the head of the butterfly as 'monstrous' and compares it to that of humans: 'gli occhi enormi e senza pupille, le antenne simili a corna, l'apparato boccale mostruoso ci appaiono come una maschera diabolica, una parodia distorta del viso umano' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 752). Perhaps Leeb's monstrous hybrids were not so far away from their 'angelic perfection' after all. It is also interesting to note that at the beginning of the essay 'Le farfalle', Levi describes the museum (a former hospital) in which the butterfly collection is housed in Turin as an unpleasant place, '[l]e sue mura vetuste e le altissime volte sembrano imbevute dei dolori di generazioni; i busti dei benefattori, […] guardano il visitatore con l'occhio senza sguardo delle mummie' (*Op*, II, 751). This recalls the eerie

They have become monstrous hybrids, half human and half avian, or as Usher writes, they are left 'in a "no-man's land" between terrestrial and aerial existence'.[41] Their fate comes to a gruesome end when they are violently killed and eaten by a group of starving citizens after the war. These citizens stood back and watched Leeb carry out his hideous experiments on his unwilling victims. Like so many Germans during the war, they did not intervene for fear of reprisal. The words of Gertrud's father are typical of such bystanders: '"Lascia andare, non occuparti di quanto capita là dentro. Noi tedeschi, meno cose sappiamo, meglio è"' (*Op*, I, 439). Levi places these bystanders in his metaphorical 'zona grigia'. They have become complicit in Leeb's crime and their complicity is further heightened by the fact that they savagely butcher and eat the prisoners. Although the four victims do not resemble humans (apart from their heads) the neighbours have ultimately committed an act of cannibalism. This suggests that they too have become monsters.

As Harrowitz comments, the identity of the monster shifts during the course of the tale: 'Leeb created monsters out of human beings, but Levi shows the real monster to be on the first level dehumanized science, and on the second level the uncaring neighbors who were willing to eat the product of monstrous conception'.[42] However, the real monster is Leeb, for his attempts at playing God and creating divine perfection on earth. Leeb is a metaphor for all that

---

apartment/laboratory of Leeb, which is similarly imbued with the suffering of its former 'patients'. The reference to the mummies also appears in the description of Leeb's monstrous creations, in particular to their heads (which like that of the butterfly are not 'belle').

[41] Usher, 'Levi's Science Fiction', p. 212.

[42] Harrowitz, 'Mon maître, mon monstre', p. 59.

Nazism represented: arrogance, cruelty, and destruction. Although Levi focuses this story on the Nazis and the Holocaust, he suggests that similar monsters lurk within and among us, they are not restricted to the Third Reich.

Levi takes up the theme of monstrous creations and destruction in his short story 'Versamina' (*Storie naturali*), which is also set in post-war Germany and has links to the Third Reich. The theme of destruction is evident from the beginning of the story, the opening sentence reads: 'Ci sono mestieri che distruggono e mestieri che conservano' (*Op*, I, 467). Levi uses metaphor throughout the tale in order to describe this destruction. The protagonist is a scientist called Kleber, who, by chance, discovered a chemical that converts sensations of pain into pleasure. We are told that Kleber came across the substance whilst working on some research 'di interesse a quegli altri, per la guerra' (*Op*, I, 468) perhaps hinting at his involvement in Nazi scientific experimentation, although this is not explicitly stated. Kleber, or 'Kleber dei miracoli' as he was known, named the chemical 'versamina'.

The drug was tested on various animals including rabbits, monkeys and dogs. Due to the severe food shortages of the war years, one of the other scientists, the narrator of the story, ate one of the rabbits (recalling the hunger of the citizens in 'Angelica Farfalla'). After consuming the rabbit, the narrator acted very strangely. His tastes and opinions changed, in fact they underwent a reversal. One of the most notable changes was that instead of experiencing pain, he felt pleasure. As seen in chapters 3 and 4, just as describing pain is extremely difficult, so too is describing the opposite: pleasure. The narrator uses a simile to

attempt to offer a description: 'era un po' come quando uno si sveglia e si stira, ancora in letto, ma molto piú forte, piú pungente, come concentrata tutta in un punto' (*Op*, I, 469). I believe that Levi (or rather, the narrator) deliberately uses a slightly stilted simile here in order to reinforce the difficulty of expressing pleasure. This recalls Améry's assertion, as seen in chapter 3, that when attempting to describe pain, figurative language is nothing more than a 'hopeless merry-go-round […]. The pain was what it was'.[43] Pleasure and pain are two of the most difficult sensations to describe, because they are entirely subjective and individual. Even figurative language cannot adequately convey the true feelings experienced, although it is the closest thing we have to offering a description.

After that incident, the narrator did not give the 'versamina' another thought. Kleber, however, became obsessed with the drug and carried out endless experiments on animals, and even on himself. He believed that with the 'versamina', 'si poteva fare molto di piú: un poco come la faccenda della bomba di Hiroscima e delle altre che vennero dopo' (*Op*, I, 471). Indeed, towards the end of the story, we learn that the US navy administered the drug to their marines during a landing in Korea, in the hope that they would show more courage and strength. Instead, however, the marines allowed themselves to be killed. Kleber is thus reminiscent of Professor Leeb; he too is a metaphor for the arrogant scientist dangerously meddling with nature and attempting to play God. However, unlike Leeb, Kleber is not driven by fanatical Nazi ideology, rather he seems to be driven by the desire of furthering scientific knowledge. Nonetheless,

[43] Améry, p. 33.

Kleber's science is unethical and harmful, and ends in destruction. And, like those of Leeb, Kleber's experiments produce hybrid 'monsters'.

Instead of creating human/bird hybrids, Kleber creates human/dog hybrids. However, Kleber's 'monsters' are not hybrids in the physical sense, he does not bring about a physical transformation like Leeb. Instead, he creates a spiritual transformation, creating a dog that thinks and behaves like a human, and a human who acts like a dog. One of the dogs on which Kleber tested the 'versamina' became addicted to feeling pain, which the drug turned into pleasure. The dog developed the ability of understanding, 'come un uomo', what would cause him pain (pleasure). Consequently it deliberately gave up all the things that dogs normally like: 'non c'era piú niente di canino in lui: non gli piaceva piú la carne […]. Mangiava l'insalata' (*Op*, I, 472). It turned into a 'counter-dog', resembling a human more than a dog.

Similarly, Kleber became addicted to inflicting pain on himself, which turned into pleasure thanks to his wonder drug. Just as the dog took on human traits, Kleber developed canine characteristics. In order to create pain, he would scratch himself 'in un modo feroce, come un cane, appunto, come se volesse scavarsi' (*Op*, I, 473). Both Kleber and the dog share the same destructive fate, they both end up killing themselves due to the overpowering influence of the 'versamina'. They have become slaves to Kleber's deadly creation and Levi uses them as a metaphor to warn against the dangerous power of science and the monsters that it can unleash. Indeed, the explicit references in the story to Hiroshima and the Third Reich reinforce this warning. As Gordon notes these

'catastrophes' are 'both characterised by utopian aspirations and disastrous dystopian realisations on the part of research scientists, once again cast as Frankenstein'.[44] The next section will continue the theme of arrogant creators and dangerous creations. It will look specifically at inanimate inventions, such as machines, and will analyse how these are used as metaphors to tell us about humankind and life in general.

8.5 Metaphor and machines

The dangers of human invention form one of the most important and recurring themes of Levi's short stories. Although Levi explores these concerns from a fictional point of view, he uses the act of invention, and the inventions themselves as metaphors for other unrelated phenomena and events. This occurs most notably in the series of stories which feature the mechanical inventions of a fictional company called NATCA and its salesman Simpson. One such story is 'L'ordine a buon mercato' in *Storie naturali*. This recounts the tale of the latest NATCA invention, an office duplicator called the 'Mimete', which becomes a metaphor for humankind's greed and arrogance. Simpson sells this technological machine, which is capable of reproducing objects perfectly in three dimensions, to the narrator of the story, who incidentally is a chemist. However, the narrator is not like Levi at all, as we will see.

The 'Mimete' is a revolutionary copying machine as Simpson explains: 'non imita, non simula: ma riproduce il modello, lo ricrea identico, per cosí dire, dal nulla. […] Non proprio dal nulla, evidentemente: intendevo dire, dal caos,

[44] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 190.

dal disordine assoluto' (*Op*, I, 448-49). Although Simpson did not personally invent the 'Mimete', he is very proud of it, and treats it lovingly like a child: '[Simpson] era raggiante, e portava fra le braccia, con l'affetto di una nutrice, una scatola di cartone ondulato [il Mimete]' (*Op*, I, 447). This recalls Arié's fondness of his Golem in 'Il servo', whom he considers a son. The term 'nutrice', used to describe Simpson, recalls the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila under which *Storie naturali* was first published. Although Levi claims that the choice of the name was coincidental, he notes that in Piedmontese, 'malabaila' means 'cattiva balia', or bad wet-nurse. Perhaps Levi's choice of pseudonym was not entirely unplanned after all, as he comments: '[m]i pare che da molti miei racconti spiri un vago odore di latte girato a male, di nutrimento che non è più tale, insomma, di sofisticazione, di contaminazione e di malefizio'.[45] So, Levi uses the metaphor of the 'cattiva balia' to refer to those who use, or rather, misuse their inventions. As Benchouiha notes, it is not necessarily that the inventions themselves are dangerous, it depends on how they are used.[46] For example, the Golem in 'Il servo' only rebels because of human error, when Arié forgets to remove the scroll from its mouth. Similarly, the 'Mimete' is not dangerous in itself, it only becomes dangerous in certain hands, as we will see.

Another parallel can be drawn between the Golem and the 'Mimete', they both create 'ordine dal disordine' (*Op*, I, 449). It is this aspect that particularly intrigues the chemist narrator. However, he is not interested in the invention from a scientific point of view (as the real Levi would be), but from a

[45] Gabriella Poli and Giorgio Calcagno, (eds), *Echi di una voce perduta: incontri, interviste e conversazioni con Primo Levi* (Milan: Mursia, 1992), p. 37.
[46] Benchouiha, p. 41.

financial perspective; in other words he is interested in its money-making potential. So, he embarks on a series of experiments, testing the machine over a six-day period and resting on the seventh day, a clear echo of the Creation story. However, as in the other creation stories we have looked at, his attempts at playing God are far from moral. He begins by recreating rather innocuous inanimate objects such as a die, handkerchief and cigarettes. He then moves on to dangerous and unethical territory by recreating animate objects such as a spider and a lizard. Driven by greed and arrogance, the narrator tells Simpson that the 'Mimete' could make them money, and he hints that with a larger duplicator it might be possible to recreate human beings: 'insistetti sul duplice aspetto delle sue virtú: quello economico, di creatore d'ordine, e perciò di ricchezza, e quello, dirò cosí prometeico, di strumento nuovo e raffinato per l'avanzamento delle nostre conoscenze sui meccanismi vitali' (*Op*, I, 454). Fortunately, Simpson, unlike the narrator, does have morals and is disgusted by his unscrupulous plans. The story ends with the release of a circular by NATCA, which forbids the use of the 'Mimete' for the reproduction of items of monetary value and living beings.

The story 'Alcune applicazioni del Mimete', as the title suggests, also features the 'Mimete', where again it is a metaphor for humankind's hubris and unethical use of technology. However the story is given a lighthearted, even comic, air. At the beginning of the story we learn that the narrator has just been released from prison for what he calls his 'lavoro di pioniere' with the 'Mimete' (*Op*, I, 460). However, the narrator was not the only one to have experimented

with the 'Mimete'. His friend, Gilberto, who is described as 'un uomo pericoloso, un piccolo prometeo nocivo', made a larger version of the original machine in order to duplicate his wife Emma (*Op*, I, 461). In a process that resembles the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam, Gilberto had 'costruito una specie di polmone artificiale' which magically gave birth to his new 'Mimete' (*Op*, I, 461). Gilberto created the machine on a whim, simply to see if he could reproduce a human being 'con le sue proprie mani'; he had no desire for two wives (*Op*, I, 462).

Gilberto's experiment does succeed and he creates a second wife, who describes herself as the first artificial woman in the history of humankind, or the second if you take the creation of Eve into consideration. Gilberto does not consider that he has broken both divine and human laws. Instead, he is excessively proud of his accomplishment, and initially finds that having two wives is wonderful. However, he begins to favour the new Emma over the original, and consequently his first wife becomes increasingly unhappy with him. Gilberto ingeniously resolves the situation by creating a new partner for his first wife: he duplicates himself!

Although the story ends happily, with chaos being resolved by the creation of order, and although this is clearly intended as a comic tale, Gilberto and his invention are metaphors for human egocentrism, arrogance and a misuse of technology. Gilberto is 'un simbolo del nostro secolo', he is 'ingegnoso e irresponsabile' (*Op*, I, 461). The narrator remarks that Gilberto would unleash an atomic bomb merely out of curiosity. He duplicated his wife without

consulting her first or considering the consequences. The question of cloning humans raises serious ethical issues. For example, the philosopher John Gray notes that '[i]f it becomes possible to clone human beings, soldiers will be bred in which normal emotions are stunted or absent. Genetic engineering […] is likely to be the technology of choice in future genocides'.[47] Indeed, in 'Versamina' we saw how the drug which converts pain into pleasure, was administered to the US marines during combat. Although this is a fictional story, it serves as a metaphor, or a warning for the possible dangers of our future.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Levi used the concepts of creation and invention as metaphors which cast light on various key aspects of the human condition, and in particular on the dangers of a reliance on the manmade. Although being able to create is an essential part of human life, we have seen that, for Levi, humankind has increasingly misused its creative abilities in its obsessive desire to defy nature. This attempt at playing God can have devastating consequences, as Auschwitz has shown, and as Levi illustrates on a less catastrophic (but still often on a striking) scale in many of his fictional works. Indeed, he shows repeatedly how human involvement in matters of creation and invention can often have destruction as an unintended consequence. His lesson, therefore, is that human beings must not abuse science and technology, or become obsessed with trying to create order from chaos.

[47] John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 14. I am grateful to Charlotte Ross for this quote which she uses in her thesis, (p. 15).

Furthermore, Levi argues that we must not become slaves to machines. Although they are part of our way of life, we should not always rely on them. As Simpson says in 'Pieno impiego': 'le macchine sono importanti, non ne possiamo piú fare a meno, condizionano il nostro mondo, ma non sono sempre la soluzione migliore dei nostri problemi' (*Op*, I, 518). Machines cannot replace humans, as the poetry-making machine in 'Il Versificatore' shows. Although the man-made machine does create poetry, it is no substitute for a human poet, for – significantly for my theme – it cannot create the vast array of metaphors upon which poetry depends.

The following chapter will look at the interaction in Levi's work between creation and creativity: that is to say, at the theme of literary creation and the way in which many of the themes analysed in Part III are brought together in the metafictional elements of Levi's writing.

Chapter 9: Metafiction and Metaphor

9.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the notion of writing, which is one of the most recurrent themes of Levi's *oeuvre*. Nearly all of Levi's texts (testimonial, essayistic and fictional) provide some sort of insight into the process of writing, either directly or indirectly. Levi was fascinated with the process of literary production and this interest is reflected in his own writing. For instance, he frequently comments in his texts on his own literary style and technique, as well as that of other writers. He has even written fictional stories about writers writing novels ('Lavoro creativo' and 'Nel Parco'), about poets writing poetry ('Il Versificatore'), and about oral storytelling (*La chiave a stella*). One of the most effective and striking ways in which the theme of writing is portrayed in Levi's texts is by metaphor. Before looking specifically at Levi's use of figurative language, I will examine the notion of metafiction, since a number of Levi's novels and short stories, which deal with the theme of writing, contain metafictional elements. These elements can also be applied to a certain degree, I will argue, to his non-fictional writing, including his testimonial works.

9.2 Metafiction

Metafiction refers to fictional writing (generally that of the modern and postmodern periods), which is self-reflexive, that is, fiction which comments on its own narrative and/or linguistic nature. In other words, it is fiction about

fiction. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as: 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.[1] Examples of the form metafiction can take include a novel about a writer creating a story (such as, André Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters*), a novel about a reader reading a novel (such as Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*), and a novel where the narrator deliberately or accidentally exposes him/herself as the author of the text being read, or hints at it (for example, Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*). Self-reflexive elements can make up only a small part of a metafictional text, or they can be central to the work as a whole, as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. I want to suggest that, in the case of Levi, this self-reflexive concern with language and narrative can be extended to non-fiction, even to Holocaust testimony.

Waugh notes that the following are common elements of metafiction: 'an uncertainty about the validity of its representations, an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions, a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality'.[2] These characteristics can be applied to Levi, a very self-aware writer, who frequently comments in his texts (both fiction and non-fiction) on his use of language and the narrative process itself, and on the validity of his writing. These 'autocommenti',[3] as Daniele Del Giudice calls them, stem, in part, from Levi's

[1] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.
[2] Waugh, p. 2.
[3] Daniele Del Giudice, 'Introduzione', in *Op*, I, xiii-lxv (p. xiv).

own insecurities as a writer. As discussed in chapter 3, Levi openly doubted his writing abilities, viewing himself foremost as a witness not a writer. He was very self-conscious about this, even feeling the need to apologise in his texts for his lack of credentials. Critics, such as Sodi have identified the use of apologies and disclaimers as a 'key device in Levi's stylistic armamentarium'.[4] Indeed, as seen in chapter 3, *Se questo è un uomo* opens with Levi asking his readers to excuse, what he calls, the 'difetti strutturali del libro' (*Op*, I, 5). In the same preface, Levi informs the readers overtly that what they are reading is true, stating: 'Mi pare superfluo aggiungere che nessuno dei fatti è inventato' (*Op*, I, 6). If Levi believes it is unnecessary to state that his testimony is based on reality rather than fiction, why does he do so? Like other survivors, he was concerned that he would not be believed, and he wished to stress the veracity of his text from the outset.

As discussed in chapter 3, survivors worried that writing in a literary fashion somehow 'beautified' and therefore invalidated the experience. Levi frequently apologised for the 'poor' style of his work and insisted that he was a witness merely reporting the facts. By disclaiming any literariness for his book he seems to underline its reliability as a piece of testimony. Interestingly, this is where parallels, albeit, inverse ones, can be drawn between metafiction and testimony. Metafiction does not want to be mistaken for reality since that would undermine its creative meaning, and non-fiction, especially Holocaust testimony, does not want to risk being viewed as fiction because that would undermine the importance and validity of its message. So, just as metafiction

[4] Sodi, 'The Rhetoric of the *Univers Concentrationnaire*', p. 37.

draws attention to its fictionality, testimonial writing tends to draw attention to its truthfulness.

According to Lejeune, stressing the veracity of the text is a typical rhetorical technique of autobiography in general: the autobiographer makes a pact with the reader, usually stated explicitly in the first pages of the book (as Levi does in the preface to *Se questo è un uomo*), to tell the truth.[5] This 'autobiographical pact' of telling the truth is reminiscent of the oath sworn in court by witnesses. As Gordon notes:

> In law, the witness – or to be more precise in analogy with the survivor of genocide, the eye-witness [...] – follows an elaborate set of conventions and procedures which are guarantors of fidelity [...]. He or she [...] speaks the truth, indeed swears to do so, offers an account of a fact or event that he or she has seen that [...] is valorized as testimony because of his or her individual presence.[6]

By highlighting his role as witness rather than a writer, Levi reinforces the truthfulness of his testimony.

Despite Levi's doubt and self-criticism, *Se questo è un uomo* is one of the most successful and highly regarded pieces of Holocaust testimony, from both a documentary and literary perspective.[7] As seen in chapter 3, it combines both factuality and literariness, an outstanding accomplishment given the sensitive nature of its subject. Indeed, Sodi notes that

> in spite of Levi's apprehension, it is the very literary underpinning of his book, combined with its probing meditations, and Levi's privileged position as witness, that [...] have made *Se questo è un uomo* the classic

[5] Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', pp. 13-15.
[6] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, pp. 4-5.
[7] The poor reception of the first publication of *Se questo è un uomo* in 1947, which has been discussed in chapter 3, was not associated with Levi's style or writing ability (although, minor textual changes were made to the later second edition), but with the reluctance of the post-war public to engage with such devastating and harrowing events.

> it is today. Levi possessed the uncommon ability to express atrocity in exquisite prose.[8]

However, even after the success of his first work, Levi continued to have reservations about his literary talent. As late as 1985, in the preface to *L'altrui mestiere*, Levi struggles to view himself as a literary writer: 'Il mio destino, aiutato dalle mie scelte, mi ha tenuto lontano dagli assembramenti: troppo chimico, e chimico per troppo tempo, per sentirmi un autentico uomo di lettere' (*Op*, II, 631). Despite his own doubts, writing came easily to Levi, as Del Giudice comments, 'Levi riesce a dare la forma che dà a *Se questo è un uomo* [...] perché è fin da subito un narratore, uno scrittore'.[9] In particular, one of Levi's literary strength lies in his use of figurative language to describe the atrocities he witnessed. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Levi is able to draw the reader into the unknown and ineffable world of Auschwitz via metaphor and simile. Another key theme of Levi's texts, which tends to be portrayed in figurative language, is the theme of writing. It is interesting to note that Levi, who was uneasy about labelling himself a writer, chooses to use metaphor, a literary tool, to describe the technique of writing. Levi could not write directly about writing, since he lacked, or claimed to lack the necessary vocabulary associated with literary theory. Instead, as this chapter will show, Levi compared writing to things he was familiar with, such as chemistry, and science in general (as seen most explicitly in *Il sistema periodico* and *La chiave a stella*).

---

[8] Sodi, 'The Rhetoric of the *Univers Concentrationnaire*', p. 41.
[9] Del Giudice, p. xxxvii.

Levi's uneasiness about labelling himself a writer is linked to his background as a chemist and Holocaust survivor. Writing is not Levi's first 'profession', and consequently, he worries that he will be viewed as an imposter. According to Levi, he only started to write because of Auschwitz, as he states in an interview: 'I did not choose to be a writer. I was turned into one. [...] If there is an impulse behind my writing it is linked to my deportation, to the suffering of others'.[10]

However, in the preface to *La ricerca delle radici*, the anthology of writings that Levi considered to be 'essential' reading, he attributes his ability as a writer *not* to his Holocaust experience, but to his interest in reading, a trait which was developed at an early age: 'Forse, leggendo, mi sono inconsapevolmente preparato a scrivere, cosí come il feto di otto mesi sta nell'acqua ma si prepara a respirare' (*Op*, II, 1362). Here, Levi uses a wonderful and original simile to describe his relationship with writing, which is one of innateness. Similarly, elsewhere, Levi stresses that writing is something that cannot be learnt; it is a natural gift. So, Auschwitz, which is the antithesis of nature, did not spark Levi's writing ability. Rather, Auschwitz gave Levi something to write about, as Thomson states: 'Levi believed the Lager was a paradoxical "godsend", since it gave him his subject "on a plate"'.[11] Belpoliti also notes that the Lager gave Levi the necessary subject matter to start writing: 'l'evento capitale della sua esistenza è proprio quello da cui ha preso avvio la sua avventura di narratore e di parlatore [...]. In molti

[10] From 'Primo Levi', an interview with Rita Caccamo De Luca and Manuela Olagnero, in Belpoliti and Gordon (eds), *The Voice of Memory*, pp. 161-66 (p. 161).
[11] Thomson, 'Primo Levi in Conversation', p. 41.

incontri gli viene chiesto se sarebbe stato uno scrittore anche senza Auschwitz; Levi risponde che senza sapere "cosa dire", senza il "contenuto", non c'è racconto'.[12]

However, even before his Holocaust experience, Levi flirted with *les belles lettres*, laying down the foundations for his later career as writer. For example, as discussed in chapter 5 of this thesis, his poem 'Crescenzago', which was composed before deportation in 1943, can be read as a prelude to his later poetry. The poem, although not explicitly about the Holocaust, does reflect the uncertainty and danger of the Fascist years, and the use of language, in particular the type of imagery used, is echoed in Levi's later poem 'Il tramonto di Fossoli', and in 'Il viaggio', the first chapter of *Se questo è un uomo*. Even before Auschwitz then, Levi was developing a characteristic literary style.

Levi's literary experimentation was not restricted to poetry, he also wrote two alchemical short stories 'Piombo' and 'Mercurio', which were composed in 1942, and which now appear as individual chapters in *Il sistema periodico*. Although, they cannot be classed as the best pieces of his *oeuvre*, they are, nonetheless, early signs of Levi's ability as a *creative* writer. They are completely fictional, unlike the later testimonial writings which are conventionally seen as having launched his writing career. Levi was clearly fond of these tales, and considered them worthy of publication, not least because he maintains that they shared a similar fate to him: 'i due racconti minerali che [...] avevo scritti [...] hanno avuto una sorte travagliata, quasi quanto la mia: hanno subito bombardamenti e fughe, io li avevo dati perduti, e li ho ritrovati di recente

[12] Belpoliti, 'Io sono un centauro', p. xii.

riordinando carte dimenticate da decenni' (*Op*, II, 807-08).[13] Here, Levi anthropomorphises his stories, comparing them to his own experience as a Holocaust survivor. This method of 'humanising' texts is a common feature of Levi's work. By using the Holocaust as a metaphor for his alchemical texts 'Piombo' and 'Mercurio', Levi combines his two main literary influences: the Lager and chemistry.

Despite the metaphorical link to the Holocaust noted above, 'Piombo' and 'Mercurio' are completely unconnected to Levi's Auschwitz experience (both in terms of the date of composition and the subject matter), showing that Levi's ability as a writer of fiction already existed (at least *in nuce*) before his horrific experience. Instead, they are clearly influenced by Levi's scientific background, which disproves Levi's statement that chemistry 'non aveva niente in comune col mondo della parola scritta' ('Appendice' in *SQU*, in *Op*, I, 200). Again, Levi's view on writing is contradictory. For, as we have seen in chapter 7, Levi frequently observes the similarities between writing and chemistry. One such instance occurs in 'Ex chimico', where Levi celebrates his former profession as a chemist, and describes the 'benefici che mi pare di averne tratto, e che tutti si riferiscono al nuovo mestiere a cui sono passato, cioè al mestiere di scrivere' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 641). At the end of the essay, Levi notes, even more forcefully that 'scrivo proprio perché sono un chimico: il mio vecchio mestiere si è largamente trasfuso nel nuovo' (*Op*, II, 643). In the same essay, as we have

[13] The protagonist of 'Piombo', Rodmund, is a wanderer and moves from country to country. There are possible parallels here with Levi's experience of exile to Auschwitz, in particular, the idea of the 'popolo che non ha terra' which Levi describes in *Se questo è un uomo* (*Op*, I, 10).

seen in chapter 7, Levi states that chemistry provides the writer with 'un patrimonio immenso di metafore' (*Op*, II, 642). Indeed, Levi uses chemistry (and science in general) as metaphors to describe the process of writing itself.

Another theme used metaphorically by Levi to describe writing is that of creation. In previous chapters of this thesis, we have seen how central the theme of creation is to Levi; in fact, the theme recurs throughout Levi's *oeuvre* and forms clusters of metaphors in all his works. This chapter will revisit this key theme to show how it is also connected to the theme of writing itself. This chapter will also address the influence of the Holocaust on Levi's 'writing' metaphors. Although Levi does not explicitly use the subject of Auschwitz as a metaphor for writing, he does use the associated element of witnessing to describe the writing process. This idea of witnessing, or looking, will be discussed below.

By returning to these central themes, and looking at them from different angles, I will bring together the threads of the thesis, in preparation for the conclusion in the next chapter.

9.3 Writers on writing

According to Linda Hutcheon, the most common devices used in metafictional texts to 'thematize narrative artifice' are parody, allegory and the *mise en abyme*.[14] In terms of Levi's work, I would add another device, that of metaphor. In fact, other writers use metaphor to comment on the process of writing. For

[14] See Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 48-56.

example, in her interview with Levi, Greer states that 'lo scrittore è come un parassita i cui escrementi durano piú a lungo di ciò di cui si è cibato'.[15] Levi agrees, adding: 'Ma lo scrittore non è soltanto un parassita, è anche un creatore. Nei casi migliori, il libro dura piú a lungo dell'uomo che lo ha scritto e trasmette una realtà che non è quella vera'.[16] The metaphor of a writer as a parasite and a creator also appears in Levi's ironic short story 'L'amico dell'uomo', which describes how a tapeworm can communicate with its human host in poetry. The tapeworm is portrayed as being more intelligent than its host, due to its ability to use *terza rima*, and by the insightful content of its messages. Indeed, we learn that the tapeworm's most successful poetic composition has been published in an anthology of foreign literature and is lauded by the public and critics alike (*SN*, in *Op*, I, 459). The parasite's message, recorded in print, will live longer than the parasite itself. Levi, however, is being ironic, in his comparison of a parasite and writer. In 'La rima alla riscossa' (*Racconti e saggi*), Levi states that creating poetry, in particular rhyme, is a human activity which involves immense creative skill and intellect. By comparing writers to parasites, in 'L'amico dell'uomo', Levi is wryly downplaying the ability of writers.

Another interesting animal metaphor used to describe writing is that of C. S. Lewis, who has compared writing to bird watching: 'I see pictures', he writes, 'some of these pictures have a common flavour, almost a common smell, which groups them together. Keep quiet and watch and they will begin joining

[15] Greer, p. 70.
[16] Greer, p. 70.

themselves up'.[17] The general idea of witnessing, or observing, will be discussed in the following section. The specific idea of watching or observing animals as part of the writing process is echoed in Levi's discussion of Aldous Huxley's metaphor, which equates watching the behaviour of cats with inspiration for writing:

> In un suo elegante saggio [...] a un giovane che intendeva diventare scrittore e si era rivolto a lui per consigli, Aldous Huxley raccomandava di comperare una coppia di gatti, di osservarli e di descriverli. Gli diceva [...] che gli animali, e i mammiferi in specie, e ancor piú particolarmente gli animali domestici, sono come noi, ma "senza coperchio". Il loro comportamento è simile a quello che sarebbe il nostro se fossimo privi di inibizioni. Perciò la loro osservazione è preziosa per il romanziere che si accinge a scandagliare le motivazioni profonde dei suoi personaggi. (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 64)

Another area of life which writers turn to in order to create metaphors about writing, is the mechanical world, the opposite of the animal world. In a 1979 interview, Levi tells of his encounter with Paolo Volponi, an important writer and intellectual, who is particularly associated with novels about modern industrial society. Levi describes how he and Volponi disagree about the question of obscure writing; Levi is an advocate of clear writing whereas Volponi is not. In order to describe his view of writing, Volponi uses a mechanical metaphor, as Levi notes:

> Ha detto che uno scrittore deve porsi come locomotiva rispetto al lettore, non allo stesso livello, ma a un livello piú alto. Deve rimorchiarlo, deve fornirgli una informazione e anche una formazione. Quindi può anche, anzi deve secondo lui, parlare un linguaggio libero, a piacere. Se gli va e sente di dover parlare un linguaggio anche intricato, anche astruso, lo può fare, anzi lo deve fare. E tocca al lettore arrivare fino a lui.[18]

---

[17] Cited in Beatrice Gormley, *C. S. Lewis: The Man Behind Narnia* (Grand Rapids, Mich; Cambridge: Eerdman, 2005), p. 125.
[18] Grassano, p. 173.

Although Levi disagrees with Volponi's view on the role of the writer as a 'locomotive', he does use metaphors from the mechanical world to describe aspects of writing. One striking example is Levi's description of his relationship with the great writer Kafka, whose novel *The Trial* he translated. Levi views Kafka in terms of machinery: 'Kafka è un autore che ammiro, non lo amo e lo ammiro, lo temo, come una grande macchina che ti viene addosso, come il profeta che ti dirà il giorno della tua morte'.[19] This reference to 'a great machine' is reminiscent of Levi's metaphorical description of Auschwitz as 'una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie' (*SQU*, in *Op*, I, 35). As Levi writes, Kafka was like a prophet, foreseeing the horrors of the Holocaust. Levi uses an animal metaphor to describe this power of Kafka: 'Qualche dote al di là della ragione corrente bisogna pure concederla a Kafka. Aveva certamente una sensibilità quasi animalesca, come si dice dei serpenti che prevedono i terremoti'.[20] Levi unites the two polar opposites of the animal and machine world in his imagery: Kafka is both a machine and a snake. The uniting of diverse entities is a common element of Levi's work, in particular of his metaphors, which stems perhaps from Levi's centaur-like nature. The theme of finding common ground in diverse entities will be explored below, in terms of fictional and non-fictional writing.

[19] Federico De Melis, 'Un'aggressione di nome Franz Kafka', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 188-94 (p. 189).
[20] De Melis, p. 192.

9.4 Writing as witnessing

I would now like to discuss the metaphor of the writer as a witness, a metaphor which Levi himself used to describe his testimonial writing. However, rather than looking at the role of the writer as witness in Levi's Holocaust writing, which has been explored in chapter 3, and by numerous critical studies on Levi, I will concentrate here on Levi's fictional and essayistic writing. Witnessing is an imperative part of all types of writing. Indeed, as Alfredo Luzi has commented, with reference to Levi: 'L'attività di osservatore è [...] all'origine della narrazione'.[21] In 'Scrivere un romanzo' (*L'altrui mestiere*), Levi discusses the differences between writing fiction and writing about 'things seen'. In doing so, he employs a number of metaphors and similes. In particular, Levi uses a metaphor of photography to describe writing about things experienced or witnessed first hand:

> Scrivere di cose viste è piú facile che inventare, e meno felice. È uno scrivere-descrivere: hai una traccia, scavi nella memoria prossima o lontana, riordini i reperti (se ne hai il talento), li cataloghi, poi prendi una sorta di macchina fotografica mentale e scatti: puoi essere un fotografo mediocre, o buono, o magari "artistico"; puoi nobilitare le cose che ritrai, o riportarle in maniera impersonale, modesta e onesta, o darne invece un'immagine distorta, piatta, sfuocata, scentrata, sotto o sovraesposta, ma in ogni caso sei guidato, tenuto per mano dai fatti, hai terra sotto i piedi. (*Op*, II, 774)

Levi uses the metaphor of photography throughout the paragraph. Not only does he describe the writer as a photographer, but he also describes the technique and

[21] Alfredo Luzi, 'L'altro mondo di Levi. Scienza e fantascienza nelle *Storie naturali*' in *Scrittori italiani di origine ebrea ieri e oggi: un approccio generazionale*, ed. by Raniero Speelman, Monica Jansen and Silvia Gaiga (Utrecht: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing and Archive Services, 2007), pp. 67-76 (p. 69).

results of writing in photographic terms, such as the unwanted creation of a distorted, flat, unfocused image. It is interesting to note Levi's statement that fictional writing is more joyful than writing about things seen. He attributes this to 'una libertà sconfinata, quasi licenziosa' which is associated with creating fiction (*Op*, II, 774). Nonetheless, later on in the essay, Levi concedes that even fictional writing involves the process of witnessing, it is not dependent solely on the imagination, and he again uses the metaphor of photography to demonstrate this: 'Il personaggio che credi ingenuamente di aver fabbricato nella tua officina si rivela una chimera, un mosaico di tasselli, di istantanee scattate chissà quando e relegate nel solaio della memoria' (*Op*, II, 777). Every literary creation is a hybrid. According to Levi, it is impossible to create a totally fictional character; the writer cannot help being conditioned by what he has seen or read.[22]

Metaphors of looking and photography also appear in Levi's essay, 'Il pugno di Renzo', which is dedicated to Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. Levi discusses the enjoyment and benefit he gets from analysing books in minute detail, namely discovering hitherto unnoticed details, which he believes is comparable to looking at a series of increasingly detailed enlargements of the same image:

> Le letture successive di un libro già noto si possono fare, per cosí dire, con ingrandimenti crescenti, come certe bellissime sequenze di fotografie in cui si vede una mosca, poi il suo capo con le antenne delicate e gli occhi multipli, poi un singolo occhio simile a una cupola di cristallo, e infine la complicata eppure necessaria struttura intima di

[22] In a similar vein, in 'Inventare un animale' (*L'altrui mestiere*), Levi discusses the impossibility of creating a totally original animal. Levi himself attempts to create novel animals, such as the creature 'Vilmy', in the short story of the same name (in *Vizio di forma*), but does not succeed. His creatures tend to be a mixture of mythical or existing animals.

> questo; o le stesse letture si possono anche fare, se ancora vogliamo attingere al linguaggio fotografico, con luce diversa, o sotto un diverso angolo visivo. (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 699)

As in metafictional texts, Levi draws the reader's attention to the fact that he is employing figurative language, in this case by signalling his use of 'linguaggio fotografico'. In his essay, Levi goes on to describe how after closely re-reading *I promessi sposi*, he notices that Manzoni's description of human gestures are at times 'al limite del credibile, o addirittura del possibile' (*Op*, II, 701). Referring to a particular gesture of Renzo's, Levi again employs photographic imagery to illustrate his point: 'Questa è veramente un'instantanea mal riuscita, anzi inventata' (*Op*, II, 701). Although the exercise of reading texts with a magnifying glass can be fruitful for the reader, since he/she can benefit from seeing things that previously went unnoticed, it is not so beneficial for the writer, as Levi notes at the end of the essay, as a sort of warning: 'Come si vede, la lettura con la lente è un esercizio impietoso. Guai allo scrittore che lo pratica sui suoi stessi scritti: se lo fa, si sente condannato a riscrivere senza fine ogni pagina, e ogni suo libro diventa un'opera aperta' (*Op*, II, 703). Too much focus on reality (as in a photo or book seen up close) can be unhelpful. Metaphor can overcome this problem as it merely hints at reality, or gives us a different reality. It allows texts to be read in an un-photographic way. However, this creates other problems, especially in non-fictional writing such as Holocaust testimony. Because of the cognitive effort associated with interpreting metaphor, the reader risks misunderstanding the message, thus creating a false or distorted reality.

9.5 Writing as creating/manufacturing

As mentioned above, writing is a creation process which can be viewed metaphorically as a transformation of raw materials. In other words, writing is comparable to manufacturing: the writer transforms the basic materials of thoughts, ideas, experiences into something useful: stories. Levi uses the metaphor of manufacturing on numerous occasions and in different contexts. Perhaps Levi was fond of this metaphor due to his role as manager of SIVA, a chemical factory, where he was involved in manufacturing on a daily basis and consequently saw links between his 'day job' and his 'other' job as a writer. However, in his essay 'Ex chimico', Levi points out that writing 'non è propriamente un mestiere, o almeno a mio parere, non lo dovrebbe essere: è un'attività creativa, e perciò sopporta male gli orari e le scadenze, gli impegni con i clienti e i superiori' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 641). Similarly, in 'A un giovane lettore', Levi points out that writing is not merely a profession: 'da quanto Lei mi dice si desume che Lei si rappresenta il raccontare come un mestiere, mentre secondo me non lo è' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 845).

In the play, 'Il Versificatore', Levi describes a fictional poet who makes his living by writing trite verses for birthdays, weddings and funerals. The poet is unhappy with his job since it does not involve using his creative imagination: 'ne ho abbastanza di questo sporco mestiere: sono un poeta, io, un poeta laureato, non un mestierante. Non sono un menestrello. [...] Non sono un versificatore' (*SN*, in *Op*, II, 417). The poet views his job as repetitive and mechanical, and so he decides to purchase a machine (the eponymous

'Versificatore') that is capable of doing his job, of writing verses: 'Il fattore umano è e sarà sempre indispensabile, nel nostro lavoro; ma abbiamo dei concorrenti, e perciò dobbiamo pure affidare alle macchine i compiti piú ingrati, piú faticosi. I compiti meccanici, appunto' (*Op*, II, 418). He believes that his job does not involve 'real' writing so he sees no harm in letting a machine take over, in fact, he is delighted with his decision:

> Posseggo il Versificatore ormai da due anni. Non posso dire di averlo già ammortizzato, ma mi è diventato indispensabile. Si è dimostrato molto versatile: [...] infatti, gli ho insegnato a comporre in prosa, e se la cava benissimo. Il testo che avete ascoltato, ad esempio, è opera sua. (*Op*, II, 433)

'Il Versificatore' is a prime example of metafiction. The reader is informed that what s/he has just read has been created by the mechanical versifier, which is listed at the beginning of the play as one of the 'characters'. This calls into question the value of the story. Is it the product of an author or a 'mestierante'? Can we tell the difference? Irony, another element common in metafiction, is also evident in the short story, in particular the irony that a machine can write poetry and prose, a feat which Levi frequently comments would never be possible. For example, Levi states that 'non sarà mai costruito un computer che secerna "motu proprio" poesia originale e valida' (*PS*, in *Op*, II, 1266). However, he does admit that a machine could be able to create:

> cattiva poesia sí: si arriverà [...] a comporre endecasillabi correttamente accentati e non privi di senso, o magari anche esametri conformi alle norme della prosodia latina: che potranno destare stupore e/o riso per la loro parodistica rassomiglianza alla poesia umana, ma a generare poesia nel senso forte del termine, no. (*PS*, in *Op*, II, 1266)

We have already seen a parody of human poetry in the short story 'L'amico dell'uomo', however, this was not by a machine but by a tapeworm. The tapeworm metaphorically embodies Levi's assertion, which he makes in his interview with Greer quoted above, that writers are 'parasites'.[23] Levi states in this interview (as mentioned previously) that writers, as well as being parasites, are also *creators*. Levi believes that 'scrivere è un "produrre", anzi un trasformare: chi scrive trasforma le proprie esperienze in una forma tale da essere accessibile e gradita al "cliente" che leggerà' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 641). The narrator of *La chiave a stella* describes storytelling in similar terms to Levi. Stories are created from personal experience and the experience of others: 'Storie mie finché ne avevo nel sacco, poi storie d'altri, rubate, rapinate, estorte o avute in dono, per esempio appunto le sue [di Faussone]; o anche storie di tutti e di nessuno, storie di aria, dipinte su un velo, purché un senso ce l'avessero per me, o potessero regalare al lettore un momento di stupore o di riso' (*Op*, I, 1076). Characters, in particular, are created from things seen, heard or experienced; they are amalgamations of the writer and other people. Faussone, for example, is made up of both fictional and real characteristics: 'i racconti di Faussone sono quasi tutti o racconti di avventure che qualcuno ha fatto a me, o avventure che io ho attribuito a Faussone, a un Faussone'.[24] So, Levi, like his fictional creation, the narrator of *La chiave a stella*, is told anecdotes and tales, and he puts these into a narrative form to create a book.

[23] Greer, p. 70.
[24] Grassano, p. 177.

Conversely, in his testimonial writing, Levi explicitly excludes stories told to him by others: 'ho da portare una testimonianza, quella delle cose che ho subíte e viste. I miei libri non sono libri di storia: nello scriverli mi sono rigorosamente limitato a riportare i fatti di cui avevo esperienza diretta, escludendo quelli che ho appreso piú tardi da libri o giornali' ('Appendice' in *SQU*, in *Op*, I, 186). Once again, Levi is highlighting the factuality of his testimony.

Levi's novel *Se non ora, quando?* is, however, created from other people's stories, as Levi admits in the afterword to the text: 'Questo libro è nato da quanto mi ha raccontato molti anni fa un mio amico [...]. Non mi sono prefisso di scrivere una storia vera, bensí di ricostruire l'itinerario, plausibile ma immaginario, di una di queste bande [of partisans]' ('Nota', in *SNOQ*, in *Op*, II, 511). Although Levi initially planned to create a plausible account, based on real people's experiences, he admits in an interview that the characters he created took on a life of their own; that they ended up controlling Levi their creator:

> Ho avvertito la sensazione paranoica di avere messo al mondo dei figli. Ma poi è successo che queste creature, una volta nate, mi hanno preso la mano, si sono rivoltate, hanno [...] piantato delle grane sindacali, hanno rivendicato il diritto di scegliere. E infatti hanno deciso loro: specie per le storie di donne. Io avevo una 'scaletta', che poi ho completamente disatteso. Volevo farne degli eroi raciniani, e loro invece hanno preferito un ruolo comune, medio, fatto piú di fatica che di gesta memorabili.[25]

Metafictional links can be made here, and Levi's interviewer, Rosellina Balbi, in fact compares *Se non ora, quando?* with Pirandello's metafictional play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. Levi agrees with the comparison, adding: 'il

[25]Rosellina Balbi, 'Mendel, il consolatore', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 129-35 (p. 134).

personaggio di un romanzo è una creatura ben strana. È fatto di carta, è disegnato in bianco e nero, abita in una pagina. Eppure ci si può innamorare di lui, lo si può odiare, insomma si è implicati emotivamente'.[26] Levi anthropomorphises the elements of storytelling, viewing literary characters as real people. This will be explored in more detail in the next section on writing and friendship.

9.6 Writing as friendship

As seen above, one of Levi's key literary techniques is to anthropomorphise the process of writing. One way Levi does this is by using friendship as a metaphor for writing. Gordon has pointed out the importance of the metaphor of friendship to Levi's writing:

> Levi works through his writing [...] to create a sense of community with his own interlocutors, whether his characters, fictional and non-fictional, or his real and imagined readers. [...] And the key vocabulary or metaphor in which his particular forms of communication and affinity are given energy is that of friendship.[27]

Levi views every aspect of writing – books, writers, readers – as friends. For example in the preface to *La ricerca delle radici*, Levi's anthology of his favourite texts, Levi describes how, if he had persevered with reading authors such as Balzac and Dostoevsky, he could have made new friends. On the contrary, Rabelais is one of Levi's closest 'friends'. Levi's admiration for Rabelais is clear, demonstrated by using an extract from *Gargantua* as the epigraph to *Storie naturali*, dedicating an essay to him in *L'altrui mestiere*, and

[26] Balbi, pp. 134-35.
[27] Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 219.

including him in *La ricerca delle radici*. In fact, Levi views Rabelais as his master, or father figure, as he tells Aurelio Andreoli in an interview: 'la mia simpatia per Rabelais è apparentemente incomprensibile. Eppure tra tutti è quello cui mi sento piú legato in modo quasi filiale. Se potessi lo sceglierei come padre'.[28] This father-son relationship appears in 'Lavoro creativo' and 'Nel parco', where the character James Collins, the literary creation of the writer Antonio Casella, becomes Casella's real life friend. However, he is also like a son to Casella: 'un personaggio è come un figlio, quando è nato, è nato' (*VF*, in *Op*, I, 654), and 'Era lui che lo aveva tratto dal nulla, come un figlio, anzi piú di un figlio' (*Op*, I, 656).

According to Levi, this love or bond is an essential part of creating characters, as he explains: l'amore [...] è necessario, indispensabile per la creazione poetica. È un'amore [...] disinteressato e puro, l'amore di Pigmalione, che lega il creatore alla sua creatura perfetta, o in via di diventare perfetta; e che non può mancare, perché senza amore non si crea' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 651-52).

In *La chiave a stella*, Faussone similarly views writing as an activity that maintains a bond with its creator. The creation is your own piece of work, it is the product of your own toil and tender loving care which you have seen grow before your eyes. In order to demonstrate his point, Faussone anthropomorphises the outcome of work; he compares work that has gone wrong to a person dying, it is an immensely painful experience, as Faussone describes: 'vedere venire giú un'opera come quella, e il modo poi come è venuta giú, un pezzo per volta,

[28] Aurelio Andreoli, 'Per Primo Levi questo è un modo diverso di dire io', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 123-28 (p. 126).

come se patisse, come se resistesse, faceva male al cuore come quando muore una persona' (*Op*, I, 1052).

Finally, Levi himself builds a rapport with the reader, he creates a sense of intimacy. Paul Bailey writes that with Levi 'it is possible to sustain a lasting friendship'.[29] Calvino also notes that Levi 'è sicuramente uno scrittore amico, che continua a parlare a ciascuno dei suoi lettori'.[30]

9.7 Conclusion

The theme of writing appears in numerous guises in Levi's works. This chapter has shown how, despite Levi's apparent lack of literary confidence, of which he reminds the reader throughout his texts, he creates innovative metaphors to describe the various aspects of the writing process. For example, writers are portrayed as parasites, parasites are portrayed as poets, and pylons are compared with books. In both his fictional and non-fictional writing, Levi's interest in the writing process and in a consideration of what it means to consider oneself 'a writer' is evident.

Perhaps most significantly, we have seen that Levi viewed writing metaphorically as a friend; and in fact, it is true that writing helped him, like a friend, to deal with his horrific past. This thesis as a whole has highlighted how writing about, or bearing witness to, the Holocaust was therapeutic for Levi, and how metaphor, in particular, aided Levi's ability to describe to others his indescribable experience. It has also shown how Levi's dual role as author and

[29] Cited in Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 223.
[30] Italo Calvino, *Perché leggere i classici* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), p. 13.

scientist provided him with very specific and original metaphors. In this final chapter, the threads of all the previous chapters have been drawn together in a consideration of the writing process itself, with metaphor at its very core.

Part IV: Conclusion

Chapter 10: Conclusion

This thesis has looked in detail at Levi's use of metaphorical language throughout his *oeuvre*. This is an area of his writing that has received little critical attention to date, and as such, I hope to have presented an original and insightful reading of his work, and to have inspired new avenues of enquiry. As stated from the outset, the aim of my thesis was not to provide an overview of every single metaphor used by Levi in his works, which – even if it were possible – would not be beneficial, but rather to focus on two principal areas. First of all, I looked at the way in which Levi's use of metaphor feeds into his communication of key thematic concerns which extend throughout his writing – first the Holocaust and then scientific concepts. And secondly I focused on certain important recurring conceptual metaphors and analysed their contribution to the effectiveness of his writing, in particular through the way in which they support his key theme of bridging different spheres of activity, forms of writing, and philosophical outlooks.

My thesis concentrates on the figure of metaphor, although, as chapter 1 suggests, there could also have been scope for a broader approach to the topic; for example, through a comparative study of metaphor and Levi's other figurative devices such as simile and allegory. I chose to dedicate the thesis to metaphor because, as I maintain in my introduction, I believe that it is the most important and recurrent trope in Levi's writing, and also – as I have shown – one which can also stand synecdochically for figurative language in

general. My analysis thus supports Vico's claim that, of all the tropes, metaphor is 'la piú luminosa e, perché piú luminosa, piú necessaria e piú spessa',[1] and aims to bring to the fore the light and depth which Levi's metaphors add to his writings and the ways in which they illuminate also different aspects of his own authorial persona.

Perhaps one reason for the lack of sustained critical work on metaphor in Levi is because Levi is renowned for his clear, concise writing style, which is generally attributed to his training as a chemist. These characteristics are not usually associated with figurative language, which is viewed, inaccurately, by some as an ornamental extra in language. However, as I have shown, the fact that Levi was a chemist does not necessarily mean that he favours clear, straightforward prose. His literary style reflects a series of complex choices, and is characterised by a number of contradictions. For instance, on occasion, Levi deliberately creates a disorientating effect in *Se questo è un uomo*, such as when he does not translate certain foreign words and phrases which were used in the Lager. Levi does so in order to represent the Babel-like nature of the camps and to confuse the reader. This seems to contradict his aversion to obscure writing ('Non è vero che il disordine sia necessario per dipingere il disordine; non è vero che il caos della pagina scritta sia il miglior simbolo del caos ultimo a cui siamo votati' (*AM*, in *Op*, II, 680)), and to suggest that his renowned clarity of style might represent a more sophisticated approach to language than is sometimes assumed.

[1] Cited in chapter 2 above: Vico, II, ii, 2 (I, 164).

Despite the occasional disorientating techniques noted above, Levi's writing is generally clear and concise; but far from being the result of a refusal to adopt figurative language, I have argued that the desire to communicate with clarity and concision, across a range of subject matter, and in different literary forms and styles, lies at the heart of Levi's use of metaphor. Levi's figurative language is not closed and impenetrable, instead it contributes directly to the text's message and meaning, engaging the reader and encouraging him/her to participate in the interpretation process. This is particularly important when discussing issues such as the Holocaust, which require heightened thought and contemplation.

Levi's metaphors form part of the new way of using language which is, he believes, necessary after Auschwitz. The Holocaust is ineffable and Levi uses figurative language to overcome this linguistic obstacle. Levi's use of metaphor disproves the arguments of writers such as Rosenfeld and Hochhuth who believe that figurative language has no place in Holocaust literature. Levi's figurative language helped those who were not in Auschwitz to gain an insight into the *univers concentrationnaire*.

As I proposed in chapter 4, Levi uses the *topos* of ineffability as a technique in *Se questo è un uomo* alongside metaphor to describe his Auschwitz experience. Having declared the inexpressibility of this event, Levi proceeds to convey the very nature of the ineffable experience via figurative language. This heightens the effect of the metaphor and consequently the message of the text. Levi uses a series of individual and conceptual metaphors based around key

concepts such as hell, animals and inanimate entities, which reflect the horrific conditions of the Lager. In some cases, due to the severity of the events described but also to the effectiveness of the metaphors used, the reader questions whether what he/she is reading is a metaphor or literal language.

In contrast to the metaphors in Levi's prose, I argued that those in his poetry are more open to interpretation as they do not come with the surrounding contextual clues that prose generally provides. I have identified a network of recurring conceptual metaphors in Levi's poems which are used to represent Auschwitz, notably darkness and light, the extinguishing of light and plant imagery. By recognising and deciphering these key images, the reader is able to gain an insight into the *univers concentrationnaire*, which is different from that provided by the prose works of Levi because it works more directly on the reader's emotions rather than speaking more rationally, and because it actively involves the reader in the construction of its meaning.

As mentioned above, Levi's literary style is informed by his Jewishness and this extends to his use of figurative language. I dedicated chapter 6 to this aspect of Levi's poetics, showing how he employed religious imagery to describe the Holocaust, despite his lack of religious beliefs. Levi used conceptual metaphors from both Judaism and Christianity, including exile, the exodus and baptism, to highlight the nature of his Holocaust experience.

The other major part of Levi's identity is chemistry. Again, Levi uses the ineffability *topos* in relation to science, claiming that the scientific world provides challenges to the writer wishing to describe it accurately and fully. As

in his writing on the Holocaust, Levi opens up the alien and incomprehensible world of science to the layperson via his use of metaphor. By comparing science to familiar and everyday concepts, the reader is able to understand the processes and workings of the scientific world. At the same time, Levi used science as a metaphor for other phenomena such as the Holocaust. Levi proves that metaphor does not belong merely to the realm of literature, it also forms an important part of scientific writing. Thus, via metaphor, Levi creates a bridge between the two cultures. Levi also used metaphor to build a further bridge between the world of science and that of literature, through his focus on a process linked to both: creation. Levi's aim in his writing was to unite the differing identities which made up his centaur-like nature: Holocaust survivor, chemist, and writer, as well as to bring together different forms of knowledge and understanding, and encourage dialogue; and he succeeded in doing so thanks to metaphor. Levi shows that metaphor is much more than an ornamental extra in language. It is not merely a 'device of creative literary imagination; it [is] a valuable cognitive tool without which neither poets nor ordinary people could live'.[2]

[2] Kövecses, p. ix.

Bibliography

Works by Primo Levi

(a) Editions of collected works:

Opere, ed. by Marco Belpoliti, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1997)

Opere, ed. by Cesare Cases, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1987)

(b) Published works:

Se questo è un uomo (Turin: De Silva, 1947; 2nd edn, Turin: Einaudi, 1958)

La tregua (Turin: Einaudi, 1963)

Storie naturali (Turin: Einaudi, 1966)

Vizio di forma (Turin: Einaudi, 1971)

L'osteria di Brema (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1975)

Il sistema periodico (Turin: Einaudi, 1975)

La chiave a stella (Turin: Einaudi, 1978)

Lilít e altri racconti (Turin: Einaudi, 1981)

La ricerca delle radici (Turin: Einaudi, 1981)

Se non ora, quando? (Turin: Einaudi, 1982)

Ad ora incerta (Milan: Garzanti, 1984) [including *L'osteria di Brema*]

L'altrui mestiere (Turin: Einaudi, 1985)

I sommersi e i salvati (Turin: Einaudi, 1986)

Racconti e saggi (Turin: Editrice La Stampa, 1986)

Other works consulted

Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973)

——— 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in Levi and Rothberg (eds), *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, pp. 280-81

Agamben, Giorgio, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005)

Alexander, Zaia, 'Primo Levi and translation', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 155-69

Alighieri, Dante, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, 4 vols, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994)

Améry, Jean, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (New York: Schocken Books, 1991)

Amir, Yehoyada, 'The Concept of Exile as a Model for Dealing with the Holocaust', in Katz (ed.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, pp. 304-17

Amis, Martin, *Time's Arrow. Or the Nature of the Offence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991)

Andreoli, Aurelio, 'Per Primo Levi questo è un modo diverso di dire io', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 123-28

Angier, Carole, *The Double Bond: Primo Levi, a Biography* (London: Viking, 2002)

Antonello, Pierpaolo, *Il ménage a quattro: scienza, filosofia, tecnica nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2005)

——— 'Primo Levi and "man as maker"', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 89-103

Aquinas, St Thomas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. by Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1964)

Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1991)

——— *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996)

——— *Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 2004)

Avis, Paul, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999)

Bailey, Richard, 'Conceptual Metaphor, Language and Pedagogy', in *Journal of Language and Learning*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2003), 59-72

Balbi, Rosellina, 'Mendel, il consolatore', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 129-35

Banner, Gillian, *Holocaust Literature: Schulz, Levi, Spiegelman and the Memory of the Offence* (London, Portland, Or.: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000)

Bareil, Jean-Philippe, *Exil et voyage littéraire dans l'œuvre de Primo Levi* (Paris: Editions Messene, 1998)

Barthes, Roland, 'The death of the author', in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-48

Battistini, Andrea, 'Comparing Two Constructs: Literature and Science', in Cervigni (ed.), *Literature and Science*, pp. 15-30

Beasley-Murray, George Raymond, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973)

Bedani, Gino and others (eds), *Sguardi sull'Italia: miscellanea dedicata a Francesco Villari dalla Society for Italian Studies* (Leeds: Maney, 1997)

Belpoliti, Marco (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste 1963-1987* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997)

——— 'Io sono un centauro', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. viii-xix

——— 'Primo Levi traduttore', in *Op*. II, 1582-89

——— *Primo Levi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998)

——— and Robert S. C. Gordon (eds), *Primo Levi: The Voice of Memory: 1961-1987* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001)

——— and Robert S. C. Gordon, 'Primo Levi's Holocaust Vocabularies', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 51-65

Benchouiha, Lucie, *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005)

Black, Max, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962)

Borri, Giuseppe, *Le divine impurità: Primo Levi tra scienza e letteratura* (Rimini: Luisé, 1992)

Brooks, Cleanth, 'Metaphor, Paradox and Stereotype', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 5/4 (1965), 315-28

Brown, Theodore L., *Making Truth: Metaphor in Science* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinios Press, 2003)

Bruck, Edith, 'Ebreo fino a un certo punto', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 269-73

Caccamo De Luca, Rita, and Manuela Olagnero, 'Primo Levi', in Belpoliti and Gordon (eds), *The Voice of Memory*, pp. 161-66

Calvino, Italo, *Perché leggere i classici* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991)

Cameron, Lynne, 'Operationalising "metaphor" for applied linguistic research', in Cameron and Low (eds), *Researching and Applying Metaphor*, pp. 3-28

——— and Graham Low (eds), *Researching and Applying Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Camon, Ferdinando, *Conversazione con Primo Levi* (Milan: Garzanti, 1991)

Carroll, Robert P., 'Deportation and Diasporic Discourses in the Prophetic Literature', in Scott (ed.), *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Conceptions*, pp. 63-85

Caruth, Cathy (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995)

——— 'Preface', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. vii-ix

Cases, Cesare, 'L'ordine delle cose e l'ordine delle parole', in Ferrero (ed.), *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica*, pp. 5-33

Catani, Maurizio, '"Even if we were to tell it, we would not be believed": A Lesson from the Work of Primo Levi', *Current Sociology*, 43 (1995), 137-60

Cervigni, Dino S., (ed.), *Literature and Science* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina, 2005)

Chevalier, Jean, and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. by John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin Books, 1996)

Cheyette, Brian, 'Appropriating Primo Levi', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 67-85

Cicero, *De oratore*, trans. by H. Rackham, 2 vols (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942)

Cicioni, Mirna, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* (Oxford: Berg, 1995)

——— 'Moral Snares and Parables: Between Science Fiction and Midrash', in Kremer (ed.), *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, pp. 75-87

Cole, Tim, *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the 'Shoah Business'* (London: Duckworth, 1999)

Collini, Stefan, 'Introduction', in Snow, *The Two Cultures*, pp. vii-lxxi

Collins, R. A., and H. D. Pearce (eds), *Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985)

Cooper, David E., *Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)

Debatin, Bernhard, Timothy Jackson and Daniel Steuer (eds), *Metaphor and Rational Discourse* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997)

De Melis, Frederico, 'Un'aggressione di nome Franz Kafka', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 188-94

De Rienzo, Giorgio, 'Lavorare piace', *Famiglia Cristiana*, 21 January 1979

Del Caro, Adrian, *The Early Poetry of Paul Celan: in the Beginning was the Word* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997)

Del Giudice, Daniele, 'Introduzione', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Opere*, I, xiii-lxv

Druker, Jonathan, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz. Posthumanist Reflections* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

Druce, George Claridge (trans.), *The Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc: originally written in 1210-11* (Ashford, Kent: Printed for private circulation by Headly brothers, 1936)

Eaglestone, Robert, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

——— *How To Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007)

Emmett, Lucie, '"L'uomo salvato dal suo mestiere": aspects of *Se questo è un uomo* revisited in *Il sistema periodico*', *Italian Studies*, 56 (2001), 115-28

Ezrahi, Sidra, 'The Holocaust Writer and the Lamentation Tradition: Responses to Catastrophe in Jewish Literature', in Rosenfeld and Greenberg (eds), *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, pp. 133-49

Ezrahi, Sidra Dekoven, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

Fadini, Edoardo, 'Primo Levi si sente scrittore "dimezzato"', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 106-09

Farrell, Joseph (ed.), *Primo Levi the Austere Humanist* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004)

Felman, Shoshana, 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 13-60

——— and Dori Laub (eds), *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992)

Felstiner, John, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995)

Ferme, Valerio, 'Translating the Babel of Horror: Primo Levi's Catharsis through Language in the Holocaust Memoir *Se questo è un uomo'*, *Italica*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2001), 53-73

Ferrero, Ernesto (ed.), *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997)

Foley, Barbara, 'Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives', *Comparative Literature*, 34 (1982), 330-60

Forbes, Peter, 'Introduction', in Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots*, trans. by Peter Forbes (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. vii-xvi

Friedlander, Saul, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1992)

Foucault, Michel, 'What is an author?', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1986)

Frank, Anne, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, ed. by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, trans. by Susan Massotty (London: Puffin, 1997)

Garber, Zev, and Bruce Zuckerman, 'Why do we call the Holocaust "The Holocaust"? An Inquiry into the Psychology of Labels', *Modern Judaism*, 9 (1989), 197-211

Geis, Deborah (ed.), *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor Tale" of the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003)

Gibbons, David, *Metaphor in Dante* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002)

Gitay, Yehoshua (ed.), *Literary Responses to the Holocaust 1945-1995* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998)

——— 'Uri Zevi Greenberg: A Poem from the Forest: A Laughing Animal...The Poetics of Hebrew Poetry of the Holocaust', in Gitay (ed.), *Literary Responses to the Holocaust*, pp. 41-53

Giuliani, Massimo, *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Lanham: Lexington, 2004)

Glatstein, Jacob, (ed.), *Anthology of Holocaust Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1977)

Glucksberg, Sam and Boaz Keysar, 'How Metaphors Work', in Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, pp. 401-24

Golino, Carlo L., *Contemporary Italian Poetry: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962)

Gordon, Robert S. C., 'Primo Levi: On Friendship', in Bedani and others (eds), *Sguardi sull' Italia*, pp. 184-94

——— '"How Much Home Does a Person Need?" Primo Levi and the Ethics of Home', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 19 (2001), 215-34

——— *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

——— *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Italian Literature*: *A Difficult Modernity* (London: Duckworth, 2005)

——— 'Real Tanks and Toy Tanks: Playing Games with History in Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*/*Life is Beautiful*', *Studies in European Cinema*, Volume 2, Number 1 (2005), 31-44

——— 'Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy', *Italian Studies*, Volume 61, Number 1 (2006), 85-113

——— (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

——— 'Introduction', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. xvii-xxi

Gormley, Beatrice, *C. S. Lewis: The Man Behind Narnia* (Grand Rapids, Mich; Cambridge: Eerdman, 2005)

Grassano, Giuseppe, 'Conversazione con Primo Levi', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 167-84

Gray, John, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003)

Greenberg, Irving, 'Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust', in Morgan (ed.), *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, pp. 102-15

Green, Joel B., Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter Varsity Press, 1992)

Greer, Germaine, 'Colloquio con Primo Levi', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 65-76

Grieco, Giuseppe, 'Io e Dio', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 282-90

Gubar, Susan, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003)

Hallyn, Fernand (ed.), *Metaphor and Analogy in the Sciences* (Dordrecht: Klewer Academic Press, 2000)

Hanfling, Oswald, 'Paradoxes of Aesthetic Distance', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43/2 (2003), 175-86

Harrowitz, Nancy, 'Primo Levi's Science as "Evil Nurse": The Lesson of Inversion', in Kremer (ed.), *Memory and Mastery*, pp. 59-73

——— '"Mon maître, mon monstre": Primo Levi and Monstrous Science', in Jewell (ed.), *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, pp. 51-64

——— 'Primo Levi's Jewish Identity', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 17-31

Heath, Malcolm, 'Introduction', in Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. vii-lxxi

Hesse, Mary, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966)

Hochhuth, Rolf, *The Deputy*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Grove, 1964)

Homer, Frederic D., *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001)

Honess, Claire E., *From Florence to the Heavenly City: the Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006)

Horowitz, Sara, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997)

Hutcheon, Linda, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Methuen, 1984)

Insana, Lina, *Arduous Tasks: Primo Levi, Translation, and the Transmission of Holocaust Testimony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009)

Jewell, Keala (ed.), *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2001)

——— 'Introduction: Monsters and Discourse on the Human', in Jewell (ed.), *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, pp. 9-24

Karpf, Anne, *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* (London: Heinemann, 1996)

Katz, Steven T., 'Jewish Faith After the Holocaust: Four Approaches', *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972), 1-17

——— (ed.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Kelly, Judith, *Primo Levi: Recording and Reconstruction in the Testimonial Literature* (Market Harborough: Troubador, 2000)

Kennedy, John M., and Daniel L. Chiappe, 'What Makes a Metaphor Stronger than a Simile?', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 14 (1999), 63-69

Kittay, Eva Feder, *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

Kofman, Sarah, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Galilée, 1987)

Kövecses, Zoltán, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Kremer, Roberta S., (ed.), *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness* (Albany, NY: State University of Albany Press, 2001)

Kruger, Kathryn Sullivan, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susqehanna University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2001)

Kuhn, Thomas, *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977)

Lakoff, George, 'The contemporary theory of metaphor', in Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, pp. 202-51

——— and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

——— and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989)

Lamberti, Luca, 'Vizio di forma: ci salveranno i tecnici', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 110-17

Lang, Berel, 'Holocaust Genres and the Turn to History', in Leak and Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text*, pp. 17-31

——— *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000)

Langer, Lawrence, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975)

——— *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991)

——— *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

——— *Art from the Ashes: a Holocaust Anthology* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Lanham, Richard A., *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969)

Laqueur, Walter (ed.), *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)

Laub, Dori, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in Felman and Laub (eds), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, pp. 57-74

——— 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 61-75

Lawson-Tancred, Hugh, 'Introduction', in Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, pp. 1-61

Leak, Andrew, and George Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 2000)

——— 'Introduction', in Leak and Paizis (eds), *The Holocaust and the Text*, pp. 1-16

Leatherdale, W. H., *The Role of Analogy, Model and Metaphor in Science* (Amsterdam; Oxford: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1974)

Lejeune, Philippe, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975)

——— *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin and trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)

——— 'The Autobiographical Pact', in Eakin (ed.), *On Autobiography*, pp. 3-30

Lentricchia, Frank and Thomas McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd edn (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995)

Lepschy, Anna Laura, and Giulio Lepschy, 'Primo Levi's Languages', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 121-36

Levi, Neil and Michael Rothberg (eds), *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003)

——— 'Literature and Culture After Auschwitz: An Introduction', in Levi and Rothberg (eds), *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, pp. 273-76

Levine, George (ed.), *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987)

——— 'One Culture: Science and Literature', in Levine (ed.), *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, pp. 3-32

Linenthal, Edward T., *Preserving Memory: the Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001)

Lipton, Sara, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1990)

Locke, David, *Science as Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)

Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1961)

Luzi, Alfredo, 'L'altro mondo di Levi. Scienza e fantascienza nelle *Storie naturali*' in Speelman, Jansen and Gaiga (eds), *Scrittori italiani di origine ebrea*, pp. 67-76

Mackay, Marina (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Mahon, James Edwin, 'Truth and metaphor: a defence of Shelley', in Debatin, Jackson and Steuer (eds), *Metaphor and Rational Discourse*, pp. 137-46

Mailloux, Steven, 'Interpretation', in Lentricchia and McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, pp. 121-34

Marchis, Vittorio, 'La meccanica come metafora. Alcune considerazioni intorno alla *Chiave a stella* di Primo Levi', *Studi piemontesi*, 31 (2002), 71-74

Marcus, Millicent, *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002)

——— *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007)

Martin, Janet, and Rom Harré, 'Metaphor in Science', in Miall (ed.), *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, pp. 89-105

Martin, Wallace, 'Interpretation', in Preminger and Brogan (eds), *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, pp. 614-19

Massen, Sabine, 'Metaphors in the Social Sciences: Making Use and Making Sense of them', in Hallyn (ed.), *Metaphor and Analogy in the Sciences*, pp. 199-244

Mengaldo, Pier Vincenzo, 'Lingua e scrittura in Levi', in Primo Levi, *Opere*, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), III, vii-lxxxiii

Miall, David S., (ed.), *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982)

——— 'Introduction', in Miall (ed.), *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, pp. xi-xix

Miller, Arthur I., 'Metaphors and Scientific Creativity', in Hallyn (ed.), *Metaphor and Analogy in the Sciences*, pp. 147-64

Mintz, Alan L., *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001)

Moliterni, Fabio, 'Primo Levi. Dell'a-topia letteraria', in Moliterni, Ciccarelli and Lattanzio (eds), *Primo Levi. L'a-topia letteraria*, pp. 3-61

——— Roberto Ciccarelli and Alessandro Lattanzio (eds), *Primo Levi. L'a-topia letteraria. Il pensiero narrativo. La scrittura e l'assurdo* (Naples: Liguori, 2000)

Morgan, Michael (ed.), *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Nascimbeni, Giulio, 'Levi: l'ora incerta della poesia', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 136-41

Nezri-Dufour, Sophie, *Primo Levi: una memoria ebraica del Novecento* (Florence: Giuntina, 2002)

Nystedt, Jane, *Le opere di Primo Levi viste al computer. Osservazioni stilolinguistiche* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993)

O'Rawe, Catherine, *Authorial Echoes: Textuality and Self-Plagiarism in the Narrative of Luigi Pirandello* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005)

Orr, Mary, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003)

Ortony, Andrew, 'Why Metaphors Are Necessary and Not Just Nice', *Educational Theory*, 25 (1975), 45-53

——— (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd edn (2001); online version <http://www.oed.com>

Ozick, Cynthia, *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

Paoletti, Pier Maria, 'Sono un chimico, scrittore per caso', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 101-05

Patruno, Nicholas, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995)

Peck, John, and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1993)

Pilz, Kerstin, *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005)

Poli, Gabriella, and Giorgio Calcagno, (eds), *Echi di una voce perduta: incontri, interviste e conversazioni con Primo Levi* (Milan: Mursia, 1992)

Preminger, Alex, and T. V. F. Brogan (eds), *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993)

Pugliese, Stanislao (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi* (London and New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005)

Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. by Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942)

Rabinow, Paul (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1986)

Ramrus-Rauch, Gila, 'The Holocaust and the Fantastic: A Negative Revelation?', in Collins and Pearce (eds), *Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, pp. 33-42

Rau, Petra, 'The war in contemporary fiction', in Mackay (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, pp. 207-19

Reddy, Michael, 'The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language', in Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, pp. 164-201

Reeves, Carol, *The Language of Science* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Regge, Tullio, *Primo Levi e Tullio Regge: Dialogo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984)

Reiter, Andrea, *Narrating the Holocaust*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London & New York: Continuum, 2000)

——— 'Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation', *Mortality*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2008), 91-93

Richards, I. A., *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979)

Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation and Meaning in Language*, trans. by Robert Czerny (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986)

Rosenfeld, Alvin, 'The Problematics of Holocaust Literature', in Rosenfeld and Greenberg (eds), *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, pp. 1-30

——— and Irving Greenberg (eds), *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978)

——— *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980)

Rosenthal, Bianca, *Pathways to Paul Celan: A History of Critical Responses as a Chorus of Discordant Voices* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995)

Roskies, David G., *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988)

Ross, Charlotte, 'Representations of Science, Literature, Technology and Society in the Works of Primo Levi' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2004)

——— 'Primo Levi's science-fiction', in Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, pp. 105-18

——— *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human* (New York: Routledge, 2011)

Roth, Philip, 'L'uomo salvato dal suo mestiere', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 84-94

Rousset, David, *L'univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946)

Rowland, Antony, 'Poetry as Testimony: Primo Levi's Collected Poems', *Textual Practice*, 22.3 (2008), 487-505

Rudnicki, Adolf, *Ascent to Heaven*, trans. by H. C. Stevens (London: Dobson, 1951)

Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman, (eds), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopaedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech, Literary Patterns and Universal Images of the Bible* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998)

Santagostino, Giuseppina, *Primo Levi: metamorfosi letterarie del corpo* (Turin: Centro universitario di ricerche sul viaggio in Italia, 2004)

Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)

Scott, James, M., (ed.), *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Conceptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1997)

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *A Defence of Poetry* (Portland, ME: Mosher, 1910)

Simborowski, Nicoletta, '"Il ritegno": Writing and Restraint in Primo Levi', *Romance Studies*, 19, I (2001), 41-57

Snow, C. P., *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

——— 'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution', in *The Two Cultures*, pp. 1-51

——— 'The Two Cultures: A Second Look', in *The Two Cultures*, pp. 53-100

Sodi, Risa, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990)

——— 'The Rhetoric of the "Univers Concentrationnaire"', in Kremer (ed.), *Memory and Mastery*, pp. 35-55

Spadi, Milvia, 'Capire e far capire', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 242-59

Speelman, Raniero M., ‘Primo Levi’s Short Stories: A Modern Midrashim’, in Pugliese (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 23-32

——— Monica Jansen and Silvia Gaiga (eds), *Scrittori italiani di origine ebrea ieri e oggi: un approccio generazionale* (Utrecht: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing and Archive Services, 2007)

Steiner, George, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber, 1967)

Stone, Dan (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

Stone, Marla, ‘Primo Levi, Roberto Benigni, and the Politics of Holocaust Representation’, in Pugliese (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 135-46

Sullam Caliman, Anna-Vera, ‘A Name for Extermination’, *Modern Language Review*, 94/4 (1999), 978-99

Tasato Mellone, James, ‘A Bibliography of English and Italian Scholarly Writings on Primo Levi, 1985-2002’, in Pugliese (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 233-66

Taverniers, Miriam, *Metaphor and Metaphorology: A Selective Genealogy of Philosophical and Linguistic Conceptions of Metaphor from Aristotle to the 1990s* (Gent: Academia Press, 2002)

Thomson, Ian, ‘Primo Levi in Conversation’, in Belpoliti and Gordon (eds), *The Voice of Memory*, pp. 34-44

——— *Primo Levi* (London: Vintage, 2003)

Usher, Jonathan, ‘Primo Levi’s Science Fiction and the Humanoid’, *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*, 4 (1996), 199-216

——— '"Libertinage" Programmatic and Promiscuous Quotation in Primo Levi', in Farrell (ed.), *Primo Levi the Austere Humanist*, pp. 91-116

Valabrega, Paola, 'Primo Levi e la tradizione ebraico-orientale', in Ferrero (ed.), *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica*, pp. 263-88

Viano, Maurizio, '"Life is Beautiful": Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 17 (1995), 155-71

Vice, Sue, *Holocaust Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000)

Vico, Giambattista, *La scienza nuova*, ed. by Fausto Nicolini, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1928)

Vigevani, Marco, 'Le parole, il ricordo, la speranza', in Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi: conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 213-222

Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

Waxman, Zoë, 'Testimony and Representation', in Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, pp. 487-507

——— *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Wiesel, Elie, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration', in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University by Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, Robert McAfee Brown* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1977), pp. 4-19

——— 'Death Train', in Glatstein (ed.), *Anthology of Holocaust Literature*, pp. 6-7

——— *Night*, trans. by Marion Wiesel (London: Penguin, 2006)

——— 'Preface to the New Translation', in *Night*, pp. vii-xv

Wilner, Arlene Fish, '"Happy, Happy Ever After": Story and History in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*', in Geis (ed.), *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor Tale" of the Holocaust*, pp. 105-21

Wilson, David L., and Zack Bowen, *Science and Literature: Bridging the Two Cultures* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001)

Wollaston, Isabel, '"What can – and cannot – be said": Religious Language after the Holocaust', *Journal of Literature and Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1992), 47-56

Woolf, Judith, *The Memory of the Offence* (Hull: Hull Italian Texts, 1995)

Young, James E., *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988)

——— 'Literature', in Laqueur (ed.), *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, pp. 393-98