

**“LITERATURE ABSORBED THROUGH THE SKIN”: INTERTEXTUALITY IN
PRIMO LEVI’S IF THIS IS A MAN**

by

ISLA REYNOLDS

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ISLA REYNOLDS

Name of Author (please print)

19/08/2004

Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

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Introduction

Despite Levi's claim that "reason, art, and poetry are no help in deciphering a place in which they are banned," literary references litter his memoirs which aim to elucidate and explain the experience of the concentration camp both for the reader and for Levi himself (DS 142). However, simple allegorical comparison does not result in this explanation; indeed Levi's use of literary referents tends to complicate rather than clarify his experience of the Lager. By using Dante's Divine Comedy as an intertext, Levi introduces a variety of possible, often antagonistic, interpretations of his own memoir. This coexistence of different readings allows Levi to avoid reducing the Lager to a single definitive signified, and therefore pre-empts any possibility of rationalizing the Holocaust in terms of literary or cultural tropes.¹ This multiplicity also ultimately demonstrates the difficulties faced by any attempt, whether literary or otherwise, to represent a past experience, especially one that involves such atrocity. However, rather than submitting to the problems inherent to language, Levi is aware of the diversity of interpretations introduced through intertextuality and uses this multiplicity to attempt the difficult task of representing the Lager without reducing the horror or consequence of the experience. By illustrating the inadequacy of The Divine Comedy as a referent, Levi indicates the

¹ As La Capra and others have pointed out, "the term *Holocaust*...is problematic," referring as it does to both catastrophe and sacrifice (109, n.4; see also Haidu 279). Some scholars, such as Haidu (who prefers to use "the Event"), refuse to use terms such as "Holocaust," "Shoah," or "Final Solution" because they access referents outside of, or counter to a certain concept of the event described (277-299). However, LaCapra observes that there is an "unavailability of innocent terms" and points to three reasons why "Holocaust," although problematic, is preferable: a) the risk that alternative terms like "Final Solution" recall Nazi terminology; b) the term has been taken up in the discourse of survivors and should be recognized and respected; c) the term's establishment in discourse, including that of non-survivors, that has "helped to counteract its sacrificial connotation without entirely reducing it to cliché" (109, n.4). I will use the term "Holocaust" throughout my thesis, although I respect that the term is neither uncomplicated nor innocuous.

enormity of his experience without reducing it to a deficient linguistic description. The complex intertextual networks which produce the comparison between Dante and Levi also undermine it and in doing so demonstrate the ultimately impenetrable nature of the Lager as an actual event, while still delineating its presence and significance.

By using the ideas of intertextuality as developed by Barthes, Bakhtin, and Kristeva, I will study the complex weave of references that Levi uses, and in doing so explore the personal and cultural significance of Levi's literary sources. I will use my first chapter to discuss the theories developed predominantly by Barthes and Kristeva. Kristeva defines the idea of intertextuality as the "transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another," identifying intertextuality as the referencing by one text of one or more other texts that exist outside its physical confines (Revolution 59). Allen clarifies this concept, explaining that "the text is not an individual, isolated object but, rather, a compilation of cultural textuality," indicating that texts draw from a variety of sources already invested with cultural, historical, or political significance (36). Both Kristeva and Barthes assert that such intertextuality cannot and should not lead to a retracing of sources in an attempt to find a fixed and irreducible meaning. Instead the study of intertextuality exposes meaning as a "play" of signification that is continually deferred to other sign systems rather than to one indisputable source. A text is therefore a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of readings blend and clash," and it is this multiplicity that is particularly relevant to Levi and his use of Dante (Barthes, IMT 146). I will be examining how Levi's use of intertextual reference prompts this conflict between different interpretations, and how such conflict reflects Levi's attempt to relate

his experiences and the effect this has on the reader's ability to engage and understand those experiences.

Involved in these ideas of intertextuality is the construction of the speaking subject and the effect of intertextuality on the identity of that subject. Kristeva's emphasizes "the manner in which the speaking subject itself forms part of the transpositional practice" (Allen 54). This discussion will subsequently facilitate my study of Levi's identity as victim, survivor, and writer as constructed through his reference to other texts in his memoirs, in particular to Dante's depiction of Ulysses. Levi uses the multiplicity produced by intertextual comparison to access a variety of often contradictory tropes which influence the construction of his own identity, although this construction is complex and often confounded by the very multiplicity on which it is built.

Using these theoretical frameworks, my second chapter investigates the role of Dante as an intertext in Levi's If This is a Man.² By exposing the different "sign systems" involved in the text, I explore the influence of Dante's verse on the understanding of Levi's memoir. I concentrate on "The Canto of Ulysses" in If This is a Man where Levi recalls his attempt to recite a passage of Dante's Inferno, which in turn refers to, and modifies, Homer's Odyssey. This instance illustrates the complex weave of references involved in intertextuality, and demonstrates the concept that a written text is not original, but is "constructed as a mosaic of quotations" from other texts (Kristeva, Desire 66). Before considering Levi's use of Dante's text within his memoir, it is important to note that The Inferno's reconfiguration of the Ulysses myth is itself a

² Levi refers to other intertexts throughout If This is a Man, and in his other work. Some examples are; Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," (see Wilson 25-39), The Bible, Shakespeare's King Lear.

complex example of intertextuality. The weave of interpretations produced affects the impression of both Ulysses and Dante, and is subsequently repeated and refracted in Levi's memoir. Such refraction increases the variety of interpretations and comparisons available to the reader of Levi's text, and the use of Canto XXVI as an intertext results in a number of different and complex comparisons between Levi and Ulysses, and Levi and Dante. Concepts of journeying, rebellion, and free will emerge through these comparisons, although each differs according to the interpretation or definition of the figures involved. However, it is the complexity itself that is important to Levi's memoir, rather than the specifics of the different interpretations. By using an intricate, multiple, and ultimately frustrating framework to describe the Lager, Levi illustrates the difficulty involved in the linguistic representation of his experience, as well as the confusion involved in the experience itself. The complexity of Levi's intertextual reference requires the reader to actively interpret the text, an endeavor which in turn forces readers to engage with, and consider, the Lager rather than allowing them to easily accept a preconceived notion of the Holocaust.

I am therefore interested in this extract not only as an example of intertextuality, but also as significant to Levi's experience of the Lager and his attempts to explain and represent that experience. Despite his claim "who knows how or why it comes into my mind?" Canto XXVI seems to be peculiarly significant to Levi, both in the immediacy of the situation and as he looks back and recalls the instant (ITM 118). Regardless of the urgent need "not to waste this hour," Levi still roughly edits the passage as he recites it, discarding "fragments" that are "not relevant" (*ibid.*). What does Levi mean by "not relevant"? Not relevant to what? These questions lead to yet more questions: What is the

importance of “The Canto of Ulysses” to Levi, both in the camp and afterwards? Why does Levi choose to recite Dante and not some other text of cultural or religious consequence? Is Levi aware of the allegorical nature of this reference, either at the time or retrospectively?

Using the ideas of intertextuality discussed in the first chapter and the detailed close reading of the second chapter, my third chapter examines the importance of Levi’s intertextual reference to his identity within a specific cultural and historical context. Bearing in mind that “both the writer and reader exist and work within an intertextual field of cultural codes and meanings that can never be contained within an analysis,” I describe Levi’s constructed identity and suggest possible intentions behind his reference to specific “centres of culture” (Allen 89). I also discuss how this construction of identity reflects ideas of rebellion already touched on in earlier chapters. Involved in both these aspects of my discussion is Levi’s awareness of the difficulty involved in the linguistic rendering of the Lager experience, and the paradoxical compulsion to communicate such experiences to others. This concern is apparent throughout Levi’s writing and integral to ideas of identity and rebellion within the Lager. I therefore finish this chapter by investigating Levi’s awareness of the reductive and inadequate nature of language when used to describe the Lager, and his use of intertextuality as a means to pre-empt and avoid this aspect of testimony.

Having discussed Levi’s concerns about language and testimony, I conclude by introducing my discussions into the wider critical debate that surrounds the issue of representation and the Holocaust. My discussion focuses on the prevalent idea that the Holocaust cannot be represented, and how more recent discussions tackle this idea, where

it develops into a question of how representations are constructed and received.³ I argue that, although language cannot reconstruct or access the event itself, it can communicate an idea of the Holocaust. The importance of representation lies, not in the ability to communicate an exact, unequivocal description of the Holocaust, but in the ability to engage the addressee in a critical study of events. Rather than allowing a received (and therefore easily accepted) concept of the Holocaust to develop and persist, representations should force engagement, and therefore confrontation, with the Holocaust as both a historical event and a mediated concept. Levi achieves such engagement by using intertextuality to produce a multitude of conflicting readings within his memoir, forcing the reader to consider each in a process of critical evaluation. This multiplicity also exposes its own artifice as a mediation of events, rather than an exact replica, and thus confronts the reader with its own inherently problematic nature as representation. Levi therefore addresses and anticipates debates over representation and reception that have only recently emerged in critical discourse regarding historiography and the Holocaust. The concepts integral to theories of intertextuality are also relevant to these debates on representation. My conclusion will therefore discuss the points of intersection between these discourses and look forward to areas in need of further investigation.

By using the Canto of Ulysses as the focal point of my thesis and concentrating on this specific instance of intertextuality in If This is a Man, I investigate the complexities of intertextuality and its effects on Levi's memoir. Literature, apparently "absorbed through the skin" becomes not only an intertextual tool of expression, but also a means to challenge the degradation enforced by the Lager (Levi, Interview with Greer

³ Friedlander, Lentin, and Vogler all provide good summaries of these debates over representation in the introductions to their respective books.

3). Although Levi claims that this literature is an unconscious “absorption,” his memoir highlights its own nature as a text, prompting discussions on representation and challenging the notion that such representation can, and should not be attempted. I show that Levi’s use of intertextuality is both a complex means to illustrate the horror of the Lager without reducing or rationalizing it, and complicates others’ claims that the Holocaust cannot be effectively represented.

Chapter 1

“How much of what we write comes from what we read?”:

Theories of Intertextuality⁴

Using theories of intertextuality as a framework for investigation, I want to explore and understand the function of the Ulysses episode in *If This Is a Man*, as well as Levi's use of referencing in a broader sense. Although Hawthorne defines an intertext as “the text within which other texts reside or echo their presence,” it is important to understand the complexities involved in this idea in more detail (85). Consequently, before I apply this framework to Levi's writing, I wish to examine and clarify these concepts as developed by Bakhtin, Barthes, and Kristeva. Kristeva conceives the term “intertextuality,” but she does so when discussing Bakhtin's work on dialogism and the utterance. I will therefore start my investigation of this concept by first gaining an understanding of Bakhtin's theories of novelistic discourse as they relate to and elucidate Kristeva's later developments. In a process that is itself intertextual, Barthes and Kristeva use Bakhtin's work, and each other's, to further refine and develop the concept of intertextuality. Because their work is closely linked in both time and subject, it is difficult to discuss one without the other. However, differences separate the two and, as Hawthorne observes, Barthes' conception of intertextuality “seems significantly more diffuse and all embracing than Kristeva's” (86). To discuss this significant difference I will follow my discussion of Bakhtin with an investigation of Barthes' idea of the text and intertextuality, and then Kristeva's.

⁴ Levi in an interview with Aurelio Andreoli, 99.

Despite concentrating on language at the level of the utterance, Bakhtin's work clarifies later theories that deal with a broader sense of the text as it operates within a network of other texts. However, Bakhtin's work is not merely a spur to Kristeva's discovery of intertextuality; Allen describes him as "less an author from whose works a notion of intertextuality can be derived than a major theorist of intertextuality itself" (16). The initial concept of language as affected by external factors and not merely operating within a "closed system" emerges in Bakhtin's critique of Saussure's theory of language (Bakhtin/Volosinov 58). Bakhtin observes that the Saussurian conception of language does not allow for the effect of the social and historical context in which language occurs at any specific instant. Instead, Bakhtin argues, a word without context is like that in a dictionary, "simply a conventional sign," and is therefore "only of technical significance" (Bakhtin/Medvedev 120). Language, or more specifically the utterance, is "a social act" that is not only "an individual material complex, a phonetic, articulatory, visual complex," but "also part of a social reality" (ibid). Language generates its meaning from various influences that exist outside the actual utterance itself, but which are integral to it. The individual linguistic unit is not neutral or fixed when spoken or written as part of a discourse, or when uttered within a social or historical space. The socio-historical context in which language occurs informs and influences its signification. The utterance is itself a "historical event, albeit an infinitesimal one," and language both reflects aspects of the space in which it is uttered, as well as affecting that space by including it in a linguistic field (ibid). At the same time as it "reacts" to its surroundings, the utterance also "organizes communication oriented toward reciprocal action," and therefore charges the context of the following utterance by introducing a new set of influencing factors

(ibid). As Bakhtin defines it, the utterance acts within a network of past and future contexts that the utterance itself subsequently influences. This relationship between language and its historical and social context is particularly relevant to the debate involving problems of representation and the Holocaust, which I discuss in my conclusion. The arguments that surround this issue regard language as having an adverse effect on the Holocaust as a historical event, or on the memory of that event, equating the reduction of the experience of the Holocaust into language with a reduction of the event itself. More recent discussions of the role of historiography and the Holocaust also include the idea of history as an essentially linguistic construct which exists within and is influenced by a network of social, political, and historical utterances.⁵

Part of the social and historical context that influences an utterance, or language more generally, are past utterances. Clayton and Rothstein observe “the individual utterance [. . .] is always caught up in a context of other utterances” (18). Bakhtin explains this concept in relation to the novel and his idea of “heteroglossia” in “Discourse in the Novel,” in which he introduces the idea of “literary language” as “stratified and heteroglot” (33). Having defined heteroglossia as the multitude of voices (author, narrator, character, genre etc.) present in any one instance of novelistic discourse, Bakhtin identifies these “fundamental compositional unities” as establishing a “multiplicity of social voices” and “a wide variety of links and interrelationships” which reference discourses outside the utterance itself (ibid 32). Holquist further explains Bakhtin’s concept:

⁵ Friedlander’s Probing the Limits of Representation is a good source of various essays exploring the idea of history as a mediated, linguistic field in terms which recall Bakhtin’s concepts of the utterance.

[. . .] an utterance is never in itself originary: an utterance is always an answer. It is always an answer to another utterance that precedes it, and is therefore always conditioned by, and in turn qualifies, the prior utterance.

(60)

Indeed, “at any given moment languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another” in the same utterance and thus these heteroglot languages “intersect” each other (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 34). As Dentith observes, a text is constructed from “the socially located languages that each and every text manages in its own particular way,” and therefore a text is the specific arrangement of these heteroglot utterances (95).

By using terms such as “intersect,” “interrelated,” and “interwoven” to describe these concepts, Bakhtin anticipates Barthes’ idea of a text as “a tissue of quotations” and looks forward to the concept of “intertextuality” (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 33; Barthes, *IMT* 146). Indeed, Bakhtin has already hinted at the concept of language as always already belonging to somebody else:

As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no “neutral” words and forms – words and forms that can belong to “no one”: language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. (“Discourse in the Novel” 35)

Anticipating Barthes' subsequent claim, Bakhtin asserts that "the word in language is half someone else's" (ibid). Allen links this idea of repetition to Bakhtin's earlier idea of the utterance as influenced by other utterances when he claims that, for Bakhtin, "all utterances depend on or call to other utterances; no utterance is itself singular; all utterances are shot through with other, competing and conflicting voices" (27). Like later theories of intertextuality, Bakhtin's concept of the utterance defines language as referential, although the referents he cites are historical, verbal and social "belief systems" rather than texts in particular ("Discourse in the Novel" 32).

This idea that language achieves meaning through the influence of factors external to itself is central to the premise of intertextuality. Bakhtin exposes language as existing not as a fixed system of algebra-like formulae, but as a "socio-historical act," which at any one time is dependent on "the conditions of a given social system" (ibid). Allen's assertion that, for Bakhtin, meaning "is unique, to the extent that it belongs to the linguistic interaction of specific individuals or groups within specific social contexts" emphasizes this connection to intertextuality in that meaning derives from *interaction* not from a fixed, isolated presence inherent to the linguistic unit and unchanging between utterances (17). Indeed, in a prediction of later theories of intertextuality, Bakhtin claims "any utterance...always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it" (Speech Genres 93-4). Meaning is not definitively encoded in language, but depends instead on its reference to something preceding it, and in turn becomes a reference for following utterances. Any utterance is "but one link in a continuous chain" ("Discourse in the Novel" 32). If, for Bakhtin, a word is "a bridge thrown between myself and another," it is important to remember that any network of

intertextuality spans both forward and backward. Dentith observes that Bakhtin “locates the utterance in the to and fro of active social forces, pulling back and forth in competition with each other” (95). The “bridge” between utterances described by Bakhtin is not stable or stationary, but is forever shifting and reaching out to other utterances. According to Todorov, “no utterance is devoid of the intertextual dimension,” and therefore no work or utterance is completely individual but relates to, and is dependent upon, others (62).

Unlike later theorists of intertextuality, who tend to stress the reference of texts (and therefore language) to other, past texts, Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of the individual “addressee” when considering the meaning of an utterance (Bakhtin/Volosinov 86). The word for Bakhtin is “*a two-sided act*” and is “determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant” (ibid, Bakhtin’s italics). Bakhtin develops this concept further, claiming “*who* speaks and under what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the word’s actual meaning” (Dialogic Imagination 401, Bakhtin’s italics). This point and Bakhtin’s assertion that “a word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee,” also anticipates later theories of intertextuality (Bakhtin / Volosinov 72). The concept of the word as “the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee,” when expanded to include the idea of the text as a whole, will provide an interesting framework from which to examine and discuss Levi (ibid.). Remembering that the “orientation” of a specific utterance towards the addressee is of “extremely high significance” gives any exploration of the intertextual nature of Levi’s memoirs a new avenue of investigation and potential interpretation (ibid). Bakhtin’s assertion emphasizes the importance of examining not

just preceding discourses but also the potential discourse at which Levi's own writing is aimed or in which it emerges.

Barthes uses Bakhtin's ideas of the utterance to develop a theory more specific to the text, but before discussing Barthes' concept of the text, it is important to include his insistence on the difference between "work" and "text." Barthes defines the text as a "methodological field" as opposed to the work which is "a finished object," something that "can occupy a physical space" ("Theory of the Text" 39). The text is the linguistic sphere generated by, and present within, the work. However, this idea of text does not confine it to a concept of definitive meaning. Barthes instead insists upon the text as a "multi-dimensional space" which accesses references beyond the bounds of the material work:

We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning [. . .] but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. (IMT 146)

Like Bakhtin, Barthes recognizes the text as "made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations," acknowledging the impact of culture on language (IMT 147). However, Barthes also emphasizes that such "centres of culture" are themselves linguistic constructions and do not instill a fixed meaning within language, but only add to its multiplicity. The text exists within an intertextual field from which it is not decisively separate. Instead, the boundaries between the text and its

referents bleed into each other and “the intertextual in which every text is held” is “itself [. . .] the text-between of another text” (IMT 159). Any text not only refers to other texts to achieve meaning, but is also itself a referent in a network of relation that is multidirectional.

Barthes’ theory of the text builds upon Bakhtin’s idea of the dialogic, insisting that literature does not contain “the voice of a single person” (IMT 143). However, unlike Bakhtin, who still locates his idea of heteroglossia as originating with the author to some extent, Barthes claims that “it is language that speaks, not the author” (*ibid*). Rather than arguing, like Bakhtin, that an utterance is simply referencing other discourses, Barthes asserts that such utterances are replications of previous ones, and Allen claims, “Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse or dialogic word gives way...to a vision of the text in which no word means one thing alone” (67). Barthes insists on a more dramatic idea than that of the utterance as only “half someone else’s,” instead declaring that “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original,” and in doing so removes any notion that the word is anything other than totally derived from someone (or somewhere) else (IMT 146). Barthes sees this textual echoing as erasing the notion of origin, claiming that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” and instigates the “death” of the author (IMT 142-8). This seems contradictory to Bakhtin who identifies the multiple voices of writing as originating from, or at least defined by, specific socio-historical circumstances. Barthes, however, asserts that although writing is a replication, the source of that replication is anonymous. This is because it is “language that speaks, not the author,” and the pattern of replication and imitation is contained within this “methodological field” uninfluenced by the author

(IMT 143). Levi echoes Barthes' sentiment, claiming that although "whoever writes is free to choose the language or un-language that suits him best," it is the reader who determines meaning: "writing which is obscure for its own author may be luminous and open for him who reads" (Other People's Trades 169). For Barthes, to "give the text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to finish it with a final signified," and ignore the inherent referencing that occurs throughout language and enforce an ultimate origin that disrupts this chain of quotation (IMT 147). Therefore Barthes' notion of the text is also a concept of intertextuality in that every text is involved within a web of citations that links it to others as both referencing agent and referent.

The shift in emphasis from authorial production of definitive meaning to "an empty process of enunciation" opens new avenues of interpretation that are important to consider when looking at Levi (IMT 145). If the author's "only power," as Barthes claims, is to "mix writings, to counter the ones with others," then what becomes important to interpretation is not the source of these writings but the manipulation of them (IMT 147). Barthes asserts that "in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like a thread in a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath," and the resultant entanglement of texts should be the focus of investigation, rather than their sources (*ibid*). If every text is a "new tissue of past citations" then it is the pattern that these quotations make and the impression that they give that should be interpreted (Barthes, "Theory of the Text" 39). Sean Burke points out that "the field of intertextuality is not generalized and unfurrowed: it exists by virtue of constellations, overlap, relays," and Barthes asserts that "the current theory of the text turns away from the text as a veil and tries to perceive

the fabric in its texture, in the interacting of codes, formulae of signifiers" (Burke 155; Barthes, "Theory of the Text" 39). Interpretation is infinite, deferred along the stocking-like chains of quotation and reference. Still, the construction and order of the quotations is important, and when studying Levi I will examine what impressions, whether intentional or not, his overt use of reference achieves, and why he might wish to manipulate references in this way.

This conception of writing as pattern and manipulation also has interesting implications for the construction of the writer's own identity through the play of language. With the "death" of the traditional idea of the author, the text has a new role in the construction of what Barthes terms the "modern scriptor" (IMT 145). Indeed, "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text" and this is an important when discussing Levi's possible motives in using overt references to other texts to explain his experience in the concentration camp (*ibid*). By arranging explicit citations in a specific manner, Levi manipulates the construction of his own identity as scriptor. Just as the text is a "polysemic space where paths of several possible meanings intersect," so too Levi's identity, as constructed in the text, is not definitive or fixed, but emerges as part of the multiplicity generated by intertextuality (Barthes, "Theory of the Text" 37).

However, Levi is not only the "scriptor" of his memoir and his identity is not limited to his role as writer. Instead, in reciting a specific passage from Dante, he is also a reader of texts. It is therefore interesting to consider Barthes' idea of the reader as the "the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" (IMT 148). Although the idea of the reader as able to recognize all the quotations seems to contradict Barthes' previous claim that "the citations that go to make

up a text are anonymous, untraceable,” the concept that the reader is the site where the patterns of citations make sense is an interesting one (IMT 160). If, as Barthes states in his later essay “Theory of the Text,” a text “cannot be reduced to a problem of sources or influence; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located,” then the reader must be the site in which the intertextual itself is read and interpreted, as far as that is possible (39). Stanford-Friedman describes Barthes’ definition of the text as “a performative site of engagement,” but this performativity is only achieved through the action of reading and the reader, who brings his or her own individual fields of reference to the text, is therefore bound to prefer certain avenues of reference above others (149). Levi is just such a reader, and the interpretive decisions he makes in his translation and explanation of Dante not only offer an individual reading of this text and its intertexts, but also allow for a reading of Levi himself by demonstrating which references he recognizes and prioritizes within the specific intertext he has chosen. Levi’s own identity is therefore constructed through his relationship to his intertext, both in the comparisons he explicitly articulates, and those formed by the reader of both texts.

Kristeva develops this idea of the author as both a reader and a writer. Like Barthes, Kristeva uses ideas of interrelation introduced by Bakhtin and modifies them to include a wider field of textuality. She identifies Bakhtin as “the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure,” recognizing that intertextuality is central to Bakhtin’s notion of literary texts (Desire 64-5, Kristeva’s italics). She distinguishes Bakhtin’s “conception of the ‘literary word’” as “an intersection of textual surfaces rather

than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of writer, addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context” (Desire 65). This distinction emphasizes Bakhtin’s idea of the “interaction” between linguistic units generating meaning, as well as the concept of the dialogic utterance. However, Clayton and Rothstein observe that Kristeva “transforms Bakhtin’s concepts by causing them to be read in conjunction with ideas about textuality,” and in doing so she shifts from Bakhtin’s focal point of the individual, essentially human utterance, to a broader, more abstract view of a textual web of enunciation (18). Kristeva redefines Bakhtin’s notion of history and society (in which he “situates the text”) as themselves “texts read by the writer,” identifying the contextual influence on the utterance as having an essentially textual nature itself (Desire 65).

Ironically, in attempting to develop and explain intertextuality, Kristeva also offers an example of how such intertextuality echoes, but slightly alters the text it references. The replacement of Bakhtin’s idea of the utterance with Kristeva’s idea of the text is apparent in her insertion of the word “text” into a quotation taken from Bakhtin: “Each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read” (Desire 66). As Clayton and Rothstein point out, this addition is itself an intertextual act that commandeers another’s text and reforms it (19). In a definition parallel to Bakhtin’s idea of the utterance, Kristeva distinguishes between “discourse” and “semiotic practices,” whereby “semiotic practices” are “translinguistic” and “operate through and across discourse” (Desire 36). Like Bakhtin’s utterance, these semiotic practices are sites in which various discourses “intersect” (“Discourse on the Novel” 34). Kristeva subsequently defines a text as “a translinguistic apparatus” in

which such semiotic practices are arranged, and a text therefore exists as a composition of linguistic units that reference “different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances” (Desire 36). Kristeva further defines these semiotic practices as “operations” that are not passive, but actively involved in the referencing process that constitutes a text (Desire 37). Again, like Bakhtin, Kristeva identifies this referencing as occurring both backward toward a past socio-historical context or preexistent text, and also forward towards the reader: “the word in the text belongs to both the writing subject and addressee” (Desire 66). She goes on to suggest that, because this continual activity of referencing is intrinsic to any “translinguistic apparatus,” and therefore also to any text, a text is “a *productivity*” (Desire 37). The text is not a static, concrete entity, but is continually produced and re-formed in an active process of referencing and reinterpretation.

As part of this productive process, a text is always incorporating other texts into its own “space,” and referencing others exterior to that space. Any text, according to Kristeva, “is a mosaic of quotations...the absorption and transformation of another [text]” (Desire 66). In claiming that “the term *inter-textuality* designates this transposition of one (or several) system(s) of signs into another,” Kristeva specifies the idea of the absorption of one text into another as integral to the definition of intertextuality (Revolution 59-60). Any text is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and naturalize one another” (Desire 37). However, as Allen notes, it is important to recognize that a text, although a “mosaic of quotations,” does not maintain the autonomy of those quotations: “[. . .] texts do not just utilize previous textual units but [. . .] they transform them by giving them what Kristeva terms new thetic positions” (53). A quotation introduced into

a pattern of other quotations is subtly altered by the precedence given to certain intertextual connections over others. Kristeva develops this idea by identifying the specific intersection of “a given textual arrangement (a semiotic practice) with the utterances that it either assimilates into its own space or to which it refers” as what she terms the “ideologeme” (Desire 37). This ideologeme helps to locate and identify specific sites of intersection, employed as an “intertextual function,” which furnishes the text with “historical and social coordinates” (ibid). Like Barthes, Kristeva conceives the text as a pattern of references that can be mapped, although such a map is “not an interpretive step coming after analysis” and cannot lead to definitive meaning but only to more references (Desire 36-7). By emphasizing that “linguistic units...will serve only as springboards in establishing different *kinds of novelistic utterances as functions*,” Kristeva echoes Barthes’ idea that literary criticism should not involve the search for definitive meaning but should instead establish “semantic sequences” and then discover “the logical practice organizing them” (Desire 37, Kristeva’s italics). Kristeva turns to intertextuality to study the patterns of citation and intersection within a text, rather than to trace its source or origin.

By including “social and historical coordinates” in her definition of a text, Kristeva defines society and history themselves as textual:

The concept of text as ideologeme determines the very procedure of semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history. (ibid)

For Kristeva, the social and historical contexts which inform Bakhtin's utterances are themselves textual, providing the concept of the ideologeme with a wider significance in that it no longer identifies only the intersection of written texts but also includes social and historical discourses within this network of references. The literary text is therefore also "social" rather than simply literary; "the text is not an individual, isolated object, but, rather, a compilation of cultural textuality" (Allen 36). This idea is important not only because social and historical references inform written texts but also because this process can be reversed and social and historical contexts are informed by written textual references. Indeed, for Kristeva, "history and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts" (Desire 65). This is significant when studying Levi, whose citation of Dante is not only affected by his socio-historical surroundings but can also be seen as an attempt to re-define those surroundings. This concept is also relevant to the wider concerns involved in representing the Holocaust itself, in which recent critical study has identified the Holocaust itself as a conceptual entity, and therefore part of Kristeva's idea of the "ideologeme."⁶

Bound up within this double-edged referencing is the identity of the writer. Kristeva argues that, by writing, the writer constructs his own identity. Using La Sale as an example, she claims "Antoine de La Sale's narrative confirms the narrative of his own writing: La Sale speaks but also, writing, enunciates *himself*" (Desire 42, Kristeva's italics). However, this enunciation is duplicitous.⁷ Although Kristeva herself "does not emphasize the role of the reader," Barthes demonstrates that the reader has a significant

⁶ See those such as Lentin, Kaes, Jay and Young (At Memory's Edge), among others, for discussions on the Holocaust as a "post-facto conceptual entity" (Jay 103).

⁷ By "duplicitous" I mean that the ability to write identity is both double-edged and misleading. Although intertextuality allows a writer to create an identity, the process of intertextuality also exposes that creation to interpretation by the reader that is beyond the control of the writer.

effect on the interpretation of any one text (Clayton and Rothstein 21). The nature of intertextuality and the significant role played by the reader in determining and prioritizing certain references over others results in a construction of identity that is not under the control of the writer himself. Kristeva also emphasizes this duplicity, claiming “the writer is thus the subject of narration transformed by his having included himself within the narrative system” (Desire 74). Hawthorne reiterates her point by claiming that the “timebound *act* of making a statement” is altered as soon as it enters a linguistic, textual field and becomes the “*verbal result* of that act, a result which escapes from the moment of time and from the possession of the person responsible for the act” (57, Hawthorne’s italics). The writer does not completely “die,” as Barthes suggests, but is instead involved in a construction of identity that is not entirely his own. Similarly, Allen observes that Kristeva stresses “the manner in which the speaking subject itself forms part of the transpositional practice” (54). The writer is subject to the capriciousness of his own medium and therefore to intertextuality itself.

Kristeva further complicates this idea of identity by also recognizing the writer as a reader. If, as she has argued, social and historical spaces are textual, then they can be “seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them” (Desire 65). The writer acts both as an interpreter of texts (both socio-historical and written), and as a reformer of those texts:

The writer’s interlocutor, then, is the writer himself, but as reader of another text. The one who writes is the same one who reads. Since his

interlocutor is a text, he himself is no more than a text rereading itself as it rewrites itself. (Desire 86-7)

She posits the writer/reader as a linguistic unit operating within a field of intertextual relations, re-emphasizing that the writer is open to interpretation by the reader, for, having been defined as part of the pattern of utterances that constitute a text, the writer is involved in the production of the "word in the text," which in turn "belongs to both the writing subject and addressee" (Desire 66). The reader, to whom he addresses himself, informs the writer's identity. Levi's identity, then, is not only informed by his reference to texts preexisting his own but is also constructed by the reader's understanding and knowledge of those texts, as well as other intertextual interactions that the reader brings that were not intended by Levi himself.

The complicated concept of intertextuality offers a variety of useful methods of interpreting and investigating Levi's text. By locating the points of intersection within Levi's writing, and the pattern of references that are constructed, I will examine different aspects of Levi's writing. I will use the concepts discussed in this chapter to consider how Levi attempts to redefine the socio-historic definition of the concentration camp by emphasizing the alternative socio-historic discourse associated with Dante. In doing so, I will also consider how such referencing affects Levi's identity as narrator, and whether Levi is aware of such influence and therefore able to manipulate the process of intertextuality to his advantage. I will then conclude by using my investigation of intertextuality in Levi to inform a more general discussion of the problems involved in representing the Holocaust and the debates that already exist concerning this issue.

Chapter 2

“Here I stop and try to translate”: Levi and “The Canto of Ulysses”

Levi's use of Dante is an example of what Barthes means when he states that writing is to “mix writings, to counter the ones with others” (IMT 147). In this chapter I will discuss how intertextuality and the opposing readings it invites allow Levi to express the complexity involved in his experience of the Lager, without reducing and therefore diminishing that experience. Levi exploits the complex web of reference involved in any text, both as a narrative tool used to build layers of understanding and as means to illustrate that such understanding is neither uncomplicated nor undemanding for both writer and reader.

Levi's If This is a Man uses Dante as an explicit referent, although not a simple one. Gunzberg argues that Dante's Inferno provides “a conceptual grid through which to examine and make sense of the details of the incomprehensible world into which he had been so cruelly cast,” defining Levi's use of Dante as a method of explaining the confounding nature of the Lager (“Down among the Dead Men” 27). However, as both Truglio and Egan have observed, the inclusion of Dante in Levi's testimony “functions in a somewhat more complex manner” than Gunzberg suggests (Truglio 147).⁸ Gunzberg's idea of a “conceptual grid” is misleading in its suggestion that Dante somehow provides a key to an irrefutable understanding of Levi's experience. The comparisons between

⁸ In her book A Dante of our Time: Primo Levi in Auschwitz, Sodi also discusses the “substantial commonality of themes and structure” between Dante's Inferno and Levi's If This is a Man (2). However, she tends not to take into account how Levi's use of Dante both elucidates and complicates his own narrative, claiming “Levi's message is often clearest when filtered through Dante” (Ibid). I disagree, and would stress the Inferno is an important intertext for Levi precisely because it allows Levi to complicate his own narrative.

Dante's Hell and the Lager are often multiple and antagonistic, offering opposing interpretations which exist in an unresolved tension. This multiplicity is an example of Kristeva's "ideologeme," and identifies Levi's text as the site at which a number of texts meet and produce a diverse variety of interpretations that exist simultaneously (Desire). The coexistence of divergent readings, produced through intertextual reference, complicates Levi's text and forces the reader to examine both the subject of his writing and the means by which it is communicated. Dante's text is itself destabilized by its inclusion in a context drastically different and new, and our understanding of his Hell changes when refigured within the setting of the Lager. Levi notices this reconfiguration, claiming "I had to come to the Lager to realize" the significance of specific aspects of Dante's verse (ITM 119). In recognizing the effect of the Lager on his understanding of Dante's text, Levi recalls Bakhtin's insistence that the meaning of a linguistic unit or "utterance" depends upon "the here and now, in given circumstances, at a certain moment, under the conditions of the given situation" (Bakhtin/Medvedev 120). Levi's experience in the Lager opens up new referents and avenues of understanding previously unavailable or unnoticed by Levi.

In particular, "The Canto of Ulysses" illustrates Levi's own realization of the intertextual nature of language, and also utilizes this intertextuality as part of the chapter itself. Jagendorf observes that "as we read this passage a number of scenes and texts are superimposed on our imagination," articulating the intertextual nature of this episode which produces a "radically plural" text (Jagendorf 38; Allen 66; see also Barthes, IMT 159). Levi's stuttering recital of Dante provides an "interlacing of codes" that work with and against each other, presenting a multifaceted and continually shifting composite of

readings and illustrating Barthes' concept of a text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash" ("Untying the Text" 39; IMT 143). These equally complementary and antagonistic elements of intertextuality operate at various interpretive levels, and it is a complex, indeed impossible, job to unravel or find an exhaustive interpretation. Levi himself warns the reader "not to go in search of messages," alluding to the possibility that such "messages" are not there to be found (The Mirror Maker 3). However, in order to determine the complexity involved in Levi's use of Dante, I will map out some of the patterns produced by the interaction of the two texts. Before considering broader ideas of the ambitions and consequences involved in Levi's use of Dante in the next chapter, I will focus on the effects of this referencing at a thematic level. This is no easy task as the fabric of each text is intricately interwoven and reaches beyond each individual text. I hope to illustrate that this intertextuality provides a variety of possible readings that work in dialogue with each other, producing a parallel between their own complexity and that of Levi's experience in Auschwitz. I will also discuss how this complexity illustrates the frustrating process of intertextuality and is itself a metaphor for the difficulty involved in representing the Lager.

Dante and Ulysses

The complexity already present in the "Canto of Ulysses" contradicts Patruno's definition of the connection between Dante and Levi as a mere "metaphorical likeness" (12). In reciting a passage from the Inferno involving a number of narrative voices, Levi enters into an already elaborate mesh of quotation and reproduction that produces a more

complicated web of association than that of metaphor. Described by Mazzotta as “play[ing] a pivotal role in the dramatic economy of the whole poem,” the intricacies involved in the “Canto of Ulysses” are difficult to distill comprehensively and concisely (“Ulysses: Persuasion Versus Prophecy” 348). In order to gain a better understanding of the subsequent inclusion of the Canto in Levi’s testimony I will present a brief outline of these intricacies.⁹

Ulysses’ tale is uttered within the context of Dante’s own narrative, and is already entangled within a system of interrelation that draws comparisons between the two protagonists and produces an elaborate commentary on both Ulysses’ and Dante’s accounts of their individual journeys. Although Dante admires Ulysses and identifies with his “burning wish / to know the world,” he also uses Ulysses’ ultimate failure as a foil to his own success (*Inferno* XXVI 97). Ulysses’ apparently inspirational account of his “mad flight” serves as a warning for Dante to be aware of the danger inherent to his own ambition or pride (*Inferno* XXVI 125). Mazzotta observes that “for all his admiration of Ulysses, Dante exposes the limits of Ulysses’ heroic vision” (“Ulysses: Persuasion Versus Prophecy” 349) and in doing so obliquely identifies the significance of his own achievement. Dante’s journey succeeds where Ulysses’ failed, for Ulysses’ ship is wrecked in “churning waters” within sight of Mount Purgatory, while Dante reaches the safety of the shore (*Inferno* XXVI 139).¹⁰ The sight of Mount Purgatory also marks the beginning of Dante’s journey, while for Ulysses it signifies the end and failure

⁹ Much critical literature addresses the details of “The Canto of Ulysses” and I do not want to be diverted by a long discussion of the various details involved in different debates. For more detailed analysis of the role of Ulysses in *The Divine Comedy* see Barolini; Freccero; Mazzotta; Thompson.

¹⁰ This parallel between the two adventurers is emphasized by the comparable descriptions of drowning that each encounters. However, whereas Dante survives the “dangerous waters” of his metaphorical drowning and reaches Mount Purgatory “Just as a swimmer, still panting with breath, / now safe upon the shore” (*Inferno* I 20-24), Ulysses describes how the storm “sent / the bow down deep... / And then the sea was closed again, above us” (*Inferno* xxvi 140).

of his adventure. Dante's description of Ulysses is therefore ironic in that while the character of Dante seems in awe of Ulysses, the poet offers a critique of the hero's adventure. The treatment of Ulysses also exposes the two figures of Dante that exist within the narrative at any one time: Dante as pilgrim experiencing the journey through Hell and Dante as poet relating that journey. The two are separate and often act in contrast to each other to reveal a subtle commentary that further complicates a reading of the Dantean epic within Levi's own text.¹¹

Dante not only uses the figure of Ulysses as a convenient foil to himself but, in doing so, he challenges an established myth and asserts his own authority as poet. These claims are articulated through the intertextual comparison of Dante's journey with the familiar myth of Ulysses' adventure, for as Thompson observes, "Dante has invented the entire account of Ulysses [. . .] not to fill in gaps in the story...but in direct opposition to a perfectly clear tradition" (39). Dante radically changes the story of Ulysses as presented by Virgil, and (through various intermediaries) Homer.¹² Rather than have Ulysses return to Ithaca, Dante describes Ulysses' death and subsequent condemnation to Hell. Ulysses is not the cunning and successful warrior portrayed in Homer's epic; but Dante instead depicts him as a victim of his own vanity and a shameless exaggerator who does not understand the reason for his fall (Mazzotta 348-49). Dante includes Ulysses' tale for his own purposes and to inform his own narrative. Dante himself is manipulating intertextuality to his own ends, and that Levi's use of this passage is therefore a further

¹¹ In this case, the poet's comparison of the pilgrim and Ulysses succeeds in emphasizing the pilgrim's superiority, while maintaining the pilgrim's humility (and therefore not succumbing to the same flaws as Ulysses) by separating the protagonist's voice from that of the poet. The pilgrim appears referential, while the subtlety of the poem confirms his power.

¹² Both Thompson and Freccero discuss the distinct possibility that, although Dante probably did not know Homer's original text, he did have access to close reproductions and retellings of the *Odyssey* (Thompson 39; Freccero 15-18). This is itself an instance of intertextual reference and the refraction of knowledge or understanding through various textual or linguistic sources.

complication in an already intricate narrative structure; any parallels between Levi's account and Ulysses' tale include the distorting lens of Dante's narration and necessarily complicate the reading of both texts.

Levi and Ulysses

By introducing the episode as "The Canto of Ulysses," rather than directly referring to Dante, Levi initially emphasizes the figure of Ulysses rather than that of the poet, prompting an early comparison between Levi and the mythical hero rather than Dante (ITM 118). Jagendorf observes that Levi "is speaking, not reading" and therefore Levi is literally "the voice of Ulysses" and both his own and Ulysses' tale conflate in one voice (37). The thematic parallels between the two are instigated and emphasized by the aural effect of Levi's narration, for although it is Dante's voice that provides a brief introduction, it is Ulysses' speech that is given precedence throughout the recital. Levi's experience of the Lager can be compared to and read within the framework of Ulysses' account of his own journey.

In presenting Ulysses and inviting comparison to himself, Levi reconfigures his own experience of the Lager as a journey that explores "uncharted distances" (ITM 118). Although Ulysses' journey corresponds to several different journey schemas existing within Levi's testimony, both Ulysses and Levi ultimately end up in Hell, whether it is Dante's literary Inferno or the modern Hell of the Lager. Ulysses' voyage compares to Levi's deportation to Auschwitz, whereby the Lager is associated with the Hell which proves to be Ulysses' final destination just as it is that of the deportees. In this

comparison the gates that frame the entrance to the first *Bolgia*, and their cautionary inscription “Abandon every hope all ye who enter,” are echoed and parodied by those standing over the entrance to Auschwitz proclaiming “*Arbeit Macht Frei*” (“work gives freedom”) (*Inferno* III 9; *ITM* 28). Alternatively the experience of the Lager itself can be associated with the adventures of Ulysses. In an interview with Ian Thomson, Levi refers to his experience of the Lager as “an adventure in the sense that my experience was a sort of rite of passage,” mirroring that of Ulysses in that Levi gains the “experience / of all man’s vices” that Ulysses craves (Levi 37; *Inferno*, xxvi 98). In a more immediate comparison, Ulysses’ journey resonates in Levi’s trek to fetch the daily soup, occurring as it does simultaneously with the recollection of Ulysses adventures.

This particular comparison, noted by both Gunzberg and Jagendorf, is perhaps the most revealing in that Levi’s and Pikolo’s journey to collect soup takes on new metaphorical connotations when compared to Ulysses’ adventure. The recital of the Ulysses story “marks the pace of the prisoners’ walk from the pit to the kitchen,” so that the events recounted and the recital itself are allied in an intricate correspondence between physical, linguistic, and philosophical aspects of each journey (Jagendorf 35). These are further emphasized and echoed in the textual construction of the chapter in which they are remembered. Levi’s written narrative ends at the same point as both Ulysses’ story and his own recital of that story, and three narratives therefore end at the same time. The structural correspondence between the journeys of Ulysses and Levi encourages a thematic comparison of the two. However, this correspondence rarely produces a definitive parallel, but instead tends to expose each journey to contradictory comparisons that exist in dialogue with each other. One means of connecting these

interlocking concepts presents Ulysses' narrative as a positive, even inspirational, example for Levi that reacts against the demeaning and destructive bent of the Lager; whereas an alternative understanding of the interrelationship between the two produces a confirmation of the futility of Levi's position, and the inevitability of death. I will try to demonstrate how these possible readings are produced, often simultaneously with each other, and how this multiplicity functions to convey the irreducible complexity of the Lager and Levi's existence within it.

The temporary freedom from work provided by the journey to the soup queue, prolonged by Pikolo's "cleverly" chosen path, mirrors the sense of freedom sought, and briefly gained, by Ulysses and his crew (ITM 117). Levi's attempt to teach Pikolo the Dantean passage also reflects Ulysses' "burning wish / to know the world" and the sense of excitement that such an attempt entails (Inferno xxvi 97). These aspects of freedom and exploration associated with both journeys are equally short-lived. Just as Ulysses describes how "over our heads the hollow seas closed up," ending his journey in the literal drowning of his crew, so too Levi and Pikolo are re-immersed in the "ragged 'crowd of soup carriers'" at the end of their walk (ITM 121). Already we encounter a double reading; the "hollow sea" that "close[s] up" over Levi is at once the physical sea of people and the metaphorical immersion into the despair and drudgery caused by the relentless routine of the camp.

In constructing a comparison with Ulysses, Levi equates himself with the heroic status of the mythic figure, redefining himself as an adventurer and a hero. Ulysses' initial success in venturing beyond "the narrow neck / where Hercules put up his signal pillars / to warn me not to go beyond that point" appears to be an act of defiance and

bravery that challenges the statutes of the gods (Inferno, xxvi 107). Likewise Levi, in surviving the lethal environment of the Lager, can be regarded as one who has thwarted the intentions of a force that is almost omnipotent in its effects on over the prisoners. However, this is where reading Levi's use of Ulysses as a purely positive allegory becomes complicated, for the correlation between Ulysses' and Levi's heroism is misleading; Levi also offers a stark contrast to the mythical figure. Despite claiming "I and my mates were old and tired" at the outset of his voyage, Ulysses describes his last adventure as still driven by a "burning wish" that is essentially youthful and vital (Inferno, xxvi 97-106). Levi, in contrast, has been aged by his experience in the Lager and resembles Ulysses more in his physical frailty and weariness than in the thirst for adventure. Ironically the association between age and vitality is reversed in the Lager, where Levi, despite being in his early twenties, recognizes himself and others as having aged dramatically: describing Resnyk the Pole, Levi observes "he is thirty, but like all of us, could be taken for seventeen or fifty" (ITM 71). Age in the Lager is meaningless in the face of physical and psychological hardships that reduce all the prisoners to "dead leaves" (ITM 57). Such a comparison presents Levi not as Ulysses' counterpart but as his ironic opposite, providing an example of the extent to which life in the Lager debilitates the prisoners.

Despite this discrepancy, Levi himself directly links the experience of the two "adventurers." Describing the "stronger and more audacious" connotations behind the line "...So on the open sea I set forth," Levi explains that boundaries are being transcended: "it is a chain that has broken, it is throwing oneself on the other side of a barrier" (ITM 119). This sense of transgression appeals to Levi, who claims "we know

the impulse well" (Ibid.). Yet even this apparently direct affiliation is ambiguous for it is unclear what this "impulse" refers to in the camp. Levi describes how, during their deportation to Auschwitz, "we felt ourselves by now 'on the other side,'" having broken contact with "the outside world" (ITM 24). Does this description of "set[ting] forth" refer to the sense of transgression caused by the forced break with past identity, home, or family? Or does it refer to a more severe disconnection from a sense of humanity, as implied by the rhetorical question in the title of Levi's memoir? Or does the impulse refer to a shared desire to break free of the imposed confines set by the Lager? Levi seems to emphasize this latter wish for freedom in his subsequent description of the "open sea," identifying an empathy with Ulysses' restless need to travel and escape the real or perceived confines of his present situation.

However, once again the correlation between the two figures begins to fracture when it becomes clear that the freedom sought for, and to a degree achieved, by Ulysses is "ferociously far away" for Levi (ITM 119). Levi's identification of an "impulse" that is common to himself and Ulysses marks both a point of correspondence between the two, and a point of incongruity. The ability to "set forth" is, for Levi, limited to an impulse and impossible to realize, while for Ulysses that impulse generates his last adventure. Even the fatal consequences of this adventure are heroic in that Ulysses dies in his attempt to reach Mount Purgatory, dying as a man in an act of defiance and free will. For Levi, the regime of the Lager has stripped away the ability to choose death; the impulse cannot generate an action and therefore ultimately contrasts with that of Ulysses.

This concept of free will is central to the importance of the passage within Levi's memoir. The choice of Ulysses focuses on the mythic hero's rallying speech designed to

spur his reluctant men into action and adventure. Recalled in the context of the Lager, this speech takes on new import, and Levi is not just remembering a forgotten verse but also reconfiguring that verse and applying it to this new environment. Levi uses Ulysses' speech as a medium through which he can make an active appeal directed at those who share his present situation;

Think of our breed; for brutish ignorance

Your mettle was not made; you were made men,

To follow knowledge and excellence. (ITM 119)

In the act of appropriating Ulysses' voice by reciting his tale, Levi redirects and refigures the implications of the speech. Ulysses' speech is realigned and applied to the prisoners, and acts as a rallying call, appealing to them to defy the oppressions of the Lager and reclaim their places as men who are free to act on their own will.

This redirection lends new significance to the words of the speech, in which the comparison between men and beasts is not just a powerful rhetorical device but carries particular resonance for those reduced to "*Häftlinge*." The goal of the Lager is precisely this "demolition of man" whereby each individual is reduced to an object, and every effort is made to strip the prisoners of their human identity (ITM 32). Even the tattooed identification number replaces the human name with little more than a cattle brand, transforming the prisoners to "cheap merchandize" or "*stücke*" ("pieces") in the Lager jargon (ITM 22-3). This observation is expressed elsewhere in Levi's memoir, and proves to be a motivating force of survival: "precisely because the Lager was a great

machine to reduce us to beasts,” he writes “we must not become beasts” (ITM 47). Now, in the context of the Lager, Levi gains a new understanding of Ulysses’ meaning, claiming that it is “as if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God” (ITM 119). Connecting Ulysses’ speech to his own situation, Levi at once acknowledges that they have been reduced to beasts and simultaneously calls for resistance to such a reduction:

We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last – the power to refuse our consent. (ITM 47)

That death is inevitable for both the prisoners and Ulysses’ men is irrelevant. What is important is the act of defiance that precedes that death. For Ulysses, defiance lies in the adventure itself, while for Levi it is a more finite, but equally brave act of retaining even a small aspect of free will. This fragment of Ulysses’ speech therefore “has to do with all men who toil, and us in particular” (ITM 120).

However, even this apparently direct connection is ambiguous; who are the “us” to which Levi refers? Is it the *Häftlinge* in general, or Levi and Pikolo specifically? If it applies in a more general sense to the *Häftlinge*, then the speech ultimately results in disappointment. Although Ulysses’ persuasive rhetoric succeeds in convincing his men to follow him beyond the boundaries of the known world, Levi’s repetition of the speech does not inspire the same effect. The speech does not result in any heroic act, nor does it

inspire others to rebel against the effects of the Lager. Nor does the speech apply to Ulysses' men who have not yet reached Hell, but to the *Häftlinge* already trapped within it. Can the speech have the same resonance or produce the same motivational affect if those addressed are already sure that they "will not return" (ITM 61)? The next fragment of the verse that Levi remembers expresses this uncertainty: "My little speech made every one so keen" (ITM 120). The irony here is that "everybody" is only Pikolo, and Levi's stumbling translation means that even he may not have understood the import of the previous lines. Only Pikolo hears the translation of Ulysses' eloquent call to action, and most of the other prisoners are unaware of its existence, let alone its significance. Nor, ultimately, does the "little speech" result in any sort of action and both Levi and Pikolo are soon swallowed up by the "grotesque and sarcastic manner" of the Lager (ITM 34). Levi reenters the routine of the Lager as he joins the soup queue, effectively accepting the system of the Lager, and with it the verb that describes how the prisoners eat, "*fressen*," which significantly is "the way of eating of animals" (ITM 82). The comparison to Ulysses collapses when applied to the Lager in a more general sense.

However, if the "us" refers exclusively to Levi and Pikolo, then Ulysses' speech acquires new connotations. Levi applies to himself Ulysses' assertion that only through the search for "knowledge and excellence" can his crew's potential as men be fulfilled. Rebellion against "brutish ignorance" is achieved by the very act of reciting the verse in which the speech is framed. As Jagendorf observes, "what in the epic is an incitement to action, catastrophic in its outcome, becomes in Primo's quotation an incitement to thought which can effectively combat the visible signs of enslavement" (39). Levi makes this connection explicit by claiming "it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these

things with the poles for soup on our shoulders” (ITM 120). Whereas Ulysses’ pursuit of “knowledge and excellence” takes the form of his voyage beyond the Pillars of Hercules, Levi’s occurs in his attempt to remember Dante and instruct Pikolo. Levi’s actual journey to the soup queue reiterates this search for “spiritual nourishment” by connecting simultaneous goals of soup and knowledge, reemphasizing the concept of knowledge as essential to the survival of the *Häftlinge* as men.¹³

The apparent escape afforded through the recital is double-edged. Caught up in the rhetoric of Ulysses’ inspirational call to arms, Levi claims “for a moment I forget who I am or where I am” (ITM 119). Such oblivion could describe the effect of recalling Dante, and the concept that doing so provides a temporary mental escape for Levi from the nightmare of the Lager. In *The Mirror Maker* Levi describes the “subtle pleasure one can still experience when one can get his hands on an elegant and rare quotation,” alluding to the possibility of this reading where the pleasure of reciting Dante’s verse provides relief from physical suffering (93). However, this claim also reads as an admission that such a speech has no effect in the Lager. Levi’s initial hope that Ulysses’ rhetoric will inspire rebellion can only be entertained when he “forget[s] who I am and where I am.” Remembering these crucial factors extinguishes that hope.

What appears to be an attempt to awaken hope and action is negated in the very next chapter of Levi’s memoir as he asserts:

¹³ See Biasin’s chapter on Levi entitled “Our Daily Bread – Pane – Brot – Broid – Cheleb – Pain – Lechem – Kenyér: Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*” in his book *The Flavors of Modernity*.

[...] experience had shown us many times the vanity of every conjecture:
 why worry oneself trying to read the future when no action, no word of
 ours could have the minimum influence? (ITM 122)

When considered within the context of Levi's other comments on the futility of life in the Lager, the ostensibly motivating call to "follow after knowledge and excellence" perversely emphasizes the inability of the *Häftlinge* to do just that. The three lines of Ulysses' speech epitomize the ambiguities initiated and compounded by the intertextual relationship between Dante's verse and Levi's memoir. Ulysses' speech can be interpreted as a call for rebellion that ultimately fails, resulting in the emphasis of the futility of the prisoners' existence; or it can serve as an example that such resistance is possible and the Lager's intention to reduce its inmates to little more than "*stücke*" is ultimately unsuccessful. Yet it is the presence of both these interpretations that is important, rather than the domination of one over the other. Working through an intertextual web of contrast and comparison, these two readings allude to the complexity of the experience of the Lager itself.

There is a further twist in the comparison of Levi and Ulysses as metaphorical or mythical heroes. Ulysses presents himself as a hero in a narrative that is biased. In contrasting the eager promotion of his own actions with their actual success and the final outcome of the adventure, it becomes clear that Ulysses does not understand, or perhaps conceals, the nature of his own actions. What is interesting, however, is that in describing "the foolhardy journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules," Levi recognizes this contradiction (ITM 119). This raises the question as to which Ulysses Levi is aligning

himself with: the heroic and inspirational individual, or the “foolhardy” and ill-fated figure who does not recognize his own failings. Having defined Ulysses’ journey as “foolhardy,” Levi introduces the idea that it was doomed to fail from the beginning and is therefore reckless rather than daring. Ulysses’ narrative describes an inevitable and therefore unavoidable death, as well as his ultimate subjection to punishment and pain in an eternal Hell. Ulysses is no longer inspirational but, instead, provides a potent reminder of the fate of those condemned to the Hell of the Lager. In comparing himself to Ulysses, Levi is in a sense predicting his own death, although Levi’s Hell exists before death, and therefore is a perversion of Ulysses’ fate.

Although I have argued earlier that Ulysses’ heroism, and therefore his appeal to Levi, lies in the act of defiance rather than the success of his adventure, the penultimate fragment of Ulysses’ speech recalled by Levi refutes this interpretation:

And three times round she went in roaring smother

With all the waters; at the forth poop

Rose, and the prow went down, as pleased Another. (ITM 120)

As Levi immediately tries to explain, it is the “as pleased Another” that is important here. Even considering the ambiguity of this line purely in the context of Dante’s poem produces a number of conflicting possibilities. Ulysses appears to be shifting the blame of the tragedy from himself onto “Another,” and in doing so contradicts his earlier suggestion that he is successfully defying the gods by venturing beyond the boundaries declared by Hercules. This reading provides an interesting twist to the idea that Ulysses’

act of free will is heroic, as ultimately another's will destroys him. The allusion to divine condemnation also acts as an oblique means for Dante to promote himself as one chosen by "Another" to succeed where Ulysses failed. The context of the Lager compounds the ambiguity of this line yet further. Levi may be drawing attention to the line in order to connect his fate to that of Ulysses and suggest that he too is condemned "as pleased Another." However, this reading jars with Levi's passionate rejection, evident throughout his writings, of any attempt to justify the phenomenon of the concentration and extermination camps as somehow part of a divine plan.¹⁴ "Another" therefore becomes a reference to the malevolent force of the Lager itself, so often described by Levi as exacting its own "new order," which is all the more horrific precisely because it is conceived and carried out by men and not a divine entity. Levi's contrast with Ulysses' concept of "Another" as part of a mythic, revengeful power exposes the horrific implications of a destructive power operated by mere humans.

By exposing the hypocrisy of Ulysses "heroic" tale, Levi produces a narrative documenting the futility of existence in the Lager that contrasts with the earlier reading of both Ulysses and Levi as defiant. Indeed, elsewhere in his testimony Levi asserts "I already know the Lager well enough to realize that one should never anticipate, especially optimistically," and the concept of futility has already been introduced (ITM 113). The term "*Morgen früh*," "tomorrow morning," which means "never" in Lager slang further emphasizes this, pointedly illustrating the absurdity of imagining even an immediate future in the world of the Lager (ITM 139). The desperate sense of limited

¹⁴ Levi's later scathing condemnation of Kuhn, as noted by various critics, is an example of the horror he feels at any thought that the massacre of so many could be explained in religious terms. In an interview with Anna Bravo and Frederico Cereja, Levi reiterates this horror; "My impression then and now is that no religious credo could possibly justify the killing of children and the like. An adult can be consciously or unconsciously guilty – anyone who has lived has also sinned in some way – but not a child" (228).

time is reiterated at the end of Levi's recital of Dante as he describes the urgency involved in trying to make Pikolo understand the significance of the passage he has just recalled: "[. . .] it is vitally necessary and urgent that he understand...before it is too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again" (ITM 121). Yet even this need to make Pikolo understand is contradictory and alien in the Lager where "everyone is desperately and ferociously alone" in their "struggle to survive" (ITM 94). Levi's effort to convey Dante's verse can be regarded as an attempt to deny the destructive impact of the Lager and act as a bridge between Levi and Pikolo. Levi seems to be attempting to include Pikolo in his journey and replicate the sense of loyalty and brotherhood represented by "that small band of comrades that had never left [Ulysses]" (ITM 119). This episode therefore epitomizes the difficulty involved in unraveling the concept of defiance from the pervading sense of futility. Acts that are both defiant and futile exist as one action, adding to, rather than clarifying, Levi's representation of the confusion involved in life in the Lager.

The resonance caused by this interweaving of narratives is confusing, but crucial, in that repetition emphasizes the idea of journeying, but such repetition also results in refraction and distortion. The concept of journeying is impossible to avoid, yet also impossible to completely isolate as a stable point of reference and comparison. The process of intertextuality at work in this passage is complex and irreducible, even when considering what at first appears to be a straightforward comparison. The linguistic representations of the Lager continually shift and change as different contexts are considered. Bakhtin's assertion that language has no "neutral forms," but is "shot through with intentions and accents" is illustrated by the instability of Dante's verse in

relation to Levi's text (Bakhtin/Volosinov 86). Allen, commenting on Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theories of language, observes that meaning "belongs to the linguistic interaction of specific individuals or groups with specific social contexts" and the extreme nature of the Lager illustrates the dependence of meaning on environment by providing a context which complicates understanding and produces intricate, antagonistic readings of any one utterance (17). Such intricacy is essential to the understanding of Levi's text.

However, the connections and contrasts between Levi and Ulysses are not limited to the concept of journeying or adventuring. The acts of speaking and narrating also link the two in a comparative association that critiques the notion of storytelling itself. As I have already noted, Levi adopts Ulysses' voice during his recital, connecting himself to the narrative in a physical sense. If we take the Lager as Hell, then Levi mirrors Ulysses in the very act of narration, for both speak from Hell in an attempt to transmit their stories to those who exist beyond its confines. But there is an opposite reading to that of Ulysses as a great and inspirational orator. The original description of Ulysses as trapped within a "wavering flame" that is like a "speaking tongue vibrant to frame / Language" introduces the concept that it is the flame, not Ulysses, speaking (ITM 118). The flame controls Ulysses and his speech and this in turn alludes to the inability of any speaker to control language. The flame is a literal manifestation of Barthes' claim that "it is language that speaks, not the author," emphasizing the understanding of language as intertextual, open to the reader's interpretation and beyond the control of the author (IMT 143). The irony is that Ulysses cannot "frame language"; he relates his tale but ultimately does not seem to understand that what he describes is not his success as an adventurer but his failure and

condemnation. Levi too is struggling to control language as, plagued by a faulty memory, his attempt to repeat Ulysses' narrative produces only disjointed fragments of the original. Even these fragments operate beyond the control of Levi and exist as a linguistic frame for his own testimony that is complicated and always ambiguous. The struggle also alludes to the difficulty of testifying itself and the problematic nature of frankly representing the Holocaust and individual experiences of it.

Yet this awareness of the difficulties inherent in language, and therefore in storytelling and testimony, also provides a point of contrast between Levi and Ulysses. As Mazzotta observes, "Ulysses is blind to the fact that he does not control language, but is, to all intents and purposes, controlled by it," while Levi, in exposing this aspect of Ulysses, demonstrates his own recognition of the controlling influence of language ("Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy." 353). Complicating this comparison is Dante's positing of Ulysses in the eighth Bolgia, which defines Ulysses' sin as that of fraudulent speech (Barlolini, "Dante's Ulysses"). This location gives Ulysses' story yet another dimension, in that it is possibly a willful exaggeration or even manipulation of the truth. Payton observes that, condemned to Hell for fraudulent speech, Ulysses is not "an intrepid explorer who defies fate to gain knowledge and glory," but is redefined as "an impious and devious personality [whose] steadfastness and intelligence are used in the service of his vainglory" (194). I have already pointed to contradictions within Ulysses' speech that result in his misrepresentation of his adventure, yet these have suggested a misunderstanding on the part of Ulysses, rather than a deliberate intention to mislead. What is important in this new intertextual referent, although still only alluded to and by

no means indisputable, is the agency involved in the misrepresentation of Ulysses' adventure.

How does this new means of reading Ulysses' story affect Levi's text within the context of the Lager? Does it somehow result in an accusation that Levi is misrepresenting his experience? Although this is a possibility, Levi's texts exist within a vast literature of the Holocaust which not only support his testimony but do so through a network of intertextuality. However, I think the allusion to Ulysses' fraudulent speech does contribute to Levi's awareness of the nature of language as an imperfect and ultimately uncontrollable means of transmitting any experience. I also think that Ulysses' manipulation of language to pander to his own vanity and promote himself acts as a contrast to Levi's attempt to recount his experience in the Lager. In an interview with Grassano, Levi raises questions about his account that echo Ulysses' motivation to manipulate his story:

[. . .] am I sure [events] all happened and am I obliged to tell them exactly as they were? Couldn't I, for example, change them a little to serve my purpose, or even invent them from scratch? (133).

Levi is aware of the dangers and temptations of writing, and by including Ulysses within that writing he makes this awareness apparent, preempting and counteracting any accusations of misrepresentation directed towards his own testimony. In a different interview Levi reasserts the authenticity of his own account, stressing that "it comes spontaneously and naturally to me to abstain from embellishment, from extras added in

just to make the writing look good,” refuting any comparison between the elaborate rhetoric of Ulysses and his own attempt to translate, as faithfully as possible, the experience of the Lager (interview with De Luca and Olagnero 171). By introducing Ulysses’ fraudulent speech, Levi promotes his own testimony as unembellished and reliable in comparison to which Ulysses’ sin of fraudulent speech operates as a warning against the use of exaggeration, and as a foil to Levi’s own writing style.

It is worth noting that Ulysses’ sin is never explicitly stated, and critics have only been able to argue this point through intra-textual reference within The Divine Comedy. The allusion to Ulysses’ fraudulent speech is therefore only attainable with previous knowledge of The Divine Comedy, and this intertextual reference depends upon readers’ familiarity with Dante’s text, and with Ulysses in particular. Although Levi’s contemporaries graduating from the *liceo* system knew Dante well and Levi, writing in Italian, assumes that his readers will be familiar with Dante, this necessity demonstrates the dependence of each interpretation on an intertextual chain of reference that is individual to the reader. Levi’s text, constructed from “socially located languages” is dependent for interpretation on the reader’s recognition of or familiarity with certain referents (Dentith 95, discussing Bakhtin). Levi’s memoir is therefore “a territory shared by both addresser and addressee” and is reliant upon the relationship between the two (Bakhtin/Volosinov 72). However, the specific result of individual readers’ interpretations is less important than the awareness that these readings are multiple and often antagonistic. In aligning himself with Ulysses, and the complications that this entails, Levi demonstrates the contradictions that amount to the Lager itself.

Levi and Dante

The complexities of existence in the Lager are not merely illustrated in the comparison between Levi and Ulysses but also exposed by the parallels between Dante and Levi. Ulysses' voice appears to take precedence in the Canto and, although he is the actual narrator, Dante is more difficult to identify. The subtlety of Dante's presence in the narrative is further compounded by there being two identifiable "Dante's" within the text; the pilgrim who travels through Hell, and the poet who recalls and relates that experience. At certain points of the narrative the voices of these two diverge and conflict, exposing the critical commentary of Dante the poet. This separation of Dante into two parts immediately poses problems for any comparison to Levi as it is difficult to identify which Dante Levi may be associating himself with, and whether that association is intentional or purely a product of the reader's own intertextual interpretation. The initial parallel between Levi and Dante occurs simply as a result of Levi reciting "Canto XXVI." By appropriating Dante's narration, and therefore his voice, Levi reintroduces the verse into a new context which exposes both to an array of new associations and connotations. Again this demonstrates Bakhtin's and Kristeva's concept that language is dependent on the socio-historical environment in which it is uttered at any one point.

As with Ulysses, the concept of journeying connects Levi and Dante. Both Levi's and Dante's fascination with Ulysses (another shared trait) stems from their association with the mythical hero's adventure. The comparison of Levi's journey with that of Dante must therefore recognize that the understanding of Dante's journey is to some extent attained through its comparison with Ulysses'. I will start by considering the parallels

between the journeys of the pilgrim and the *Häftling* on a more general scale.

Throughout *If This is A Man* Levi explicitly explains the Lager in terms of a Dantean Hell, directly equating his own experience with that of the medieval poet. Gunzberg asserts that "Levi's emotional maturation is not unlike Dante's," as both witness and experience the depths of human behavior ("Down among the Dead Men" 23-4).

However, like the comparison between Levi's and Ulysses' adventure, this comparison also exposes contrasts between the two protagonists and, in doing so, offers a clearer representation of existence in the Lager. Dante's successful navigation through Hell compares with Levi's (at best) unknown future within the Lager, and even though Levi does emerge from his "Hell" he does not do so through the providence of God or because of the careful guidance of Virgil. In comparison, Dante's privileged position as pilgrim accentuates the isolated struggle for survival experienced by Levi and also highlights the pointless violence that drives the Lager. Levi is *not* Dante, and this is evident in his inability to recall the verse, despite beginning "slowly and accurately" (ITM 118). Sayre and Vacca have observed that Levi's "indirection reinforces the fundamental unintelligibility of what happened" and, while I agree, I think Levi's stuttering alludes to a more malevolent consequence of life in the Lager and the active "demolition of man" (127). The Lager imposes its presence on Levi's attempt to recite the classic verse and the jargon of camp life threatens to break the flow of the recital: "[. . .] the light kindles and grows Beneath the moon' or something like it; but before that? [. . .] Not an idea, 'keine Ahnung' as they say here" (ITM 120). Here "the jargon of the camp invades the Dantean text," and the Lager is an active force that erases or obstructs a prisoner's previous claims to art and culture, and therefore also to humanity (Jagendorf 40). In

Levi's attempt to recite Dante, an intertextual reference to the Inferno is blocked and countered by the Lager jargon in a literal manifestation of Barthes' "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash" (IMT 143). Such clashing exposes the contrast, rather than the comparison between Dante and Levi, both in their physical situation in "Hell" and their subsequent attempts to relate that experience.

Despite their differences, both Levi and Dante are fascinated by and emphasize Ulysses' story within their own narratives, indicating each narrator's awareness of his story and its possible reception. The inclusion of Ulysses acts as a warning to both, although the warning is significant to each in different ways. As Mazzotta observes, Dante "fears that he may be reenacting Ulysses' mad quest" and is therefore using Ulysses' story as a foil to, and validation of, his own ("Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy," 349). Alternatively, Levi concentrates on Ulysses as an example of an unreliable and manipulative speaker, using his story as a reminder of the temptation to embellish and exaggerate a narrative. However, the "Canto of Ulysses," as shown by the complications involved in the perception of the figure of Ulysses himself, is more than a good story of heroic deeds and mythical adventure. Dante the poet uses the story as a narrative device that operates to the advantage of his own incredible tale. Although in claiming "Dante anticipates or recalls Ulysses' epic journey as the steady point of reference enabling the pilgrim to define the inner sense of his own quest," Mazzotta identifies Ulysses' story as a foil to Dante's own journey, he glosses over the fact that the comparison also exposes the influence of Dante the poet on the construction of the narrative (Inferno 348). Dante's careful construction of his narrative in turn speaks to Levi's earlier concern with the manipulation of narratives and the temptation to "change

them a little to serve [a] purpose” (Interview with Grassano 133). Yet this relationship between Dante and the story of Ulysses exposes an important difference between Dante and Levi. Although Ulysses provides a point of reference for him, Levi is neither a “pilgrim” nor is he on a “quest.” Instead he is subject to the destitution of the Lager for no apparent purpose of individual or collective advantage. The comparison therefore highlights the senselessness of the Lager as opposed to the divine justice that operates within Dante’s Hell.

This contrast between the awful reality of the Lager and Dante’s attempts to verify the authenticity of his fantastical Hell exposes the parallel between both figures as storytellers and witnesses. In comparing himself to Dante, Levi associates himself with the pilgrim’s journey and act of witnessing the horrific wonders of Hell, as well as the poet’s relation of that journey. Dante uses the subtle difference between his different identities as pilgrim and narrator to generate a complex critique of both the sinners that the pilgrim meets and the pilgrim himself. In turn Levi emphasizes this duality by adopting Dante’s voice as he recites “The Canto of Ulysses,” and, in doing so, also highlights his own position as storyteller and narrator recalling the instance at a later date. This distinction between the writer recalling the event and the actual event is therefore common to both Dante and Levi. However, Dante’s use of his position as narrator to manipulate and critique his own story to achieve specific purposes contrasts with Levi’s apparently involuntary selection of verse caused by his faltering memory and stuttering translation. Yet even Levi exerts some discriminating power as he quickly edits and rejects aspects of the already incomplete verse: “A fragment floats into my mind, not relevant” (ITM 118). Just making this observation illustrates the selective nature of the

knowledge that the reader gains from the remembered event and exposes the difference between Levi as narrator and the Levi involved in the actual event. The influence of Levi as writer is also evident in the publishing history of If This is a Man; the 1947 De Silva publication did not contain the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses," and it was only added in the later edition published by Einaudi in 1958 (Patruno 8). Why add this episode to the revised edition? This is an unanswerable question, but must have something to do with a wish to enhance or develop the testimony in some way. Levi draws a parallel to Dante including the story of Ulysses to portray and expose a complex web of issues that occur within his own story. Both authors use "The Canto of Ulysses" as a touchstone for their individual concerns and the complexities involved in their separate narratives.

The parallel between Dante and Levi, introduced explicitly by the recital of "The Canto of Ulysses," is therefore another example of Levi's representation of the Lager in terms that are complex and often conflicting. By initiating an intertextual network that refuses to establish a single, definitive relationship between Dante and himself, Levi further complicates the intricate reading already introduced in my discussion of Levi and Ulysses. The points of importance are the "ideoloemes" that Kristeva identifies as the instances of intersection and multiplicity between texts which complicate the readers understanding of Levi's memoir and expose the difficulty inherent to representation of any sort. This complication prevents the reduction of the Lager to some stable or definitive classification, and avoids the danger of simplifying, and therefore dismissing, the extent of the atrocity involved in the conception and implementation of the camp system. The figure of Dante, having experienced Hell and narrated that experience, not

only provides a comparison but also allows Levi to emphasize the difficulties involved in relating that experience.

Levi and Hell

The comparison of Levi and Dante leads to the obvious definition of the Lager as a modern reconfiguration of Dante's Hell. Throughout If This is a Man Levi draws explicit parallels to Dante's hell through the references to devils, the "*Borgia*," and the comparison of the gate to Hell and the gate to Auschwitz. As Patruno observes, "the Lager proves to be a modern version of Dante's city of Dis, where most of the rules of the world of 'the living' are ignored," and Levi's description of the camp consciously utilizes this association as a means to allude to his own experience (13). Here, too, is another parallel between Levi and Dante, for both struggle to describe, in terms that are accessible to the reader, scenes that are difficult to imagine or comprehend. Dante himself offers an indication of this paradox when he claims "one cannot describe with human terms that which transcends humanity" (Paradiso, I 70-1). Levi, echoing Dante, observes "our language is human, born to describe things at a human level" and thus when faced with the task of describing the Lager, language "collapses, falls apart, cannot cope" (Interview with Di Caro 173). Like Dante, Levi identifies and struggles with the challenge of conveying the nature of a system dedicated to the "demolition of man," and the suffering that it inflicts.

As I have already mentioned, however, the comparison of the Lager to the Hell of The Divine Comedy is complicated by Dante's concept of "*contrapasso*," the idea that

the punishments inflicted on the sinners are a just reflection of their sins.¹⁵ Compared to the sinners of Dante's Hell, who recognize that their predicament directly correlates with their sin, the *Häftlinge* are subject to a similar, although perversely ironic, condemnation. The difference is that those condemned to the Hell of the Lager are neither aware of their sin nor deserving of their punishment. Even when Levi attempts to obtain a reason for the brutal treatment of the guards, he is simply told "'*Hier ist kein warum*' (there is no why here)" (*ITM* 35). Although Levi stresses that "this is Hell" and parallels the Lager experience with that of Dante's *Inferno*, it is the contrast between the two that is most significant in portraying the perverse logic that operates within the camp. Truglio asserts that "Dante's system...is presented as one predicated upon justice and commensurability: a system of adequation which throws into relief the infinite injustice and self-incommensurability of the Auschwitz experience" (150). The Ulysses episode not only explicitly introduces the idea of *contrapasso* by referencing Dante's Hell, it also complicates it. I have already suggested that part of the appeal of "The Canto of Ulysses" lies in the ambiguity that surrounds Ulysses' specific sin and, rather than attempting to discover and isolate this information, I want to suggest that the very absence of this knowledge results in Levi's close affiliation to this passage. By reciting "The Canto of Ulysses," Levi associates himself with the one instance in *The Divine Comedy* in which the sinner seems unaware of why he is in Hell, echoing and emphasizing Levi's own unjustifiable position in the Lager.

¹⁵ See Mazzotta for a discussion on how the concept of "*contrapasso*" relates to Ulysses ("Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy" 354).

Conclusion

What I have wanted to show through this close analysis of one specific instance of intertextuality in If This is a Man is not only the vast variety of readings made possible through the use of intertextual theory as an investigative tool but, more specifically, how Levi exploits this theory within his own text. Levi produces a weave of references that provide an example of what Kristeva terms “an intersection of textual surfaces” that exist as “a dialogue among several writings” (Desire 65). Although, due to the nature of intertextuality itself, it is unlikely that Levi planned the details involved in the comparison of the two texts (or that I have exhausted the possibilities), he is aware of the complexity involved. Levi uses this complexity, rather than the specifics of the intertextual network, to illustrate the irreducibility of his experience in the Lager. Truglio articulates this point effectively when she claims that “The Divine Comedy does not really familiarize the enormity of the experience [of the Lager], nor even provide a direct contrast, but rather casts echoes which reverberate in the ear of the reader” (148). These “echoes,” initiated and then lost in the network of intertextual references, allow a glimpse of life in the Lager, with all its confusion, violence, and depravity, marking the existence of the event if not actually accessing or reproducing it. Levi’s deliberate confusion of texts and authors make sense of Barthes’ claim that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified,” and therefore avoids the reduction of the Lager to a “final signified” (IMT 147). Levi even uses the writer’s inability to control the specific arrangement of these networks or the final outcome of their interaction to illustrate and emphasize the irreducibility of the Lager. Therefore the

process of intertextuality itself, as well as the actual intertexts, is integral to the overall effect that "The Canto of Ulysses" has on readers and their individual understanding of If This is a Man. The reader's attempt to unravel and understand the various texts and the voices within those texts, as well as the challenge of then deciphering and interpreting their significance, mirrors (although on a lesser scale and without the appalling consequences) the confusion of the Lager itself. Thus Levi illustrates the frustration of being unable to understand or decipher the experiences of the camps at the same time as he appears to describe and explain them.

Chapter 3

“Who knows how or why it comes into my mind”:

Identity, Rebellion, Testimony.

In my previous chapter I explored the intricacies involved in the intertextual relationships between Dante’s Canto XXVI and Levi’s If This is a Man, focusing on the possible interpretations that these relationships encourage. In this chapter I want to broaden this focus and address more general questions of why Levi might choose to use Dante, and what effect his choice has on his ability to construct an identity that revolts against the Lager’s purpose of reducing men to “*Häftlinge*.” I have already touched on some of the issues that are pertinent to these questions in Chapter 2, including the idea of reciting Dante as an act of rebellion, a construction of identity, and a means to address concerns with testimony and representation. I now want to develop and investigate these concerns further, exploring how intertextuality and the ability (or inability) to access certain socio-historical “texts” is integral to each one (Kristeva, Desire 36). I will still use “The Canto of Ulysses” chapter in If This is a Man as a focal point for my discussion.

I want to address the question of why Levi chooses Dante, and the effect that this choice has on his own interwoven concepts of rebellion, identity, and testimony, because the Inferno does not provide a clear means of achieving any of these aims. My comparison between Levi and Ulysses in the previous chapter has already shown that, for Levi, rebellion is a complicated and frustrating issue. Rebellion, no matter how slight, seems to be both integral to the prisoners’ survival, yet also made virtually impossible in the rigorous system of the Lager. Gunzberg, among others, discusses the brutal necessity

of rebellion caused by the severity of the camp rules which, despite the risk of punishment, must be broken in order to survive: “the insufficient rations, the sickness and cold lock the prisoners into [a] pattern of transgression and punishment” (“Dante as Vademecum” 88). Levi notes that within the first week he finds himself adhering to this cycle of transgression, as a means to protect himself and negotiate the daily problems incurred by life in the Lager:

I had already learnt not to let myself be robbed, and in fact if I find a spoon lying around, a piece of string, a button which I can acquire without danger of punishment, I pocket them and consider them mine by full right.
(ITM 43)

These are not acts of rebellion based on an ideological or moral value, but are instead necessities of survival imposed, and even encouraged, by the very system apparently resisted. Levi articulates this paradox when he claims “in this place everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose,” explaining that the Lager simultaneously enforces the rules that encourage transgression, and takes advantage of such transgression for the purpose of efficiency and as a purpose in itself (ITM 35). Levi emphasizes this perversity as he recalls that prisoners must buy or steal bowls and spoons, necessary for the collection and eating of soup. Levi describes how “when the camp at Auschwitz was liberated, in the warehouse we found thousands of brand new transparent plastic spoons besides tens of thousands of spoons...which came from the luggage of deportees as they arrived,” illustrating the

perverse complicity of the Lager itself in the maintenance and encouragement of the cycle of transgression and punishment identified by Gunzberg (DS 114). The Lager depends on this pattern of transgression in order to function not merely on a practical level whereby “theft in Buna is the only and regular way of provisioning [the Lager]” (ITM 89), but also to achieve its “resolution [. . .] to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards” (ITM 57). The Lager achieves its goal of both the psychological and physical degradation and “demolition” of the prisoners’ previous identities as part of civilized humanity by forcing them to adhere to a degenerate system of theft and exploitation.

This forced adherence to an exploitative system affects an important component of potential rebellion: identity. Throughout his memoir, Levi emphasizes the correlation between the ability to survive (and in a sense rebel against) the Lager, and the ability to maintain an identity as “a man.” The tattooed number, with its own connotations and system of identification, replaces individual identity as soon as the prisoners enter the camp. For the “old hands of the camp, the numbers told everything,” and the factors that define a man in the world outside the camp are replaced by a new, uncompromising scheme that objectifies and devalues each individual (ITM 34). The numbers are the new means of gaining important information about an individual: their nationality, the convoy they arrived on, and consequently (and perhaps most importantly) their potential as victims of extortion.

Everyone will treat with respect the numbers from 30,000 to 80,000: there are only a few hundred left and they represented the few survivors of the

Polish ghettos. It is as well to watch out in commercial dealings with a 116,000 or a 117,000. [. . .] As for the high numbers they carry an essentially comic air about them like the words "freshman" or "conscript" in ordinary life. (Ibid)

The dynamics of this numerical form of identification are unique to the Lager and contrast with the systems of identification used in the world "outside." The tattoos not only strip the prisoners of their human identity but replace it with a mathematical system based on the recording of mass destruction which provides a constant reminder of the awful success of the Lager in destroying vast numbers of people, and the prisoners' own place within this design. Unlike the world beyond the Lager where identity is a mark of individuality and life, the tattoos signify a denial of humanity and the inevitability of death.

Yet this system depends on a method of reference not dissimilar to the ideas articulated by Bakhtin and Kristeva. Identity is a textual construct which depends on an intertextual process of referencing prompted by name and nationality (among other things), and affected by social and historical context.¹⁶ The numbers that now identify the prisoners are significant within the specific social and historical context of the Lager. There they reference specific convoys and nationalities, signal gullibility or experience, and generate respect or contempt. This numerical system therefore blocks access to and replaces the system of referents previously available to the prisoners through their names.

¹⁶ I am taking identity as essentially textual in the same sense as Kristeva understands history and society more generally as textual. Dentith notes, in his exploration of Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theories of intertextuality, "we are not subjects so much as sites in which the various interaction and transpositions of the multiple texts of society are effected," suggesting that identity is intertextual and therefore subject to the same influencing factors (context, other texts) as Bakhtin's utterance and Barthes' and Kristeva's text (96).

Levi recognizes the success of this replacement as a fundamental factor in determining an individual's ability to survive:

They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains. (ITM 33)

The Lager succeeds in erasing the prisoners' means of identifying themselves by replacing and controlling the intertextual referents available to them and in doing so reduces them to inhuman objects.

Identity, linked by Levi to the act of rebellion, further complicates the idea of revolt within and against the Lager system. Dante provides Levi with a means to reaccess an intertextual system otherwise denied by the Lager's attempts to reduce the prisoners to *Häftlinge*, and provides Levi with a means to reconstruct his "human" identity. Although not "a guide to survival in Hell," Dante's verse offers Levi some sort of perspective on, if not actual understanding of, his imprisonment (Gunzberg, "Down Among the Dead Men" 26). This foundation, however "imperfect" it may be, allows Levi to "see – or better, to hear anew his situation in the camp," and provides the first vital step to rebuild identity and rebel against the Lager by enabling him to access referents that recontextualize his experience and therefore rephrase it in a new terms of understanding (Frederic Homer 141; Truglio 150).¹⁷ Here Levi even uses terms

¹⁷ I am taking Frederic Homer's discussion on language in general as an "imperfect tool" to include the use of the Inferno as an "imperfect" intertext.

associated with language, either in oral or textual form as he “listens” to the echoes of referents prompted by Dante’s text within the oppressively silent environment of the Lager. Gunzberg redefines the remembered lines from Dante as a last “intangible possession” that cannot be “stolen or shorn or beaten” from Levi (“Down Among the Dead Men” 13). This “possession” is unique because it is the chain of referents available and personal to Levi, not gained through extortion or at the expense of others. Indeed, recalling Dante combats the “normal order of things” in the camp, whereby “the privileged oppress the unprivileged,” providing a complicated mixture of relief from the perversity of the Lager and proof that such perversity is not absolute (ITM 50). Levi’s use of Dante therefore repositions his experience within a new set of intertextual references which furnish that experience with new “historical and social coordinates,” redefining that experience and in a sense reclaiming it as human, as well as providing a means of rebellion in itself (Kristeva, Desire 36).

Dante provides what Kristeva calls “ideologemes” that act as “intertextual functions” and provide intersections of reference within specific texts to other texts (Desire 36). Dante, as a canonical Italian poet, provides a connection to Levi’s life before Auschwitz which Levi articulates when he claims; “[Dante] made it possible for me to re-establish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity” (DS 139).¹⁸ The effect of the Lager is to destroy the connection between the prisoners and their identities before deportation, and in doing so damage their identities as men within the camp itself:

¹⁸ In an interview with Greer, Levi later claims that he is surprised at the literariness of If This is a Man, asserting that “I was a bad student of literature” (Interview with Greer 3). This demonstrates the subtlety of intertextuality, which works with referents surprising even to those involved and emphasizes the pervasiveness of this referencing system.

We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment. (DS 75)

Dante therefore helps Levi to resist the Lager's attempt to sever the prisoners' links to their past lives by reestablishing access to previous systems of references. The contrast between the prisoners' identities in the world outside the Lager and those within it is central to Levi's attempts to reconstruct a human, individual identity and resist the destructive bent of the Lager. As Jagendorf observes, "even his partial success in quoting Ulysses' speech enabled Primo Levi to believe that the Lager had not obliterated all civilized tradition," providing Levi with both proof of the existence of a world outside the camp, and a means to access that world (48). Observing that the "Canto of Ulysses" provides Levi with "both literature and homeland, two concepts that had no place in Auschwitz but which frequently help to form and define human identity," Kelly classifies Levi's use of Dante as essential to the construction of identity, which is itself an act of resistance. As a means to retain a connection to a past embedded within a cultural and physical homeland, Dante offers a foundation for the rebuilding of identity and an act of rebellion against the dehumanizing effect of the Lager.

Levi achieves this reinforcement of identity through the intertextual networks initiated by the recital of "The Canto of Ulysses." Levi establishes a connection to Italy and an Italian sense of identity through what Gunzberg has termed the "commonly shared heritage" accessible through Dante's verse ("Down Among the Dead Men" 14). The link

formed retrieves a sense of identity which is at once individual in the context of the Lager yet also reliant upon a communal sense of history, culture, and nationality. The immediate trigger for this connection is the poetic, medieval Italian language itself. From the beginning of the episode, language is the focal point, even when the original intention of teaching Pikolo is surpassed by the more complex interaction of memory, rebellion, and relief. The contrast to the Lager jargon that pervades camp communication further emphasizes the Italian language. The relatively small number of Italian speakers in the camp forces Levi to adapt to the German, Polish, and Yiddish variants that dominate camp vernacular. Even these are peculiar to the Lager, and the violence of the camp reflects in their mutilation and perverse development. The opportunity to speak Italian, and a poetic, refined Italian at that, provides relief from the “confusion of languages” that are “a fundamental component” of camp life through a network of referents that not only connect Levi to Italy, but also form a contrast to the Lager (ITM 44).

However, this language does not form a simple link to Levi’s previous existence but is complicated by the same cultured sophistication distinguishing it from the harsh slang of the Lager. Dante’s Italian is medieval and restricted to a formal poetic style which is not like the Piedmontese dialect Levi associates with home.¹⁹ Dante provides a connection to Italy, but this connection is steeped in historical and cultural references that are informed and influenced by the definition of Dante as “the most canonical text in Levi’s mother tongue” (Truglio 147). By citing Dante, Levi enters this framework and asserts himself as someone capable of recognizing and navigating a complex aesthetic and imaginative world. Levi, in Kristeva’s terms, is “transformed by his having included himself within the narrative system” of Dante, placing himself as a point at which

¹⁹ See both The Periodic Table and The Mirror Maker for Levi’s discussion on the Piedmontese dialect.

intertextual connections meet and diverge (*Desire* 74).²⁰ The importance of these references lies not in their specific connotations but in their existence within a cultural and intellectual discourse, convincing Levi that “my mind, although besieged by everyday necessities, had not ceased to function,” and providing evidence that the influence of the Lager is not absolute (139). To make Pikolo understand the relevance of “The Canto of Ulysses” is to prove that both Levi and Pikolo are intelligent, civilized human beings who can access a complicated system of referents, rather than *Häftlinge* who must rely on the enforced system of identification numbers and Lager jargon. Such proof directly defies the process that renders the prisoners “hollow” men, “reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint” (*ITM* 33). Moreover, to expend energy on an activity that is not of immediate importance to physical survival is another means to act in defiance of camp regulations which force prisoners to devote all their time to seeking food or avoiding punishment.

Yet Levi’s act of reciting Dante does provide necessary and important nourishment of sorts.²¹ Levi recognizes that “it is doing me good,” and the remembered lines afford a welcome respite. Jagendorf proposes that remembering Dante in the context of such suffering represents “the mind’s resistance to the brutality of the Lager” (46). Indeed, Levi’s ability to recite “The Canto of Ulysses” contrasts with those like “Null Achtzehn,” who is “no longer a man” (*ITM* 48).²² As Egan observes, “the

²⁰ Levi also “include[s] himself” in the narrative of his own testimony, which I will discuss later (Kristeva, *Desire* 74).

²¹ See Biasin’s chapter on Levi entitled “Our Daily Bread – Pane – Brot – Broid – Cheleb – Pain – Lechem – Kenyér: Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*” in his book *The Flavors of Modernity*.

²² Null Achtzehn, “indifferent to the point of not even troubling to avoid tiredness and blows or to search for food” is the epitome of the “hollow men” that are produced by the Lager system (*ITM* 49). In contrast, Levi’s recital of Dante demonstrates that he is not “empty inside” like Null Achtzehn, and is neither indifferent to the immediate, physical necessities of survival, nor unaware of the benefits of maintaining a psychological, intellectual vitality (*ITM* 48).

passionate intellectual engagement that Levi and Pikolo share increases their chances of physical survival by enriching their sense of who they are as men,” underlining the connection between identity and survival (191). Null Achtzen provides an example of the dangers involved in submitting totally to “the struggle of each one against all” and conversely emphasizes the importance of accessing a system of referents that exist beyond the confines of the Lager and maintaining an identity beyond the “last three figures of his entry number” (ITM 48). Levi recognizes this danger in all the *Muselmänner*, “for he who loses all often loses himself” (ITM 33). His observation illustrates the difficulty prisoners face in the Lager where degradation results in the loss of identity and oblivion. By recalling Dante’s verse, Levi simultaneously wards off this temptation to “sink” and begins to define an identity that combats the dehumanizing effect of the tattoo by reestablishing previous “historical and social coordinates” within his own identity (Kristeva, *Desire* 36).²³ The intertextual connections to historical and cultural discourses are therefore both a means of escaping the consuming cycle of survival as well as a means of confirming that such survival is still attainable.

The connection to Italy is not simply linguistic but is also influenced by a network that includes thematic references within Dante’s verse in which specific phrases within “The Canto of Ulysses” form direct links to Levi’s home. Levi’s direct association of Ulysses’ memory of Mount Purgatory with his own memory of Italy focuses Dante’s more general, inherent affiliation to Italy:

²³ I am taking Levi’s identity to be a form of text in a similar manner to Kristeva’s definition of history and society as texts constructed and influenced by their intertextual relationships to other texts (Kristeva, *Desire* 37).

And the mountains when one sees them in the distance...the
 mountains...oh Pikolo, Pikolo, say something, speak, do not let me think
 of my mountains which used to show up against the dusk of evening as I
 returned by train from Milan to Turin. (ITM 120)

This painful memory at once connects Levi to Italy and also articulates the difference between that past identity and the present one, emphasizing the loss of that identity. Just as Dante's verse changes when uttered in the context of the Lager, so too its associations suggest that Levi cannot completely reclaim his past identity. Instead the context of the Lager reconfigures the references to Italy and Levi's life before Auschwitz into a new identity that neither corresponds exactly to his past identity nor accepts that imposed by the camp. Identity, when taken as textual, is therefore subject to the same intertextual and contextual effects identified by Bakhtin in his theory of the utterance as affected differently "in given circumstances, at a certain historical moment, under the conditions of the given social situation" (Bakhtin/Medvedev 120). For Levi, references to Italy, recited in the radically different environment of the Lager, take on new and significant meaning, illustrating how his identity is a textual construct altered by the conditions of the Lager and the recital of Dante within those conditions.

Levi's use of Dante to construct his identity is not restricted to the confines of the Lager, but extends to the construction of Levi's identity as the survivor who remembers and records his experiences. Ariella Lang observes that "precisely through the act of writing Levi reestablishes his identity as a man," and links the threads of rebellion, identity, and testimony together (261). Levi also describes the need to write as a means

of reconstructing his identity: “[. . .] by writing I found peace for a while and felt myself become a man again, a person like everyone else” (PT 151). Writing also provides a “therapy” for Levi; much as the recital of “The Canto of Ulysses” provided relief in the immediacy of the camp, so too “by writing [Levi] felt a strange sense of healing” (Interview with Rudolf 26). The act of testifying is fundamental to the reconstruction of identity outside the Lager, and the reclamation of what the Lager attempted to strip away by maintaining and projecting a highly textual set of references unavailable in or restricted by the Lager. Levi’s testimony is therefore rebellious, despite occurring outside the confines of the Lager itself, as it simultaneously proves that Levi is an articulate, educated man, and defies the Lager’s attempts to surround the horrific events of the Holocaust in silence.

Levi introduces this idea of writing as rebellion through the complex intertextual references established by his use of Dante. The episode in which Levi recites Ulysses speech is a scene where multiple layers of translation take place.²⁴ There is the literal translation from Italian to French for Pikolo’s benefit, the translation from memory into spoken word, and Levi’s attempts to explain the significance of the passage to Pikolo. Beyond this web of translation relating to the immediate scene is a further layering of translation involved in Levi’s subsequent writing of his memoir. The same scene perceived and described after the event and from outside the confines of the Lager now involves a new set of translations: the reconfiguration of Levi’s initially oral recital into a written one and the translation of the experience of the camp into an accessible, coherent narrative. Jagendorf asserts that “what Primo so passionately says to Jean about having to listen and open his mind is rooted in two times and two places; it was said in the camp

²⁴ Truglio also discusses Levi’s recollection of Ulysses as “set in a scene of translation” (148).

by one prisoner to the other; it was written by the survivor burdened by his need to tell” (39). The act of translation spans two time frames and is emphasized by the reference to Dante itself, for the Canto recited by Levi describes Ulysses’ translation of his story and Dante’s subsequent retelling of it. There are therefore two contexts in which Dante’s verse is uttered, each affecting the verse in different ways, and the writer Levi necessarily understands the significance of Dante’s verse differently than the prisoner Levi.²⁵ For the prisoner Levi, Dante provides access to referents otherwise controlled and obstructed by the Lager, while for the writer Levi, Dante provides an intertext that highlights the problems of testimony and representation and challenges the Nazi’s attempt to erase all records of the “Final Solution.”²⁶

Egan identifies this multiplicity as an example of Levi’s refusal to submit to the limitations of language: “[Levi] insists on language as a tool for comprehension, not only by telling his story...but by telling it in terms of multiple dialogue” (171). The polyphony introduced by the intertextual relationship between Levi and Dante combats the incommunicability that Levi expressly dislikes; “I never liked the term *incommunicability*, so fashionable in the 1970s, first of all because it is a linguistic horror, and secondly for more personal reasons” (DS 18).²⁷ Dante’s familiarity to others, existing on a national and international scale that transcends generations, combats this difficulty in communication by providing an intertext that is accessible to a large number of people. As Gunzberg observes, “for a cultured Italian, Christian Hell, at least Dante’s

²⁵ Yet again Bakhtin’s idea of the utterance as influenced by and influencing, social and historical context is demonstrated here.

²⁶ For a clear and comprehensive discussion of the events leading up to and following the Holocaust see Dwork and van Pelt.

²⁷ The idea of incommensurability stems from those such as Wiesel, Lyotard, and Adorno who talk variously about the inconceivability and incommunicability of the Holocaust (although admittedly each has different opinions on whether or not such difficulties can be overcome). See also Chapter 12 in Novick’s The Holocaust in American Life, 267-281.

powerful version of it, is a familiar notion,” and provides Levi with a means to translate the Lager experience into terms that are recognizable by those who have not experienced it (“Down Among the Dead Men” 13-14). Like Levi, Dante also relates an experience that is beyond belief, yet his is a story that has become familiar to many and as such provides a comparison for Levi’s narrative. Levi’s act of translating his experience into a coherent and accessible narrative is echoed by the very text he relies on to achieve this accessibility. The inclusion of Dante, and the multiplicity that comes with it, therefore seems to be a deliberate tactic which Levi employs to resist the apparent impossibility of communicating the horrors of Auschwitz.

Yet this double appeal also exposes the problem of successful communication inherent in translation, or indeed storytelling of any sort. Just as Levi the prisoner “does not *know* that Jean has understood the message,” so Levi the writer cannot guarantee that the reader of his account will recognize the relevance and complexity of the episode (Jagendorf 39). Biasin identifies the difficulty involved in communicating the experience of the Lager itself when he claims that Levi is obliged, as a survivor, to “bring home to all of us, spoiled, secure, and safe readers, the reality of an experience that is intrinsically unthinkable, perhaps unspeakable: the destruction of millions of human beings” (132-33). The Lager’s active attempt to prevent witnesses surviving, and survivors’ own unwillingness to remember the horrors of their experience make this task more complex. The fear that “if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen they will not understand” introduced and encouraged by the Lager also applies to the outside world, and articulates an anxiety that the ordeal of remembering and communicating will be wasted on those who cannot or will not understand (ITM 22). Yet however Dante

complicates Levi's testimony, the Inferno as an intertext facilitates the actual telling of and communicability of his testimony. Dante is therefore the medium through which Levi achieves another form of rebellion: that of bearing witness to an event hidden from public view. In The Drowned and the Saved Levi describes the death marches as a means to ensure silence and maintain the "secret of the Lagers": "it did not matter that [the prisoners] might die along the way; what really mattered was that they should not tell their story" (14). Jagendorf alludes to this aspect of testimony as rebellion when he specifies the Canto of Ulysses as "an episode which juxtaposes the storykilling reality of the camp's regime of labor and death with the sense-making fiction of Dante's imagination" (50). Again the dual time frame emerges, and the action of story telling is rebellious both in the immediacy of the camp as Levi recalls Dante's verse, and as a form of delayed or deferred resistance as the story of the camp is itself communicated in the act of writing. Egan considers this concept of writing, citing the multiplicity predominantly introduced through the intertext of the Inferno, as a means to combat "the monologism of the Lager," and therefore to rebel against a dogma that denies multiple viewpoints and wishes to destroy alternative ideologies (171). Levi himself recognizes that "testimony was an act of war against fascism," equating his own attempt to communicate the horrors of the Lager with an act of rebellion (DS 18).²⁸

The ambiguity introduced with the references to Dante, not the poet's familiarity, challenges the notion of the incomprehensibility of the Lager itself but also reveals the

²⁸ Intertextuality is thus also associated with, and in part defined by, the morality to which it is aligned. Kelson claims that "[Levi's] homeland which serves as his cultural centre affords him an idea of the humane that seeks to sustain not negate mankind" (387-88). Dante, as the means through which Levi accesses and establishes his homeland is therefore also a reference to this "idea of the humane," with the medieval verse representing an ideology which contrasts with that imposed by the Lager. Gunzberg reiterates this concept, claiming that Dante offers Levi a means to "safeguard his cultural memory and through it his humanity" ("Down Among the Dead Men" 27).

difficulties involved in trying to describe it. The complex issues of writing already involved in the Inferno provide Levi with a means to expose the problems inherent in writing and testifying, as well as a means to circumvent such problems in his own writing. As Sayre and Vacca observe, by using Dante's Inferno as an intertext, Levi "resist[s] the temptation to try to make sense of and sum up the horror of the Holocaust," and instead "anticipates and short-circuits attempts to discredit by counter-example" (127). Truglio points out that "the Divine Comedy does not really familiarize the enormity of the experience, nor even provide a direct comparison"; instead it exposes the tension between the rational, outside world and the experience Levi is trying to communicate (148). Levi uses the complexities already present in Dante and the uncertainty developed through the specific use of Canto XXVI to generate a comparison that is incomplete and always ambiguous. Dante therefore provides Levi with a means of giving shape to the horrors of the Lager without completely defining them. The use of Dante to allude to the experiences of the Lager, while simultaneously obscuring them in ambiguous intertextual networks that never lead to an ultimate reduction of the Lager, prompts Truglio's description of Levi's memoir as being an "open question" (150). Levi uses Dante as a narrative tool that facilitates the act of remembering and testifying at the same time as it is an integral part of that memory and the subject of the testimony.

Dante's verse allows Levi to resist the destruction of identity and rebel against the silence that the brutal efficiency of the camp maintains. Within the camp Dante renews Levi's access to referents otherwise obstructed by the Lager, although those referents are themselves altered by their being accessed from the environment of the Lager. This renewal is a form of rebellion that allows Levi to resist the destructive bent of the Lager.

Beyond the confines of the camp the writer Levi consolidates access to these referents by including Dante in his testimony, where it is again altered by the change in context.

Dante also highlights the intertextual nature of language and the problems associated with testimony. Thus Dante as an intertext provides a multiplicity that allows Levi to perform complex and various types of rebellion both as a prisoner inside the camp, and as a survivor testifying to his experience.

Conclusion

“Our language lacks words for this offence”: The problem of representation

Throughout my thesis I have argued that Levi's overt reference to other texts generates a “multidimensional space in which a variety of readings blend and clash,” demonstrating that he is aware of, and exploits, the processes involved in the construction of a narrative (Barthes IMT 146). So far I have been examining Levi's memoir through the lens of literary theory, but now I want to study how, in actively highlighting the intertextual nature of his own narrative, Levi forces the reader to consider questions of representation and interpretation and confront the problems associated with them in regard to the delicate subject of survivor testimony.

I want to conclude by considering how Levi's manipulation of intertexts within his own narrative speaks to, and in turn is spoken to by, later debates concerning the representation of the Holocaust. I will start my discussion by briefly exploring reactions to representations of the Holocaust, especially artistic or aesthetic representations, by those such as Wiesel, Steiner, Langer, and Young, among others and how Levi himself articulates the tensions within this discussion. I will then follow the development of this discussion as it is influenced by the issues that arise from the “German historians' controversy” which signals a change in focus from representation to the reception and critical study of Holocaust narratives (Friedlander 2).²⁹ The idea that the individual

²⁹ I am interested in the later part of the historians' controversy between those scholars, like Hayden White, who assert that historians cannot retrieve or access actual events only their representations, and others, like Vidal-Naquet and Ginzberg, who recognize the mediated nature of history, but insist that behind mediation “there is something irreducible which, for better or for worse, I would still call reality” (Vidal Naquet quoted in Ginzburg 86). See Bernard-Donals and Glejzer (23-48) and Lentin's introduction to his edited collection of essays, Re-Presenting the Shoah For the 21st Century for good outlines of the various debates surrounding representation and the effect of the German historians' controversy on these debates. I am

linguistic unit is not neutral or fixed when spoken or written is central to both this debate and the concept of intertextuality that I have concentrated on throughout my discussion of Levi. During my discussion in this chapter, I therefore want to draw attention to how the theories of intertextuality manipulated by Levi in his narrative are also integral to the later debates on representation and reception in which that narrative becomes an intertext itself. Indeed, the repeated use of Levi's work by scholars as an example in the discussions of representation is a direct illustration of Bakhtin's definition of the utterance as referencing other utterances, both past and future.

Levi's use of Dante as a complex intertext to his own narrative demonstrates his understanding of language is an imperfect and capricious tool for communicating reality. Echoing Dante, he observes "our language is human, born to describe things at a human level" and thus when faced with the task of describing the Lager, language "collapses, falls apart, cannot cope" (Interview with Di Caro 173). However, Levi also identifies the "need to tell our story to 'the rest', to make 'the rest' participate in it," which "had taken on for us...the character of an immediate and violent impulse" (ITM 15). Levi's articulation of the conflict between the need to bear witness and the enormity of the task foreshadows the debate between those who recognize the need for and importance of testimony, and those who assert that the Holocaust cannot be reduced into language. Wiesel claims that "the Holocaust transcends history" because it is "the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted" (Wiesel quoted in Vogler

interested in how such debates reflect on Levi's struggle with representation and narrative, and how his use of intertextuality speaks to the theories of representation and reception that emerge from the controversy. I will not go into a lengthy discussion of the historians' controversy itself, but will instead use this chapter to point out connections between Levi and the issues that emerge from the controversy. I will base this part of my discussions around the articles in Friedlander's book Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution.

24). Cohen expresses a common opinion when he observes, "if the Holocaust is explained in rational terms [. . .] its enormity is somehow diminished" (44). The fear of trivializing the Holocaust includes a sense that the Holocaust cannot be understood or penetrated and therefore cannot, and should not, be represented in understandable terms.

Literary or poetic language is particularly criticized as a poor, even profane, means to represent the Holocaust and further complicates the concept of the inadequacy of language. Young summarizes this argument against fictional or artistic representation when he observes;

Holocaust writers and critics have assumed that the more realistic a representation, the more adequate it becomes as testimonial evidence of outrageous events. [. . .] For the survivor's witness to be credible it must be natural and unconstructed. (Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust 17)

The idea that credibility is connected to the realism of representation alludes to the fear that aesthetic or figurative representations of events somehow result in the undermining of their validity and existence as real.³⁰ In the case of the Holocaust, such reduction diminishes the scale and horror of those events. Wiesel vehemently denies the possibility, and even the morality, of attempting to represent the Holocaust through literature:

³⁰ Novick argues that even survivor testimony is not particularly useful or valid as historical documents (Chapter 12).

There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust - there cannot be. Auschwitz negates any form of literature as it defies all systems, all doctrines. [. . .] To substitute words, any words, for it is to distort it. A Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction. (A Jew Today 197)

Here Wiesel pronounces the impossibility of representing the events of the Holocaust in fiction and the limitations involved in any representation of the Holocaust, indeed in the representation of any event. In Wiesel's opinion, narration, especially that using aesthetic or literary forms, cannot faithfully reproduce an event and therefore distorts it: to reduce an event to words is to reduce the significance of the event itself. Worse than that, to present that event in literary terms is an attempt to interpret and find meaning in that event, an activity he maintains that the Holocaust resists.

Howe rephrases this perspective as a question; "what can the literary imagination [. . .] add to – how can it go beyond – the intolerable matter cast up by memory?" (187). Inherent to this problem of reduction is the concern that literary or artistic representation will reduce the Holocaust to a distant, imaginative aesthetic. Again it is Wiesel who articulates this fear of reducing the horrific, unintelligible process of the Holocaust to an artistic interpretation:

How can one convince himself without feeling guilty that he may use such events for literary purposes? 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? ("The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" 7).

According to Wiesel, literature or any aesthetic mode seems to negate the actuality of events being described and invite a reading of the Holocaust in aesthetic (and therefore trivial) terms. Not only is the event rendered in linguistic terms that do not reflect the actual event, but those terms are distorted further by a sense that they do not tell the "truth" even if that truth is itself inherently problematic. This concern echoes Adorno's famous statement that "After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric," highlighting the impropriety of literature which seeks to "squeeze aesthetic pleasure out of artistic representation of bodily pain" (Adorno, quoted in Vice 6; Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Representation" 7). Literary representation usurps the gravity of the Holocaust itself, and is seen as an almost blasphemous approach to an event which defies comprehension. Steiner rearticulates this, claiming "eloquence after Auschwitz would be a kind of obscenity," illustrating that a literary representation of the Holocaust would somehow refute the severity of the event itself by reproducing the horror and degradation of the Holocaust in eloquent, and therefore palatable, terms (156).

How, then, does Levi's autobiography relate to this debate on the literary representation of the Holocaust? Levi is generally regarded as an objective writer whose language is "unadorned and chaste," yet my previous chapters have shown that, although the language appears to be bare of embellishment, Levi's use of reference is far from simple (Howe 16).³¹ Indeed, despite Levi's claim that his aim in writing is "to bear

³¹ It is ironic here that it is Howe who holds Levi up as an example of "appropriate" Holocaust representation when Levi resorts to literary devices that Howe himself finds unacceptable in testimony.

witness” and “certainly not to write a work of literature,” his persuasive references to literary texts and his reliance on the device of intertextuality complicate the definition of his memoir as a simple relation of facts (Interview with Vigeroni 250).³² Harrowitz identifies Levi as belonging “to the group of survivors who present their experience in literature,” and although her definition of “literature” is unclear, she highlights the textual and aesthetic nature of Levi’s account (29).

Although Dante’s Hell provides Levi with a basic analogy for his experience of the Holocaust, the literary model is ultimately inadequate for representation of the Lager. The complex intertextual networks that compare and contrast the two frames of reference succeed not in elucidating or interpreting the Lager but in demonstrating that Dante’s version of Hell is an imperfect equivalent. Rather than providing a “conceptual grid” which aims to organize and rationalize the events of the Holocaust, Dante’s Inferno demonstrates that “our language lacks words for this offence,” marking the impossibility of such an endeavor (Gunzberg, “Down among the Dead Men”; Levi, ITM 32).

However, this does not mean that Levi fails to communicate the horror of his experiences. The very collapse of Dante’s Inferno as a comparison indicates the nature of the Holocaust precisely because it establishes the incompatibility of the Lager with familiar frames of reference. Levi’s testimony, by its very nature linguistic and representational, therefore refutes the idea that there can be “no Holocaust Literature” by providing a text that marks the existence of the Holocaust without trying to reduce it into a simple linguistic representation (Wiesel, A Jew Today, 197). Because Dante’s text

³² I recognize that there are problems involved in defining any text as a relation of “facts,” but I want to differentiate between Levi’s conscious, eloquent manipulation of his narrative and the idea of an unconsciously mediated text. For discussion of the problems involved in any “factual” account, see Langer, Young, Rosenfeld, Schwartz and Rothberg among others.

cannot compete with the reality of the Holocaust Levi underscores the difficulty faced by his narrative, impressing upon the reader the enormity of the Holocaust itself (Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust 38). Indeed, Levi's use of Dante demonstrates that literature and literariness are "made to defer to the absolute reality of evil," even if that demonstration is achieved through an innately fallible linguistic representation of the Holocaust, and the literary device of intertextuality (Girelli-Carasi 46).³³

Levi's testimony, with its use of literary devices and frames therefore refutes the concept that the Holocaust cannot be represented. Instead, Levi's If This is a Man supports Young, who argues that despite the inadequacy of any form of representation where the Holocaust is concerned, the method of representation is as much part of a testimony as the events it tries to reproduce: "*how* victims and survivors have grasped and related their experiences comprises the actual core of 'their story'" (Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust 38-39, Young's italics). Just as the failure of Dante's Hell as a comparison to the Lager is demonstrated in If This is a Man, so the method of recounting the events of the Holocaust can provide some sense of those events, if not a connection to the actual events themselves. Van Alphen develops this argument asserting that "in many testimonies the un-representability of the Holocaust experiences is explained not by a lack of narrative frames, but by the inadequacy of frames," identifying the mode of representation, not just the content, as an important aspect of testimony (53). Intertextual reference is an essential part of this comparison, providing the components of comparison

³³ The fact that Levi is a survivor also affects the reception of his memoir, whether it is literary or not. As Vice observes, the apparent connection between reality and its representation in a text is validated when connected to an eyewitness, regardless of the problems that are inherent to any form of representation: "It seems that the formal objections [to Holocaust fiction] are just other ways of saying that survivor testimony is better...we can get in touch with the reality of an extreme experience through the witness of those who were there" (6). Levi's reliance on a literary process to convey his experience highlights the duplicitous nature of narrative and forces the reader to resist this assumption that the witness provides a direct connection to reality.

and producing the idea that such comparisons are inadequate. Fridman also points to literary language as an important means to convey the experience of the Holocaust, although not as an attempt to reproduce the Holocaust itself:

[. . .] where extreme experience renders an experience unavailable (numbing, coldness), poetic language marks the numbing, exploits the fragmenting of the perceptual process, and dwells on perceptual facts that mark the disintegration of the experiencing self within the experience.

(121)

Like Young, Fridman identifies “poetic” or literary language as a means of delineating the effect of the Holocaust through its use in survivor narratives. How a survivor chooses to convey experience (whether consciously or not) is an important part of studying that experience, and the literary devices used provide access to them, although they do not explain them.

Developing this idea that representation, although imperfect, is necessary, and anticipating the later debates surrounding historical narrative, Young observes “whatever ‘fictions’ emerge in the survivors’ accounts are not deviations from the ‘truth’ but are part of the truth in any particular version” (Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust 32). Thus although the very nature of representation means that an historical event cannot be reproduced in its entirety or to any degree of accuracy, Young suggests that witness accounts are still useful and valid if treated as narratives and recognized as representations. This stress on history as narrative is subsequently addressed by what

Friedlander terms the “German historians’ controversy” in which discussions develop the issues of representation in the reexamination of the role of historical scholarship in its attempt to effectively reconstruct or access a sense of “truth” (2). Like Young, Wiesel, and Steiner, those involved in this debate recognize the tension between “the need for ‘truth’ and the problems raised by the opaqueness of the events and the opaqueness of language” (Friedlander 4). However, rather than refuting the possibility of representation, Friedlander observes that “the extermination of the Jews of Europe is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event,” and instead insists that the problem lies in the fact that “we are dealing with an event that tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an event ‘at the limits’” (2-3). The focus of these later discussions therefore shifts away from the ability to represent to a discussion on how representations are constructed and subsequently received by a particular audience.

In contradiction to Wiesel’s allegation that representation, especially literary representation, reduces the Holocaust, Friedlander asserts that the inherent rift between reality and its representation is essential to the conceptualization of the Holocaust for those not directly involved in events themselves:

Even when the unsayable is almost directly presented, the existence of this narrative margin appears a necessity, lest our capacity for comprehension and perceiving be entirely blunted, lest we create an internal barrier to supplement the absence of external distancing. (17)

Here Friedlander alludes to the role of the reader or audience in the representation of events, echoing Kristeva's assertion that narrative is a reciprocal relationship between writer and reader: "the word in the text belongs to both the writing subject and the addressee" (*Desire*, 66). Levi himself articulates the difference between the writer's understanding and that of the reader, claiming "writing which is obscure for its own author may be luminous and open for him who reads" (*Other People's Trades* 169).

LaCapra develops this idea, claiming that any representation is read differently by individual readers with specific and personal "subject positions," identifying the limits of representation as involving not only its mode, but also its reception (108-127).³⁴ The problems of representation are now matched by the "problem of the 'audience,' its manipulation, appropriation, or rejection of the Shoah" (Friedlander 19). From a literary rather than historical perspective, this problem of audience interaction with any particular representation has already been identified within the theories of intertextuality discussed earlier. Barthes' claim "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed," echoes Bakhtin's assertion that a word is "*a two-sided act* [. . .] determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant" (Barthes, *IMT* 148; Bakhtin/Volosinov 86, Bakhtin's italics). Thus the understanding of any one representation will be different for different people;

Whether the historian or analyst is a survivor, a relative of survivors, a former Nazi, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazis or collaborators, a younger Jew or German distanced from more immediate

³⁴ LaCapra uses the idea of "subject positions" to discuss "working through" and "transference," but his points are often relevant to my discussion of representation and the reader/writer relationship (108-127).

contact with survival participation or collaboration, or a relative 'outsider' to these problems will make a difference even in the meaning of statements that may be formally identical. (LaCapra 110)

Levi's use of Dante as a complex intertext exposes this aspect of narrative as inherent to any form of representation, whether literary or not. The endless variety of readings made possible by Levi's comparison of the Lager to Dante's Hell illustrates Jay's assertion that "even if we identify with one group in the past [. . .] our narrative reconstruction of their experience and the meaning they give to it will always be incongruent" (104). As I discussed in the previous chapters, readers' understanding of Dante's Ulysses within the context of the Lager is highly dependent on their own personal knowledge and the referents available to them. Levi therefore confronts and exposes the nature of texts as dependent upon the relationship between the writer and the reader, and in doing so he forces the reader to confront, not only his representation of the Lager, but also the problems associated with that representation.

Levi's attempt to engage the reader in an active evaluation of both the subject and the representational mode of his testimony anticipates the ideas of those such as Vogler and Laub who identify a need for historical narrative which forces the reader to engage with it in a form of active reading that prevents the trivialization or reduction feared by Wiesel and Steiner (Vogler 1-53). According to Laub, testimony "includes its hearer" who therefore "comes to be a participant in and a coowner of the traumatic event: through his listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (Laub 57, quoted in Vogler 46). More than this, the recognition of the reader as a "participant" in

representation of the Holocaust threatens the idea that the event is unrepresentable. Indeed, those such as Hartman suggest that “a picture, story, or poem that allows reflection and interpretation may be more crucial – if the aim is an active rather than passive response – than images that produce only shock and the defenses roused by [. . .] *pathos*” (334, Hartman’s italics). This alludes to the possibility of successful representation, if the purpose of that representation is not to reproduce the actual event, but to engage the reader in critical examination of both the event and the reader’s own position in regard to it.

Levi’s use of Dante’s Ulysses as a complex intertext involves the reader in the construction of (often contradictory) comparisons between Dante’s literary Hell and the Lager. In such constructions readers are forced to recognize both the difficulty involved in representing the event, and their own role within that difficulty. Indeed, Levi asserts that his account must “[take] into account the complexity of the Lager phenomenon,” and this complexity involves the difficulty of representation itself (DS 18). By marking the presence of the Holocaust through the multiple intertextual readings offered by the comparison of the Lager and Dante’s Hell, Levi asks the reader to confront the complexity of his experience and thus offers a representation of the Holocaust that neither pretends to be absolute nor shies away from the difficulty of representation. Just as Friedlander recognizes that the Holocaust is accessible to representation, although the method and mode of representation must struggle to reflect the enormity of the event, so Levi’s use of Dante appears as an attempt to find a successful means of representation, despite his dependence on the imperfect tool of language.

The call for active reading springs from the recognition of that silence, posed as an alternative to representation of the Holocaust, is inadequate and irresponsible, a concept that is exposed by Levi's own attempt to render his experience through linguistic and literary means. To insist on the incommensurability of the Holocaust is, according to Rose, "mystifying something we dare not understand, because we fear it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human" (242-43). This admonition speaks to an emerging sense that assumptions concerning the incommensurability of the Holocaust must be challenged, as Berel Lang asserts:

It seems to me that sufficient evidence, both theoretical and in fact, argues against the claim [that the Holocaust is incommensurable] – as much, at all events, as it argues against the unintelligibility of evil in any of its appearances. (317)

Underpinning this challenge is the recognition that the "Holocaust" as it is understood today is a "post facto conceptual entity not in use at the time," and itself a product of discourse and not the actual event (Jay 99).³⁵ Indeed, as Kaes asserts, "the insistence on the impossibility of adequately comprehending and describing the Final Solution has now become a *topos* of Holocaust research" (207).³⁶ The danger of this "topos" is that the incommunicability of the Holocaust is accepted and uncontested, which only adds to,

³⁵ I recognize that, by writing this thesis, I too am contributing to the Holocaust as a discursive construct. By including others' opinions and outlining common debates, I am constructing an understanding of the Holocaust as a linguistic code influenced by discourse that occurs long after the event itself, and subject to my own position within that discourse and distanced from the event.

³⁶ Sicher also discusses the emergence of an accepted idea of the Holocaust as incommensurable and therefore incommunicable. He points to representations such as Spiegelman's *Maus* as an example of a text that challenges the "facile Americanization of the extremity and unknowability of the Holocaust" (306).

rather than reduces the risk of concealing, and therefore forgetting, the atrocities involved. Ezrahi poses the question “are there Holocaust symbols or *torpoi* so overdetermined that they cannot enter other existential universes without being either disruptive or presumptuous – violating an unspoken principle of incommensurability [. . .]?” identifying the idea of incommunicability itself as reducing the Holocaust into the accepted standard so feared by Wiesel and Steiner (260).

It is this “unspoken principle of incommensurability” that Lentin claims contributes to the process whereby the Holocaust becomes “a political ideology, a code” and “the Shoah myth replaces the Shoah itself” (11). The theories of intertextuality discussed earlier in my thesis point to this codification as an inherent part of rendering an event in language, and thus redirect Lentin’s observation back to the original concerns of those such as Wiesel and Steiner. An event cannot be recreated in language as meaning and understanding are in a continual state of flux, influenced by the social and historical positions of utterance at any one time. According to Kristeva, “by studying a text as intertextuality,” we study it “within (the text of) society and history” and a text is therefore influenced by the relative positions of both writer and reader within this socio-historical environment. The socio-historical context in which language occurs informs and influences its signification. The utterance is itself a “historical event, albeit an infinitesimal one,” and language both reflects aspects of the space in which it is uttered, as well as affecting that space by including it in a linguistic field (Bakhtin/Medvedev 120). Similarly, Jay observes that “the narrative expectation of historians will be shaped by later outcomes, which no protagonist in the event themselves can know” (104). Thus the Holocaust as represented through various narratives is a linguistic, not actual, event

and influenced by the changing socio-historical contexts in which it occurs. This concept of historical event as linguistic structure anticipates those who call for an awareness of the Holocaust as a discursive construct, itself influenced by the various subject positions of those studying it.

However, Lentin alludes to a concern, not with the linguistic replacement of events (which is inevitable), but with the easy acceptance of such a representation without challenge or critical evaluation. Ezrahi develops this idea, claiming that, in order to avoid the "naturalization" of the Holocaust through the use of established representations (or refusal of them) the conceptualization of the event must be examined. In posing the question, "where, in our symbolic geography, do we locate Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto?" Ezrahi initiates an investigation into the accepted symbols of the Holocaust and suggests that attempts to render the Holocaust in language must first avoid and address these assumptions (260). Therefore, as Haidu points out, "[The Holocaust's] 'unspeakability' is less an inherent quality of the text than a product of our cognitive relation to the Event and to its texts" and both witness and reader have a responsibility to engage with the events represented (whether or not such engagement causes discomfort or challenges accepted reactions to the Holocaust) rather than accept the assumptions already attached to the Holocaust as a concept (294).³⁷ To refuse testimony because of the problems of representation results in the concealing of the Holocaust, and reduction of a different sort:

³⁷ Although such challenges are necessary to continue to engage the reader/hearer, Friedman notes that there is still a sense that "*there are limits to representation which should not be but can easily be transgressed*" (3, Friedlander's italics). He goes on to observe that the idea that such atrocity must be remembered and recorded also "implies...the imprecise and less self-evident notion that this record should not be distorted or banalized by grossly inadequate representations," identifying an uneasy sense that there are still moral and ethical limits to representation, although the details of such limits cannot be specified (3).

...it will not do to encapsulate the Holocaust in a sterile shroud of mystery, regarding it as a permanently inexplicable and horrible enigma.

This approach to the Holocaust is, paradoxically, another form of trivialization. (Gottlieb 3)

The responsibility of remembering and representing the Holocaust is therefore a mutual one tied to both writer and reader, for as Vogler observes, "to accept the role of reader or hearer is to accept a responsibility and obligation, to take ones place in a series of readers those attention keeps the witness alive" (45). The debate over whether or not representation is possible has thus turned to an insistence that representation, although imperfect, is possible, indeed necessary, and not to attempt to represent the Holocaust is to condemn any knowledge of the event to a "naturalized" concept that can be overlooked and accepted without effort.

By forcing the reader to actively participate in his representation of events, Levi highlights this responsibility. If, as Barthes claims, "[The writer's] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them," then Levi resorts to the only means of representation available to the writer that effectively engages the reader and refuses to reduce the narrative to a simple, closed statement (IMT 146). By relating and subtly evaluating various examples of storytelling in Canto XXVI, as well as introducing conflicting comparisons between the Lager and Dante's Hell, Levi exposes the problems of representation inherent to any narrative account of actual events. Although Levi does not attempt to explain or describe the

Holocaust in its entirety, by marking its presence through the failure of Dante's Hell as a comparative frame, Levi offers a representation that includes silence, not as the antithesis of representation, but as an integral part of it. As Berel Lang observes, "silence emerges as a limit precisely because of the possibility of representation and the risks which that possibility entails" (317). Levi succeeds in conveying the horror of the Holocaust precisely because he demonstrates the failure of narrative, and therefore of literature, to adequately convey his experience. Yet it is not this failure that is ultimately important, instead it is the questions and challenges posed by this failure that force the reader to engage in an active investigation of Levi's memoir that result in a successful representation of his experience.³⁸ Although Levi observes "I realize that it is very difficult to put that experience into words," he also asserts "I never liked the term *incommunicability*, so fashionable in the 1970s, first of all because it is a linguistic horror, and secondly for more personal reasons" (Interview with Vigevani 251; DS 18). For Levi representing the Holocaust, despite its inherently problematic nature, is essential to combat the incommunicability that threatens to conceal the event behind a weak excuse for avoiding confrontation with a difficult and distressing subject.

I demonstrate in this thesis that the study of Holocaust testimonial literature through the lens of literary theory is valid and informative, providing insight into the way a survivor such as Levi confronts the difficulty involved in representing his experiences. Levi's use of Dante and his insistence on the fallibility of any narrative demonstrate that the study of literary form in testimony is important, not as a means to somehow define

³⁸ By successful I mean a representation that engages the reader and refuses to simplify the experiences represented into an undemanding description.

the Holocaust, but as a way to attempt representation and prevent the reduction of the event. Although literature (or any referent) may be unconsciously “absorbed through the skin,” Levi’s memoir exposes the necessity and centrality of these referents, and therefore the system of intertextuality, to survival, rebellion and testimony (Interview with Greer 3). For Levi, intertextuality provides the complication necessary to convey a sense of his experience, while simultaneously frustrating any attempt to crystallize that experience in language. Intertextuality not only provides Levi with a means of relating his experience, but also appears as an integral part of his survival, providing both relief from the Lager and a means to reconstruct his identity and rebel against the “demolition of man.”

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