

A WANDERING VAUDEVILLE

Levi's Spectacle of a Voyage Home and Initiation into Art in ›The Truce‹

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This essay argues that the nostos narrative of the ›The Truce‹ should be read as both Levi's account of his homecoming as a parallel journey into the realm of art, and as Levi's recognition that the artistic representation of the Holocaust is not only practicable, viable, but also an ethical duty.

Primo Levi's ›The Truce‹ famously closes with the often quoted "dream within a dream" passage, which portrays the experience of the survivor as that of eternal captivity in an internalized realm of the concentrationary universe:

It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat [...] Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this means, and I also know that I have always known it: I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream: my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds [...]. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, 'Wstawàch'.¹⁾

In his ›Life or Literature‹, Jorge Semprun establishes a fundamental identification with Primo Levi on the basis of the experience expressed in this quotation; that of survival turning, at least at times, into an illusion.²⁾ Semprun weaves the poetic first line of this closing passage of Levi's ›The Truce‹, "È un

¹⁾ PRIMO LEVI, *The Truce. A Survivor's Journey Home from Auschwitz*, trans. into English by STUART WOOLF, London 1965, pp. 221–221.

²⁾ JORGE SEMPRUN, *L'écriture ou la Vie*, Paris 1994.

sogno entro un altro sogno,” as a repetitive rhythm, as a refrain, into his reflections on his own and his comrades’ feeble mental endurance after liberation. He thus endows his own writing with a tone of lamentation, which he exposes through, and adopts from, Levi’s text: “È un sogno entro un altro sogno, vario nei particolari, unico nella sostanza [...]’. Indeed, a dream. Always the same dream. [...] It is impossible to say it better than Primo Levi.”³⁾ Semprun’s affinity with Levi, to which these lines from ›Life or Literature‹ attest, emerges, then, from their common grasp of the psychologically multifaceted experience of survival. They are both intimately acquainted with and give voice to the dark shadows of the trauma that determine their post-Holocaust terms of existence. They both acknowledge, as Semprun’s quotation from Levi demonstrates, the state of uncanny derealization these shadows may generate.⁴⁾ And, most importantly, their affinity is related to a crucial aspect of their biographies as writers, namely the circumstances of their becoming such: both Levi and Semprun initiated their literary careers after their liberation (though a longer period of time elapsed before the publication of his first novel in Semprun’s case as compared to Levi’s), and in connection with their victimhood. They emerged from the concentrationary universe as witnesses to a catastrophe, the writing of which became their life-long project. They thus both adhere to what Lacan determines as “the ethics of survival”: an obligation to accept one’s fate of staying alive by not falling into a deadly silence regarding his/her trauma.⁵⁾

It is in light of Semprun’s retrospective reflection in ›Life or Literature‹ on his painful process of returning to the domain of horror while writing his first novel, ›The Grand Voyage‹ (1963), that I suggest in this essay a reading of ›The Truce‹ as a retroactive contemplation on Levi’s part on his own path to art as a means of testimony. Thus ›The Truce‹, according to the reading I propose here, is the story of Levi’s fascination with art during his voyage home, as well as his recognition of the feasibility and ethicality of representing the Holocaust by artistic means. It is an account of his discovery, through intensive interaction with fellow survivors, of his uncanny memories as a source of richness and liter-

³⁾ “Sans doute: un rêve, toujours le même.” Ibid., pp. 244–245. My translation from the French. The quoted lines are repeated and rephrased by Semprun time and again: “A dream inside a dream, indeed. The dream of death, inside the dream of life. Or, more accurately: the dream of death, the sole reality of life, which in itself is nothing but a dream.” Ibid., p. 252.

⁴⁾ Derealization is a sense of inner and outer reality being unreal. As a psychiatric category, it is considered part of what is conceived of as Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder (DPD). See: <<http://traumadissociation.com/depersonalization>> [13.01.2018].

⁵⁾ See CATHY CARUTH’S discussion, following Lacan, of the ethics of survival in her book: *Traumatic Awakening (Freud, Lacan and the Ethics of Memory)*, in: *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore and London 1996, pp. 91–112.

ary creativity. This discovery may be conceived of as the trigger that led him, almost immediately upon his arrival in Turin after the long journey related in ›The Truce‹, to enter enthusiastically into his lifelong project of producing numerous artistic narratives that comprise his written testimonial of Auschwitz. I thus conceptualize ›The Truce‹ as the story not only of the journey home, but also of Levi's initiation into art as the medium to which he was about to commit himself.

›The Truce‹ of course portrays an actual journey that advances along concrete geographical coordinates, from one station to the next, the zigzag itinerary on specific roads and amid particular landscapes followed by the convoy of refugees Levi was part of, deserted villages, ruined train stations, and abandoned military camps. Some editions of the novel include a map of post-World War II Central Europe that marks the exact route it describes.⁶⁾ However, despite this geographical precision, the journey also proceeds along obscure spaces, much less distinct and well-defined than the black line that demonstrates a path on a map. It is a journey into and out of numerous incoherent moments and episodes, exposing a domain of blurred reality, of fact merging with fantasy, of certainty turning into absurdity and vice versa. As such, it is a delineation of the alternating forms and shapes of continuous trauma, of extreme despair and of the survivors' absolute disbelief, including on the part of Levi himself, that events could change for the better or that liberation was in any way real – all of which anticipate the closing paragraphs of ›The Truce‹ (“[...] now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over [...]”). However, these moments are often artistic in nature and, as such, they also offer momentary relief. Levi thus reconstructs the artistic gestures from which his own artistic tendency eventually emerges as both a refuge and as means for negotiating the terms of existence after Auschwitz, as well as a means of deciphering the experience of the Lager and what it had revealed about humankind.

What is at stake during the journey is, then, Levi's recognition of art as an arena inherently capable of containing the post-traumatic blurring of borders and merging of facts and fiction; his understanding of art as a medium that readily obscures the distinction between the real and surreal, endowing realistic episodes with a mythic aura and inverting hallucinatory incidents into commonplace life events. In ›The Truce‹ Levi thus exposes how art revealed itself to him as a means of maintaining both an intimate closeness to and a safe distance from such hybrid reality. ›The Truce‹ may therefore be read as the narrative of Levi's initiation into the world of art, as a *Künstlerroman* of sorts (its dynamics

⁶⁾ See the 1965 publication of ›The Truce‹ as translated by STUART WOOLF (cit. fn. 1). A similar map appears in a 1987 edition (same translator) by Abacus.

of escape being, of course, different from the traditional dynamics of this genre of escape from bourgeois norms).

Two aspects of the journey's relatedness to and fascination with art will be stressed in the following discussion. One is the abundance of appearances of artistic, particularly theatrical, moments and gestures, to the extent that the entire novel may be conceived as an assemblage of artistic pieces performed by various figures, mostly the survivors Levi traveled with or met along the journey. The other is the complex nature of the artistic instances as Levi formulates them: their simultaneous manifestation of a post-traumatic compulsion to repeat and of a desire for remembering and working through.⁷⁾ The latter is at the core of the multifaceted experience of survival to which ›The Truce‹ testifies. Through his remarkable choice to bring the story of the journey of return to its close with the echo of the Auschwitz morning call, Levi ascribes a complex meaning to the title of the book's last chapter ("Reawakening"), which is also the title chosen for the English translation of the book in the United States.⁸⁾ What comes to a conclusion in this passage, and in the last chapter of the novel as a whole, is the journey from Auschwitz to Turin that took approximately nine months: the long voyage that brings the wrecked survivor to the haven of his home and his comfortable bed, to secure meals and the warmth of a circle of friends full of life. This also brings to a conclusion his assumption of the role of a writer of death and survival in Auschwitz and in the post-Auschwitz era. Reawakening is a synonym for rebirth (the actual nine months of traveling thus taking on a symbolic meaning), a resurrection, a lifting of eyes that are fixed on the ground (from the habit of searching for something to eat) to the horizons of life and beauty.⁹⁾ It corresponds, as I have mentioned before, with Lacan's concept of "traumatic awakening" to the reality of survival and the ethical duty to testify it implies. At the same time, reawakening, in the unique way Levi uses it, represents a tragic recognition and, in a way, acceptance of the shadowy state of the survivor, the limbo in which he is destined to exist, where the reality of liberation and the dream

7) This twofold practice is described by Freud as means for relief applied by psychoanalysis. See: SIGMUND FREUD, *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through (Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psychoanalysis II)* (1914), SE 12: p. 145.

8) Levi's original Italian text, ›La Tregua‹, was translated into English by STUART WOLF and published in Britain under the title ›The Truce‹ in 1965. Its US publishers, Collier Books (in 1993), who used the same translation, chose the title ›The Reawakening‹.

9) "I found my friends full of life, the warmth of secure meals, the solidity of daily work, the liberating joy of recounting my story. I found my large clean bed, which in the evening (a moment of terror) yielded softly under my weight. But only after many months did I lose the habit of walking with my glance fixed to the ground, as if searching for something to eat or to pocket hastily or to sell for bread [...]". *The Truce* (cit. fn. 1), p. 221.

of captivity are intertwined in a most threatening yet intriguing way (“yet a dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit me”¹⁰).

Blurred reality is indeed introduced into the story of the voyage of return through the narrative’s consistent tendency, from the opening paragraphs onwards, to endow circumstances and occurrences with an artistic touch. This is achieved through a recurring reference to almost everything that takes place along the way as a “spectacle” or a “scene” of artistic nature. Levi’s text demonstrates full awareness of this strategy. He articulates the circumstances into which he and his fellow voyagers have been thrown declaratively as a series of fascinating, though not infrequently ridiculous, imaginative episodes, surrealistic scenes, and grotesque and melodramatic gestures, as numerous pieces of a theater of the absurd. Europe in the winter of early 1945, which is the place and time of the events, was indeed submerged in a chaos of mythic dimensions. Parts of it had already been liberated from Nazi occupation while others were still being fought over. It was a frozen, ruined cosmos, with millions of displaced persons – soldiers, citizens and recently liberated inmates of concentration camps, still dressed in their striped Lager uniforms (“perhaps I was among the first dressed in ‘Zebra’ clothes to appear in that place”) – roaming its ruined roads that led to dead ends. Belonging to many nations and finding themselves in unfamiliar terrain, these crowds that spoke many languages found it hard to communicate and were often completely disoriented. Survival instincts that had carried them through the war also guided them in these difficult months. Levi, one among these tens of millions of individuals who were trying to find their way home in this unprecedentedly chaotic state of affairs, assumed the role of a collector of surreal personal stories as they unfolded before him. And this happened in performances more often than in straightforward verbal accounts.

The novel is indeed constructed as an assemblage of theatrical moments that constitute the stories Levi accumulates. Though basically portraying a chronological chain of events, those that took place during Levi’s journey by train or on foot from Auschwitz to Turin, it often digresses to other routes and destinies. The novel thus constructs its literary itinerary as a unitary and at the same time fractured artifact. The non-linear route, running sideways to and against the required direction in turnabouts, loops and zigzags, thus becomes in and of itself not only a realistic representation of the distractions on the road, but also a performance of the liminal mental space of its occurrences. Levi himself is sometimes an active participant in the performances he relates, but mostly he is an outside observer, always an avid and keen one, and often plays the role of their alternately naïve and ironic commentator.

¹⁰) Ibid.

The theatrical effect of ›The Truce‹ narrative as a sequence of vivid spectacles, which together form a colorful wandering vaudeville, is so powerful that although it is still shocking and heartbreaking, it does not come as a complete surprise to actually see the curtain fall on the final scene, allowing the picture of captivity to reappear. It is in fact only natural that in such a context, all the details of the closing episode – a home, the beauty of nature, a circle of friends, tranquility – are revealed to be artificial scenery, a deception destined to collapse abruptly when the show comes to its end and to abandon its “hero” to yet another stage set – that of the domain of death.¹¹⁾

Two actual theatrical performances took place along the voyage. The first in a camp called Bogucice, where Levi stayed, nostalgic and bored, during April and June of 1945. It was there that he and his fellow wandering refugees received the news that World War II, which was still going on when they set out on the road, finally came to an end. The thrilled Russian soldiers stationed in Bogucice improvised a theatrical show in celebration of Victory Day. The camp’s Russian commander, a captain named Egorov, was a chief participant in the event and appeared on stage “overcome by a desperate alcoholic despondency.”¹²⁾ He therefore exposed his real self, rather than a theatrical role, when he “presented the various comic or patriotic numbers in the program in a sepulchral voice, amid resounding sobs and fits of tears.”¹³⁾ The tears obviously do not belong to the script but rather to the actual soldier whose army had finally won the war and who could afford to imagine a return home. However, in the eyes of the audience – mostly displaced persons who did not know whether their homes still existed – these alcohol-tears turn the celebration into a grotesque spectacle which reflects their own state, that of continuing to remain a group of worn out, disoriented, and lost refugees with no control over their destiny. In his delirious exhilaration, the Russian captain-actor unknowingly acts out the vulnerable post-traumatic state of the survivors, who are fascinated by the performance yet intuitively experience and identify with the agony in which it is submerged.

The second actual theatrical show takes place a few months later. In it, the merging of reality with the fictive performance is a drama in itself. This is de-

¹¹⁾ In this regard, Levi of ›The Truce‹ is an equally subversive witness to the terms of existence after liberation as Levi of ›If This is Man‹ and ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ is to the conditions of death and survival in the concentrationary universe. As opposed to the narrative of a tragically successful “Bildung” within the cosmos of the Lager portrayed in the latter two books, in ›The Truce‹ he relates a narrative of a failed re-accommodation to life outside the Lager. See a discussion of adaptation to evil circumstances in ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ in my essay: IRIS MILNER, The ‘Gray Zone’ Revisited: The Concentrationary Universe in Ka. Tzetnik’s Literary Testimony, in: *Jewish Social Studies*, 14/2 (2008), pp. 113–155.

¹²⁾ LEVI, *The Truce* (cit. fn. 1), p. 92.

¹³⁾ *Ibid.*

clared openly by Levi in a manner that bestows heavy weight on the theatrical motif in *The Truce* in general:

But finally the announcement came: the announcement of our return, of our salvation, of the conclusion of our lengthy wanderings. *It came in two novel, unusual ways, from two different sides, and it was convincing and open, and dissipated all anxiety. It came in the theatre and through the theatre, and it came along the muddy road, carried by a strange and illustrious messenger.*¹⁴⁾

These comments refer to the news that the thirty five-day final section of the voyage to Italy, eagerly awaited by Levi and his companions, most of them of Italian origin, was finally about to take place. At that time, the survivors, who had already been on the road for eight months, were staying in a village called Starye Dorogi, a few kilometers south of the town of Minsk, in a peculiar building made of red bricks and commonly referred to as the “Krasny Dom” – the “Red House.”¹⁵⁾ This architecturally odd complex, the original function of which remains unknown, is a perfect setup for a spectacle that represents the absurd terms of existence of the group of abandoned people who find in it a temporary refuge.

And indeed, as the “Red House” had a particularly awkward part to it that appeared to have functioned in previous times as a theater hall, the survivors decided to keep themselves busy by working on an amateur theater production. The subject matter of the theatrical pieces they put together was the actual condition of the “actors”: their fate as wanderers along Europe’s ruined roads, traveling further and further away from their destination. In his choice to recount this event in meticulous detail, Levi again reveals his recognition of art as a medium through which trauma might be overcome. He relates his impression of the theatrical entertainment put on stage in the awkward theater hall of the “Krasny Dom” and his narration consists of a detailed verbal account of the various episodes it included, some of which are particularly uncanny. Such, for example, is his description of a “sinister, obscurely allegorical pantomime” of a childish nonsense song, the “Three Cornered Hat.”¹⁶⁾ In slow motion, Levi describes the bodily movements of three “nightmare figures” wrapped with black cloaks and black hoods, their faces a “corpse-like, decaying pallor,” a choir that practically rises up from the land of the dead. In what may be conceived of as a realization of the disappearance from the human vocabulary of words fit for textualizing the “void” of the Holocaust, the figures recite the repetitive nonsense song, some words of which are omitted at each repetition and replaced

¹⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 187 (my emphasis).

¹⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

by silence and bodily gestures. The voices of the singing phantoms, as well as the sound of the accompanying orchestra, eventually diminish and “a hypnotic pulsation of a single muted drum” takes over. Then the phantoms bow, “trembling in every limb, straighten themselves in a senile movement and disappear, leaving the audience in paralysis.”¹⁷⁾ The silence in the theater hall, Levi notes, is a response to “the heavy breath, under the grotesque appearance, of a collective dream.”¹⁸⁾ Levi does not explicate what the content of this dream may be. He does remark, however, that it is a dream that becomes noticeable only when work and pain cease and “nothing acts as a screen between man and himself,” only in moments when the “impotence and nullity” of the survivors’ lives and of life itself becomes apparent to them. This authentic experience, enabled by the artistic performance, may very well be related to the insight proposed in the final passages of *The Truce*. And indeed, the close of the novel echoes the experience of a final death that the “corpse-like” figures portray. Together, the spectacle and the “dream within a dream” comprise a concrete realization of a post-traumatic nightmare.

It is during one of the performances of this macabre theater that one of the actors, playing the cannibal chief of a boat, falls vertically on to stage as a *Deus-ex-machina* and declares that the final part of the voyage is about to start: “tomorrow we leave.” Thus the fictive is totally fused here with reality, obscuring the status of the announcement. Together the audience and actors witness a mythic moment as the metaphor of the voyage at sea, presented on stage by amateur performers who are real voyagers on a stormy land, metamorphoses in front of their eyes into the very reality it is meant to represent artistically. The result is complete disorientation that engulfs not only the participants of the scene, on and off stage, but also the readers of the novel that reconstructs it. A confirmation of the validity of the dramatic announcement of departure comes in another scene, no less imaginary, yet probably real (“and it came along the muddy road, carried by a strange and illustrious messenger”): it is spelled out by a visitor who emerges from a tiny car parked next to the “Krasny Dom”. The visitor is none other than Marshal Timoshenko – or so the story goes – the hero of the Bolshevik revolution, who stops by to chat with the survivors and repeat the message about the approaching end to the long-enforced interruption to the journey. “War over, everybody home,” he says.¹⁹⁾ The truth-value of this hilarious episode, in which a commander from the Soviet army emerges from a car several sizes smaller than his bodily dimensions, speaks Rumanian with Italian refugees from the diplomatic personnel of the Italian embassy in Bucha-

¹⁷⁾ Ibid.

¹⁸⁾ Ibid.

¹⁹⁾ Ibid., p. 191.

rest (who at some point joined the convoy of Italian Auschwitz survivors) and offers them a blessing for the road, remains inherently suspect. Such is the case, Primo Levi thus demonstrates, with all the other events the novel describes.

The fourteenth chapter of the novel, titled “The Theatre”²⁰⁾ and dedicated to the grand production in the “Red House” theater hall, is the culmination of a long series of theatrical episodes that, as I argue, constitute the text in its entirety. Its beginning, the raising of the curtains, takes place thirteen chapters earlier while still in Buna Monowitz with the appearance of four young Soviet soldiers, who approach the camp’s fences and stare in embarrassment at the decaying corpses and the crumbling barracks. They catch sight of Primo Levi and his friend Charles tipping a stretcher bearing the body of a fellow inmate into the “defiled snow”²¹⁾ next to a pit full of corpses, a common grave. Both sights, that of the camp in the eyes of the Russians and that of the Russians in the eyes of the survivors, though dated accurately to the early afternoon of January 27, 1945, have an aura of mythic revelation. The Russians, we may guess, perceive the view spread in front of their eyes as the landscape of hell. To Levi’s gaze, the Russians are “wonderfully concrete and real,”²²⁾ yet, as they are viewed from a low position dictated by the geography of the surrounding – the road is higher than the camp – they seem to be hanging on their enormous horses against the backdrop of the gray snow and sky. It seems that some elements from the theatrical show at the “Krasny Dom” – the message of liberation falling vertically from above, the corpses reacting to it in a feeble voice – are already apparent here. Indeed, the Soviet soldiers are the first in a chain of “messengers of peace” and of the journey home. Levi refers to them as an anchor, a solid center outside the world of death, “a nucleus of condensation” that has the power to pull him and his comrades out and carry them away.²³⁾ This initial “vision” indeed marks the beginning of the voyage that comes to an end nine months later on October 19, 1945 upon Levi’s arrival in Turin as the hero of another epos, the unrecognizable Odysseus: “I was swollen, bearded and in rags, and had difficulty in making myself recognized.”²⁴⁾

It is from the first appearance of the Russian patrol onwards that the numerous “visions” and “spectacles,” as Levi refers to them, take place against varying backdrops, rapidly following on from each other. Levi seems to be searching for these spectacles and is hypnotized by them. As he sees them everywhere, all around him, all the time, it becomes apparent that it is his unique point of view

²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²³⁾ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

that often ascribes artistic features to them, and that it is through such features that Levi finds it at least partially possible to decipher and acknowledge – as well as communicate in his narrative – ineffable experiences. This is revealed in various scenes, such as one in which he witnesses, together with his friend Charles, the metamorphosis of the human body into a living corpse under Nazi torture, one which is exposed soon after liberation, during what the text describes as the grotesque-devilish-sacral ceremony of the bathing of the survivors by Russian nurses.²⁵⁾ Levi and Charles go through this washing procedure (“The robust arms of two Soviet nurses lifted us down from the cart [...] with their tender hands, but without much regard, soaped, rubbed, massaged and dried us from head to foot”²⁶⁾. While in the washing room, “naked and steaming,” they watch with compassion and horror at the nurses’ attempts to bathe “a bold little figure, twisted like a root, skeleton-like, knotted up [in a desperate position of defense] by a horrible contraction of all his muscles.”²⁷⁾ The women, strictly obeying the rules to bathe each and every one of the released inmates (and obedience to rules is one obvious human trait that is scrutinized through the absurd theatrical moments of *The Truce*) seek in vain to stretch this “figure” on his back, at which he lets out shrill mouse-like squeaks. An attempt to forcibly straighten his limbs is useless: “his arms and legs do yield elastically to pressure, but as soon as they are released they shoot back to their initial position.”²⁸⁾ No one knew who that person was, because he was in no condition to speak, but the spectacle, with its grotesque gestures, does provide a clue: “When one of the arms was stretched out, we saw the tattooed number for a moment: he was a 200,000, one from Vosges: ‘Bon dieu, c’est un français!’”²⁹⁾ A complete set of transformations is exposed through the revelation that this “figure” was once a real person, with an actual identity, a French citizen.

Levi pays similarly sensitive attention to many seemingly marginal encounters along his way that take place at various times and places. Night naturally forms the scenery for episodes that expose fear, loneliness, and disorientation on the threshold of the new freedom awaiting the released inmates. One example is a woman who, “incapable of enduring solitude, suddenly jumped up from her bunk, and danced herself between the bunks, to the sound of her own songs, affectionately clasping an imaginary man to her breast.”³⁰⁾ Night is also the backdrop for another grotesque episode, in which the actor is an old German

²⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶⁾ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁾ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁾ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

political prisoner, a “red triangle,” considered a stranger and an enemy. Levi hears him weeping in the middle of the night. He is repulsed by the sounds (“[it was] as intolerable as senile nudity”³¹) but is nevertheless attentive to the drama that follows: against background sounds of heavy-breathing sleepers, coughs, groans, and sighs, the old German realizes that Levi is the only person in the hall still awake. He toils up to his bunk, stops crying and, “in low stridulous voice, grotesque and solemn at the same time,” begins to sing the ›Internationale‹, leaving Levi, his audience, “perturbed, diffident and moved.”³² Months later, when staying near Katowice, one of the many stations along the voyage, Levi steps into a grocery store, the owner of which turns out to be an old German lady who had dared to write to Hitler her opinion about his plans to start a war and was consequently thrown out of her home, eventually ending up in the Russian town. When she realizes that her customers, Levi and his companion, are survivors of Auschwitz, she drags them to a back room to tell them her story: “[she] made us sit down, offered us two glasses of real beer, and at once poured forth her legendary story with pride, her epic, near in time but already amply transformed into a *chanson de geste*, refined and polished by innumerable repetitions.”³³ Both a compulsion to repeat and the hope of finding salvation through narration is demonstrated in the behavior of the German woman, whose “positive” character defies distinct borders in the post-traumatic reality ›The Truce‹ exposes.

Typically, all the human figures portrayed in the novel, including those of German origin, are marginal. They are lonely particles, synecdoches of a chaotic post-war planet. The Lager itself is seldom referred to directly. Neither are Nazi figures and their collaborators, or even the moral issue of some victims’ transgression of the borders between good and evil – an issue with which Levi is preoccupied in the first two volumes of what is sometimes referred to as his Auschwitz trilogy, ›If this Is a Man‹ and ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. Nevertheless, the novel does represent an attempt to decipher the concentrationary universe itself. It inquires about the question of good and evil indirectly and, in fact, presents some specific conclusions, which may reflect Levi’s deep understanding of the events of the war, his conceptualization of how it may happen at all “that such crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist.”³⁴ On the one hand, the accumulation of absurd spectacles demonstrates human circumstances, including the most extreme ones, to be arbitrary, inexplicable and uncontrollable. Evil, Levi states through the long chain of situations and figures he presents in ›The Truce‹, is

³¹) Ibid., p. 15.

³²) Ibid., p. 17.

³³) Ibid., p. 111.

³⁴) Ibid., p. 12.

in fact random and undecipherable.³⁵) On the other hand – and here theater again plays a crucial role – it presents human beings' responses to this state of affairs to be guided by miraculous skills of adaptation. So powerful is this talent demonstrated in the narrative of the wandering vaudeville of 'The Truce' that people in fact function as actors in an absurd theater, skilled at rapidly changing customs and roles with their authentic being, if it exists at all, completely disappearing. Levi is not even a bit judgmental of this revelation, which the theatrical moments he collects convey, but rather perceives it with amazement and awe. The protagonists of his narrative are all such figures, sometimes naïve, other times shrewd, always working hard to make their meager ends meet in uncontrollable situations. Such is the case of fellow survivors like Mordo Nahum, of Greek origin, who shows little empathy to Levi yet pushes him, with his talent for adaptation, out of hopeless conditions. Another version is Cesare, a fellow survivor from Rome – who relies on Levi's knowledge of languages for trading with the local farmers and merchants – whose "art of the charlatan" fascinated the Polish public, the Russians of the Command and his companions in the camp, a "preposterous foreigner who had come from the ends of the earth to perform wonders in their market squares."³⁶)

Closer to the image of the collaborator and more revealing are the characters who come to identify grotesquely with the aggressors and adopt their conduct. It is easier, of course, to ridicule and scorn – with empathy – behaviors of this kind as they are performed by survivors who display ill judgment but are no longer harmful. Yet it may indeed shed light on Levi's approach to and understanding of such conduct inside the Lager too. The spectacles he describes in this context are the most morbid, carnivalesque, bizarre, out of place, awesome, pitiful, and irresistibly powerful. One excellent example is Noah, "the Scheissminister of free Auschwitz," who shows up in the days after liberation as

a young Pantagruel, as strong as a horse [...] a high flying bird, cruising along all the roads of the camp on the seat of his repugnant cart, cracking his whip and singing at the top of his voice [...] Noah wandered around the feminine dormitories like an oriental prince, dressed in an arabesque, many-colored coat, full of patches and braid. His encounters were like so many hurricanes. He was the friend of all men and the lover of all women.³⁷)

Another similarly illuminating case is that of the accountant Rovi, the self-nominated leader of the Italian survivor camp in Katowice. Undoubtedly aware

³⁵) Such an understanding echoes that of Hannah Arendt, as presented in her letter to Gershom Scholem. Interestingly, Arendt comes to this conclusion on the basis of her observation of Adolph Eichmann, whose conduct during his trial she presents as the grotesque spectacle of a clown.

³⁶) LEVI, *The Truce* (cit. fn. 1), p. 37.

³⁷) *Ibid.*, p. 28.

of this person's resemblance to some of the notorious chairmen of the Judenrats, Levi notes that "to watch the behavior of a man who acts not according to reason but according to his own deep impulse is a spectacle of extreme interest."³⁸⁾ And this is how he recounts Rovi's most ridiculous and pathetic, yet notably insightful and adaptive, conduct:

With surprising foresight, [Rovi] had understood the importance, in fact the necessity, of owning a uniform, given that he had to deal with people with uniform. He had created quite a theatrical one, not without fantasy, out of a pair of Soviet boots, a Polish railway mans' cap and a jacket and pair of trousers found heaven knows where, which seemed to have belonged to a Fascist uniform and perhaps had; he had had badges sewn on the collar, gold braid on the cap, stripes and chevrons on the sleeves, and had covered his chest with medals.³⁹⁾

A tragic portrait regarding the contagiousness of evil is offered in this ridiculing portrayal of the will to power and the aspiration to domination.

In the same camp, other "parodied versions of the German selections" often took place.⁴⁰⁾ Parody is indeed an artistic strategy inherent to the portrayal of the spectacles Levi encounters. It is a parody of primitive drives, as becomes clear in the story of the kitchen inspector in one of the camps along the way – another story of self-nomination to a fake position of power. This time it is a thirty year-old Jewish man, a survivor, whose appearance Levi characterizes as "a fine ascetic Don Quixote-like face" and who falls passionately in love with a motorcycle. He drives his motorcycle to the scene of inspection:

The ceremony of the inspection became a public spectacle, watched by the citizens of Katowice in ever-growing numbers. [...] The inspector arrived at about eleven o'clock, like a hurricane: he braked suddenly with terrible squeal, and pivoting on the front wheel made the back of the motor-cycle skid through ninety degrees. Without stopping, he aimed at the kitchen with lowered head, like a charging bull; he mounted the two steps with fearful bumping, performed two cramped figures of eight round the cauldrons, the throttle wide open [...]. The game went on for some weeks; then one day neither motor-cycle nor captain were to be seen.⁴¹⁾

"The game" is obviously an 'acting out' of a post-traumatic and obsessive identification with the aggressor, manifesting as the uncanny loss of a sense of

³⁸⁾ Ibid., p. 60.

³⁹⁾ Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁰⁾ Ibid., p. 73. Much earlier in the text Levi describes a tragic version of such a parody, this time acted out in extreme seriousness by a survivor who, in delirium, fantasizes himself as a Kapo. It is the youngest survivor, twelve years old at the time of liberation, who in the middle of the night, perhaps while asleep, "sang and whistled the marches of Buna [...] he shouted imperious commands in German at a troop of non-existent slaves. 'Get up, Swine, understand? Make your bed, quickly; [...]. All in line, lice inspection, feet inspection! Show your feet, scum!'" Ibid., p. 26.

⁴¹⁾ Ibid., p. 78.

reality and orientation. However, in its transformation into Levi's fascinated and somewhat amused artistic narration (an abundance of metaphors highlights the artistic character of the narrative) it becomes a comic interval, a moment of "truce" in the continuous war of survival.

As the journey approaches its end, Levi's convoy comes across troops of triumphant, though exhausted, Red Army soldiers heading eastward, in the direction of their own home base. Again their appearance seems to Levi to be a spectacle, this time "a spectacle as dramatic and solemn as a biblical migration, and at the same time as rambling and colorful as the passage of a circus."⁴²) The double imagery he formulates with regard to the Russian soldiers, that of a "solemn biblical migration" that is also "as rambling and colorful as the passage of a circus" also applies of course to the convoy of refugees heading westwards, of which he is part. In fact, the chance encounter and the implied juxtaposition of the two entirely different yet highly similar groups of wanderers on a crossroads in post-World War II Europe provides Levi with an opportunity to articulate concisely the multifaceted nature of the many scenes and episodes he encounters and portrays along the way.

The simultaneous metaphors – that of a "biblical migration" and that of "a colorful circus" – make it clear that what each and every one of these episodes realizes is a diversity of often contradictory terms of existence that only art may contain simultaneously and give voice to: the mythic aura of the victims' resurrection (an aura with which it is endowed from the very first passages of 'The Truce'), their post-traumatic compulsion to repeat, their desire to be released from the inner experience of horror, the melting of reality into illusion and vice versa, the hope for redemption and the uncanny recognition that redemption is illusive.

Art, Levi thus comes to recognize along the journey he chooses to define as a "truce," is a medium capable of presenting this almost ineffable intricacy. It is the arena in which survivors, the corporeal carriers of the catastrophe, may present themselves and be present as they are: phoenixes that rise from death but remain "figures," as Nazi-Germans referred to the prisoners; living corpses that participate in their own funeral and chant their own requiem, their *Kadish*, as the Jewish prayer for the dead is called. Nevertheless, the theatrical episodes and gestures that Levi's magnificent literary text, 'The Truce', weaves together, are also an ode to humanity in its sublime realization, through art and in art. Levi and his fellow survivors are the joint authors of this ode. They express in it a commitment to, and belief in, reawakening, as mythic and yet indispensable as that may be.

⁴²) Ibid., p. 82.