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## Of Nakedness and Clothing: Primo Levi's Affective Compromise

Giovanni Miglianti

Così anche per noi l'ora della libertà suonò grave e chiusa, e ci riempì gli animi, a un tempo, di gioia e di un doloroso senso di *pudore*, per cui avremmo voluto lavare le nostre coscienze e le nostre memorie della bruttura che vi giaceva: e di pena, perché sentivamo che questo non poteva avvenire, che nulla mai più sarebbe potuto avvenire di così buono e puro da cancellare il nostro passato, e che i segni dell'offesa sarebbero rimasti in noi per sempre, e nei ricordi di chi vi ha assistito, e nei luoghi ove avvenne, e nei racconti che ne avremmo fatti. Poiché, ed è questo il tremendo privilegio della nostra generazione e del mio popolo, nessuno mai ha potuto meglio di noi cogliere *la natura insanabile dell'offesa, che dilaga come un contagio*. (*T*, OCI 310, emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>

(So for us even the hour of freedom struck solemn and oppressive, and filled our hearts with both joy and a painful sense of shame, because of which we would have liked to wash from our consciences and our memories the monstrosity that lay there; and with anguish, because we felt that this could not happen, that nothing could ever happen that was good and pure enough to wipe out our past, and that the marks of the offense would remain in us forever, and in the memories of those who were present, and in the places where it happened, and in the stories that we would make of it. Since—and this is the tremendous privilege of our generation and of my people—no one could ever grasp better than us the incurable nature of the offense, which spreads like an infection. [CWI 216–217])<sup>2</sup>

The opening chapter of *La tregua* (*The Truce*) represents a threshold. In terms of content, the liberation scene marks the transition between Primo Levi's status as concentration camp prisoner and that of displaced person; it is the end of the forced journey "all'ingiù, verso il fondo" (*SQU*,

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from Levi's works are drawn from the first two volumes of *Opere complete* (Levi 2016). The two volumes are referred to throughout as OCI and OCII, followed by the page number and—where relevant and not immediately evident from the context—preceded by the abbreviation of the book title according to the following list: *Rapporto* = *Rapporto sulla organizzazione igienico-sanitaria del Campo di concentramento per Ebrei di Monowitz (Auschwitz-Alta Slesia)* (1946, written with Leonardo De Benedetti); *De Silva* = *Se questo è un uomo* (1947); *SQU* = *Se questo è un uomo* (1958); *T* = *La tregua* (1963); *SN* = *Storie naturali* (1966); *VF* = *Vizio di forma* (1971); *SP* = *Il sistema periodico* (1975); *CS* = *La chiave a stella* (1978); *RR* = *La ricerca delle radici* (1981); *L* = *Lilit e altri racconti* (1981); *SNOQ* = *Se non ora, quando?* (1982); *AOI* = *Ad ora incerta* (1984); *AM* = *L'altrui mestiere* (1985); *RS* = *Racconti e saggi* (1986); *SES* = *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986); *PS* = *Pagine sparse*. Levi's interviews are mostly cited in the third volume of *Opere complete* (Levi 2018), referred to throughout as OCIII.

<sup>2</sup> English translations of Levi's works are mostly cited from *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* (Levi 2015a), whose three volumes are referenced as CWI, CWII, and CWIII, respectively, followed by the page number. The translators are: Stuart Woolf (*If This Is a Man*), Ann Goldstein (*The Truce, The Periodic Table, and Lilith and Other Stories*), Jenny McPhee (*Natural Histories and Flaw of Form*), Nathaniel Rich (*The Wrench*), Alessandra Bastagli and Francesco Bastagli (*Uncollected Stories and Essays*), Antony Shugaar (*If Not Now, When? and Other People's Trades*), Jonathan Galassi (*Collected Poems*), Anne Milano Appel (*Stories and Essays*), and Michael F. Moore (*The Drowned and the Saved*). Unless otherwise indicated, all the other translations from Italian are my own.

OCI 144; “down, toward the bottom” [CWI 12])—the deportation to Auschwitz that he describes in *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*)—and the beginning of his “return to life,” by means of an odyssey through Eastern Europe that he recounts in his second book, *La tregua*.<sup>3</sup> In (meta)literary terms, the reflection on the emotions of liberation reaches far beyond the incipit of *La tregua*—written already in 1947—and virtually circumscribes most of Levi’s writerly production. Immediately preceding the paragraph cited above is the passage where the writer accounts for the emotional reaction of the Soviet liberators: “Non salutavano, non sorridevano; apparivano oppressi, oltre che da pietà, da un confuso *ritegno*, che sigillava le loro bocche e avvinceva i loro occhi allo scenario funereo. Era la stessa *vergogna* a noi ben nota” (*T*, OCI 310, emphasis added; “They didn’t greet us, they didn’t smile; they appeared oppressed, not only by pity but by a confused restraint, which sealed their mouths, and riveted their eyes to the mournful scene. It was a shame well-known to us” [CWI 216]). Levi returns to this very passage in his last work: what in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*) he attempts to summarize under the title “La vergogna” (“Shame,” the third chapter of the book, published in 1986) appears at the beginning of *La tregua* as a constellation of words from the same semantic field, all italicized in the citations above: *ritegno*, *vergogna*, and *pudore* (restraint, shame, and—roughly—modesty).

Such a density of the affective vocabulary is emblematic of a recurring tendency in Levi’s writing. His rendering of emotions often relies, rather than on precise definitions, on modulated accumulation; words like “restraint,” “shame,” and “modesty” can barely provide a one-to-one translation for emotional states whose hardly graspable nature is emphasized by adjectives like “confuso” (see above, “un confuso *ritegno*” [“a confused restraint”])—and similarly, a few lines before, “uno strano imbarazzo” [OCI 310; “a strange embarrassment” {CWI 216}], and complicated by the interconnection with other emotions like “gioia,” “pena,” and “pietà” (“joy,” “anguish,” and “pity”).<sup>4</sup> Levi himself acknowledges the difficulty of clearly discerning this burst of emotions: “Queste cose, allora mal distinte, e avvertite dai piú solo come una improvvisa ondata di fatica mortale, accompagnarono per noi la gioia della liberazione” (*T*, OCI 310; “These things, at the time not clearly discerned, and noted by the majority only as a sudden wave of mortal fatigue, accompanied the joy of liberation” [CWI 217]). Far from indulging in a rhetoric of ineffability, the realization of the difficulty to produce exact definitions in the effort to pin down emotions attests to both the overwhelming nature of their traumatic experience and Levi’s later awareness of their complexity, which in his thoughtful labor of writing is often rendered by means of modulated accumulation. A few pages later, with reference to the uncanny view of defeated German soldiers packed in a freight car (in a reversal of the deportation of Jewish

<sup>3</sup> In keeping with current scholarly practice and with common use in the Anglophone context, I use the term Holocaust to refer to Nazi genocides at large. Despite its limitations (see Sullam Calimani 2001), the term encompasses the distinct experiences of both Jewish and political prisoners. Similarly, I am aware that the concentration camp complex at Oświęcim included a variety of subcamps, and that Levi himself was interned at the Auschwitz III (Monowitz) camp, also known as Buna; however, I will more generally refer to it as Auschwitz, in its double meaning of place-name and as symbol for the entire network of Nazi labor, concentration and extermination camps.

<sup>4</sup> Hendiadyses and oxymora are crucial techniques in Levi’s treatment of emotions, belonging to the same rhetorical strategy of modulated accumulation that I describe above: not only it is hard for him to account with a single word for the complexity of an emotional state, frequently described by the conjunction of two (or more) terms, but oftentimes the terms that he juxtaposes are divergent if not opposed in meaning, e.g. “Pietà e brutalità possono coesistere, nello stesso individuo e nello stesso momento, contro ogni logica” (*SES*, OCII 1178; “Against all logic, compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual at the same time” [CWIII 2446]). For a stylistic analysis of oxymora in Levi, see Mengaldo 2019, 84 and ff.

prisoners by the Nazis), Levi writes: “Questo spettacolo, fortemente evocatore, suscitò in me un groviglio di sentimenti confusi e contrastanti, che ancora oggi stenterei a districare” (*T*, OCI 344; “That sight, strongly evocative, roused in me a knot of confused and opposing feelings, which even today I would have a hard time sorting out” [CWI 254]).<sup>5</sup> It is such a complexity, represented by the image of the *groviglio* (a knot, or tangle), that I seek to explore in this paper, focusing on one of the affects evoked by Levi in the opening of *La tregua*. My claim is that *pudore*, the affect that preserves an individual’s physical as well as interior privacy in a social context is at the very core of the stylistic device described above and, more generally, of Levi’s writerly practice.

In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi specifies that “il disagio indefinito che si accompagnava alla liberazione forse non era vergogna, ma come tale veniva percepito” (*SES*, OCII 1189; “the vague uneasiness that accompanied the liberation may not have been shame, exactly, but that is how it was perceived” [CWIII 2459]), and later in the book he returns to “quel disagio che per semplificare ho chiamato ‘vergogna’” (*SES*, OCII 1241; “the uneasiness that for the sake of simplicity I have called ‘shame’” [CWIII 2521]). His *disagio* is certainly connected with shame, but does not completely fall under such a label. Levi significantly uses the word *disagio* to express both the complexity of the feelings connected to survival and his own uneasiness towards them also in a 1984 interview: “Quasi tutti siamo usciti dal Lager con un senso di *disagio* e a questo *disagio* abbiamo applicato l’etichetta di ‘senso di colpa’. [...] Non è che sentiamo noi la *vergogna* che dovrebbe sentire il carnefice; però in una certa misura tutti, credo, o molti, abbiamo provato un certo *disagio* a pensare che sono morti tanti che valevano quanto noi o erano meglio di noi” (OCIII 441, emphasis added; “Almost all of us came out of the *Lager* with a sense of unease and to this unease we applied the label ‘sense of guilt’. [...] It is not that we feel the guilt that should be felt by the executioner: but to some degree, I believe, all of us or most of us have felt a certain unease at the thought that so many died who were at least as worthy as us, if not more so” [Levi 2001, 253]). Critics have either reproached Levi for his apparent inconsistency between notions of guilt and shame,<sup>6</sup> or attempted to recompose the distinction between the two (“Shame and guilt, however, can never be fully separated, for what I do is part of what I am, and what I am informs what I do” [Bellin 2019, 44]). In *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*, Ruth Leys notes how “many of the figures I discuss, including Primo Levi, do not make a clear distinction between guilt and shame, treating the latter as a variant of the former—the present tendency to treat guilt and shame in binary terms is a recent development (I myself do not believe that these emotions are necessarily mutually exclusive)” (2007, 14). In an attempt to “resolve Levi’s apparent inability to distinguish between guilt and shame” (132), Leys draws upon psychologist Sue Miller’s conviction that “the victim experiences a mix of both guilt and shame, according to whether he focuses on guilty recollections of what he did or imagines he did, or on the moral shame he feels for being a weak or inferior person” (131–132). It seems to me that such a solution does not fall far from the binary typology of shame and guilt that Leys

<sup>5</sup> Examples of modulated accumulation with reference to the confusion and complexity of emotions appear throughout Levi’s works: see, for example, *L*, OCII 270, and *SNOQ*, OCII 618–619.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Agamben 2018, 822–823: “come ogni tentativo di dare spiegazioni, il capitolo del libro che porta il titolo *La vergogna* risult[a] alla fine insoddisfacente. [Levi] si sottopone a un esame di coscienza così puerile da lasciare il lettore a disagio. [I]l disagio del lettore non può che riflettere qui l’imbarazzo del superstite, la sua impossibilità di venire a capo della vergogna” (“like all attempts at explanations, the chapter of the book entitled ‘Shame’ is ultimately unsatisfying. [Levi] submits himself to a test of conscience so puerile that it leaves the reader uneasy. [T]he reader’s unease can only be a reflection of the survivor’s embarrassment, his incapacity to master shame” [Agamben 1999, 88]).

herself sets out to criticize and yet roughly adheres to in her book, including in its title; a focus on *pudore* may complicate and fruitfully problematize such a binary.

I believe that Levi's discussion of the emotional constellation of *vergogna*, famously enunciated in his last book, deserves to be considered beyond the conventional typology of guilt and shame, according to a more nuanced tripartition between guilt, shame, and *pudore*—the latter being in fact closer to the *disagio* that he describes in *I sommersi e i salvati*. While some critics who read the opening lines of *La tregua* and Levi's further commentary in *I sommersi e i salvati* have taken him as proponent of a "theory of shame" (Harrowitz 2016, 112), this paper presents Levi's work as a case study of a *practice* of *pudore* based on a constant and fruitful tension between exposure and modesty in his writing. *Pudore* is a concept hardly translatable into English, roughly pertaining to the same semantic field of such words as "modesty," "restraint," "embarrassment," "reserve," "decency," and "discretion."<sup>7</sup> In keeping with Levi's own treatment of emotions, I do not aim to propose a univocal definition of *pudore*; rather, my main focus is on Levi's testimonial production, where *pudore* features as an object of representation that also informs the mode of writing. Can writing about the violation of physical *pudore* that took place in the concentration camp be filtered through the lens of stylistic and rhetorical *pudore*? If so, what is the relationship between exposure and modesty in Levi's Holocaust testimony?

This article shows how Levi understood the Holocaust as an assault on human *pudore*, framing his testimony (and, more generally, his writing) in a constant negotiation between exposure and modesty, that is to say between representing and concealing, between saying and not saying.<sup>8</sup> At the level of content, his testimonial works present "la natura insanabile dell'offesa, che dilaga come un contagio" ("the incurable nature of the offense, which spreads like an infection") with specific reference to the Nazi attack on both external and internal layers of defense, involving a *spoliazione* (stripping) in the sense of a literal stripping naked as well as a moral plundering. As a reaction to such a negative process, Levi configures his writing by means of a stylistic practice informed by *pudore*—as evident from his constant appeal to avoidance language, understatement, and even irony—that he himself describes as *rivestire* (clothing) people and facts with words. Thus, he responds to the "contagio del male" (which he calls, "uno dei temi ricorrenti del libro [*La tregua*]" ["one of the recurrent themes of the book"; {OCI 1405}]) by appealing to an affective compromise—both partially waiving his own sense of *pudore* when putting into words what he endured and witnessed in the camp, and, at the same time, managing to partially restore the modesty and human decency so brutally denied in the concentration camp precisely through the mode of testimonial representation.

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<sup>7</sup> On "discretion as prudence and tact" as one of Levi's "ordinary virtues," see Gordon 2001, 84. The word "pudency" exists in literary language, but is seldom used.

<sup>8</sup> This is not another contribution about the "unspeakable" nature of the Holocaust (for an exhaustive study of this trope, see Trezise 2001). In response to the Adornian statement invoking the extreme form of artistic and testimonial *pudore*, namely the silence of poetry—and, by extension, of literature—after Auschwitz (see Adorno 2004, 361–365), Levi always objected with his testimonial, and markedly literary, effort to represent the Nazi genocide (see OCIII 469). Rather than focusing on the relationship between language and silence, like Steiner 1967 and others, in this paper I address the tension between *pudore* and exposure in Levi's testimonial writing as an aspect of a wider, productive tension between modesty and exhibitionism running throughout his oeuvre.

## 1. *Offesa*

The leaflet advertising the first edition of *Se questo è un uomo* in 1947 ties the ethical question that the book raises to the experience of being stripped naked and morally destroyed at Auschwitz: “È ancora un uomo chi di ora in ora, di prova in prova, viene spogliato dell’aspetto fisico e distrutto nella sua esistenza morale?” (OCI 1460; “Is this still a man, he who day after day, trial after trial, is stripped of his physical appearance and destroyed in his moral existence?” [the author of this text is probably Franco Antonicelli]). Like Primo Levi, several Holocaust survivors link the stripping of people (the *spoliazione*, or *spogliazione*) to a moral plunder. Piero Caleffi, a political prisoner deported to Mauthausen, writes about “[l]a spoliazione totale [...]. Non siamo più *noi*, siamo bestiame la cui vita non conta” (1955, 129; “the total despoliation [...]. We are no longer ourselves, we are beasts whose life is unworthy”), and Giuliana Tedeschi, a Jewish deportee to Birkenau, insists on the gendered implication of what she defines a “spoliazione dell’individualità femminile” (Bravo and Jalla 1987, 206; “despoliation of feminine individuality”).<sup>9</sup> If we understand *pudore* as the affect that preserves an individual’s physical as well as interior privacy in a social context, this *spoliazione*—something that all prisoners experience first upon arrival at the concentration camp and then routinely within the barbed wire—is among the most emblematic images of *pudore* violation.<sup>10</sup>

Testimonial accounts of the journey of deportation and the arrival at the concentration camp often reference physical experiences of suffering and humiliation, including violations on the deportees’ sense of *pudore* such as: a. overcrowding and unavoidable body contact (“Il nostro sonno inquieto era interrotto sovente da liti rumorose e futili, da imprecazioni, da calci e pugni vibrati alla cieca come difesa contro qualche contatto molesto e inevitabile” [*SQU*, OCI 145; “Our restless sleep was often interrupted by noisy and futile disputes, by curses, by kicks and punches delivered blindly to ward off some troublesome and inevitable contact” {CWI 14}]); b. poor hygiene conditions, with special reference to the question of primary needs (“Per tutti, [...] evacuare in pubblico era angoscioso o impossibile: un trauma a cui la nostra civiltà non ci prepara, una ferita profonda inferta alla dignità umana, un attentato osceno e pieno di presagio” [*SES*, OCII 1215; “For everyone, [...] evacuating in public was agonizing or impossible, a trauma for which our civilization leaves us unprepared, a deep wound inflicted on human dignity, an obscene and ominous attack” {CWIII 2490–2491}]); c. lack of privacy, which some try to remedy (“Dopo due giorni di viaggio trovammo chiodi confitti nelle pareti di legno, ne ripiantammo due in un angolo, e con uno spago e una coperta improvvisammo un riparo, sostanzialmente simbolico” [*SES*, OCII 1215; “After traveling for two days we found a couple of nails stuck in the wooden walls, repositioned them in a corner, and with string and blanket improvised a shelter that was largely symbolic” {CWIII 2491}]); and d. exposure to the mocking gaze of the Nazis (“Le SS della scorta non nascondevano il loro divertimento al vedere uomini e

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<sup>9</sup> See also Caleffi 1955, 133: “quel sistema che iniziava la distruzione della persona umana al suo ingresso, con la spoliazione e la grottesca rasatura e la vestizione con orridi stracci” (“that system that began destroying human beings upon arrival, with the stripping naked and the preposterous shaving and the dressing with awful rags”). Ravensbrück survivor Lidia Beccaria Rolfi links the *spoliazione* with her loss of Christian faith: “Ho pregato con tanta fede, ma da quando sono giunta qui, dal giorno in cui mi hanno strappato la medaglia Benedetta che portavo al collo, dopo avermi spogliata nuda, non ho più pregato” (Maida 2008, 176; “I prayed with lots of faith, but since I arrived here, since the day when they ripped my blessed pendant off my neck, after stripping me naked, I prayed no more”).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *SES*, OCII 1216, “La giornata del Lager era costellata di innumerevoli spogliazioni vessatorie” (“The day in the Lager was punctuated by countless irritating moments of denuding” [CWIII 2492]).

donne accovacciarsi dove potevano, sulle banchine, in mezzo ai binari; ed i passeggeri tedeschi esprimevano apertamente il loro disgusto” [SES, OCII 1215; “The SS guards did not hide their amusement at seeing men and women squatting wherever they could, on the benches, on the tracks. The German travelers expressed their disgust” {CWIII 2491}]).

The liminal space of the forced journey on freight or cattle cars is crucial insofar as it both prefigures and symbolizes much of the violence that is at the core of survivor narratives (see Greppi 2012). In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi’s own recollection of the deportation journey in the fifth essay of the book, “Violenza inutile” (“Useless Violence”) gives way to the reflection on the “useless violence” of the Holocaust: “Era effettivamente un prologo. Nella vita che doveva seguire, nel ritmo quotidiano del Lager, l’offesa al pudore rappresentava, almeno all’inizio, una parte importante della sofferenza globale” (SES, OCII 1215; “This was in effect a prologue. In the life that was to follow, in the daily rhythms of the Lager, the affront to decency represented, at least at the beginning, a major component of the overall suffering” [CWIII 2491]). *Offesa* (offense), Levi’s “seminal term” (Gordon 2001, 77) for the event of the Holocaust which also features in the opening lines of *La tregua*, is once again linked with *pudore*, in an expression bearing juridical resonance (see articles 527–529 of the Italian Penal Code, 2.9, Ch. 2: *Delle offese al pudore e all’onore sessuale* [Crimes against Public Decency and Sexual Honor]). In fact, even beyond the account of deportation, the offense or the affront to decency is an embodied experience that Levi presents as emblematic of the overall process of humiliation and, ultimately, of human destruction orchestrated by the Nazis, at Auschwitz and beyond: “L’inutile crudeltà del pudore violato condizionava l’esistenza di tutti i Lager” (SES, OCII 1216; “The useless cruelty of violated modesty conditioned life in every Lager” [CWIII 2492]). Therefore, I propose reading “Violenza inutile” as an essay on the violation of *pudore*, and on the crucial and metonymic relationship between such *offesa* and the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> The first two instances of such a violation mentioned by Levi are the public nature of group latrines and, chiefly, the forced nakedness: “Analoga alla costrizione escrementizia era la costrizione della nudità. In Lager si entrava nudi: anzi, piú che nudi, privi non solo degli abiti e delle scarpe (che venivano confiscati) ma dei capelli e di tutti gli altri peli” (SES, OCII 1216–1217; “The forced nakedness was similar to the forced evacuation. You entered the Lager naked: more than naked, in fact, deprived not only of your clothing and shoes (which were confiscated) but also of all the hair on your head and body” [CWIII 2492]). Other instances of the violation of *pudore* in “Violenza inutile” include: the tattooing, an “operazione [...] traumatica” (“traumatic procedure”) because of its dehumanizing intent, and because it was particularly offensive to orthodox Jews given the prohibition against tattoos derived from the Mosaic Law (SES, OCII 1220); the deportation of old and dying people (“violare le porte dei morenti” [SES, OCII 1221; “violat[ing] the doors of the dying” {CWIII 2498}]); the “fatica puramente persecutoria” of slave labor (SES, OCII 1222; “purely punitive labors” [CWIII 2499]); the medical experiments (“[...]l’empio uso che è stato fatto [non saltuariamente, ma con metodo] del corpo umano come di un oggetto, di una cosa di nessuno, di cui si poteva disporre in modo arbitrario” [SES, OCII 1223; “the evil use that was made (not sporadically but methodically) of the human body as an object, belonging to no one, that could be disposed of arbitrarily” {CWIII 2500}]); and—for a kind of offense that probably transcends the violation of *pudore*—the use of human remains for industrial purposes (“sulla motivazione del profitto prevaleva quella dell’oltraggio” [SES, OCII 1224; “their contempt prevailed over the profit motive” {CWIII 2501}]).

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<sup>11</sup> On the *spudoratezza* of the Holocaust, see PS, OCII 1314.

The relevance of *pudore* violation is already adumbrated by Primo Levi's description of his arrival at Auschwitz in the second chapter of *Se questo è un uomo*, "Sul fondo" ("On the Bottom"), which begins "in una camera vasta e nuda" (*SQU*, OCI 149; "an enormous bare room" [CWI 18]) and appears entirely dominated by the nakedness of the new inmates.<sup>12</sup> In "Sul fondo," an SS officer conveys to the prisoners the order to strip naked ("bisogna spogliarsi e fare un fagotto degli abiti in un certo modo" [OCI 149; "we are to undress and make a bundle of our clothes in a particular way" {CWI 19}]) by means of Flesch, a deportee chosen as interpreter because of his knowledge of both German and Italian: "un uomo chiuso e taciturno, per il quale provo un istintivo rispetto perché sento che ha cominciato a soffrire prima di noi" (OCI 151; "a closed, taciturn man, for whom I feel an instinctive respect, because I am aware that he began to suffer before we did" [CWI 20–21]). Levi reports the translation mostly through indirect discourse; the only two sentences that Flesch pronounces in the chapter are disturbing and offensive: first prompting an elderly Mr Bergman to leave his truss ("Il maresciallo dice di deporre il cinto, e che le sarà dato quello del signor Coen" [OCI 150; "The officer says, take off the truss, and you will be given Mr Coen's" {CWI 19}]), and then brutally shutting prisoners up ("Il maresciallo dice che dovete fare silenzio, perché questa non è una scuola rabbinica" [OCI 151; "The officer says you must be quiet, because this is not a rabbinical school" {CWI 20}]). For both utterances, Levi records the discomfort of the interpreter. On the one hand, Flesch begins to suffer before the others, as Levi notes, because he is the first to experience the impudence of Nazi rhetoric and behavior;<sup>13</sup> on the other hand, the figure of the interpreter foreshadows Levi's own future task to mediate the Holocaust as witness and "ideal translator" (Insana 2009, 52).

"Sul fondo" presents the entry procedure to the camp, including the *spoliazione* of the newly arrived prisoners, as a "dramma pazzo" (OCI 151; "some mad play" [CWI 21]), with a hectic succession of characters "entering" the scene; whenever they are inmates, Levi characterizes them by reference to their uniforms: "Entrano con violenza quattro con rasoi, pennelli e tosatrici, hanno pantaloni e giacche a righe, un numero cucito sul petto" (OCI 150; "Four men with razors, shaving brushes, and clippers burst in; they wear striped trousers and jackets, with a number sewn on the front" [CWI 19]); "Di nuovo si aprì la porta, ed entrò uno vestito a righe" (OCI 151; "The door opened again, and someone else wearing stripes came in" [CWI 21]); "Poi la porta si è aperta, ed è entrato un ragazzo dal vestito a righe" (OCI 154; "Then the door opens and in comes a [...] boy in striped clothes" [CWI 24]). Levi's description of how he and the other people from

<sup>12</sup> The adjective "nudi" ("naked"), always in the plural form and referred to the prisoners, occurs eight times in this chapter alone. See, for example: "eccoci tutti chiusi, *nudi* to sati e in piedi, coi piedi nell'acqua, è una sala di docce. Siamo soli, a poco a poco lo stupore si scioglie e parliamo, e tutti domandano e nessuno risponde. Se siamo *nudi* in una sala di docce, vuol dire che faremo la doccia. Se faremo la doccia, è perché non ci ammazzano ancora. E allora perché ci fanno stare in piedi, e non ci danno da bere, e nessuno ci spiega niente, e non abbiamo né scarpe né vestiti ma siamo tutti *nudi* coi piedi nell'acqua, e fa freddo ed è cinque giorni che viaggiamo e non possiamo neppure sederci" (*SQU*, OCI 150, emphasis added; "here we are, locked in, naked, shorn, and standing, standing with our feet in water—it is a shower room. We are alone. Slowly the astonishment dissolves, and we speak, and everyone asks questions and no one answers. If we are naked in a shower room, it means that we'll have a shower. If we have a shower it's because they are not going to kill us yet. Why then do they keep us standing, and give us nothing to drink, while nobody explains anything, and we have no shoes or clothes, but are all naked with our feet in the water, and it's cold and we've been traveling for five days and can't even sit down" [CWI 20]).

<sup>13</sup> See *SQU*, OCI 149–150: "Tutti guardiamo l'interprete, e l'interprete interrogò il tedesco, e il tedesco fumava e lo guardò da parte a parte come se fosse stato trasparente, come se nessuno avesse parlato" ("We all look at the interpreter, and the interpreter asks the German, and the German smokes and looks right through him, as if he were transparent, as if no one had spoken" [CWI 19]).



his convoy get to be clothed in the same striped uniforms ends with these words: “Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo” (OCI 153; “Then for the first time we become aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man” [CWI 22]). This is the first occurrence of the term *offesa* in Levi’s oeuvre. The line is already present in the 1947 edition (*De Silva*, OCI 18) and sums up some of the major preoccupations of *Se questo è un uomo* and of Levi’s testimony at large, namely those of communication and language on the one hand, and of the inhumanity of the Holocaust on the other. That the topos of ineffability hinted at here and elsewhere in the book does not exhaust the scope of Levi’s testimony nor annihilate its communicative intent has been noted by critics (Gordon 2001, 77–70); *Se questo è un uomo* itself, together with the rest of Levi’s production as author and public witness corroborate his belief in the power of communication. What is crucial here is the apparent relationship between the physical exposure derived from the initial *spoliazione* and the overall *offesa*, which Levi identifies with the goal of the concentrationary system itself: “la demolizione di un uomo.” Later occurrences of the term in the book are also linked to exposure: “siamo schiavi, privi di ogni diritto, *esposti a ogni offesa*, votati a morte certa” (OCI 165, emphasis added; “We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to an almost certain death” [CWI 37]), and “ci ritroviamo desti senza remissione, *esposti all’offesa*, atrocemente nudi e vulnerabili” (OCI 185, emphasis added; “we find ourselves mercilessly awake, exposed to insult, atrociously naked and vulnerable” [CWI 60]). Thus, *offesa* becomes for Levi a marker encompassing both the violation of *pudore* (“l’offesa al pudore,” as he explicitly puts it in *SES*, OCII 1215) and, by metonymy, the demolition of humanity in the Holocaust (what in his last book he calls *destituzione* [destitution]).<sup>14</sup>

Together with the stripping bare, the camp uniform, completing the grotesque metamorphosis of the deportees into “pupazzi miserabili e sordidi” (*SQU*, OCI 153; “miserable, sordid puppets” [CWI 22]), is part of the *offesa*. In “Sul fondo,” deprivation defines the prisoners even after they have been “dressed” with the camp uniform: “ci hanno tolto gli abiti, le scarpe, anche i capelli” (OCI 153; “they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair” [CWI 23]). As I have argued elsewhere (Miglianti 2016), concentration camp uniforms function as a means of depersonalization and assimilation to the camp system, contributing to the *demolizione*, or destruction of humanity. While *pudore* as an affect and a behavior is opposed to the disclosure of a body part or an emotion, the contrary is experienced by the newly arrived prisoners, for whom the uniforms mark the entrance into a world dominated by humiliation (as understood by Guenther 2012, 61) and exposure. One mortifying trait of concentration camp uniforms that Levi

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<sup>14</sup> Besides its occurrences in *La tregua* and *I sommersi e i salvati* (quoted above), as well as in Levi’s activity as public speaker and newspaper contributor, the notion of the persecution of European Jews as *offesa* returns in the novel *Se non ora quando?* (*If Not Now, When?*), where the antisemitism that led to the Holocaust is defined as the Nazis’ commitment “a spogliare gli ebrei, a deriderli, a picchiarli e a chiuderli nei ghetti” (*SNOQ*, OCII 566; “to start stripping the Jews of their possessions, mocking them, beating them, and locking them up in ghettos” [CWII 1730]), and Gedale’s song begins with the words “Ci riconoscete? Siamo le pecore del ghetto, / Tosate per mille anni, rassegnate all’offesa” (*SNOQ*, OCII 533; “Do you know us? We’re the sheep of the ghetto, / Shorn for a thousand years, resigned to injury” [CWII 1688]). The term *destituzione* appears for the first time in *La tregua* (*T*, OCI 418—see also OCI 1397). In *I sommersi e i salvati*, all occurrences of the term pertain to reflections on physical exposure, e.g. “Avevamo sopportato la sporcizia, la promiscuità e la destituzione soffrendone assai meno di quanto ne avremmo sofferto nella vita normale, perché il nostro metro morale era mutato” (*SES*, OCII 1190; “We had endured filth, overcrowding, and deprivation, suffering much less than we would have in normal life because our moral compass had shifted” [CWI 2461]; see also *SES*, OCII 1217, 1229, and 1231).

often specifically recalls is the blasphemous Nazi practice of making undergarments out of the tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of uniforms within the life of the camp is paramount: aside from playing an important role in the new inmates' first impact with the concentrationary system, they bear the symbols of the classification of prisoners (see *SQU*, OCI 158). Sometimes the triangle color becomes a metonymy for the category of prisoners, e.g. “i nostri padroni effettivi sono i triangoli verdi” (Ibid.; “Our masters in effect are the ‘green triangles’” [CWI 29]); similarly, Levi uses the term *stracci* (rags) to define not only the prisoners' attire (“indossando stracci su stracci” [*SQU*, OCI 261; “putting on rag after rag” {CWI 147}]) but also the prisoners themselves (“Gli ‘stracci’ non si ribellano” [*SQU*, *Appendice*, OCI 288; “The ‘ragged’ do not rebel” {CWI 175}]).<sup>16</sup> Nazi regulations prescribed a certain care of the camp uniform, made of prohibitions (among other things, it was forbidden to “dormire con la giacca, o senza mutanda, o col cappello in testa [...]; uscire di baracca con la giacca sbottonata, o col bavero rialzato; portare sotto gli abiti carta o paglia contro il freddo” [*SQU*, OCI 159; “to sleep in one's jacket, or without one's pants, or with one's cap on [...]; to leave the barrack with one's jacket unbuttoned, or with the collar raised; to wear paper or straw under one's clothes against the cold” {CWI 29}]), obligations (“Il regolamento del Lager prescriveva di mettersi sull'attenti e di scoprirsi il capo” [OCI 266; “The rules of the Lager stated that one must stand at attention and uncover one's head” {CWI 152}]), and “best practices,” including being able to sew one's buttons, secure acceptable shoes, and defend one's allotted “clothes” against theft. This is not just because the inmates are responsible for the uniforms they have received (OCI 199), but also because their very survival may depend on them: in Auschwitz, the state of the uniform speaks for the status of a prisoner within the camp, with cleanliness being a marker—and oftentimes a consequence—of some sort of privilege.<sup>17</sup> These “best practices” are all linked to survival, as are the attempts of the prisoners to partake into the clandestine economy of the camp by trading their garments in exchange for food (“anche le pietre del Lager sanno che, novantanove volte su cento, chi non ha camicia se la è venduta per fame” [OCI 199; “even the stones in the Lager know that ninety-nine times of a

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<sup>15</sup> “Ricordo qui per inciso che il vilipendio del manto di preghiera è antico come l'antisemitismo: con questi manti, sequestrati ai deportati, le SS facevano confezionare mutande, che venivano poi distribuite agli ebrei prigionieri nei Lager” (*SP*, OCI 862; “I note here in passing that contempt for this prayer shawl is as ancient as anti-Semitism: from such shawls, confiscated from the deportees, the SS had underwear made, which was then distributed to the Jewish prisoners in the camps” [CWI 756]). See also *Rapporto*, OCI 1179, and Tinterri 2014, 115. The entity of such a *vilipendio* (insult) is evident in the offensive subversion of the original function of the tallit as “support de la pudeur” (Horvilleur 2018, 83; “support for modesty”).

<sup>16</sup> See also *SES*, OCI 1248 on the ordinary person at Auschwitz as “un uomo-straccio” (“a ragged man”), therefore incapable of resistance (“con gli stracci, come già sapeva Marx, le rivoluzioni non si fanno nel mondo reale, bensì solo in quello della retorica letteraria o cinematografica” [*SES*, OCI 1248–1249; “with rags, as Marx knew, you can't start a revolution in the real world, only in the world of literary and film rhetoric” {CWI 2530}])—and, similarly, the reference to “uomini-stracci” in Levi's 1961 “Testimonianza per Eichmann” (Testimony for Eichmann, *PS*, OCII 1315).

<sup>17</sup> In a letter dated 16 August 1966 to costume designer Gianni Polidori, in preparation for a theatrical adaptation of *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi specifies, for example, that “Henri [see below, section 2] dovrebbe avere una uniforme pulita e non rappezzata” (Tinterri 2014, 112; “Henri should have a clean and unpatched uniform”). For other references to the cleanliness of uniforms (especially those of younger deportees) as a marker of sexual exploitation in male concentration camps, see *T*, OCI 321. On the relationship between the state of the uniform and the status of a female concentration camp prisoner, see Beccaria Rolfi's comment: “Anche nella città concentrazionaria ‘l'abito fa il monaco’, l'abito indica la condizione sociale, la classe sociale a cui la deportata appartiene” (Beccaria Rolfi and Bruzzone 2003, 26; “Even in the concentrationary city, ‘the cowl makes the monk’, clothes state the social condition, the social class to which each deportee belongs”).

hundred those who have no shirt have sold it out of hunger” {CWI 75}}) or sewing a secret pocket that would become a repository for stolen goods (as Levi sets out to do in OCI 250), which may be traded for food. The strong tie between the primary needs of food and clothing is evident in one crucial reflection on the failure of ordinary language to convey the hardships of the Holocaust:

Chi non morrà, soffrirà minuto per minuto, per ogni giorno, per tutti i giorni: dal mattino avanti l'alba fino alla distribuzione della zuppa serale dovrà tenere costantemente i muscoli tesi, danzare da un piede all'altro, sbattersi le braccia sotto le ascelle per resistere al freddo. Dovrà spendere pane per procurarsi guanti, e perdere ore di sonno per ripararli quando saranno scuciti. [...] Se i Lager fossero durati più a lungo, un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato; e di questo si sente il bisogno per spiegare cosa è faticare l'intera giornata nel vento, sotto zero, con solo indosso camicia, mutande, giacca e brache di tela, e in corpo debolezza e fame e consapevolezza della fine che viene. (*SQU*, OCI 236)<sup>18</sup>

(Whoever does not die will suffer minute by minute, all day, every day: from the morning, before dawn, until the distribution of the evening soup we will have to keep our muscles continually tensed, dance from foot to foot, beat our arms under our armpits against the cold. We will have to spend bread to acquire gloves, and lose hours of sleep to repair them when they come unstitched. [...] “If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have come into being; and we feel the need of this language in order to express what it means to labor all day in the wind, in temperatures below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, a cloth jacket and trousers, and in our body weakness, hunger, and knowledge of the approaching end. [CWI 117–118])

Though clothing is ostensibly necessary for survival, Levi nonetheless stresses the degrading nature of the concentration camp uniforms, which become a stand-in for the overall *offesa*. Rather than protecting, concentration camp uniforms expose—to the point that, as I will show, moral resistance seems paradoxically slightly more possible when the prisoners are free from the symbolic and physical constraint of the uniform.

## 2. *Difesa*

The initial *spoliazione* upon arrival at Auschwitz is the overarching theme of Levi's famous thought experiments in “Sul fondo”:

Ma consideri ognuno, quanto valore, quanto significato è racchiuso anche nelle più piccole nostre abitudini quotidiane, nei cento oggetti nostri che il più

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<sup>18</sup> For an analogous relationship between survival and the satisfaction of primary needs of food and clothing see Levi's poem “Il superstite”: “Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro / E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni” (*AOI*, OCII 737; “It's not my fault if I live and breathe / And eat and drink and sleep and put on clothes” [CWIII 1967]); and Beccaria Rolfi's *Taccuini*, “Voglio vivere per tornare, per ricordare, per mangiare, per vestirmi, per darmi il rossetto e per raccontare forte, per gridare a tutti che sulla terra esiste l'inferno” (Maida 2008, 171; “I want to live in order to return, to remember, to eat, to dress myself, to put on lipstick and to tell my story loud, to scream to everyone that hell exists on Earth”).

umile mendicante possiede: un fazzoletto, una vecchia lettera, la fotografia di una persona cara. Queste cose sono parte di noi, quasi come membra del nostro corpo; né è pensabile di venirne privati, nel nostro mondo, ché subito ne ritroveremmo altri a sostituire i vecchi, altri oggetti che sono nostri in quanto custodi e suscitatori di memorie nostre.

Si immagini ora un uomo a cui, insieme con le persone amate, vengano tolti la sua casa, le sue abitudini, i suoi abiti, tutto infine, letteralmente tutto quanto possiede: sarà un uomo vuoto, ridotto a sofferenza e bisogno, dimentico di dignità e discernimento, poiché accade facilmente, a chi ha perso tutto, di perdere se stesso; tale quindi, che si potrà a cuor leggero decidere della sua vita o morte al di fuori di ogni senso di affinità umana; nel caso più fortunato, in base ad un puro giudizio di utilità. Si comprenderà allora il duplice significato del termine «Campo di annientamento», e sarà chiaro che cosa intendiamo esprimere con questa frase: giacere sul fondo. (*SQU*, OCI 153)

(But consider what value, what meaning is contained in even the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions of even the poorest beggar: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photograph of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; it is inconceivable to be deprived of them in our world, for we would immediately find others to replace the old ones, other objects that are ours as guardians and evocations of our memories.

Imagine now a man who has been deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, of literally everything, in short, that he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, heedless of dignity and restraint, for he who loses everything can easily lose himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided, with no sense of human affinity—in the most fortunate case, judged purely on the basis of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double meaning of the term “extermination camp,” and it will be clear what we seek to express with the phrase “lying on the bottom.” [CWI 23])

These passages have rightly been analyzed with reference to Levi’s debt to the scientific method (Porro 2009, Bucciantini 2019) and to the anthropologic practice of participant observation (Rudolf 1990, Volpato and Contarello 1999, Miglianti 2017); but they also clarify the relevance of concentration camp entry procedures to the overall *demolizione* of a human being. Levi’s rational appeal to empathy through the reader’s identification (with the insistent repetition of the possessive “nostro” in the first paragraph) and imagination (“Si immagini ora”) suggests a more nuanced understanding of the process of *spoliazione*, one where the stripping away produces not only the exposure of nakedness through undressing, but also the emptying of humanity by means of deprivation—a deprivation that for many began even prior to deportation, with the requisition of goods and property, and that is symbolized upon arrival by the confiscation of all private objects (the “cento oggetti nostri” that provided another layer of clothing to the deportees). Indeed, the verb *spogliare* encompasses both meanings of stripping bare and plundering. Likewise, the term *spoglia*—often used in the plural, *spoglie*—can refer to both the covering or clothing of something, including the corpse (with reference to the Catholic notion of the body as mortal dress for the soul), and to war prey or spoils (with reference to the armor of the defeated

warrior becoming a possession of the victor). In Levi's reflection, the result of the stripping away of a person's loved ones, home, habits, belongings, and clothes is "un uomo vuoto" ("a hollow man"), whose own humanity is at risk, "poiché accade facilmente, a chi ha perso tutto, di perdere se stesso" ("for he who loses everything can easily lose himself").

Once again, the violation of *pudore* (adumbrated by the specification "dimentico di dignità") is linked to a challenge to the very humanity of Auschwitz inmates, to the point that the empty face becomes for Levi the emblem of the *sommersi* or *Muselmänner* of the camp: "Essi popolano la mia memoria della loro presenza senza volto, e se potessi racchiudere in una immagine tutto il male del nostro tempo, sceglierei questa immagine, che mi è familiare: un uomo scarno, dalla fronte china e dalle spalle curve, sul cui volto e nei cui occhi non si possa leggere traccia di pensiero" (*SQU*, OCI 209; "They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could encompass all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image, which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, head bowed and shoulders bent, on whose face and in whose eyes no trace of thought can be seen" [CWI 85]).<sup>19</sup> The personification of what Levi would later define as the Nazi "mistica del vuoto" (*T*, OCI 400; "mystique of the void" [CWI 319]) in *Se questo è un uomo* is Null Achtzehn, whose camp (non-)name, derived from the last ciphers of the matriculation number tattooed on his forearm (018) and marking his dehumanization ("solo un uomo è degno di avere un nome, e [...] Null Achtzehn non è più un uomo" [*SQU*, OCI 167; "only a man is worthy of a name, and [...] Null Achtzehn is no longer a man" {CWI 39}], becomes an antonomasia for the condition of the *Muselmann* ("un qualunque Null Achtzehn" [OCI 207; "some Null Achtzehn," {CWI 83}]): "Credo che lui stesso abbia dimenticato il suo nome, certo si comporta come se così fosse. Quando parla, quando guarda, dà l'impressione di essere vuoto interiormente, nulla più che un involucro, come certe spoglie di insetti che si trovano in riva agli stagni, attaccate con un filo ai sassi, e il vento le scuote" (*SQU*, OCI 167, emphasis added; "I think that even he has forgotten his name—certainly he acts as if this were so. When he speaks, when he looks around, he gives the impression of being empty inside, no more than a husk, like the slough of some insect that one finds on the edge of a pond, attached to the rocks by a thread and shaken by the wind" [CWI 39–40]). According to Cavaglion, "L'involucro è, nel senso in cui adopera l'espressione il critico francese Charles Mauron, la 'metafora ossessiva' di Levi: è il guscio, la corazza, la nicchia, il nido disfatto, la casa, ossia una presenza importante in *SQU*" (Levi 2012, 185; "The husk is, in the way in which the French critic Charles Mauron uses it, Levi's obsessive 'metaphor': it is the shell, the armor, the lair, the disassembled nest, the home; it is an important presence in *If This is a Man*"). The comparison to the slough (*spoglie*) of some insects presents Null Achtzehn, that is the *Muselmann*, as an emptied out *involucro*, prefiguring the ultimate fate of his mortal remains (*spoglie*). Similarly, throughout the book, Levi compares the prisoners—including himself—to "vermi vuoti di anima" (*SQU*, OCI 191; "worms emptied of a soul"), describing the camp as a "mondo di morti e di larve" (OCI 276; "world of the dead and of larvae"), in a powerful and disturbing hysteron proteron.<sup>20</sup> Such entomological images—the empty slough and worms on the one hand, the

<sup>19</sup> On the emptied-out humanity of the *Muselmann* in Levi, see Gordon 2015, 71. See also Tedeschi 2005, 17–18 for an analogous testimony on the *Muselmänner* as hollow people.

<sup>20</sup> For another comparison between the prisoners and worms, see "cenciosi, cadenti, scheletrici, i malati in grado di muoversi si trascinarono per ogni dove, come una invasione di vermi" (*SQU*, OCI 265; "ragged, feeble, skeleton-like, the sick who were able to move dragged themselves in all directions over the frozen ground, like an invasion of worms," CWI 151); for the identification with larvae, see *SQU*, OCI 160 on the "strana andatura dell'esercito di larve che ogni sera rientra in parata," and *T*, OCI 316. Levi's short story "Angelica farfalla" (*SN*, OCI 515–523; "Angelic Butterfly")—deriving its title from *Purg.* X, where Dante uses worms as a metaphor for mankind (see

defenseless larvae on the other—may appear diametrically opposed, but they actually point to interrelated notions of nakedness, exposure, and lack of protection.

*Pudore*'s function is two-fold, preserving an individual's physical as well as interior privacy. Conversely, Levi presents the *offesa* or *demolizione di un uomo* in Nazi concentration camps as an attack on both external and internal layers of defense. Those among the prisoners who manage to survive need to negotiate their own coping strategies against such an overwhelming exposure. In the chapter "I sommersi e i salvati," Levi offers four examples of "vie della salvazione" (*SQU*, OCI 209; "paths to salvation" [CWI 85]).<sup>21</sup> Schepschel, a Galician saddler, is presented as an unremarkable man, whose description Levi articulates by means of a rapid repetition of negations: "da molto tempo si è disabituato a pensare a sé altrimenti che come a un sacco che deve essere periodicamente riempito" (OCI 211; "for a long time now he has been accustomed to thinking of himself merely as a sack that needs periodic refilling" [CWI 87]). The image of the sack needing periodic refilling is probably less definitive than that of the slough associated to Null Achtzehn, but it is not far from the idea of an *involucro*-man, whose body is completely reduced to his primary needs in the struggle for survival. Alfred L., a famous engineer who "in campo era entrato come tutti entravano: nudo, solo e sconosciuto" (OCI 211; "entered the camp like everyone else: naked, alone, and unknown" [CWI 88]), relies on his discipline for a long-term plan based on the intuition that "un aspetto rispettabile è la miglior garanzia di essere rispettato" (OCI 212; "a respectable appearance is the best guarantee of being respected" [CWI 89]). In order to do so, he invests energy and even food in keeping a dignified appearance, securing a decent uniform for himself ("persino il suo abito a righe era singolarmente adatto alla sua corporatura, pulito e nuovo" [OCI 212; "even his striped garments were singularly suited to his physique, and were clean and new" {CWI 89}]) and carefully washing his face, hands, and shirt—a risky act that Levi presents as proof of his rigor.<sup>22</sup> Elias Lindzin, the dwarf of the Chemical Kommando, owes his *salvazione* to his semblance, and specifically to his body, which Levi describes at length as both fascinating and monstrous: "Quando è nudo, si distingue ogni muscolo lavorare sotto la pelle, potente e mobile come un animale a sé stante; [d]alla sua persona emana un senso di vigore bestiale" (*SQU*, OCI 213; "When he is naked you can see every muscle rippling beneath his skin, powerful and mobile, like an animal unique of its kind [...]. A sense of bestial vigor emanates from his body" [CWI 90]). Elias' strength, which allows him to carry out heavy work and to violently impose his will over weaker inmates (Levi himself recalls being attacked by him in *SES*, OCII 1232–1233), combined with what the author describes as an atavistic stupidity, contribute to his uncanny survival: "Elias

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Pianzola 2017, 121)—clearly refers to the reduction of human beings to larvae in concentration camps through the experiments of Professor Leeb, a Nazi scientist who "scopre che l'uomo è lo stato larvale di un animale diverso, come il bruco per la farfalle, ma che non raggiunge la muta perché muore troppo presto" (*PS*, OCII 1581; "discovers that man is merely the larva of a different animal, just as the caterpillar is of the butterfly. However, man never undergoes mutation because he dies too early" [CWIII 2649]).

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, in a note to the school edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, the author specifies that the term *salvato* "ha un valore fortemente ironico" (OCI 1416; "has a strongly ironic meaning"). For a parallel reading of Levi's four examples of *salvati* in light of "un'indagine microfisica del potere" ("a microphysical investigation of power"), see Forti 2021.

<sup>22</sup> "[F]acciamo qui notare che lavare la camicia vuol dire trovare il sapone, trovare il tempo, trovare lo spazio nel lavatoio sovraffollato; adattarsi a sorvegliare attentamente, senza distogliere gli occhi un attimo, la camicia bagnata, e indossarla, naturalmente ancora bagnata, all'ora del silenzio, in cui si spengono le luci" (*SQU*, OCI 212; "we would like to point out here that to wash a shirt meant finding soap, finding time, finding space in the overcrowded washhouse; training oneself to keep a careful watch on the wet shirt, without losing sight of it for a moment, and to put it on, naturally still wet, at the time for silence, when the lights are turned out" [CWI 89]).

è sopravvissuto alla distruzione dal di fuori, perché è fisicamente indistruttibile; ha resistito all'annientamento dal di dentro, perché è demente" (*SQU*, OCI 215; "Elias has survived destruction from the outside, because he is physically indestructible; he has resisted annihilation from within because he is insane" [CWI 92]). Finally, young polyglot Henri "si è chiuso in sé come in una corazza, e lotta per vivere senza distrarsi, con tutte le risorse che può trarre dal suo intelletto pronto e dalla sua educazione raffinata" (OCI 216; "he closed himself up, as if in armor, and fights to live without distraction, using all the resources that he can derive from his quick intellect and his refined upbringing" [CWI 93]). His own description is virtually shielded by two references to his "armor"—the one above and the one towards the end of the chapter, "duro e lontano, chiuso nella sua corazza, nemico di tutti, inumanamente scaltro e incomprensibile come il Serpente della Genesi" (OCI 217; "hard and distant, enclosed in armor, the enemy of all, inhumanly sly and incomprehensible, like the Serpent in Genesis" [CWI 95]). Henri's *corazza* (somewhat resonant with Levi's later description of the Nazis as "sordi e ciechi, chiusi in una corazza di ostinazione e di deliberata sconoscenza" [OCI 251; "deaf and blind, encased in an armor of obstinacy and willful refusal to know" {CWI 135}]) is the product of a double affective process: on the one hand, "Henri ha reciso ogni vincolo di affetti" ("Henri cut off every tie of affection" [CWI 93]) as a consequence of the death of his brother;<sup>23</sup> on the other, his survival strategy seems based on organization, theft, and chiefly the manipulation of others through a subtle appeal to their compassion. According to Levi's comparison, "Come l'icneumone paralizza i grossi bruchi pelosi, ferendoli nel loro unico ganglio vulnerabile, così Henri valuta con un'occhiata il soggetto," so that everyone "è conquistato: ascolta con crescente simpatia, si commuove sulla sorte del giovane sventurato, e non occorre molto tempo perché incominci a rendere" (OCI 216; "Like the ichneumon wasp that paralyzes a large hairy caterpillar, wounding it in its sole vulnerable ganglion, Henri sizes up the subject, [so that everyone] is conquered: he listens with increasing sympathy, he is moved by the fate of this unfortunate young man, and it isn't long before he begins to yield returns" [CWI 94]); the friends thus "conquered" become Henri's "protettori" (Ibid; "protectors").

Levi's story itself can offer an additional example of "salvation." Next to the often enumerated factors to which he attributes his survival—chiefly luck, and then his mountaineering training, his profession as chemist, his interest in fellow humans, the goal to bear witness (see *SQU*, *Appendice*, OCI 304), as well as the solidarity of manual worker Lorenzo Perrone (*SQU*, OCI 234–235)—I would like to stress the crucial role played by inwardness and the life of the mind, whose relevance would become apparent in his later development as writer.

In her study of corporeality in Levi's works, Santagostino states that his testimony conveys a "memoria corporea dell'offesa concentratoria" (2004, 41; "embodied memory of the concentrationary offense"). Following Levi's body throughout *Se questo è un uomo* reveals not just a single *spoliazione* upon arrival, but rather a pattern of undressing and dressing. When his foot is wounded and he decides to visit the infirmary, the Ka-Be, the admission procedure requires that he strip naked multiple times, prompting Levi's bewilderment:<sup>24</sup> "questa è una

<sup>23</sup> "Henri," whose real name was Paul Steinberg, survived the Holocaust and went on to write his own memoir, *Chroniques d'ailleurs*, where he touches briefly on Levi's unfavorable description (Steinberg 1996, 151–153) and he talks about his relationship with Philippe Hagenauer, who was actually not his brother and whom he had met at the Drancy transit camp (Ibid., 37–72).

<sup>24</sup> Prisoners are required to undress for the preliminary inspection ("In questa fila ci si spoglia progressivamente, e [...] bisogna essere nudi" [*SQU*, OCI 171; "In this line, you undress progressively, so as to be naked" {CWI 44}]), for the actual inspection ("ci hanno fatti spogliare fuori al freddo, ci hanno tolto le scarpe" [OCI 172; "they made us undress outside in the cold, they took our shoes" {CWI 44}]), and finally at the entrance ("Dentro, mi tolgono

complicata messinscena per farsi beffe di noi. Sarebbe questo l'ospedale? Ci fanno stare nudi in piedi e ci fanno delle domande" (OCI 173; "Is this a complicated rehearsal to make fools of us? Could this be the hospital? They make us stand naked and ask us questions"). The reflection on nakedness—as well as on nakedness as a source of reflection and, paradoxically, protection—becomes clearer in the chapter immediately following "Ka-Be," titled "Le nostre notti" ("Our Nights").

"Le nostre notti" is where the writer discusses the dreams of the concentration camp prisoners. In a description not just of a particular night, but of all nights in the camp, Levi informs the reader that inmates had to undress before going to bed, and that even when using the external latrine at night they could not leave the barrack "se non in tenuta notturna (camicia e mutande)" (*SQU*, OCI 183; "except in night uniform [shirt and pants]" [CWI 58]). In fact, the whole chapter is inscribed between a "spogliarci" (OCI 181; "undress" [CWI 56]) and a "vestirsi" (OCI 185; "get dressed"). This is especially true of the 1947 version (see *De Silva*, OCI 37–42). In the 1958 Einaudi edition, Levi adds eight paragraphs at the beginning of the chapter, strengthening the link between "Le nostre notti" and the preceding "Ka-Be" by means of a reflection on nakedness and bodily boundaries:

Di piú, dal Ka-Be si esce nudi; si ricevono vestiti e scarpe «nuovi» (intendo dire, non quelli lasciati all'ingresso), intorno a cui bisogna adoperarsi con rapidità e diligenza per adattarli alla propria persona, il che comporta fatica e spese. [...]

La facoltà umana di scavarsi una nicchia, di secernere un guscio, di erigersi intorno una tenue barriera di difesa, anche in circostanze apparentemente disperate, è stupefacente, e meriterebbe uno studio approfondito. Si tratta di un prezioso lavoro di adattamento, in parte passivo e inconscio, e in parte attivo: di piantare un chiodo sopra la cuccetta per appendervi le scarpe di notte; di stipulare taciti patti di non aggressione coi vicini; di intuire e accettare le consuetudini e le leggi del singolo Kommando e del singolo Block. In virtù di questo lavoro, dopo qualche settimana si riesce a raggiungere un certo equilibrio, un certo grado di sicurezza di fronte agli imprevisti; ci si è fatto un nido, il trauma del travasamento è superato.

Ma l'uomo che esce dal Ka-Be, nudo e quasi sempre insufficientemente ristabilito, si sente proiettato nel buio e nel gelo dello spazio siderale. I pantaloni gli cascano di dosso, le scarpe gli fanno male, la camicia non ha bottoni. Cerca un contatto umano, e non trova che schiene voltate. È inerme e vulnerabile come un neonato, eppure al mattino dovrà marciare al lavoro. (*SQU*, OCI 179)

(Moreover, they leave Ka-Be naked; they are given "new" clothes and shoes (I mean not those left behind at their entry), which need to be adapted to their own persons with speed and diligence, and this involves effort and expense. [...])

Man's capacity to dig a niche for himself, to secrete a shell, to build around himself a tenuous barrier of defense, even in apparently desperate circumstances, is astonishing and deserves serious study. It is an invaluable exercise of adaptation, partly passive and unconscious, partly active: hammering in a nail above his bunk on which to hang his shoes at night; concluding tacit pacts of

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mantello e sandali, e io mi trovo ancora una volta nudo e ultimo di una fila di scheletri nudi" [OCI 172; "Inside they take off my coat and sandals, and I'm naked again and last in a line of human skeletons" {CWI 45}]).



nonaggression with neighbors; understanding and accepting the habits and laws of the individual Kommando, the individual Block. By virtue of this work, one manages after a few weeks to arrive at a certain equilibrium, a certain degree of security in the face of the unforeseen. One has made oneself a nest: the trauma of the transplantation is over.

But the man who leaves Ka-Be, naked and almost always insufficiently recovered, feels himself ejected into the dark and cold of sidereal space. His trousers are falling down, his shoes hurt, his shirt has no buttons. He searches for a human contact and finds only backs turned. He is as helpless and vulnerable as a newborn babe, but in the morning he will have to march to work. [CWI 53–54]

While the following sentence informs the reader that such is also Levi's condition ("In queste condizioni mi trovo io" [OCI 180; "It is in these conditions that I find myself" {CWI 54}], this 1958 opening of *Le nostre notti* is a general comment on life in the concentration camp. Exit from the Ka-Be leaves the inmates in a similar condition to that of the newly arrived prisoners, and more generally exposes nakedness as one central, recurring experience of life in the camp.

Several critics have analyzed the Holocaust in terms of the victims' reduction to physicality.<sup>25</sup> Italian thinkers in particular have taken the Holocaust as a biopolitical turning point, often drawing upon notions of bareness. Esposito writes about the interconnection between Nazi thanatopolitics and medical science, revealing a "doppio procedimento di biologizzazione dello spirito e di spiritualizzazione del corpo" (2004, 153; "dual procedure of the biologization of the spirit and the spiritualization of the body" [2008, 217]) according to which "la vita che non vale la pena di vivere è l'esistenza priva di vita, la vita ridotta a nuda esistenza" (2004, 144; "the life unworthy of life is existence deprived of life—a life reduced to bare existence" [2008, 134]). The theoretical framework at the basis of Agamben's twenty-year-long project *Homo sacer* is that "La coppia categoriale fondamentale della politica occidentale non è quella amico-nemico, ma quella nuda vita-esistenza politica, *zoé-bíos*, esclusione-inclusione" (Agamben 2018, 22–23; "The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bíos*, exclusion/inclusion" [Agamben 1988, 8]). Therefore, he claims, the condition of the *homo sacer* (whose "intera esistenza è ridotta a una nuda vita spogliata di ogni diritto" [Agamben 2018, 164; "entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right" {Agamben 1988, 183}]) is best exemplified by the paradigmatic role of the concentrationary space: "In quanto i suoi abitanti sono stati spogliati di ogni statuto politico e ridotti integralmente a nuda vita, il campo è anche il più assoluto spazio biopolitico che sia mai stato realizzato, in cui il potere non ha di fronte a sé che la pura vita senz'alcuna mediazione" (Agamben 2018, 154; "Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation" [Agamben 1988, 171]).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Des Pres 1980 offers a sociobiological reading of "radical nakedness" in the camps. Echoes of a similar reflection can be found in Levi's brief *Presentazione* to a 1983 volume of concentration camp drawings, see *PS*, OCII 1540.

<sup>26</sup> Agamben is also the author of a short essay titled "Nudità" ("Nudity"), which considers nakedness as an event vis a vis a state, and discusses the theological implications of "il dispositivo nudità/veste" (Agamben 2009, 113; "the dispositive nakedness/clothing"). In the final part of *Homo sacer*, Agamben presents nakedness in its "valore di soglia fra pubblico e privato" (2018, 1242; "function as threshold between the public and the private"), commenting once again on the political value of the nakedness of concentration camp prisoners (Ibid., 1243).

According to Agamben, the concentration camp is emblematic of the state of exception,<sup>27</sup> just as much as the *Muselmann* is the embodiment of the reduction of humanity into bare life (“nuda vita inassegnabile e intestimoniabile” [2018, 871; “bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life” {1999, 157}]) within the camp. Levi’s reflection on nakedness is more nuanced, and includes analyses on the bodily boundaries not only of the *sommersi* (Null Achtzehn’s empty *involucro*), but also of the *salvati*. At the beginning of the 1958 version of *Le nostre notti*, cited above, it is his own nakedness at the exit of the Ka-Be that spurs a reflection on human resilience through an accumulation of cultural references: from natural sciences (“scavarsi una nicchia” [“dig a niche”]) to Darwinian evolutionism (“un prezioso lavoro di adattamento” [“an invaluable exercise in adaptation”]), from psychoanalysis (“in parte passivo e inconscio” [“partly passive and unconscious”]) to a wider notion of ethics (“in parte attivo” [“partly active”]). In the same passage, three further images that Levi employs to convey his wonder at the human capacity to “erigersi intorno una tenue barriera di difesa” (emphasis added; “build around [one]self a tenuous barrier of defense”), are those of secreting a shell, making a nest, and completing a “travasamento” from the Ka-Be to the reality of the camp—all referring to one of Levi’s central preoccupations, namely that of containment.<sup>28</sup>

*Le nostre notti* offers an example of such a defense strategy—*difesa* being indeed the opposite of *offesa*. Sound is central to the chapter, particularly in its original version. The discussion on concentration camp dreams is inscribed not only between the acts of undressing at night and getting “dressed” in the uniform the following morning, but also between acoustic markers of the end of the workday (“Si spegne a poco a poco il tumulto del Block” [*SQU*, OCI 180; “Little by little, the noise in the Block dies down” {CWI 55}]) and the Dantean-inflected new start at dawn, announced by a bell and by the Polish command for “Get up” (“Allo Wstawać si rimette in moto la bufera” [*SQU*, OCI 185—cf. *Inf.* V 31; “At the *Wstawać* the storm starts up again” {CW 60}]). Levi’s own dreaming originates from the conflation of the whistle from the narrow-gauge track at a neighboring construction site, a sound that he accurately describes as the symbol of the harshness of the camp (OCI 182), and that of an approaching train, which is both an image for the breath of Levi’s bunk mate and the object of his dream: “Si tratta precisamente di quella locomotiva che rimorchiava oggi in Buna i vagoni che ci hanno fatto scaricare” (Ibid.; “It is, in fact, the very engine that towed the freight cars we had to unload in Buna today” [CWI 56]). In the following scene of the dream, Levi is at his Turin home, surrounded by his sister, friends, and others to whom he recounts his testimony; the whistle has become the subject of his narration, “io sto raccontando proprio questo: il fischio su tre note, il letto duro, il mio vicino che io vorrei spostare” (OCI 182; “it is this very story that I am telling: the three-note whistle, the hard bunk, my neighbour whom I would like to move” [CWI 57]). Just as much as the feeling of being home and talking is a source of joy, the indifference of his listeners in the dream sparkles pain and sadness in Levi, so much so that he wakes up.

With his eyes open and still anguished by the oneiric experience, Levi begins pondering over what he realizes is a recurrent dream in the camp, not just his own but one shared by many fellow inmates:

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<sup>27</sup> “Auschwitz è precisamente il luogo in cui lo stato di eccezione coincide perfettamente con la regola e la situazione estrema diventa il paradigma stesso del quotidiano” (Agamben 2018, 795; “Auschwitz is precisely the place in which the state of exception coincides perfectly with the rule and the extreme situation becomes the very paradigm of daily life” [Agamben 1999, 49]).

<sup>28</sup> See Ross 2011 and the writer’s famous definition of the human being as a maker of containers in *RS*, OCII 1113.

Perché questo avviene? perché il dolore di tutti i giorni si traduce nei nostri sogni così costantemente, nella scena sempre ripetuta della narrazione fatta e non ascoltata?

... Mentre così *medito*, cerco di profittare dell'intervallo di veglia per scuotermi di dosso i brandelli di angoscia del sopore precedente, in modo da non compromettere la qualità del sonno successivo. *Mi rannicchio* a sedere nel buio, mi guardo intorno e tendo l'orecchio. (OCI 183, emphasis added)

(Why does this happen? Why is the pain of every day so constantly translated, in our dreams, into the ever repeated scene of the story told and not listened to?

... While I ponder this, I try to take advantage of the interval of wakefulness to shake off the anguished remnants of the preceding sleep, so as not to compromise the quality of the next sleep. I sit up, crouching in the darkness; I look around and listen intently. [CWI 57])

*Meditare* (to ponder, or meditate) is a key term. Levi's eyes are open ("apro deliberatamente gli occhi" [OCI 182; "I deliberately open my eyes" {CWI 57}]; "mi guardo intorno"), but his focus is inward. His quasi-naked body becomes the niche that protects his thinking: "Mi rannicchio." This thinking is different from the practical survival expedients that he and his best friend Alberto devise during the day; the conditions of the night allow for a life of the mind that pertains to Levi's own inner reality. Paradoxically, it is in a moment of promiscuity (bunks in the barracks were shared) and lack of clothing that Levi manages to carve some privacy for his meditation. The verb itself marks crucial passages in the book, from the epigraph ("Meditate che questo è stato" [OCI 139; "Consider if this is a man" [CWI 7]) to the departure from Fossoli ("Il tempo di meditare, il tempo di stabilire erano conclusi" [OCI 144; "The time for meditation, the time for decision was over" {CWI 12}]), indicating the hardship of such a practice within the concentrationary space.<sup>29</sup> What will later become the moral imperative and goal of Levi's testimony ("meditare su quanto è avvenuto è un dovere di tutti" [*SQU, Appendice*, OCI 302; "reflecting on what happened is a duty for all of us" {CWI 190}]) begins in the concentration camp by means of an instinctive defense of personal intimacy, despite the abject bodily exposure.

A fellow survivor recalls Levi's inclination to ponder at night: "J'appelais P. Levi 'le penseur de Rodin', parce que très souvent, le soir, il restait un long moment à réfléchir, la tête appuyée sur sa main" (Reznik 1993, 48; "I called P. Levi 'Rodin's Thinker,' because at night he would often take the time to ponder, with his head to his forehead"). Levi's posture, *rannicchiato* (crouched) like Rodin's sculpture, echoes and yet stands opposed to that of the *Muselmann* cited above; indeed, it is by reclaiming to himself the fragile boundaries of his quasi-naked body at night that Levi manages to paradoxically defend his internal *pudore*, preserving a life of the mind even within the concentrationary space. Despite being a prisoner, exposed to indignities and trapped in an eternal present by physiological needs, he uses his mind to distance himself from his actual situation, prefiguring a future narration—containing and expanding on his *meditare*—that proves to be a means of resistance and an eventual source of immanent salvation. Clearly, such a *difesa* is only possible in selected moments, like the "hospitalization" in Ka-Be or night

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<sup>29</sup> Something similar to what Levi describes in *Le nostre notti* occurs while he is in the Ka-Be, "Qui, lontani momentaneamente dalle bestemmie e dai colpi, possiamo rientrare in noi stessi e meditare" (*SQU*, OCI 178; "Here, momentarily far away from the curses and the beatings, we can reenter into ourselves and meditate" [CWI 52]).

time as described in *Le nostre notti*; even there, the reveille is a reminder, if needed, of the constrained bodily condition of the prisoners, that is naked exposure—“Alzarsi: l’illusoria barriera delle coperte calde, l’esile corazza del sonno, la pur tormentosa evasione notturna, cadono a pezzi intorno a noi, e ci ritroviamo desti senza remissione, *esposti all’offesa, atrocemente nudi e vulnerabili*” (*SQU*, OCI 185, emphasis added; “Get up’: the illusory barrier of the warm blankets, the thin armor of sleep, the nighttime escape, though tortured, fall to pieces around us, and we find ourselves mercilessly awake, exposed to insult, atrociously naked and vulnerable,” CWI 60).<sup>30</sup>

Levi’s insistence on the notion of vulnerability is an important reference in Adriana Cavarero’s *Orrorismo (Horrorism)*, where the feminist thinker distinguishes between *vulnerabile* (vulnerable) and *inerme* (helpless): “la vulnerabilità è uno statuto permanente dell’essere umano, mentre il trovarsi inermi – a esclusione dell’infanzia e qualche volta dell’estrema vecchiaia – dipende dalle circostanze” and occurs especially when a person is subject to torture (2007, 43; “vulnerability is a permanent status of the human being, whereas finding oneself helpless—except for in infancy and, sometimes, extreme old age—depends on circumstances” [2009, 31]). Cavarero maintains that the horror of Nazi concentration camps configures “una violenza finalizzata a produrre un inerme paradossalmente non più vulnerabile” (2007, 48; “a violence deliberately intended to produce helpless beings paradoxically no longer vulnerable” [2009, 34]), namely the *Muselmann*, that Levi presents as emptied of humanity. While Levi often uses the adjective “inerme” in *Se questo è un uomo* to define the condition of prisoners including himself (see *SQU*, OCI 179, 257, 263, 265, and especially 277), his attitude in *Le nostre notti* is significantly different from that of the *Muselmann* “sul cui volto e nei cui occhi non si possa leggere traccia di pensiero” (*SQU*, OCI 209; “on whose face and in whose eyes no trace of thought can be seen” [CWI 85]). Indeed, by carving out a minimal and yet crucial space of privacy and meditation within the horror and abject exposure of the camp, Levi manages to resist the “fabbricazione artificiale dell’inerme” (Cavarero 2007, 55; “artificial fabrication of this helpless being” [2009, 39]) undoing the binary between exposure and agency—that is to say, drawing exactly upon his own vulnerability (best represented by his semi-nakedness) in his *pudore*-inflected *difesa*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For further examples of ineffective protection see Levi’s short stories such as “Fine del Marinese” (“The Death of Marinese”), where an antifascist Resistance member arrested by the Nazis “si sentiva stranamente protetto dalla corazza calda della febbre e del sonno, come da una imbottitura di ovatta che lo segregasse dal mondo, dai fatti della giornata e dall’avvenire imminente” of his death (*PS*, OCII 1280; “he felt strangely protected by a burning shield of fever and sleep, as if it were an insulation of cotton wool that separated him from the rest of the world, from the facts of the day and from the things to come” [CWII 1124]). See also and especially “Protezione” (*VF*, OCI 661-665; “Protection”), presenting a world where everybody wears an armor as a protection from an alleged risk of meteorite rain. The overall atmosphere in “Protezione” is one of sadness, and several of the effects that Levi describes with melancholic irony, including positive and negative reactions to the armor (from a vague feeling of security to the loss of physical intimacy with others) may be particularly resonant with readers in the time of Covid-19.

<sup>31</sup> See Butler 2016 on vulnerability as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance: “without being able to think about vulnerability, we cannot think about resistance” (27). Butler’s essay focuses on collective forms of resistance, but I believe that her framework, undoing the binary opposition between vulnerability and resistance, as well as that between exposure and agency, can prove useful also to think about Levi’s camp experience and its relationship with *pudore*. Another example of bodily nakedness in the camp allowing rather than impeding the life of the mind (and defending rather than compromising an ethics of *pudore*) is in *SES*, OCI 1238, when Levi—an atheist—recalls how he, “nudo e compresso fra i compagni nudi” (“[n]aked and pressed between my naked comrades”), resisted the “tentazione di cedere, di cercare rifugio nella preghiera” (“the temptation to give up, to seek refuge in prayer” [CWIII 2518]) in the imminence of a selection.

### 3. Rivestire

Clothing and visibility play a crucial role in several Holocaust homecoming narratives.<sup>32</sup> Parallely, the image of the liberators' uncomfortable gaze upon the indignities embodied by Holocaust victims, dead or alive, has become a trope of memorialization practices: the permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opens with a wall mural of US army forces at Ohrdruf, a subcamp of Buchenwald. The photograph, by Harold Royall, presents the American liberators in the act of looking at the remains of a cremation pyre, and its threshold position suggests that the visitors—who are themselves about to look at documents and images of the Holocaust across the exhibition—may take the soldiers as surrogates for their own witnessing process. Levi himself draws a parallel between his entrance at Auschwitz as prisoner and the start of his period as DP under Soviet control. The second chapter of *La tregua* begins with a key reflection linking power (that of the Nazis first, then of the Soviets, and eventually of the Americans) to the ability to strip people naked:

Anche qui, come ad ogni svolta del nostro così lungo itinerario, fummo sorpresi di essere accolti con un bagno, quando di tante altre cose avevamo bisogno. Ma non fu quello un bagno di umiliazione, un bagno grottesco-demoniaco-sacrale, un bagno da messa nera come l'altro che aveva segnato la nostra discesa nell'universo concentrazionario, e neppure un bagno funzionale, antisettico, altamente tecnicizzato, come quello del nostro passaggio, molti mesi piú tardi, in mano americana: bensí un bagno alla maniera russa, a misura umana, estemporaneo ed approssimativo.

Non intendo già mettere in dubbio che un bagno, per noi in quelle condizioni, fosse opportuno: era anzi necessario, e non sgradito. Ma in esso, e in ciascuno di quei tre memorabili lavacri, era agevole ravvisare, dietro all'aspetto concreto e letterale, una grande ombra simbolica, il desiderio inconsapevole, da parte della nuova autorità che di volta in volta ci assorbiva nella sua sfera, di spogliarci delle vestigia della nostra vita di prima, di fare di noi degli uomini nuovi, conformi ai loro modelli, di imporci il loro marchio. (*T*, OCI 315)

(Here, too, as at every turning point of our long journey, we were surprised to be greeted by a bath, when we needed so many other things. But this was not a bath of humiliation, a grotesque-diabolical-ritual bath, a black-Mass bath like the one that had marked our descent into the concentration-camp universe, nor was it a functional, antiseptic, highly technological bath, like that of our passage, many months later, into the hands of the Americans; rather, it was a bath in the Russian manner, on a human scale, extemporaneous and rough.

I don't mean to question whether a bath, for us in those conditions, was fitting: it was in fact necessary, and not unwelcome. But in it, and in each of those three memorable washings, it was easy to see, behind the concrete, literal aspect,

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<sup>32</sup> See Delbo 1971, 19: “Et je suis là devant la vie / comme devant une robe / qu'on ne peut plus mettre” (“And I am there in front of my life / as in front of a dress / that one cannot put on anymore”). Levi describes himself with reference to clothing in a lighter tone in a June 1945 letter to his friend Bianca Guidetti Serra: “Sono vestito come uno straccione, arriverò forse a casa senza scarpe, ma in cambio ho imparato [...]” (cit. in Belpoliti 2015, 139; “I am dressed in rags, I might return home without shoes, but on the other hand I have learned [...]).

a great symbolic shadow, the unconscious desire, on the part of the new authority that each time absorbed us into its sphere, to strip us of the vestiges of our former life, to make of us new men, conforming to its models, to impose on us its brand. [CWI 223–224])

This “bagno alla maniera russa,” administered by two female Russian nurses, is linked to the previous “bagno di umiliazione” (described in *SQU*, OCI 152) and to the one “di purificazione e di esorcismo [tramite cui] l’Occidente prese possesso di noi” presented later in the book (*T*, OCI 465; “under that guise, of purification and exorcism, the West took possession of us” [CWI 392]). Aptly, Levi notes not only the *spoliazione* element of these baths, but also their implicit aim to exercise control over the prisoners or former prisoners’ bodies by redressing them in clothes better suited to the victors’ worldview.

Even towards the end of his life, Levi often draws upon the semantic field of clothing to express his discomfort at the appropriation of his experience and, more generally, at the imposition of judgements and labels upon him. In the preface to *Racconti e saggi* (Stories and Essays), he invites the reader to avoid searching for messages in his writings: “Prego il lettore di non andare in cerca di messaggi. È un termine che detesto perché mi mette in crisi, perché *mi pone indosso panni che non sono i miei*, che anzi appartengono a un tipo umano di cui diffido: il profeta, il vate, il veggente” (OCII 999, emphasis added; “I beg the reader not to go looking for messages. It is a term that I detest, because it puts me in a difficult situation and makes me put on clothes that aren’t mine, that, on the contrary, belong to a type of human being whom I distrust: the prophet, the oracle, the seer” [CWIII 2261]). About his relationship to Judaism, on the one hand he notes how “le leggi razziali e il Lager, mi hanno stampato come si stampa una lamiera: ormai ebreo sono, *la stella di Davide me l’hanno cucita e non solo sul vestito*” (OCIII 857, emphasis added; “the racial laws and the concentration camp, stamped me the way you stamp a steel plate. At this point I’m a Jew, they’ve sewn the star of David on me and not only on my clothes” [Camon 1989, 68]), on the other he asserts his secular stances against assumptions of religiosity due to his experience in the Holocaust, “Sono stato in America l’anno scorso, ed era proprio come se mi avessero applicato una seconda volta la stella di David!” (OCIII 697; “Last year I went to the United States, and it was as if they had pinned a star of David on my chest for the second time”). Perhaps his most emblematic opportunity to react to coercive clothing, that is to be dressed in other peoples’ interpretative clothes, comes from a letter of a German reader, who writes to him “penso che dovrei cucirLe un vestito come quello che indossano gli eroi nelle leggende, che La protegga contro tutti i pericoli del mondo” (“I think I should sew you a garment like the one the heroes wear in legends to protect you from every danger”); to which Levi significantly replies that “questi abiti non si possono regalare: ognuno deve tesserli e cucirli per se stesso” (*SES*, OCII 1267; “these garments cannot be given to others: each person has to weave them and sew them for him- or herself” [CWIII 2555]). One way in which Levi achieves this is through his literary production, both autobiographical and biographical, and chiefly through an affective compromise between the representation of life in the concentration camp and his own sense of *pudore*.

Moving from the physical experience of deportation to its later narration in testimony, Levi’s writing relies on an affective compromise that, after the physical journey of deportation, can be considered as a sort of second journey—one whose object of representation includes the stripping away of the human condition and that may therefore lead to renewed humiliation; but also one that, precisely through the conscious account of such an exposure, allows for a reaction

to the violation of *pudore*, potentially restoring the modesty and humanity so brutally demolished within the camp. Levi himself presents the translation of *Se questo è un uomo* to the German public in 1961 as a response to the immodest violence of the concentrationary experience, equating his goal of bearing witness to a “‘rispondere’ alla SS del cinto erniario, al Kapo che si è pulito la mano sulla mia spalla, al dottor Pannwitz, a quelli che impiccarono l’Ultimo, e ai loro eredi” (*PS*, OCII 1327; “to ‘talk back’ to the SS of the truss, to the Kapo who wiped his hand on my shoulder, to Dr. Pannwitz, to the man who hanged the Last One, and to their heirs” [CWII 1150]). Several years later, in *I sommersi e i salvati*, he reiterates that the “destinatari veri” of his first book, “quelli contro cui il libro si puntava come un’arma, erano loro, i tedeschi [...] Da soverchiatori, o da spettatori indifferenti, sarebbero diventati lettori: li avrei costretti, legati davanti a uno specchio” (*SES*, OCII 1254; “its real audience, those at whom the book was aimed like a gun, was them, the Germans [...] From oppressors or passive spectators they would become readers: I would force them to, I would tie them up in front of a mirror” [CWIII 2536]). Trezise’s comment on the “tangible aggressiveness” (2012, 85) of these last remarks demands that they be put in context. Levi’s retributive “aggressiveness”—which has a notable precedent in the final lines of *Shema*—is solely conveyed through “weapons” of literary nature (the book itself, the perpetrator- or bystander-turned-reader), and the reversal of the camp dynamic that he suggests does not merely consist “in exposing and hence in shaming” the former Nazis, as Trezise puts it (84). In fact, Levi configures his testimony as a counterpoint to the *offesa*, embodied by the outrageous removal of Mr. Bergmann’s truss; while the Nazis stripped people naked, his testimony will provide them with new literary clothes.

Among Levi’s recurrent metaphors for the literary rendering of existing people in his works is “rivestire un uomo di parole” (*PS*, OCII 1323; “to clothe a man in words” [CWII 1146]), adumbrating a distinct sense of *pudore*. The expression is spoken by one of the characters of “La carne dell’orso” (“Bear Meat”), a short story published in the journal *Il mondo* in 1961 and later adapted into “Ferro” (“Iron”), one of the chapters of *Il sistema periodico* (*The Periodic Table*). The character who speaks such words, an evident avatar of Levi in “La carne dell’orso” and Levi himself in “Ferro,” actually declares that his effort is set to fail (“so che è un’impresa disperata rivestire un uomo di parole” [Ibid. and *SP*, OCI 896; “I know that it’s hopeless to try to clothe a man in words” {CWII 793}]); nevertheless, he then goes on to talk. An analogous metaphor is employed in “Carbonio” (“Carbon”), the last short story of Levi’s chemical autobiography: “Ne racconterò invece soltanto ancora una [storia], la più segreta, e la racconterò con l’umiltà e il ritegno di chi sa fin dall’inizio che il suo tema è disperato, i mezzi fievoli, e il mestiere di rivestire i fatti con parole fallimentare per sua profonda essenza» (*SP*, OCI 1032, emphasis added; “I’ll tell only one more [story], the most personal, and tell it with the humility and modesty of someone who knows from the start that his theme is desperate, his means weak, and the occupation of clothing facts in words failure in its deepest essence” [CWII 946]). Be they related to existing people (as in the case of “La carne dell’orso”/“Ferro”) or real facts (“Carbonio”), the passages speak to the paradox that this paper seeks to portray: an affective narrative that relies on *pudore* as a guiding principle while at the same time bearing and acknowledging the risk (namely the potential failure) intrinsic to such a stylistic choice—for clothing and exposing are inextricably linked.

One of the “Approfondimenti linguistici” (“Linguistic Studies”) on the website of the Centro Primo Levi is devoted to *rivestire*: “Il verbo sembra mutuato dal linguaggio specialistico del settore delle vernici industriali in cui Primo Levi lavora per molti anni” (“Approfondimenti linguistici” 2021; “The verb appears to be derived from the specialized language of the paint

industry, where Primo Levi worked for several years”).<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in one of his most metaliterary works, *La chiave a stella* (*The Wrench*), Levi has his narrator-alias (a “specialista di vernici” [“paint specialist”] just like himself) say that “fare vernici è un mestiere strano: in sostanza, vuol dire fabbricare delle pellicole, cioè delle pelli artificiali, che però devono avere molte delle qualità della nostra pelle naturale, e guardi che non è poco, perché la pelle è un prodotto pregiato” (CS, OCI 1152; “making paint is a strange profession: what you’re really doing is making films, that is, artificial skins, which, however, should have many of the same qualities as our natural skin—no easy feat, as skin is a valuable commodity” [CWII 1087]). The narrator has just confessed to his interlocutor, rigger Faussonne, that he is about to leave his job as chemist to become a full time writer (just as Levi himself did in 1975):

Del resto, non è detto che l’aver trascorso più di trent’anni nel mestiere di cucire insieme lunghe molecole presumibilmente utili al prossimo, e nel mestiere parallelo di convincere il prossimo che le mie molecole gli erano effettivamente utili, non insegni nulla sul modo di cucire insieme parole e idee, o sulle proprietà generali e speciali dei tuoi colleghi uomini. (CS, OCI 1149)

(And when your job for thirty years has been to stitch together long molecular strands, supposedly for the benefit of your fellow man, and you have the corresponding job of convincing your fellow man that molecules are, in fact, useful to him, you surely learn something about the art of stitching together words and ideas, or at least about the general and specific properties of your fellow human beings. [CWII 1084])

It seems clear to me that the notion of *rivestire* draws upon both the world of chemistry (“fabbricare delle pellicole, cioè delle pelli artificiali”) and the semantic field of clothing (“cucire insieme parole e idee”). In the former case, the action of *rivestire* aligns even the chemist-writer to Levi’s famous definition of man as “costruttore di recipienti” (RS, OCII 1113; “constructor of containers,” CWIII 2367); similarly, the “barattolo di vernice” (a can of paint which is in itself a container) that the mysterious device called *psicofante* returns to the narrator as his inner image in one of the short stories of *Vizio di forma* can be taken as a reference not only to Levi’s job as chemist at a paint factory but also to his occupation as writer. However, it is the lexicon of clothing that is most relevant here, due to its intimate connection with *pudore*.<sup>34</sup>

In a recent article, Mario Barenghi discusses Levi’s writing as *rivestire*, taking inspiration from the final lines of the poem “Meleagrina” where the lyric I compares himself to a pearl

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<sup>33</sup> Available at: <https://www.primolevi.it/it/approfondimenti-linguistici>. Cf. also Levi’s 1986 interview with Philip Roth: “Non c’è alcuna correlazione fra il mio entusiasmo per le vernici ed i miei entusiasmi letterari, se non forse una metafora abbastanza far fetched: vernici e letteratura rivestono la realtà, conferendole un aspetto diverso (migliore o peggiore) di quello effettivo” (OCIII 1088; “There is no correlation between my enthusiasm for paint and my literary enthusiasm, if not perhaps a rather far-fetched metaphor: both paint and literature clothe reality, granting it, for better or for worse, a different look from its actual one”).

<sup>34</sup> Throughout his work, Levi draws upon a number of idiomatic expressions pertaining to the semantic field of clothing, from the notion of “cucire” (see above and *SP*, OCI 1007) to that of human history as “tessuto” (fabric, see *PS*, OCII 1304). The notion of clothing people in words could also echo the “pudeur interpretative” that Horvilleur presents as characteristic of Jewish readings of the Bible: “Le verset est nu comme un ver, et c’est en principe au lecteur de l’habiller” (2018, 37; “Bible verses are naked as worms, and the reader’s task is, in principle, to clothe them”).



oyster: “Ti rassomiglio più che tu non creda, / Condannata a secernere secernere / Lacrime sperma madreperla e perla. / Come te, se una scheggia mi ferisce il mantello, / Giorno su giorno la rivesto in silenzio” (AOI, OCII 733, ll. 13–17; “I’m more like you than you think, / Condemned to secrete secrete / Tears sperm mother-of-pearl and pearl. / Like you, if a shard should harm my mantle / I repair it day by day in silence” [CWIII 1960]). Barenghi notes, “*Come te*: l’analogia è ellittica, ma il senso è chiaro. Anche l’umano – il poeta – non fa altro che rivestire la propria interiorità di parole per poterne curare le ferite” (2017, 428; “*Like you*: the analogy is elliptical, but the meaning is clear. Also the human being, the poet, clothes his own intimacy in words in order to tend to its wounds”). I believe that this applies more generally, not just to Levi’s poetry but also to his testimony (which is often more biographical than autobiographical) and to his writing at large. In fact, I maintain that *pudore* should be considered as a driving force and a structuring principle of Levi’s authorial practice throughout his production, testimonial and other. His writerly practice—a practice informed by and filtered through the lens of *pudore*—enacts, in the case of testimony, both the literal experiencing of *pudore* within the diegesis of Levi’s account and the characteristic reserve that critics have often ascribed to him.<sup>35</sup>

Many non-fictional characters of Levi’s testimonial writings bear fictitious names in adherence to his stylistic *pudore*, or his “rivestire un uomo di parole.” In fact, the new name is one such word, both allowing the literary rendering of real persons into characters (that is, exposing their stories), and at the same time concealing certain traits of their actual identity, thus partially restoring their *pudore*.<sup>36</sup> As he comments in *Lilit e altri racconti* (*Lilit and Other Stories*), “l’impresa di trasformare una persona viva in un personaggio lega la mano di chi scrive. Questo avviene perché tale impresa, anche quando è condotta con le intenzioni migliori e su una persona stimata ed amata, sfiora la violenza privata, e non è mai indolore per chi ne è l’oggetto” (L, OCII 285; “the task of transforming a living person into a character ties the writer’s hands. This happens because such a task, even when it’s carried out with the best intentions, and in the case of a loved and respected person, verges on private violence, and is never painless for the one who is the object of it” [CWI 1401]).<sup>37</sup> Despite his awareness and tact, Levi often accounts in his interviews for the apparent discomfort of the people he turned into characters, even with fictional names: this happens, for example, for Cesare (“Naturalmente non si chiama Cesare, ma non scriva il suo nome, per favore [...] Dopo *La tregua* non mi ha più scritto. Forse non ha capito, forse s’è sentito offeso. Ma non scriva il suo nome, per favore, la prego, non vorrei che per causa mia avesse fastidi” [OCIII 11–12; “Obviously his name is not Cesare, but please do not write his name [...] After *The Truce* he stopped writing to me. Maybe he did not understand, or maybe he felt offended. But please do not write his name, I wouldn’t want to cause him any trouble”]) and for Fosforo’s Giulia in *Il sistema periodico* (“una mia carissima amica, a cui ho cambiato nome, [...] mi sono accorto benissimo che l’immagine che davo di lei non era quella che lei dava di se stessa” [OCIII 768–769; “a very good friend of mine, whose name I changed [...] I could clearly see that my image of her differed from her own”]). When *Se questo è un uomo* was translated into German, Levi worried that Elias Lindzin—whose real name he kept—

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Poli and Calcagno 1992, 15, and Risa Sodi in Magavern 2009, 206.

<sup>36</sup> Levi’s dedication to preserving the names of the people he met in Auschwitz is already evident from Levi 2015b, 31–35, a list of names of people encountered during his deportation and imprisonment, arguably written in 1945. For analogous lists, see Levi 2015b, 66–68 and 101, and Samuel and Dreyfus 2007, 159–162.

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, “impresa” (task) is the same word that Levi uses for the act of *rivestire* a person with words in “La carne dell’orso”/“Ferro”

might recognize himself in Levi's portrait: "Ho pregato l'editore di cambiargli nome e cognome, perché... per uno scrupolo, di... come dire... Chiaro, anche non volendolo, un ritratto scritto non riproduce la persona, [...] qualche volta uno prende la persona e ne vuole fare un personaggio, no?" (OCIII 934; "I begged the publisher to change the name and surname, because... as a form of scruple... how can I say... Clearly, no matter one's will, a written portrait cannot reproduce a person [...] sometimes one wishes to transform a person into a character, right?"). Levi's *pudore* as a writer extends not only to his fellow prisoners but also to himself and even to the side of perpetrators. The protagonist of the 1966 theatrical version of *Se questo è un uomo*, co-written with Pieralberto Marché, is called Aldo rather than Primo to avoid—as Levi puts it—"una forma di esibizione personale [...], perché non volevo insistere sull'autobiografia, ma piuttosto sulla tragedia comune" (cit. in Poli and Calcagno 1992, 43; "a kind of personal exhibitionism [...], because I didn't want to emphasize the autobiography but rather the shared tragedy" [2017, 24]). Commenting on "Vanadio" ("Vanadium"), a chapter of *Il sistema periodico* where German chemist Ferdinand Meyer, who used to work at the same concentration camp where Levi was held captive and whose story Levi narrates only after he died, is renamed "Doktor Lothar Müller," Levi interestingly wrote: "As long as he [Meyer/Müller] was alive, I felt more or less bound to him by the generical [sic] restraint between civilized persons" (letter to Hety Schmitt-Maass [1976], cit in Mengoni 2021, 176).

Beyond onomastics, Levi's narrative embroidery involves an array of rhetorical techniques that draw upon and attest to his writerly *pudore*, ranging from his often stressed intention to bear witness by proxy ("Parliamo noi [= *salvati*] in vece loro [= *sommersi*], per delega," *SES*, OCII 1196; "We speak in their place, by proxy") to tropes of reticence, euphemism, understatement, and irony—all of which would benefit from further analysis. This paper has begun to show how an important root of the stylistic and metaliterary tension between exposure and modesty in Levi's oeuvre lies in the physical experience of *pudore* (violated and regained) linked to his status as both a survivor and a witness. After all, Levi's seminal efforts as a writer revolve around his experience in the Holocaust—an event that he presents as an *offesa al pudore*. I maintain that such a traumatic violation of *pudore*, marked by bodily experiences of nakedness and clothing within the camp, plays a crucial role in his development as a writer. Jay Prosser's definition of autobiography seems particularly relevant to the affective compromise required by testimony: "Autobiography works like a skin; it is the skin the author sends out that at once conceals and reveals the self" (2001, 65—it is worth remembering that the word "trauma" etymologically points to a physical wound, an injury involving a breaking of the skin). This is true for both the autobiographical and, more typically, biographical aspects of Levi's testimonial writings; but it does not mean that his writing is merely "naked," according to a longtime critical stereotype focusing on the "privilege accorded to rhetorical constraint" in Holocaust testimony (Dean 2010, 103).<sup>38</sup> Levi's testimony is rather characterized by an affective compromise: on the one hand, bearing witness implies a partial waiver to his own sense of *pudore*, a metaphorical stripping naked ("scrivere è denudarsi," as he will provocatively suggest in *AM*, OCII 988 ["to write is to strip oneself naked" {CWIII 2242}]); on the other, Levi configures his testimonial writing as a *rivestire* of people and facts with words, and it is specifically through this practice

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<sup>38</sup> For an example of such a nakedness trope (which is in itself a rhetorical expedient), see Saccenti's definition of Caleffi's *Si fa presto a dire fame* and Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* as "Cronache nude, dense, vibranti, perfette se pur fra loro diversamente intonate" (cit. in Bucciantini 2019, 63; "Naked, dense, vibrant, perfect if differently tuned chronicles").

that he enacts his writerly *pudore*—his ultimate response against the “offesa, che dilaga come un contagio” (“offense, which spreads like an infection”).

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