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Identity and Humanity in Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*: Enlightenment, Vision, and the *animale-uomo*

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Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, first published in 1947, is much more than simply a recounting of the author's experiences as a prisoner in the Monowitz-Buna labor camp (Auschwitz) during World War II. Indeed, the author himself explicitly addresses this point in the preface, wherein he states, "questo mio libro, in fatto di particolari atroci, non aggiunge nulla a quanto è ormai noto ai lettori di tutto il mondo sull'inquietante argomento dei campi di distruzione."¹ With this quotation I do not wish to suggest that Levi is not interested in the experience of the concentration camps or that he does not, in fact, add to our understanding of the horrific historical phenomenon of the Holocaust—quite the contrary. However, I want to emphasize that he has a larger goal in mind, one that is significantly broader in scope: "fornire documenti per uno studio pacato di alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano."² As such, the work transcends issues of national or ethnic identity, and even the camps themselves, to explore instead more fundamental questions of humanity and personal identity. The ultimate focus of Levi's text is on what his own experiences and those of his *compagni*, or fellow prisoners, can teach us in regard to what it means to be a human being—both at Auschwitz and, perhaps more importantly, after Auschwitz.

Engaging closely with the text, and drawing upon the theories of Agamben and Foucault, along with important insights by historian Martin Jay, the present essay will analyze some of the complex philosophical and psychological issues investigated by Levi. In the first section I will discuss Levi's grounding in the Enlightenment tradition and the ways his previous belief system was severely tested by his life in the concentration camp. The internment experience forces him to reevaluate and revise, but not renounce, his previous conceptions of what it means to be human, leading him to compare the human to the animal. Identifying an inherent tension between these categories and the inclusion of the latter within the former, Levi shows that the Nazi's destruction of their prisoners was based upon a systematic process of dehumanization, deliberately reducing them to an animal state—and harnessing their labor—before proceeding to the final execution.

Subsequently, I will trace the fundamental links between vision and knowledge within the Enlightenment tradition that so profoundly informs Levi's

worldview; and also the connections that exist between vision, exercise of power, and control inside the camp. As we shall see, the Nazis' dehumanization regime relied on a deliberate manipulation of the detainees' vision and visibility—their seeing and being seen. In the final section of the paper, I shall ultimately argue that, on a philosophical level, Levi's reflections on this tension between the human and animal (*uomo* and *bestia* in his lexicon) anticipate Agamben's categories of *bios* and *zoē* and the paradoxical relationship of exclusion–inclusion running between them. In these analogous formulations by Levi and Agamben, the second element in each pair—designated in both cases for exclusion and removal by the group in power—is nonetheless necessary for defining the first. Thus, half a century before Agamben, Levi already shows with precision and clarity that the Final Solution was built on a fundamental contradiction in not recognizing—or recognizing but not admitting—that all people are both human and animal. Therefore, the Nazis' project of attempting to eliminate the one from the other was impossible. And though he cannot claim to have identified or defined the essence of humanity, Levi eloquently demonstrates that it would be impossible to understand the human without the animal.

A chemist by training, Levi clearly had an immense fascination with human life in all facets, not only scientific and biological, but also cultural and philosophical, that predated his experiences in the concentration camp. His foundation in the Italian humanist tradition, visible above all in the numerous references to Dante's *Inferno* (especially in the chapter dedicated to the Ulysses episode of *Inferno* XXVI), is undergirded by his faith in Enlightenment ideals of rationality and empiricist observation: the basic equality of all people(s) and notions of scientific and historical progress, all of which are severely tested by life in Auschwitz. Levi's anthropocentric, Enlightenment-orientated position is formulated most succinctly and explicitly in the 1976 Appendix to *Se questo è un uomo*: "Io credo nella ragione e nella discussione come supremi strumenti di progresso."³ Later, he adds, "In tutte le parti del mondo là dove si comincia col negare le libertà fondamentali dell' Uomo, e l'uguaglianza fra gli uomini, si va verso il sistema concentrazionario."⁴ It is necessary to stress the importance of Levi's Enlightenment heritage for two related reasons: first, it constitutes the cultural and philosophical template against which he measures life in the concentration camp; second, it provides the basic intellectual framework that guides his observations and reflections throughout the work.

The extreme conditions of "la vita del Lager"⁵ dramatically shake the foundations of Levi's previously held convictions, throwing his belief system—and even his very identity and sense of self—into crisis.⁶ How is one to reconcile a belief in the equality of all people, with the Nazi incarceration regime, and the systematic dehumanization and execution of the detainees? The great difficulty of resolving this question is apparent right from Levi's arrival at the camp; his initial reaction is one of shock, skepticism, and disbelief, or in his words: "di assistere a

qualche dramma pazzo.”⁷ The Lager seems to represent a world completely anti-thetical to his values, a world of systematized madness or “*folia geometrica*.”⁸ In Auschwitz, he soon learns, “*Hier ist kein Warum, – (qui non c’è perché)*.”⁹ There is no reason here.

In order to survive, Levi must drastically alter his principles—if not suspend them completely—for the duration of his imprisonment. In fact, one of the many rules of survival that he insists sustained him and the other *prigionieri comuni* throughout the days and months of enslavement and appalling living conditions is that precisely of learning *not* to think, not to question, while also repressing memories of one’s past and refusing to imagine any future other than the next meal or moment of rest: “*La nostra sagesza era il ‘non cercar di capire’, non rappresentarsi il futuro [...] non porre e non porsi domande.*”¹⁰ Another example of this phenomenon is found in Levi’s description of the daily march to work (which is accompanied by deliberately tormenting music, a point to which I shall return later): “*Non c’è più volontà: ogni pulsazione diventa un passo, una contrazione riflessa dei muscoli sfatti. I tedeschi sono riusciti a questo. Sono diecimila [prigionieri], e sono una sola grigia macchina; sono esattamente determinati; non pensano e non vogliono, camminano.*”¹¹ Naturally, these are oversimplifications; the author is exaggerating to make a point. Indeed, the text amply illustrates the sometimes-contradictory perspectives adopted by Levi, and that his own attempt to prevent himself from thinking is, likewise, fraught with difficulty and turmoil.¹²

In moments of relative calm and repose, such as when he is hospitalized in the infirmary —referred to throughout the text in the camp jargon of “*Ka-Be*”—the author’s old beliefs, his memories, and inclinations to careful observation and reflection, come rushing back. Indeed, the above-cited description of the inmates’ mental state during their march derives precisely from a moment of reflection while inside the *Ka-Be*, enabled by the physical rest and the change in perspective:

Il *Ka-Be* è il Lager a meno del disagio fisico. Perciò, chi ancora ha seme di coscienza, vi riprende coscienza; perciò, nelle lunghissime giornate vuote, vi si parla di altro che di fame e di lavoro, e ci accade di considerare che cosa ci hanno fatti diventare, quanto ci è stato tolto, che cosa è questa vita.¹³

It is there that Levi arrives at a critical realization: “*In questo Ka-Be, parentesi di relativa pace, abbiamo imparato che la nostra personalità è fragile, è molto più in pericolo che non la nostra vita.*”¹⁴ The meaning of the term *personalità* in this quotation should be understood not only as one’s personality in psychological terms, but more broadly as their identity and humanity. Furthermore, it is crucial to note Levi’s assertion that these concepts are not constants but rather constructs

that are much more fragile—at risk and susceptible to being undermined or erased—than one’s biological life.

One of the fundamental ways Levi articulates and explores his conception of the human is by comparison to the animal. In so doing, he draws upon the traditional categories and distinctions proposed from Aristotle to St. Thomas Aquinas to Descartes: man is rational and controls his will, whereas animals do not think and instead follow only their biological instincts; human beings possess the power of language while animals do not.¹⁵ On the surface, Levi’s approach to these questions often seems to alternate between polar contrasts in ways reminiscent of Cartesian dualistic reasoning.¹⁶ However, these formulations should be taken as Levi’s starting point and one that he will be forced to reexamine and modify in light of his harrowing, identity-testing experiences in the camp.

The issue of considering the human vis-à-vis the animal is crucial given that Levi depicts the Lager above all as a place where detainees—whom he informs us were 95% Jewish—are systematically dehumanized in preparation for being executed. The Nazis’ willful dehumanization of the prisoners is the reason that the previously mentioned marching music (which on page 44 Levi labels “infernale”), represents “la voce del Lager”; it is “l’espressione sensibile della sua follia geometrica, della risoluzione altrui di annullarci prima come uomini per ucciderci poi lentamente.”¹⁷

The detainees’ dehumanization was accomplished through a process that Levi describes as “bestializzazione.”¹⁸ In the first place, this involved removing from the newly arrived prisoners literally everything short of the bare minimum necessary for biological survival. They were left with their physical bodies, but those too in time were also consumed through undernourishment, overexertion, and disease. The most important marker of the initiation to camp life was the substitution of the person’s name with a number that was then tattooed on the prisoner’s forearm. This policy was meant to erase each prisoner’s original human identity and substitute it with a new one traditionally reserved for domesticated animals and slaves. As Levi notes in a subsequent work, *I sommersi e i salvati*, “Il significato simbolico era chiaro a tutti: questo è un segno indelebile, di qui non uscirete piú; questo è il marchio che si imprime agli schiavi ed al bestiame destinato al macello, e tali voi siete diventati. Non avete piú nome: questo è il vostro nuovo nome.”¹⁹ Imbedded within this last phrase there was another message, even more insidious: *you are not a human being*, for as Levi says, “solo un uomo è degno di avere un nome.”²⁰

In effect, the prisoners were stripped of all forms of recognition as people, all forms of human dignity, and were reduced to the status of what Giorgio Agamben calls “la nuda vita” or bare life, a concept that I shall further examine later in this study.²¹ It is important to note that Levi’s conception of a transition, indeed a “metamorfosi,”²² from *uomo* to *bestia* transcends the Cartesian opposition between the two categories, thus bringing him closer to the more modern Enlightenment positions of Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire who argued against

Descartes' rigid separation.²³ More importantly, such a change from human to animal does not rule out the possibility of reversal, by which the man-turned-beast could later change back into a man.

At the beginning of his tenure in Auschwitz, Levi claims that he, like most of the inmates, had little will to resist this brutalization. Newly arrived in the camp, on the heels of the traumatic train ride from Italy, Levi concludes "ormai è finito e ci sentiamo fuori del mondo e l'unica cosa è obbedire."²⁴ Some pages later he qualifies this representation and explains that among the new arrivals there were both optimist and pessimist viewpoints, and that most people vacillated between the two poles:

a seconda del loro carattere, fra di noi gli uni si sono convinti immediatamente che tutto è perduto, che qui non si può vivere e che la fine è certa e prossima; gli altri, che, per quanto dura sia la vita che ci attende, la salvezza è probabile e non lontana, e, se avremo fede e forza, rivedremo le nostre case e i nostri cari. Le due classi, dei pessimisti e degli ottimisti, non sono peraltro così ben distinte... i più, senza memoria né coerenza, oscillano fra le due posizioni-limite, a seconda dell'interlocutore e del momento.²⁵

The prisoners who adopt and maintain the pessimistic outlook will eventually end up as *sommersi*, Levi's term for those who will have no chance whatsoever of surviving the camp experience. Although he falls into this pessimistic mindset early on and often revisits it, this is not the end for Levi. In this regard he receives an important lesson from Steinlauf, an ex-sergeant from the Austro-Hungarian army who had fought in World War I. At the time of writing, Levi does not recall Steinlauf's exact words, but he remembers the sense and renders it eloquently:

che appunto perché il Lager è una gran macchina per *ridurci a bestie*, noi bestie non dobbiamo diventare; che anche in questo luogo si può sopravvivere, e perciò si deve *voler* sopravvivere, per raccontare, per portare testimonianza; e che per vivere è importante sforzarsi di salvare almeno lo scheletro, l'impalcatura, la *forma della civiltà*. Che siamo schiavi, privi di ogni diritto, esposti a ogni offesa, votati a morte quasi certa, ma che una *facoltà* ci è rimasta, e dobbiamo difenderla con ogni vigore perché è l'ultima: la facoltà di negare il nostro consenso. Dobbiamo quindi, certamente, lavarci la faccia senza sapone, nell'acqua sporca, e asciugarci nella giacca. Dobbiamo dare il nero alle scarpe, non perché così prescrive il regolamento, ma per *dignità* e per *proprietà*. Dobbiamo camminare diritti, senza strascicare gli zoccoli, non già in omaggio alla disciplina prussiana, ma per restare vivi, per non cominciare a morire.²⁶

This passage expresses several of the essential moral and ethical assertions and concerns that emanate from the core of the work: 1) The Lager is a machine designed to turn people into animals; 2) in order to survive, one must purposefully combat this process, first and foremost on an ethical/philosophical level by applying one's will to actively want and choose to survive; 3) in general, the detainees must defend at all costs their human dignity and oppose their will against that of the Nazis and their collaborators; 4) this will to survive is necessary not only for one's self-preservation but to be able to tell the story, to *portare testimonianza* to the rest of the world about the horrors of the camp, and of what man is capable of doing to man. The realization of these truths is what leads Levi to adopt a new approach, to resist, refusing to blindly obey and allow his captors to destroy him and to dictate the historical narrative. Yet as stated at the outset of this essay, his focus is much more than just the question of what happened. At the same time it is imperative to stress his acute awareness that from the Nazi perspective "Nessuno deve uscire di qui, che potrebbe portare al mondo, insieme col segno impresso nella carne, la mala novella di quanto, ad Auschwitz, è bastato animo all'uomo di fare dell'uomo."²⁷ This awareness actually serves to strengthen Levi's resolve, such that his greatest motivation to resist the Nazi dehumanization scheme and to survive becomes exactly that of telling this story, and, in the process, reflecting on what the personal and historical experience of Auschwitz reveals about *l'animo umano*—within the camp and beyond.

Levi defends his project against those who may object to it on the grounds that the Lagers constituted a historical anomaly, and that since the horrors that took place inside them are so far beyond any ordinary standard of morality, whatever lessons they may offer would not be applicable to human civilization in general. He contrasts such a position by arguing that the concentration camps constitute "una gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale" that actually has much to teach us about humanity and human life:

Si rinchiudano tra i fili spinati migliaia di individui diversi per età, condizione, origine, lingua, cultura e costumi, e siano quivi sottoposti a un regime di vita costante, controllabile, identico per tutti e inferiore a tutti i bisogni: è quanto di più rigoroso uno sperimentatore avrebbe potuto istituire per stabilire che cosa sia essenziale e che cosa acquisito nel comportamento dell'animale-uomo di fronte alla lotta per la vita.²⁸

Without adding extensive commentary, I merely wish to underline Levi's empirical approach, his Darwinian view of the struggle for life, and most importantly, the notion he introduces of the *animale-uomo*, to which we shall return later. Secondly let us consider his description of camp life as *controllabile*. It is important to note that as compared to its English counterpart to control, the Italian verb *controllare* differs on a fundamental level. Its root meaning is closer to the notions

of watching or checking. Implicitly therefore, in the present context, Levi is referring to the Nazis' exerting their control over camp life through visual means, by exercising visual power.

With this idea in mind, let us now turn to the question of vision and explore its relation to the issues considered thus far. As previously noted, Levi's cultural and philosophical approach is steeped in Enlightenment ideals. It is well known that one of the central characteristics of the Enlightenment was its exuberant celebration of sight, as the most important sensory perception, and most direct means to knowing the external world. As neatly summarized by Jean Starobinski: "Such was the century of the Enlightenment which looked at things in the sharp clear light of the reasoning mind whose processes appear to have been closely akin to those of the seeing eye."²⁹ Historian Martin Jay traces the origins of what he calls the age's "ocularcentrism" to Descartes and to John Locke, who famously compared the human mind to a *camera obscura*.³⁰ According to Locke's model, the eye played a crucial role in the all-important acquisition of knowledge: it was the organ through which "external visible resemblances, or ideas of things" could enter the mind, as light enters a dark room through the window.³¹ In this way ideas come into the mind, which is otherwise dark and empty, from visual observation of the external world. Indeed, Jay stresses that most Enlightenment philosophers held that *only* in this way did ideas enter: "virtually all agreed that [...] there were no innate ideas before sense impressions and no ideal space in the mind's eye."³² Consequently, in this tradition, vision is essential to the attainment of knowledge.

Levi appears to maintain a similar conception, frequently employing Enlightenment-inspired metaphors linking vision and light to consciousness and knowledge (among others we find the references to "ogni lume di coscienza"³³; and "l'istante in cui la coscienza esce dal buio"³⁴). In general, the text places great emphasis on sight and visual observation in addition to lived experience. In fact, Levi bases his claims to truth and credibility on these very elements, explicitly assuming the role of eyewitness: "alla parte del giudice preferisco quella del testimone: ho da portare una testimonianza, quella delle cose che ho subite e viste. I miei libri non sono libri di storia: nello scriverli mi sono limitato a riportare i fatti di cui avevano esperienza diretta, escludendo quello che ho appreso più tardi da libri o giornali."³⁵ Clearly, the author's enormous attention to vision and seeing is in no way accidental, but by conscious design.

Besides acquiring and maintaining credibility with the reader, what are some of the other functions of vision within the work? Certainly the nexus between surveillance and the enforcement of power, alluded to above, is one of the most important. On this point, Michel Foucault's reflections on panopticism are highly relevant. Distilling Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to its most basic essence, Foucault dryly asserts: "Visibility is a trap."³⁶ In his account visibility refers above all to a person's being visible to others. Further elaborating, he explains, "the

major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”³⁷ It is automatic insofar as the prisoners are “caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.”³⁸ This is a consequence of “dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.”³⁹ The effect is to generate within the prisoners an “anxious awareness of being observed.”⁴⁰ Therefore, Foucault concludes, they internalize the gaze of the eye in the tower, ultimately and effectively policing themselves.

These concepts can help us to better understand the surveillance regime of the camp, even if Auschwitz was obviously not constructed as a Panopticon, and the two structures represent wildly differing objectives. The latter is an optical-architectural scheme designed to maximize efficiency and ostensibly to lighten the exercise of power. According to Bentham’s conception, it can be adapted for various uses including hospitals, schools, factories, and of course, prisons. In fact, incredible as it seems to us today, its creator imagined the Panopticon could actually serve a Utopian function within the society.⁴¹ On the other hand, the Nazi concentration camps were designed primarily as temporary holding grounds for peoples the Reich intended merely to exterminate, such as Jews, gypsies and members of other so-called “inferior races.” Yet these two *machines* share certain essential characteristics. Aside from both being detention facilities, they are also both designed to serve the interests of a given power (i.e. political or administrative), and they are both founded on the need to control a subjected population or group of people. In order to maintain control, both structures, to varying degrees, rely upon visibility and optic surveillance. Moreover, in addition to the primary killing function of the Lagers, camps such as Monowitz-Buna had a second purpose, which, from one perspective, was not altogether different from the Panopticon’s imagined Utopian service to the society beyond its boundaries: they were detention facilities for slaves like Levi, who were made to serve the economic interests of the Reich at the cost of literally working them to death. Within the twisted, brutalizing Nazi logic of the Lager, this was an efficient use of a state resource—the potential labor of each slave—that would otherwise go to waste upon their extermination.

Delving further into the question of vision in *Se questo è un uomo*, we note that the Germans employ a technique not unlike the main strategy of the Panopticon: they deliberately keep themselves, representatives of the camp’s ultimate authority, removed from the prisoners and out of sight as much as possible. As such, they choose leaders amongst the inmates to police the others: “Le SS ci sono sì, ma poche, e fuori del campo, e *si vedono relativamente di rado*: i nostri padroni effettivi sono i triangoli verdi.”⁴² Levi further elucidates this point in the Appendix: “i nostri persecutori di allora non avevano viso né nome [...] erano lontani, invisibili, inaccessibili. Prudentemente il sistema nazista faceva sí che i

contatti diretti fra gli schiavi e i signori fossero ridotti al minimo.”⁴³ Hence, with the SS removed at a distance, inaccessible, and indeed “invisibili” to Levi and his fellow prisoners, the immediate policing mechanism was through an element internal to their own ranks. This is somewhat akin to the intended effect of the Panopticon: the detainees’ self-policing as a consequence of internalizing the surveillance from the tower.⁴⁴

Not only do the SS tend to limit their own interactions with the inmates but there is clearly an emphasis on keeping the latter as isolated and far-removed from the external world as possible. Significantly, Levi expresses this isolation in terms of vision, “da ogni parte ci stringe lo squallore del ferro in travaglio. I suoi confini *non li abbiamo mai visti*, ma sentiamo, tutto intorno, la presenza cattiva del filo spinato che ci segrega dal mondo.”⁴⁵ The fact that they have never seen the barbed wire perimeter of the camp but can feel its presence is, again, eerily reminiscent of the anxiety effect induced by the unseen observer in the Panopticon’s tower. Levi does not offer further comment on this point, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that the Nazi leadership would have purposefully aimed at creating such an effect in their prisoners by insulating them and restricting their field of vision as much as possible. A more apparent reason for such isolation of the inmates—which is nonetheless related to the former—involved the determination to keep the camps cloaked in a shroud of secrecy. Not only prohibiting the prisoners from *seeing* the external world but simultaneously keeping them from *being seen* from outside the camp prevented or severely limited the chances of escape, as well as the possibility of any external intervention. Levi remarks upon these phenomena with reference to the Nazi interest in protecting the “mistero che regna fra gli uomini liberi intorno alla nostra condizione.”⁴⁶

The episode in which the awesome and terrible power of vision is made most explicit is during the infamous *Selekcja*. Here, in a matter of instants, the gaze of the Nazi *padrone* decides the fate of each prisoner: whether sent to the gas chamber immediately, or kept alive longer to continue toiling for the Reich. All members of the barrack must strip naked before being herded together like a pack of animals into the *Tagesraum*, a small room adjacent to the main sleeping hall. When their turn is called, each prisoner must walk outside from the *Tagesraum*, past the three camp officials, and hand their identification card to the SS agent before entering the dormitory from the external door:

La SS, nella frazione di secondo fra due passaggi successivi, con uno sguardo di faccia e di schiena giudica della sorte di ognuno, e consegna a sua volta la scheda all’uomo alla sua destra o all’uomo alla sua sinistra, e questo è la vita o la morte di ciascuno di noi. In tre o quattro minuti una baracca di duecento uomini è ‘fatta’, e nel pomeriggio l’intero campo di dodicimila uomini.⁴⁷

This selection, literally the decision between life and death, is thus based entirely on a hurried and completely subjective visual assessment of each inmate by a single SS officer.

Furthermore, it is highly significant that after the *Selekcja*, when those chosen for elimination leave for the gas chambers, the other prisoners are locked in their barracks, specifically “perché nessuno li veda partire.”⁴⁸ Aside from mere cruelty, what are the precise reasons for this prohibition? It would seem to indicate that the gaze of even those treated as powerless can potentially rattle the power of the oppressor-executioner. This in turn implies a tacit admission by the Nazis that the prisoners are not entirely beasts after all and that their humanity has not been completely erased. The prohibition against watching the selected ones depart rests on the previously considered link between visual observation and knowledge; the latter in turn can lead to empowerment and resistance. The Nazis aim to limit this risk, and the threat it presents to their power, by restricting the prisoners’ vision. On the other hand, the passage from observation to knowledge to power cannot take place if one’s capacity to think and to attain such knowledge has been eradicated.

This seemingly insignificant detail reported by Levi points to a larger critical issue: the philosophical paradoxes upon which the Nazi concentration camp regime had been founded and which Giorgio Agamben has called to attention in *Homo Sacer*. After highlighting the ancient distinction between *zoē*, the simple fact of living, i.e. bare life, and *bios*, political life, or the life of the citizen, and pointing out that by definition the former is included within the latter, Agamben argues that the history of Western politics (and by extension Western civilization as a whole, since that is what the *polis* represents) is based on a paradox: “la politica occidentale si costituisce[e] innanzitutto attraverso una esclusione (che è, nella stessa misura, un’implicazione) della nuda vita.”⁴⁹ As such, he continues, “La nuda vita ha, nella politica occidentale, questo singolare privilegio, di essere ciò sulla cui esclusione si fonda la città degli uomini.”⁵⁰ Although bare life is excluded from politics, it is simultaneously necessary for politics and the *polis*, hence civilization, to exist. In the context of Nazi Germany, we note that the Jews, once they had been stripped of their citizenship through the Nuremberg laws, were reduced to the status of bare life. One of Agamben’s objectives, then, is to show that the Nazis, in attempting to exterminate the Jews and thus eliminate *zoē* from the body politic, were attempting the impossible: “Con la soluzione finale [...] il nazismo cerca oscuramente e inutilmente di liberare la scena politica dell’occidente da quest’ombra intollerabile per produrre finalmente il *Volk* tedesco, come popolo che ha colmato la frattura biopolitica originale.”⁵¹ Even if the Nazis had succeeded in eliminating all Jews from Europe, he argues, they would not have produced a free-standing, *pure* and monolithic German People, because *bios* always needs *zoē*. If the original excluded form of bare life is eliminated, a new one must then be found from within the body politic: some

portion of the German *Volk* or some other group would be made to occupy the role of bare life previously occupied by the Jews.

In regard to these insights, there are two points I wish to make with reference to *Se questo è un uomo*. First of all, the relation of *bestia* to *uomo* in Levi's text can be considered analogous to that of *zoē* and *bios*: the animal is not something wholly distinct, but is actually contained within the human. In itself, this view is not new to Levi. It can be traced as far back as Aristotle who had proposed that the "anima sensitiva, propria degli animali" was also contained within the "anima razionale," proper exclusively to human beings.⁵² However, Levi's conception of the above-mentioned categories proves to be more flexible than that of the ancient Greeks or the Nazis. Rather than an opposition, or a "frattura biopolitica" in Agamben's lexicon, the relation between *bestia* and *uomo* in Levi proves to be a continuum, which is implicit in his hybrid formulation of the *animale-uomo*. Given extreme circumstances like those inside the Lager, a human being can change into little more than a *bestia*, even in the strict Cartesian sense of the term. But if the living circumstances improve, or if the *animale-uomo* regains consciousness, as Levi did in the Ka-Be for instance, he can become *uomo* once again. The prohibition against watching the selected ones depart indicates that deep-down the German authorities actually understand that the continuum model is the more accurate one. By extension they *should* (though it is unclear if they *do*) also realize their rhetoric of inherent Jewish inferiority is false, since what they fear is precisely the reversal of the inmates' *bestializzazione*.

Moreover, there is a second internal contradiction or paradox which is related to the first and is deeply imbedded within the concentration camp regime, as illustrated by the dual function of labor camps such as Monowitz-Buna. On one hand the Nazis have decided to eliminate all Jews. On the other hand, they designate certain Jews as "economicamente utili" and force them into slave labor, thereby preserving their life, at least temporarily.⁵³ What this does though is to establish a relationship of economic dependence on the slave labor, analogous to the dependence of *bios* on *zoē*. This fact does not escape Levi, as he observes that the *sommersi*, the term he uses to indicate the vast majority of prisoners whose destruction is all but guaranteed because they have not internalized the lessons of Steinlauf, actually constitute the "nerbo del campo," the productive core of its labor force.⁵⁴ Indeed, the real power of the Lager lies in harnessing "la potenza dello sterminato gregge di schiavi" and applying it towards "lavoro costruttivo."⁵⁵ Given the Reich's paradoxical dependence on those whom it would eliminate, the restriction of the detainees' vision reveals itself as a deliberate attempt to keep them in a state of ignorance and non-thinking in order to prevent the above-mentioned progression of vision to knowledge to power. The Nazis are aware that their own power over the inmates is not absolute, as evidenced by the existence of the organized resistance movement discussed in the chapter called "L'ultimo," and by the Nazi insistence on executing that last resistor in public ("sotto i nostri

occhi”) in hopes of intimidating and deterring other would-be resisters.⁵⁶ Yet, in so doing, the Germans not only fail to understand “che la morte solitaria, la morte di uomo che gli è stata riservata, gli frutterà gloria e non infamia,” but they also undermine their own policy of enforced ignorance.⁵⁷

The Nazis’ contradictory stance applies also to the prisoners considered specialists, as demonstrated during Levi’s chemistry exam with Doktor Pannwitz:

Quello che tutti noi dei tedeschi pensavamo e dicevamo si percepì in quel momento in modo immediato. Il cervello che sovrintendeva a quegli occhi azzurri e a quelle mani coltivate diceva: ‘Questo qualcosa davanti a me appartiene a un genere che è ovviamente opportuno sopprimere. Nel caso particolare, occorre prima accertarsi che non contenga qualche elemento utilizzabile.’⁵⁸

This is, of course, Levi’s speculative account of the Nazi doctor’s thoughts, but the observations are revealing nonetheless.⁵⁹ If on one hand, Pannwitz views Levi as less than human (“questo qualcosa davanti a me”), he is also testing the latter’s knowledge of chemistry—thus implicitly admitting his humanity—in hopes of extracting something useful from him. This is a further example of the Nazi power structure placing itself in a relationship of need or reliance on the detainee, of the German *Volk* depending on the bare life slave. Even if he would presumably never admit it outright, it is likely that Pannwitz is on some level conscious of the contradiction inherent in his position. In fact, during their encounter Levi notes a particular look he cannot describe in the doctor’s face; I suspect it is a glimpse of this conflict showing in his eyes, and that Levi can only partially understand what he observes in the other’s gaze – on a level more unconscious or intuitive than intellectual: “quello sguardo non corse fra due uomini; e se io sapessi spiegare a fondo la natura di quello sguardo, scambiato come attraverso la parete di vetro di un acquario tra due esseri che abitano mezzi diversi, avrei anche spiegato l’essenza della grande follia della terza Germania.”⁶⁰

In the two citations from this episode, Levi transcends the eyewitness perspective that he has attempted to maintain throughout. Here, he engages in an intriguing triangulation of viewpoints: representing his own as prisoner in that exact moment, that of Pannwitz, and thirdly that of the detached or objective narrator reflecting on the events after the fact. The first two perspectives correspond to the subjective gazes of two human beings, each searching or probing the other, and each unable to grasp the other. In the third perspective, the authorial voice explains the incommunicability as determined by the different worlds or “mezzi diversi” that each one inhabits. As such, the observation that “quello sguardo non corse fra due uomini” does not mean that one of them is human while the other is not, but is rather a function of their different spheres, which simply do not overlap, and of their vastly different beliefs. It is only through the

eyes of Pannwitz and the assumptions of his world that Levi is not a man. As the author explains, it is as if there is a glass barrier separating the two worlds and each man from the other. The glass allows the passage of sight but prevents actual contact and comprehension, thereby illustrating the limits of vision in the search for knowledge.

At the moment of writing, Levi is still tantalized by this encounter with Pannwitz, perceiving that it could have afforded the possibility of unlocking, at least in part, the mystery which led to the Holocaust: the collective folly of Nazi Germany—something that is completely senseless and antithetical to his own treasured belief in the essential rationality of human beings.⁶¹ In that moment, and afterwards, Levi would have desperately wanted to find a glimmer of reason, and perhaps sympathy, in the German's gaze, to confirm the other's humanity as well as his own. Instead, he could see nothing more than folly and conflict, a mixture of disgust and curiosity that likely unsettled even Pannwitz himself. Ironically, in light of the *animale-uomo*, we can conclude that this vision does indeed provide a confirmation of humanity, but in terms quite different from Levi's ideals. In this first and only face-to-face meeting with the Nazi adversary, Levi does in fact see the other man's humanity, but he also glimpses the beast inside him, which the author knows instinctively corresponds to the beast he has found within himself during his time in Auschwitz. This poignant, fleeting perception of man's dual nature explains why the encounter continues to haunt him after his liberation from the camp: "Da quel giorno, io ho pensato al Doktor Pannwitz molte volte e in molti modi. Mi sono domandato quale fosse il suo intimo funzionamento di uomo."⁶² It is why Levi wishes to meet Pannwitz again, "non già per vendetta, ma solo per una mia curiosità dell'anima umana."⁶³ Coming full circle, this is the question Levi outlines in the preface, and the one alluded to in the book's title. Moreover, it is the question to which he will persistently return, continually searching, observing, remembering, and analyzing, in myriad ways and from countless vantage points, throughout a lifetime of exemplary fiction and non-fiction writing.

Notes

1. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), 9.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 158. Written for a scholastic edition in 1976, the Appendix was subsequently added to all Einaudi editions.
4. *Ibid.*, 166.
5. *Ibid.*, 30.
6. I will be following Levi's convention of capitalizing "Lager" and leaving it in the German without italics.

7. Ibid., 21.

8. Ibid., 45.

9. Ibid., 25.

10. Ibid., 104.

11. Ibid., 45.

12. This conflict is particularly evident in Levi's description of dreaming: "non appena gli occhi si richiudono, ancora una volta percepiamo il nostro cervello mettersi in moto *al di fuori del nostro volere*; picchia e ronzia, incapace di riposo, fabbrica fantasmi e segni terribili, e senza posa li disegna e li agita [...] sullo schermo dei sogni." Ibid., 56 (emphasis added).

13. Ibid., 48.

14. Ibid.

15. For a concise history of the relationship between humans and animals in Western thought, see Umberto Eco, "Sull'anima delle bestie," in *Animalia*, ed. Ivano Dionigi, (Milano: BUR Rizzoli, 2011), 69–84.

16. Here it is worth noting that Descartes is the only philosopher that Levi explicitly cites in the pre-Auschwitz presentation of himself from the book's opening paragraph, on page 11.

17. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 45. This reflection echoes the quotation from the preface, cited in my introduction, where Levi refers to the camps as "campi di *distruzione*." Ibid., 9 (emphasis added).

18. Ibid., 152.

19. Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 95.

20. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 37.

21. The following is Levi's equivalent of bare life: "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." Ibid., 23. The prisoners' sense of losing themselves (*perdere se stesso*) is by no means incidental, but is rather a conscious aim of the concentration camp regime.

22. Ibid., 18.

23. See Eco, "Sull'anima delle bestie," 77–78; 85.

24. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 20. The tendency to speak for the group in the first person plural recurs throughout the book and is symptomatic of the duty Levi feels to represent not only his own experiences but also those of his *compagni* who did not survive.

25. Ibid., 31.

26. Ibid., 35–36 (emphasis added).

27. Ibid., 49. Furthermore, it is important to note that Levi explicitly cites the humanity not only of the prisoners but also of their Nazi tormentors.

28. Ibid., 79.

29. Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty, 1700-1789*, trans. Bernard C. Swift (Geneva, 1964), 210.

30. See Martin Jay, “Dialectic of EnLIGHTenment,” in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 83–148.

31. The quotation is from John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: [1689]), 43. <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1690book2.pdf>The following is Locke’s full enunciation of the metaphor: “Dark room. I pretend not to teach, but to inquire; and therefore cannot but confess here again, —that external and internal sensation are the only passages I can find of knowledge to the understanding. These alone, as far as I can discover, are the windows by which light is let into this dark room. For, methinks, the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without: would the pictures coming into such a dark room but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the understanding of a man, in reference to all objects of sight, and the ideas of them.”

32. Jay, “Dialectic of EnLIGHTenment,” 99.

33. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 83.

34. *Ibid.*, 126.

35. *Ibid.*, 166–167.

36. Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 200.

37. *Ibid.*, 201.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 202.

40. *Ibid.*

41. “The Panopticon [...] has a role of amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself, nor for the immediate salvation of a threatened society: its aim is to strengthen the social forces—to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply.” *Ibid.*, 207–208. The sarcasm of the last phrase reveals Foucault’s criticism of Bentham’s idealized vision.

42. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 28 (emphasis added). The *triangoli verdi* were the non-Jewish common criminals who had been recruited and transferred from the German prisons for this very purpose.

43. *Ibid.*, 158.

44. Of course, this is not a perfect analogy, since in the hierarchical nature of camp life, the “*triangoli verdi*” enjoyed a relatively higher status than common prisoners. And yet, the same basic principle of restricting the prisoners’ vision of the camp’s authority, with a view to enacting an internal enforcement of that authority, certainly applies.

45. *Ibid.*, 38 (emphasis added).

46. *Ibid.*, 75.

47. Ibid., 114.
48. Ibid., 113.
49. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), 10.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 200.
52. See Eco, "Sull'anima delle bestie," 70.
53. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 40.
54. Ibid., 81.
55. Ibid., 105.
56. Ibid., 132.
57. Ibid., 132–133.
58. Ibid., 95.
59. While this is arguably not the only instance in the text in which Levi assumes the perspective of the oppressor, it is certainly the most explicit and fully explored.
60. Ibid., 95.
61. In 1976 Levi still subscribes to this notion of a collective folly in Nazi Germany: "Nel rileggere le cronache del nazismo, dai suoi torbidi inizi alla sua fine convulsa, non riesco a sottrarmi all'impressione di una generale atmosfera di follia incontrollata che mi pare unica nella storia." Ibid., 174.
62. Ibid., 95.
63. Ibid.