FROM THE ROOTS TO THE BRANCHES:

TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRIMO LEVI'S THOUGHT

THROUGH HIS WRITINGS

by

LARRY KENNETH BOLLING

(Under the Direction of Steven Grossvogel)

ABSTRACT

This work examines the development of Primo Levi's thinking throughout his career as a writer. The available research materials were his collected literary works, transcribed interviews, and various critical essays and books. Levi's anthology and another book on numerous chemical elements were the most essential resources for this study, both being very autobiographical in nature. Significant information has been gleaned from Levi's other writings. The foundational linkages between Levi and Job, the classical sufferer, are treated at length. Also, the impact of the printed word on Levi throughout his life is analyzed. Models for Levi's reasoning patterns show how he fits in with some great thinkers in history. Finally, Levi is shown to be, not so much a moralist, but more than that, one whose sensitive but unpretentious humble suggestions to mankind are being well-received twenty years after his death.

INDEX WORDS: Primo Levi; Roots; Auschwitz; Jew; Anthology; Dante; Job; Identity; Chemist; Italy; Chart; Thought; Writings, Periodic table, Lucretius, Roger Vercel, Homer, Ulysses, Bertrand Russell, Kip Thorne, Bob Sorge, Identity, Tattoo, Brownshirts, Lorenzo, Mendel; Italo Calvino; Einaudi; Nazis; Saint Exupéry; Thomas Mann; Sholem Aleichem; Paul Celan; Tziyon Zadoka

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my work here to God above all. To numerous persons He created and put in my life who have helped me wonderfully I express thanks. My parents showed me godly principles as I was growing up, and also turned their faces heavenward in a way I could see. I must mention by name those who helped me particularly before I started writing, and those who have helped me while I was writing. My mother inspired me to write when I was young, and I know she would have been delighted to see this work. My daughter Amy was such a help and inspiration from the time I was writing my thesis. My daughter Nancy helped me more than she can comprehend, in conversations a good deal, but mostly with the threat that she would finish her dissertation before me. My daughter Laura has helped me the most, recently, and has had a big part in this successful endeavour. To tell it all would take another hundred pages.

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Leigh, Paul, Katie and Josh have shown me love during this time. “Love is the greatest thing."

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INTRODUCTION

In my research, I discovered early the importance of the *Book of Job* for Primo Levi, and so have begun with that theme. It is significant in numerous ways, starting with the obvious similarities between the two men in the area of great suffering, then going on to the prominent place that Job held in numerous writings by Levi, and finally, in the expressed thoughts of Levi that demonstrate the influence of Job in his thinking.

As Primo Levi's writing career advanced, he began to show a greater maturity in his thoughts. This had some considerable effect on his style of writing, but an even greater influence on his choices in the types of literature he began to produce. Levi wrote articles for newspapers, especially *La Stampa*, of Turin, a leading Italian daily. He wrote short stories, poems, novels, and also translated the poetry of others. His skill with languages also landed him the offer to translate one of Franz Kafka's better-known books, *The Trial*, from German into Italian. Levi also used translators for some of his own purposes, notably Guido Ceronetti, whose version of *Giobbe* (*Job*) Levi chose when Einaudi, his Turin-based publisher, commissioned him to produce a short anthology.

Levi had been a very serious student, graduating *summa cum laude* from his university, and much of his academic effort had been in the area of scientific research with experiments in a chemistry laboratory. During his time in the concentration camps, it was almost totally his powers of observation that were at the forefront. However, upon his return home after the war, he began to process many of his experiences and observations, and became a very astute thinker. Levi's highly developed mental processes served as impetus for many of his later works. Of

course, some of the literary works that he had previously read proved to be quite beneficial for him, and he never left off reading what he considered to be, not only classics, but also necessary.

The matter of Primo Levi's world-view became interesting to many people toward the end of his life. Levi was generous in giving interviews to those who requested them. Several of his interviewers questioned him about the spiritual dimensions of his life, and it appears that he was quite open to express himself. It is a matter of great importance to consider the personal perspective that the various interviewers had as they approached Levi for the interviews, and it behooves the researcher to take that into consideration, thus allowing some of Levi's answers to be tempered with the chemistry of the moment as well as the interpersonal relationships between Levi and each interviewer. It is clear that critics quite out of context have circulated some of the extracts from Levi's interviews. I contend that Levi's purported doubts and any implied faith that he might have had are sometimes distorted today, and anyone who attempts to place him in any easy category will have their hands full disputing the opposite viewpoints. My study produced material for varying viewpoints, and that is just the point: I am now convinced that Levi wanted it that way. He steadily resisted efforts of anyone who wanted to pigeonhole him.

Primo Levi has been variously categorized as a pessimist and an optimist. One of his biographers, Miriam Anissimov, even used as a subtitle for her work, *Tragedy of an Optimist*. The opposite view could be sustained by a cursory glance at something Levi himself produced. It is found in his drawing, or graph, at the beginning of his anthology. In that graph, his suggested routes through *The Search for Roots*, Levi has provided four optional paths for its study. However, since they all begin with *Job* and end with "The Black Hole," there does not seem to be much room for hope. Levi did hold out hope, and that is easily understood when one discovers that his last statement in his introduction to the last selection in his anthology is

connected to significant optimistic suggestions by Bertrand Russell in the chapter Levi entitled "Why We are not Happy." Russell declares that "man must enlarge his heart as he has enlarged his mind" (*Roots* 171), whereas Levi signed off his anthology in his introduction to Kip S. Thornes' article by writing "if the human mind has conceived Black Holes, and dares to speculate on what happened in the first moments of creation, why should it not know how to conquer fear, poverty and grief?" (*Roots* 215) Levi was a student of very broad interests. His library, as well as his conversations and writings, demonstrate that. Recognizing the complexity of the world around him, that of human relations as well as the material universe, Primo Levi is never presumptuous, almost always good-humored, and steadily cautious. This dissertation brings forth many facets of the man and his thought, and demonstrates the value of his forthright yet complex writings.

CHAPTER 1

PARALLELS BETWEEN PRIMO LEVI AND JOB

A. ORIGINS IN JOB

Levi writes in the preface of *The Search for Roots*, which is an anthology he compiled at the behest of his editor at Einaudi, that the book of Job deserved to be first by "right of primogeniture" (*Roots* 8). However, exactly what he meant by that expression is unclear. Did he have in mind a chronological primogeniture, as in the first-born child, or rather an abstract significance, as in the first seed-thought in his inspiration to be a writer?

Among all the authors and works in the anthology, Job would properly come first, if consideration were given to historical precedent. Theologians, both Jewish and Christian, generally place the period of the book of Job as contemporaneous with the patriarch Abraham who, according to Biblical genealogy, lived some 2,500 years before Christ (Gen. 11:26; 25:7, I Chronicles 1:1-9:44, Matt. 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38).

The second selection in *The Search for Roots* came from Homer's *Odyssey*. It is generally assumed that Homer lived around 800 B.C., so he would be the next in line among the remaining authors if Levi had taken a purely chronological approach in his placement of the works. These two selections would seem to establish a strict chronological order in Levi's anthology.

However, such is not the case from Homer onwards. The chronological ordering does not hold up. It seems that Levi took great delight in mixing up the selections. He in essence created an air of mystery when he denied trying to establish a time line: "The authors are not arranged in the chronological order traditional in anthologies" (*Roots* 8).

Another consideration for the placement of Job could be that Job had been the first of the thirty works that Levi had encountered in his youth. Levi's father could have introduced him to Job. Perhaps Levi discovered the book around the time he was in the *liceo* or the university. It is more reasonable that his first introduction to the book of Job occurred when he was preparing for his *bar mitzvah* (his only formal religious education), at the age of thirteen (Anissimov 26). However, Levi never specifically says when he first encountered Job. It is probable that he began studying the book of Job after his time in Auschwitz.

In contrast to the uncertainties surrounding both Levi's discovery of the book of Job and his predilection for it in *The Search for Roots*, he had a clear recollection of his first encounters with some other works and authors with surprising detail. He emphasized, for example, that he had discovered the works of Rabelais early in life. In *The Search for Roots* he declared he has been "faithful to Rabelais for forty years" (*Roots* 6), which indicates that he first became familiar with his writings when Levi was around twenty years old.

Levi also delineated meticulously his first exposure to Ludwig Gatterman, whose excerpt from *Laboratory Methods of Organic Chemistry* constitutes Chapter 10 in the anthology. Levi named that selection "The Words of the Father." Writing in the introduction to that selection, Levi says these words represented for him "a sober but firm call to responsibility that I first heard at the age of twenty-two" (*Roots* 74).

In his introduction to the excerpt from Sir William Bragg's treatise on Lucretius, *Concerning the Nature of Things*, which Levi entitled "To See Atoms" as Chapter 4 in *Roots*, Levi declares that he read this work "by chance at the age of sixteen: I was captivated by the clear and simple things that it said, and I decided I would become a chemist" (*Roots* 31).

There are other examples where Levi makes it quite clear how and when he first came to know certain authors. There were authors that he enjoyed reading, such as Vercel and Melville, and those he particularly disliked he confessed to having read "with little profit" (*Roots* 7), such as Dostoevsky and Balzac. Why he disliked these is left to conjecture. In a few cases, his justification for the authors selected does not seem to be an issue, but others command attention. Nowhere in his anthology does an inclusion attract more attention than in the case of Job. Why Primo Levi accentuates the seminal role that several of the authors included in his personal anthology had in his own life (as a student, a professional chemist and an author), and then the lack of clarification in others, could be relegated simply to mean that the other authors had not played as important a role for him as the *Book of Job* did. In contrast, however, the absence of an adequate explanation for the inclusion of Job in this particular work seems to be quite deliberate. I have not been able to find anything precise regarding the year (let alone the date) of his first encounter with the book of Job. Suffice it to say for now that it occupies a prominent place in this volume, so decided by Levi himself. This is a challenge whose resolution will help establish several elements common to both Levi and Job.

Levi has given the reader a hint that for him there were other elements in the *Book of Job* that would take some delving to bring out. An examination of his imprecise statements shows that they were deliberate, but at first they seem casual. In that casual tone Levi hid good reasons for leaving unsaid some of the background information about the authors and works in this anthology. So, since Levi as the compiler of the anthology held back a clear explanation for the prominent placement of Job as the first selection, answering the most elemental consideration of what there might be about the book of Job that Levi wanted the reader to know, Massimo

Giuliani offers some insight into this question. He sees the importance of humankind having a thirst for understanding as being foundational for Levi in this regard:

> The intimate, suffered, sober conviction that "despite all, we need to understand"-- because reason is what distinguishes us as a species-- is the "fourth dimension" of Primo Levi: it makes Levi a true Job of the twentieth century, one of the most credible witnesses of Auschwitz and one of the most classical of the writers on human dignity. (Giuliani 5)

So, as Job was a representative, in ages gone by, of sufferers seeking to understand why tragedies occur to humans, Primo Levi is the modern version.

The basic theme of the book of Job is that of the just suffering injustice. The title Levi chose for the rather long selection from Job is "The Just Man Oppressed by Injustice." It is clear from the biblical account that Job was a just man. Of course, Primo Levi was very candid about his own ethical and moral standing among men. He never specifically said that the suffering he endured was as a righteous man before God. There were numerous witnesses who knew him through much of his life that have attested to his essential goodness as a person. However, Levi's goodness was never an issue with him. There was something else that was of much greater interest to him.

Levi's overriding concern here was with the great injustice suffered by others. The many that he knew personally who suffered to the extreme at the hands of the Nazis constituted his first and perhaps major concern throughout his life. Their innocence was not allowed to become an issue in the Lager. They were not tried for crimes. They were exterminated for the simple reason that they had been born Jews. This gross injustice caused Primo Levi perplexity that he would later relate to the experiences of the just man Job.

While it is clear that injustice is the major theme springing out of the book of Job, it does not end there. It affects to a large degree much of the rest of Levi's anthology. I have noted two other references within the anthology to the *Book of Job*. One is a quote within one of the excerpts that appears to be taken verbatim from the Bible while the other is in Levi's own words in his introduction to the selection from Carlo Porta. Neither of these references carries the gravity of the main theme of the book of Job. Still, their presence here does indicate a deeper preoccupation on the part of Levi to insist on the preeminent role of Job in his work.

Levi's selection from Joseph Conrad has as its title "A Testing Time." It is from Conrad's work *Youth, and the End of the Tether*. An expression obviously originating from the book of Job is subtly woven into Conrad's narrative about the burning ship that the protagonist, Marlowe, and the rest of the crew were preparing to abandon. Describing the fire that was consuming the merchant ship, Conrad writes, "There were cracks, detonations, and from the cone of flame the sparks flew upwards, as man is born to trouble, to leaky ships, and to ships that burn" (*Roots* 64). One segment of that sentence (denoted in italics, and inverted from the Authorized Version in English yet essentially intact) comes directly from the *Book of Job* (5:7). While this is not a major consideration for this thesis, its discovery here does signal the possibility of an even greater pervasiveness of the book of Job in Levi's anthology than what otherwise might be perceived. It is not clear whether Conrad included this expression in his narrative with the full knowledge of its parentage, or whether this constitutes his using it simply because it happened to be a linguistic refrain originating from the Bible that prevailed in the English-speaking world during his lifetime. For Levi's part, it would seem more than a mere coincidence that this strange expression appear here, but we cannot be certain to what extent Primo Levi was aware of the

linguistic origins of this expression during the compilation of *Roots*. Did Primo Levi want to accentuate the role of Job in his literary search for origins, or is it just a happy coincidence?

Levi calls the piece from Carlo Porta "A Deadly Nip" (*Roots* 48). It comes from a work whose title (in Milanese dialect) is *Olter Desgrazzi de Giovannin Bongee* (Further Misfortunes of Giovanni Bongeri). Levi denominates Giovannin, Ninetta and Marchion (characters from other works by Porta), to be "Jobs in miniature" (*Roots* 48). However, it might be questionable whether any such depiction of Giovannin (to pick just one of the three that Levi mentions) qualifies as appropriately related to Job. Whereas Job suffered the loss of everything, including his seven children, Giovannin's case is on a much smaller scale: all his efforts at middle-class entertainment are thwarted. As Levi describes it, "amusements always turn sour for Giovannin: it is his destiny" (*Roots* 49). Levi's point is well taken nonetheless: there is the presence of injustice in his frustrations. However, it is a stretch to see any strong correlation between him and Job. Somehow, one sees foolishness wrapped up in the character of Giovannin, but not in Job.

Job and Levi as Messengers

Inasmuch as Primo Levi told many people about his experiences at Auschwitz, and later wrote about them in his book, *Survival at Auschwitz*, he became a messenger. His message was clear and simple. It seems that he tried to contradict that he ever had a message, however. Years afterward, he would write, in the Preface to *The Mirror Maker*:

> I beg the reader not to go in search of messages. Message is a term that I detest because it distresses me greatly, for it forces on me clothes that are not mine, which in fact belong to a human type that I distrust: the prophet, the soothsayer, the seer. I am none of these; I'm a normal man with a good memory who fell into a maelstrom and got out of it more

> by luck than by virtue, and who from that time on has preserved a certain curiosity about maelstroms large and small, metaphorical and actual. (*The Mirror Maker* 3,4)

This passage could appear to be a diatribe against anyone who would assign him an elevated position in his function as a writer. On the contrary, what we discern here is the personal witness of a humble man, who felt himself no greater (or lesser) than any other man on earth. Primo Levi did not have ambition to enter into legend. As far as his comment on the "human type," the prophet, he surely did not totally reject the role of prophets in the highest and purest Biblical sense. Some evidence of his high regard for the genuine Hebrew prophets will be demonstrated in the next section.

As we consider the significance of messengers in the book of Job, we can draw some parallels in the life of Primo Levi. As already stated, the fact that Primo Levi served in some measure as a messenger is undeniable. He simply brought news ("from afar"), which informed, at first, family and friends, as well as some strangers who listened to the young man who seemingly could not resist the impulse to talk. In that regard, Levi approximates the role of the messengers in the first chapter of Job who rushed to inform him of the awful tragedies that had occurred. Those messengers had witnessed the catastrophes. One by one they came to Job, the first three to communicate to him the loss of his property and livestock, and the fourth the loss of his children. These four separate messengers came to Job in a single day, and they all announced calamities.

Primo Levi, upon his liberation, talked to anyone who would listen about the events of Auschwitz, during the long trip home, and for quite some time after his return to Turin. His style in communicating these stories seems to have been tempered by his scientific training. Basically, his face-to-face story telling at that time was in the mold of Job's messengers. As Levi continued

to feel the impulse to share the horrible tale, however, he came up against the same challenge as Job, which was a much more complex issue than just the reporting of bare facts.

So, as Levi began to go beyond the actual occurrences to examine the inception of the horrible Lagers, he came face-to-face with similar issues that Job was forced to confront so many centuries before. Recounting bad news is one thing; to search out the ones responsible was another. Arriving at a clear understanding of why all of this had happened was a further step beyond assigning responsibility.

A later development surprised Primo Levi. He and others had to face the eventual waning of interest in the wartime atrocities. That was not acceptable for those who had been carried into a new "exile." When Levi first began to note the dismissal of those realities, it was very frustrating to him. However, those who had not suffered in the Lager could not adequately conceive that such a thing could have happened in the way it was described to them. There were others that, while they kept these things in their minds, and believed them, did not want to continue listening to the survivors (*Roots* 208-213, *The Mirror Maker* 163-166).

It is perhaps the case that Levi had less difficulty getting people to listen to him than other survivors did. People were likely more receptive because Primo was a good speaker, and his descriptions were never fraught with emotionalism. It should be understood that just because the ever-clinical Levi did not allow himself to be influenced by emotionalism did not signify that he had any sort of insipid delivery. On the contrary, he began telling anyone who would listen to him with the urgency of an evangelist. (I have used the word "evangelist" here in its popular sense. Actually, the translation from the Greek for the word "evangelist" is: "bearer of good news;" however, the telling of the atrocities committed in the Lager would of necessity be quite negative, thus, "bad news.”) This could place Levi in the role of bearer of bad news in the

fashion of those who had informed Job of the calamities. So, by definition, the bearer of bad news was in essence an "anti-evangelist."

It could be questioned whether Levi ever saw himself as a bearer of bad news. It is probably the case that he was so filled with the immensity of what he had witnessed that he simply could not restrain himself. As Levi developed as a writer he began to spend more and more time attempting to understand why the genocide had occurred. That became a matter of great importance to him. Also, he eventually gained the reputation of being a very accurate reporter who did not unduly insert his feelings in his writings. He told events in a fashion that seemed at times to be detached, with occasional wit. It is true that readers can get caught up in the narrative of Survival at Auschwitz, for example, and become very emotional themselves, but Levi disciplined himself as a writer in order to maintain literary equilibrium. His writing is never dominated by his emotions. He does not emit vitriolic judgments on the perpetrators of the genocide. For that reason, he would later be able to offer sober analysis as to why these sociological phenomena were possible. Having earned the reputation as a clear-headed analyst, his message (as we can now attribute to him) was authoritative. Also, as the subtitle for one biography of Primo Levi indicates, he became well-known for offering positive thoughts on the nature and potential of humankind (I refer to *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, by Miriam Anissimov). Anissimov certainly portrays Levi as an optimist. Without placing too much emphasis on the manner in which it was reckoned his life ended, she dwells on his heavily weighted positive accomplishments. For Anissimov, the greatest tragedy occurred when more people of Levi's generation (and the one that followed) did not take up the message and do more with it. Part of Anissimov's approach in her biography was to show that Primo Levi was driven by a clear purpose. That purpose was to learn from history, and guide humanity in such a way as

to avoid devastating cruelties in the future. It was this perception of optimism that people learned from Levi that made him unique among all those who wrote about the sufferings of the Jews during World War II.

To the extent Levi was optimistic, that quality alone could not have prepared him for what was about to occur in Italy, such as was happening in other parts of Europe. He was not afraid, but his understanding of developments at the national and international level was limited. He would become a more astute observer during the war, and later became such an articulate chronicler of those events. For this reason, one could ask to what extent he might have been able to foresee the horrors that were advancing toward the European Jews. Judging by the comments he made about having been involved with the Italian resistance, it seems that he could not conceive the horror he would witness in the months to follow. He was aware, of course, of the racial laws, instituted by Mussolini some years before the "final solution" of the German Third Reich began to be implemented. Levi had personally experienced the difficulties for a Jew to be regularly enrolled in university during that early period. He narrowly made the cut for entrance, since the laws that were passed excluding Jews from enrollment in university came into effect only after his admission. The law did not stipulate the dismissal of those who were already enrolled. Still, as the laws came into effect for Jewish students applying for enrollment, professors were alerted to potential difficulties should they agree to assist Jewish students with their projects required for graduation. It was not easy for Levi to find a professor at the university who would assist him on the *tesi* (which would be similar to a senior paper in American universities today; perhaps the rough equivalent of a master's thesis, although Levi was not going for a master's degree, but rather the baccalaureate).

Levi was quite cognizant of the growth of the brown-shirt movement. Both his father and he had been a part of the early Fascist movement, but their acceptance by the Fascists and their willingness to be a part of the movement are indicative that few Jews could see how it would develop into a force to separate races and ultimately attempt to exterminate one of them entirely. Few suspected the horrible implications that a fully developed Fascism would have for them. Primo's father did not witness or suffer the horrors of the war. He died of illness before Primo's capture. Although Primo began to feel more and more uncomfortable after he was identified at the university of Turin as a Jew, he had no inkling of the extreme subhuman treatment he would later undergo in captivity. That is why he identified himself, upon his capture, as Jewish, and not as a "partisan." But, shortly after he was transported to Forlì with other Jewish prisoners, he learned that they would not stay there. By the time they arrived at Auschwitz, all the prisoners were alarmed. Something sinister was taking place. The vast majority of those prisoners had not been arrested for any particular crimes. They were Jews, and such were the grounds for the then-secret plan to exterminate them. The almost universal scope of destruction that had been planned by the Nazis would not be evident to the prisoners until after their arrival at Auschwitz. It became one of the greatest atrocities in human history.

Thus, the months of anguish began for Primo. His daily life was one simply of getting enough food to survive until the next day. As he and his companions were reduced to a level beneath anything from their worst nightmares, they had to adapt quickly to their new surroundings. At that time, the big question was not why this was happening to them, but rather what they could do to stay alive a few hours more. It would be a long time after that Primo Levi would have the repose essential to formulate the question in his writings as to how it was possible that this had happened.

Levi may be seen at that time to be similar to Job would be appears in the three opening chapters of Job. The horror was imminent, it occurred, and then Job sat down among the ashes thus indicating his formal period of mourning (*Job* 2:8). He is covered with the marks of his suffering. It is at this point that Primo Levi declares in his introduction to the chapters from Job that he chose for *The Search for Roots* that there could be a close parallel between the two of them.

Once Levi began to study the portrayal of Job the sufferer in the Bible, he would enter the frame of mind that legitimated his own complaints. Not only for Job, but probably also for Primo Levi, the complaint would go all the way to God. Levi acknowledges God's active role in these events when he writes:

> Job the just, degraded to an animal for an experiment, comports himself as any of us would, at first he lowers his head and praises God ("Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?") then, his defenses collapse. Poor, bereft of his children, covered in boils, he sits among the ashes, scraping himself with a potsherd, and contends with God. (*Roots* 11)

We are not told how long this contention with God lasted in the case of Job, but Levi's struggle with divinity appears to be a long one. Levi, rather than contending with Germans or Italians, took the case to a Creator-God who had put in man the capacity for such horrible comportment as to allow such atrocities in the first place.

For Giuliani, Job's questioning God about the "why" of everything is quintessential to human nature.

> Job, standing at the beginning, is both the prototype of the suffering just and the ancient questioner who searches for the meaning of his suffering, and of general evil in the

> world. Although he is religiously characterized in the *Tanach*, Job poses those universal questions that every sensitive human being feels inside of him/herself. He represents the relentless hunger for answers (Giuliani 31-32).

If Levi is seen primarily as a witness or a messenger, the importance of the message itself becomes magnified. Messengers who do their work long enough become identified so much with the character of their message that they come to embody that role.

Primo Levi does make an effort to identify with Job. As already seen, his placement of this work at the head of his personal anthology intimates that fact. Italo Calvino thinks that is enough to establish the personal connection between Levi's experiences at Auschwitz and the sufferings of Job, who has become, both in Western and near-Eastern popular culture, the epitome of human suffering. Referring to the graphic that Levi drew to represent the relationship between the various selections he has included in his personal anthology, Calvino writes:

> The most important page of the book is the graphic placed at the beginning to suggest "four possible routes through some of the authors in view." The scheme has the form of an ellipse or spheroid and has at one pole the book of Job, which opens the book: the drama of "the Just oppressed by injustice" is the point from which the first questions emerge. (I would suggest that it is the very presence of the book of Job as an introduction to this "search for roots" that reminds us that the journey of Primo Levi passed through Auschwitz.) (*Roots* 222)

Primo Levi already had something pressing to tell his family, friends and colleagues as he took his circuitous route back from Auschwitz to Turin. The messengers who carried the bad news to Job, passing from the very locale of the calamities, could on this point, be compared to Levi, who, after enduring the great difficulties of the concentration camp, then witnessed the horrors

and later managed to survive that fatal destiny ultimately planned also for him, returned home to relate those events to those who were not fully aware of what had happened. Of course that does not rule out Levi's many other similarities to Job, who later was himself a messenger of sorts to his friends as he spoke of wisdom, lack of quicker judgment and the revelation of God (Job 19). The four messengers in the book of Job brought the news to Job, first of the loss of his property, then the horrible news of the loss of his children. Each messenger declared to Job, "Only I have escaped to tell you" (*Job* 2:3). One could easily extrapolate that phrase to Primo Levi's situation to read, "I am one of a very few to have escaped, and I have come to tell you what happened." That essentially sums up what Levi saw as his role for many years after his return.

Levi's thought developed as he continued to write, so that later he would be able to tell why it had happened. So, while in his earlier role as writer Levi seemed to be more like Job's messengers, he was on his way to becoming a great thinker, in the mold of Job the sufferer. Whereas he had an audience that at first went little beyond his small circle of influence to include some chance acquaintances, he later became a great voice to a generation.

B. DISCERNING THE SOURCE OF EVIL

Levi's efforts at tracing his own literary and familial genealogy were seminal in providing him the impetus to embark upon a search for the roots of the evils he witnessed in the *lager*. In *The Search for Roots* he attempted to demonstrate the influences that great literature had on him as a writer. He had previously written another volume, *The Periodic Table,* that traced his family background, and also wrote there of the importance of friends in his life. Since Levi went to such lengths to look for influences and origins in his writings, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that he would attempt to trace the source of the evil he had witnessed in the death camps. That became an integral part of his thought, and is seen in many of his writings.

Levi progressively went more and more beyond reporting: he interpreted. While in the concentration camp, he examined decisions made by soldiers at the personal level, and subsequently showed himself to be quite adroit at explaining motivations of key persons in high command. That ability to look beyond the immediate was in vigor when Levi came to study Job, one of the most famous victims of injustice in history. Researching that story now in this light is helpful in explaining what Levi came to view as the origins of the evil. Levi looked closely at the events in the life of Job in order to draw some conclusions regarding the higher questions of the book. A principal one is: who were the entities responsible for Job's troubles in the first place?

To begin with, Primo Levi offers a comment on the initial impetus for the trials that were to come to Job. He calls it a "cruel wager between Satan and God" (*Roots* 11). The perspective Levi holds appears at first to have validity from Levi's perspective, primarily because he took this portion of Scripture very seriously. It is worth noting here that there is a curious dichotomy in the writings of Primo Levi concerning sacred texts. Here is a man who "officially" asserted his lack of faith in God on more than one occasion, yet he makes regular references to God in his writings. In addition, there are such a great number of inclusions of biblical passages in his works that can traced directly to the Law and the Prophets as to leave room for conjecture on the topic of Levi's own personal faith, and the solid base on which he worked right up to his death that has its roots in the traditions of "the God of his fathers."

Numerous critics, one of the most notable being Risa Sodi, have pointed out that Levi did take Scripture seriously. As much as has been written on this subject, no one to date has yet compiled an exhaustive list of all the biblical references Levi made in his writings. Of course, it would be very complicated to accomplish a task like that, because any attempt would be limited by a compiler's biblical depth and also because it would require an interpretation of the texts to

determine Levi's level of cognizance of individual passages. How difficult would it be to determine whether the inclusion of various passages simply constituted part of his classical upbringing in a society dominated by Catholicism, or else was a result of a perspicuous study in his mature years? A compiler would have to consider first of all these different possibilities would certainly put a filter within the texts to be included or excluded.

Levi employed several different methods as he interspersed these references. One type that he used was to quote a short passage, and follow that up with his own similarly short comment. At times he quotes directly, at other times he paraphrases, and also makes allusion to a well-known passage. On one occasion, he weaves into the fabric of a novel a reference to Scripture from one of his characters. Mendel, the protagonist of Levi's historical novel, exclaims upon the reappearance of Leonid, one of his comrades in arms: "Blessed is he that returns from the dead!" (*If Not Now, When?* 148)

The fact that he mentions Scripture at all could be an indication that Levi was more of a believer than is generally thought. Still, it is not my purpose in this section to enter into speculation about the level of spirituality of Primo Levi. That consideration, and highly developed theological points, should be avoided. The methodology here will be to examine primarily some clear references that are found in his personal anthology. Other references will be followed which are connected with what Levi has written or excerpted in *The Search for Roots*. Psalm 91 is included because it speaks so directly to issues that both Primo Levi and Job confronted. However, the theologically linear doctrine of the origin of evil is not the focus here. Rather, I have followed a progression of logic that adheres to the reasoning patterns of both Job and Primo Levi as they faced the problem of injustice. The specific questioning of these two men is the entrance to this theme.

It is beneficial to consider what might have been in Levi's mind as he himself considered the roots of the tragedy that befell him and his fellow Jews. An examination of Levi's own interpretation of various aspects of the book of Job will help in drawing conclusions from the major themes. The pertinent texts may then serve as an overlay for the period in Levi's life that caused him so much perplexity. He would eventually come up with some reasonable conclusions, but it should be noted that they were not new dogma. It was both his nature and his training that guided him to consistently let reason prevail.

It should be pointed out that the troubles did not come from the messengers. They merely carried the news. While it may not seem necessary to have to treat this first point, it is offered here primarily to establish, through process of elimination, those areas from which the evil that came to Job (and ultimately Levi) did not emanate from those who announced the calamities. This could serve as a reference not only to those who might deny that calamity had never really occurred, but also to those who might ascribe blame to the victim (in the case of Job) and the victims (in the case of all those who suffered during the holocaust, both the survivors and those who perished in the camps).

Levi’s purpose in introducing scriptural passages lends credence to the view that he did consider there to be authority in the Bible. The theologically linear doctrine of the origin of evil is not the focus here. Rather, there is a progression of logic that follows the reasoning patterns of both Job and Primo Levi as they faced the problem of injustice. The specific questioning of these two men is the entrance to this theme, since it is their knowledge and interpretation of the root of evil that is in question. Some of the elements of which they were ignorant or else may have misinterpreted will be examined in Chapter Three.

Levi wrote in his introduction to the selection from Job that when calamity first came to Job he "comports himself as any of us would, at first he lowers his head and praises God" (*Roots* 11). This might well be an indicator that Primo Levi himself did similarly at some point in his own calamity, and that he thought that praising God even after experiencing setbacks would initially be a normal thing for anyone to do. We cannot assume that Levi penned these words casually. His assumption seems to be that anyone allowed to live in felicity would become so accustomed to acknowledging the Giver of all good things would, upon first encountering tragedy and loss, reckon that it was the same one who brought the evil. Job attests to that view in this way: "The Lord gave, and the Lord took away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (*Job* 1:21).

Several persons who knew Primo Levi gave him credit for being optimistic. However, ascribing to him an optimistic character does not preclude the possibility of profound perplexity as he considered gross injustices. He was, after all, a scientist, and very much a realist. I have found that Levi regularly implanted seeds of thought in his writings that can only be properly gleaned by examining various possible inter-textual connections. Risa Sodi declares that "only a handful of scholars have looked beyond Levi's commanding and captivating views on moral and ethical issues to focus on the ways in which Levi communicated these views" (Sodi, in Kremer 36). This would indicate a methodology on the part of Levi aimed at conveying morals and ethics in such a way as to make them difficult to grasp if one only reads them in a cursory fashion. This characteristic of Levi the writer could well have been a modality that he deliberately crafted, or it could have simply been an the natural result of the scientist's discipline formed in his youth, so that he did not even exert himself to write in that vein. Certainly, if we look at it in that way, we would have to acknowledge that the use of Scripture was a part of Levi's regular communication.

Since Levi points to Scripture so often in his writings, both directly and indirectly, I now refer to a passage from the Old Testament. It would have been quite natural for Levi to read the ninety-third psalm. We see there the multiple promises God made to those who want to live close to him, as Job certainly must have, and as Levi indicated that he had.

In Psalm 91, there is a promise to whoever has the protection of God: "He who lives in the secret shelter of the Most High lodges in the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1). This is surely the concept to which Satan was referring when he declared that God had "put a hedge around Job" (Job 1:10). This hedge should be understood to include not just the person of Job, but of all that he had: his house family and servants, land and livestock. Everything that constituted Job's prosperity and God had extended happiness to him in fulfillment of the promises made in Psalm 91. It seems apparent, if one follows the biblical norm, that it was for that reason that Job could not be touched by anything negative, according to Satan's contention. Satan's dare was that God would not be able to speak so positively of Job should those blessings be removed. He challenges God: "Put forth your hand, and lay it on everything he has, and he will deny Thee to Thy face!" (*Job* 1:11), At this point, for reasons that will be explained in Chapter Three, God tells Satan that he has the power to touch Job's possessions.

From that point, disaster strikes the household of Job. His children, his livestock, and property are lost in one day. Notably, the messengers who bring him the news are the only survivors. One may suppose that they were Job's servants (considered in those days to be a man's personal property, but even if they were not servants or slaves, they did serve as messengers, whether friends or simple informants. However, it is useful to note that nothing in the text could imply that their role was anything other than that of simply telling Job what had happened.

For all the parallels to be found between Primo Levi and the story of Job, one is notably missing. After Levi (whom we identify as a "messenger") gained prominence, both for his literary excellence and his role as a witness of the holocaust, he would, surprisingly enough, be considered by some of his contemporaries as an agitator, simply because he became so identified with the atrocities committed during World War II, and consequently reminded many of the culpability of the perpetrators of those crimes. Thus in his case, as messenger, he suffered scorn. Yet, in the narrative of Job, there seems to be no instance of anyone "shooting the messenger." Job himself does not question the messengers as to the veracity of their reports, and there is no record of any further conversation he might have had with any of those who reported the calamities. By all accounts, he took the reports as soon as he heard them, and there was no denying the evidence. It would be well to establish at this point that no responsibility for the committal of the tragedies is assigned to the messengers themselves. That is the biblical record.

The messengers brought the news, but had not caused the calamity. So it was with Primo Levi the messenger. His intent at first seems to have been that of informing. He gave the details. He did not pass judgment.

So, as we note that the messengers brought the news, but not the terror, are we to understand that the prominent place Levi gives the book of Job in his anthology is meant to indicate that he thought of himself as another Job? Would he not rather be equated with the various messengers who brought Job news of his personal calamities; each of which declared, “Only I have escaped to tell you” (Job 1:13-19)? That was very likely Primo Levi's view of his own role after regarding the horrible events that took place in Auschwitz. He certainly did do a lot of telling upon his return from Auschwitz. Even during his protracted, circuitous trip back to Italy he would narrate his story to total strangers. Yet it will be seen that Levi came to grips with

matters concerning the great sufferings of the concentration camps in such a way as to lend credence to a more direct association with Job. That appears to be at the heart of his anthology.

Of course, Levi did not keep retelling the experiences of the Lager without reflecting on them. His thought developed as he began to tell of those horrors to the free and happier world to which he returned. Levi's further reflections began to resemble those of Job as Giuliani characterizes them:

> Job, standing at the beginning, is both the prototype of the suffering just and the ancient questioner who searches for the meaning of his suffering, and of general evil in the world. Although he is religiously characterized in the *Tanach*, Job poses those universal questions that every sensitive human being feels inside of him/herself. He represents the relentless hunger for answers. (Giuliani 31-32)

Unlike the man Job at the time of his calamities, readers of the book have access to the prelude to Job's troubles, and can see clearly that God did not create the troubles, nor did He send them. Ascribing to God the troubles of Job is a simplistic answer, and one that some moralists who hold to a clear rationale of good and evil would find unacceptable, but surprisingly enough, it is the initial thought that Job had about the onslaught of his own torment. It appears also to be Primo Levi's first brief explanation for Job's troubles, as we have seen in his introduction to the chapters he excerpted from the book of Job for his anthology. Therein also, after an initial seven days of mourning and empathetic silence on the part of Job's three friends, lies the first conflict between Job and his friends. All of this encompasses a precise view of the ruling of the universe which almost demands one of two major theological views: either God holds to His omnipotence without exception, or else there exists a duality of rule between the Good and the Evil.

From the book of *Job*, it is said that Satan came into the presence of God after "roaming about on the earth and walking up and down through on it" (*Job* 1:7). God called Satan’s attention to Job. He declared that there was no other man like him. It is not a necessary interpretation of Scripture that God called attention to God to incite Satan to wreak havoc in Job's life. That would attribute to God motives that are most certainly not good. There is, however, another explanation. God did not call attention to Job to incite Satan to wreak havoc in Job's life. If one accepts the biblical account of original sin, then the result was that Satan was given power in the earth (not directly by God, but by those who had been given the rule). By yielding to the serpent, Eve and Adam relinquished their dominion over the earth and all the Creation (*Genesis* 3). At that point, Satan had the power to which God referred in *Job* 1:12.

This would establish culpability for the tragedies that came to Job directly to Satan. However, the issue that occupies more space in the forty-two chapters of Job is that Job's friends ascribe righteousness only to the Creator-God, and the blame for Job's troubles directly on his own sinfulness! Later, that phenomenon of friends accusing friends does not hold at all for Levi as he considers the ill treatment that the Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis, but it was an argument that was used by the Germans to lash out at the Jews. Many of them laid the blame for social ills and national economic problems on the Jews. Otherwise, the Nazis would have had no excuse for the mad attempt at extermination of the Jewish race they perpetrated.

Primo Levi made it clear that he did not consider God to blame for the Holocaust. Levi ascribes Job's eventual acquiescence to God's omnipotence merely as a result of powerlessness on Job's part (*Roots* 11). However, Levi’s thoughts on that theme go well beyond that and provide material for much further study. He did not fully recognize that Satan was not only the instigator, but also the tormentor. If one accepts that there is an Evil entity (Satan), as Levi did,

then the evil that occurs in the universe has a logical result as well as a logical origin. The power that was given to Satan had its origins in fallen man. Still, that does not necessarily signify that there is no longer any good on earth. It was this supposition that caused to reason with his friends who accused him, and it was this supposition that caused Primo Levi to continue throughout his life to try to understand the Germans as a people. He saw them as a complex people, but also as capable as any other people on earth are, of falling into a mindset that would eventually allow the extermination of individuals thought by their assassins to be beyond redemption, and ultimately, the attempt to rid the earth of an entire race.

I have made reference to Levi's comment that there was a "cruel wager" in heaven between God and Satan. If wager there was, it was Satan who was the architect of the scheme. The power that Satan had, as evidenced in the narrative of Job, may have remained mysterious for many Jews, but Primo Levi attempted to come to grips with the intricacies of how an adversarial power, breathing hatred toward human beings, could be litigious toward an Almighty God.

One notable intricacy is that, in the dialogues in the Book of Job, there is no specific mention of Satan. God does not mention him to Job. Neither does Job's wife, nor any of the messengers of the evil that befell Job and his wife. The three friends of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who came and mourned with him for seven days before speaking, but who would later speak profusely, never make reference to the evil personage. Neither does Elihu, a controversial and enigmatic character for many scholars.

Still, the particular woes that came to Job were the result of the machinations of one personage. We have seen in the previous section that it was not God. It was Satan, the fallen angel, who refused to believe in the good of Job, and who pressed to afflict him. He is identified early in the narrative (he appears early in chapter one, then in the very beginning of chapter two).

After that his name is not to be found in the Book of Job, nor is any direct reference ever made to him again. But his actions are most certainly evident in the calamitous results that follow his encounter with God, and it is in fact his words that come through the mouth of Job's wife and friends when they find themselves in the cauldron of testing.

On Job's side, there is an early indication that he had seen his approaching tragedy, when he declares his previous fear: "That which I feared has come upon me" (Job 3:36). There are several ramifications to Job's acknowledgement of potential impending disaster. One is that he was aware that he had experienced great blessings from God, and was considered "the greatest man in the East (Job 1:2,3). Another is perhaps best summed up by the adage that his situation was "too good to be true," or another similar one, "all good things must come to an end." While we could speculate that it was Job's "fear" that allowed the disasters to come, any fear he might have had is not germane to the argument. Neither can we speculate that Levi or anyone else could have foreseen the genocide that came to Europe.

C. PRIMO LEVI'S VIEW OF PROPHETS

It has been established that there are significant comparisons between Job and Primo Levi. Now comes the consideration of whether they alike in yet another way. One modern, secular definition of a prophet has already been given. A prophet may be seen as one who holds a divine office, a man who both hears from God and speak to the people. That role is to be found especially in the Old Testament, where the Scriptures, for the Jews, are divided up between the Law and the Prophets. Here, for the purposes of this study, the characteristics of the Hebrew prophets are essential.

There are several personages in the Old Testament who are not usually associated with the prophets. But it was common understanding at the time of Christ that Moses and king David were prophets.

Normally, Job is viewed as having the status of "sufferer." It is almost as if he could only have a single identity, and he is relegated to a category (or office) that ostensibly only he could occupy. He does not at all proclaim himself to be a prophet. Yet, who would question that he was a great man of faith, outstanding as an example of patient endurance. The apostle James, in his treatise on patience and endurance, goes on to mention examples, citing first the prophets in general, and mentions Job specifically.

> For an example of ill treatment that was patiently endured, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name. We call blessed those who have endured. You have heard of the perseverance of Job, and you have seen the outcome which the Lord brought about, because the Lord is compassionate and merciful (*James* 5:10-11).

The meaning of "prophet"

The biblical connotation for the term prophet was more than foretelling, yet in a way it was simpler. That is, the prophet announced the mind and heart of God. His will became more clearly known through the ministry of the prophets. Of course, most people understand it this way: in ancient times, the Hebrew prophets would bring the pronouncement from God of impending judgment, and prophets were viewed as being essentially negative. It becomes rather complex when one wishes to ascertain to what extent Levi viewed prophets in this sense. The previous references that indicated that Levi's writings are replete with biblical elements do not imply that Levi considered himself to be a biblical scholar. Still, Levi made so many references to Scripture that it cannot be denied that he had spent much time reflecting on the Bible.

Not only is there evidence that Levi understood the Old Testament on a higher level than the average layman, one finds also that he had an excellent understanding of the New Testament, to include the prophets found therein. Theirs was a positive message, and it was very clear. The apostle Paul, a prophet himself, emphasized the positive even when he was in prison. The short, New Testament letters to the Philippians and to Philemon, to name only two, were written from prison, and are thoroughly positive.

Levi was influenced by the prevailing and permeating religious thought in his own native Italy (which was, of course, Christian, and more specifically, Roman Catholic). That, combined with his own searching into the matter, expressed both in his writings and his daily living significant amounts of Christian doctrine. It does seem to be the case that at times Levi makes references to matters of Christian faith in a way that seems detrimental, but even that could be viewed as valuable in a study of Levi with regard to faith.

Levi mentions the term "prophet" numerous times in his writings. Especially, he dedicated an entire article to the subject in *L'altrui mestiere* (*Other People's Trades*). While it could be debated as to what categories of prophets he was alluding over the years (and there were more than one), priority is given to the rendering of "prophet" as a spokesperson for God in the tradition of the Jewish prophets who wrote books. That rendering is what Levi intended when he declared that he was not a prophet. However, one could search for evidence in his writings that would indicate the contrary, but it categorically cannot be found. There were moments, however, when he expressed himself in a prophetic style. For example, in referring to the prayer of thanksgiving of an elderly Jewish man who had just learned that he would be spared from execution the next day, Levi emphasizes that this prayer had been blurted out in the presence of a

younger man who had just learned that he would be put to death the next day. Levi, in a rare moment, wrote: "If I were God, I would spit on his prayer!" (*Survival at Auschwitz* 130)

Levi's interpretation of roles, especially in *Other People's Trades*, was specifically contextualized. He reckoned that the prophetic role had existed in ancient times but saw the implicit dangers of accepting the message of many would-be prophets. In the same passage he expressed his distaste (he says "distrust") for prophets. "Message is a term that I detest because it distresses me greatly, for it forces on me clothes that are not mine, which in fact belong to a human type that I distrust: the prophet, the soothsayer, the seer. I am none of these" (*The Mirror Maker* 3). That assessment has to be tempered, however, with Levi's own restricted interpretation of what it meant to be a prophet. Was he speaking in a social sense, a biblically historical sense, or purely in a spiritual manner? Above all, Levi was cautious, ever the careful chemist, holding uppermost the fear of causing an explosion by introducing toxic mixes in the laboratory.

Some light can be shed on Levi's tendency to be cautious when he referred to the prophetic by examining his comments on Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke was a scientist who also wrote fiction:

> Astronomer, radar specialist in World War II, author of happy science fiction romances [novels], Arthur C. Clarke is a living refutation of the commonplace notion that to practise science and to cultivate the imagination are mutually exclusive tasks; his life and work show, on the contrary, that a modern scientist must have imagination, and that the imagination is vastly enriched if its owner has enjoyed a scientific education. (*Roots* 188)

When Levi quotes Clarke in a subsequent sentence, there seems to be a refutation of the popular prophetic element. Clark declares, "It is impossible to predict the future [...]" (*Roots* 188). Still, he has included that very concept when he advances the possibility (and usefulness) of establishing parameters within which events in the future will occur. This is accomplished in a scientific manner, and the eventual outcomes will not be exactly as have been prognosticated, but the essential elements of prophecy, in the popular sense, are most certainly there. Clarke's science fiction does arguably contain prophetic/predictive elements. Levi enjoyed this style of futuristic fiction, and wrote some himself on more than one occasion. A number of his pieces of short fiction would appropriately be categorized as science fiction, and, like the works of Clarke, contain the predictive/prophetic elements. He predicted how certain things might develop in the future. Certainly, Primo Levi made several predictions that turned out to be true.

Turning to Levi's background and upbringing we see another dimension of his more complex understanding of what it meant to be a prophet. While no member of his family was a strictly orthodox Jew, Primo was nonetheless schooled in the Scriptures. He knew that the Old Testament consisted of the Law and the Prophets. The Law was the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and the Historical Books (Joshua through Esther in the Christian canon arrangement). All the rest of the thirty-nine canonical books, subdivided by Christians into poetry and prophecy, the Jews consider "the Prophets."

While Levi did not like hearing that he had a "message," he could not deny, in the purest sense of the word that he ended up having a message. One of the first of all the components of a prophet was that he had the need to talk. He wrote in his first book that there came a time in which he had a great compulsion to speak out: "I am not sleepy, or more accurately, my sleepiness is masked by a state of tension and anxiety of which I have not yet managed to rid

myself, and so I talk and talk" *(Survival in Auschwitz* 38). He was referring to the moment he first entered Auschwitz. It was also characteristic of him at other times. It constituted a force he could not resist.

It is certainly understandable that most of the survivors of Auschwitz did not feel like talking about the horrific experience they had endured. But someone needed to speak out. Not just for those who perished there, but also for future generations, the tragic tale of the mass executions needed to be told. Ferruccio De Cori, an Italian Holocaust survivor, calls them "the six million in search of an author" (Sodi 3). Primo Levi was one of the few who became outstanding chroniclers of those experiences.

Not only did Primo Levi describe details in his powerful narrative, he also sowed the seeds which would eventually provide a base upon which much deliberation and discussion could take place. In that way, he was instrumental in the dialogue on a moral level later on. Again, his choice of Job to open his personal anthology is a key for both the treatment of factual material and a model for the sufferer who has earned a right to question higher powers. What Giuliani proposes as Job's role also turned out to be Levi's:

> Job, standing at the beginning, is both the prototype of the suffering just and the ancient questioner who searches for the meaning of his suffering, and of general evil in the world. Although he is religiously characterized in the *Tanach*, Job poses those universal questions that every sensitive human being feels inside of him/herself. He represents the relentless hunger for answers. (Giuliani 31-32)

Levi wanted to ensure that it not be seen that the whole specter of suffering was about him. His written works were certainly not centered on him, and he took particular pains to cast his writings in such a way as to avoid putting himself in the foreground. The avoidance of using the

first person was a prominent feature of many of Levi's writings and provides strong evidence in his anthology by the inclusion of the excerpt from Thomas Mann, appropriately entitled by Levi as "A Different Way of Saying 'I.'"

Levi saw, as did Mann, of course, the issue of identity wrapped up in the biblical account of Jacob tricking his own father in order to gain the blessing pertaining to the firstborn, Esau. Jacob, aided by his mother, pretended to be Esau. His father was old and his sight was dim, thus making the deceit possible. Everything hinges on the key expression, "It is I." Upon Jacob's approach to his father, Isaac asked him to identify himself. Jacob had, upon his mother's instructions, applied goat's hair to his arm to simulate his brother's hairiness. To reassure himself that it was Esau, Isaac touched Jacob's arms. "It is the voice of Jacob, but the arms of Esau" (*Genesis* 27:22). And he gave him the parental blessing.

This is quite significant. There is a curious dichotomy in the writings of Primo Levi. Here is a man who asserted his lack of faith in God on numerous occasions, yet he made regular references to God in his writings. In fact, close analysis reveals that Levi called attention to divinity more than to himself.

At times, both the existence of God and the immediate presence of God and His intervention in human affairs are asserted. Of course, there are occasions in which it appears that Levi sees God as the all-powerful, but one who is at that time distanced from the troubles of men. So did Job. In addition, there are so many inclusions in his works that can be traced directly to Scripture as to leave room to conjecture on the topic of Levi's own personal faith, and apparently, a solid base he worked from (right up to his death) that has its roots in the traditions of "the God of his fathers." This idea is prominent in his writings, but produces a dichotomy when his doubts are introduced. This causes a researcher to want to reconcile the connection

between the sincere statements of faith of this complex man and the contradictions that emanate from his clinical mind.

For some of his contemporaries, Levi had stature as a spiritual man. There are many elements in his writing that indicate that this was a role from which did he not did not shy away, but rather one in which he wanted to assert himself. In his poem "Sh'mà" (*Survival in Auschwitz* 11), he does not draw back from the obviously close relationship (and certain inspiration) of the biblical admonition found in Deuteronomy. In fact, he makes specific reference to this when he describes his father's reading habits in his preface to *Roots* (4).

Levi used that poem, "Sh'ma," to introduce the narrative of Survival in Auschwitz. Sodi calls the Sh'ma (the original one from Deuteronomy) a prayer: "taken from the Bible, this prayer is recited daily and uttered on one's deathbed" (*A Dante for Our Time* 7). In fact, the Sh’ma was not a prayer at all, but rather a declaration, and it did not come from the mouth of man, but rather from the heart of God. Anyone reciting the Sh’ma is simply speaking the words that God had pronounced to His people, and not pronouncing a prayer to God. The message of the Sh’ma is not that of a believer appealing to, nor conversing with, God. It is rather an admonition to Israel, to believers. It means literally "Hear, Oh Israel," and is obviously the voice of God speaking, not man.

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord Our God, the Lord is One! And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (*A Dante for Our Time* 7, note 4)

The corresponding biblical passage, which evidently inspired Levi's poem, ends with a warning for Israel not to part from the ways of God. Sodi writes that Levi employs this same tone in his poem, which "ends with a bleak monition against perverting the traditional order of things envisioned by the Sh'ma" (*A Dante for Our Time* 8). In fact, Levi took as stern a posture towards his readers as God did towards Israel. God, through Moses, warned His people not to forget Him, or severe consequences would ensue. Levi is, without a doubt, warning his generation not to forget what happened at Auschwitz. Believers would not consider it an exaggeration that God had actually used Levi to issue that warning, not only to his generation, but to succeeding ones as well.

Another aspect in Levi's life was that of the traveler who had gone to a place others had not been, and who gave an account of it later. In this sense, one could cite prophets such as Daniel, Isaiah and Jonah who were witnesses to the people of significant events that had broken into their own lives.

This could perhaps be a partial explanation of Levi's decision to include Marco Polo in his anthology. Levi was like Marco Polo in the sense that both made journeys and returned home to tell of them. Levi expresses Marco Polo's experience in such a way as to make us think of Levi's own style relating his experiences: "On his return he gave an account of his travels, in which difficult tasks and dangers are highlighted with sober reserve" (*Roots* 129). This is Levi's introduction to his selection from Marco Polo's work, *The Travels*.

Levi had in common with Job many of his experiences in suffering, and also his inquisitiveness as to the reason the sufferings had occurred in the first place. If Job can be seen in a prophetic role, it is obvious that he relinquished any right to withhold the telling of the same experiences (as did Levi). The characteristics of the prophets are declared of Job, and they are

arguably extrapolated for Levi. He was a strong voice for his generation, and many see him today, in spite of his own humility-driven reticence, to have been a "prophet for our times." Of course, Levi had denied, first of all, that he even “had a message.” Also, his statements about his mistrust of “the prophetic type” are further confirmation that he did not want to be considered a prophet. He was in agreement with Clarke and others who insisted that it was impossible to predict the future. The only sense in which anyone could consider Primo Levi to be similar to the prophets of old would be that he has become, more and more, a voice to generations that have come after him. The fact that Levi’s writings have become increasingly popular since his death is a testimony that Levi is an important witness of the greatest tragedy perpetrated by man in his generation.

CHAPTER 2

THE MATURATION OF LEVI'S THOUGHT

A. RELATING EXPERIENCES THROUGH WRITING AND TRANSLATION

It is evident in Levi's first book that he wrote quickly without too much analysis. His most notable regulating characteristic was that he had determined to be clinical and not emotional. His writing began to demonstrate more maturity as he considered more deeply the thinking of others. This is better understood if one takes into account Levi's developing style in writing. Of course, he continued to read, and that is evidenced throughout his further writing. He also did some notable amount of translation.

The Color of Death

Primo Levi occasionally employed colors in a symbolic manner. While color is not one of the major themes in his writings, Levi did nonetheless speak particularly about color on more than one occasion (see interview with Risa Sodi) in such a way that numerous critics have considered it a key to understanding his outlook on life, and thus supports the position that color did have significance to him in his descriptions of the past. Additionally, on more than one occasion he referred to the lack of color (Mirror Maker, entire chapter on Grey Zone). Levi's treatment of color demonstrates the influence it had on his thinking, and provides insight into some of the manners in which he employed colors in his writings. A study of these aspects of Levi's personality reveals a connection to literary interpretation, since Levi himself acknowledged the symbolism that colors had for him even in his early career as a writer.

Beyond the allusions to color found in figures of speech, Levi's use of colors sometimes alludes to his interpretation of events and periods in his life. The hues and tints refer to a level of intensity in the author's personal experiences as well as his observation of events in the lives of other people. Anyone who is familiar with the industrial city of Turin could think that he had his hometown in mind as he wrote: "sono solo al centro di un nulla grigio e torbido" (*La tregua, Opere II* 423). (I am alone at the center of a grey and turbid nothingness.) But that effect was not at all caused by his physical environment. Rather, he was referring to the lasting impression made upon him by the cruel behavior of men. His focus was on his environment and not on himself. Here again, he was the clinical observer.

The "grey effect" was in evidence in Levi's life long before the tightening control of the Italian government with its racial laws in the years leading up to the war, and even before Levi and the other Jews with him discerned an ominous cloud of danger approaching when they were packed into cattle cars in Modena. This, of course, is a figure of speech, but there would also be a literal grey in the air shortly after. Those who were transported to the Lagers witnessed the color of death. Upon their arrival at Auschwitz, they could see the ashes of those who had been executed ascending from the smokestacks. That experience, for the ones who survived, would be more indelibly inscribed on their minds than was the number the Germans tattooed on their arms.

That experience marked the beginning of Primo Levi's powerful abilities of observation as they related to events of great historical import. Levi's readers are introduced to his training in the sciences, and become acquainted to his ability to think clearly in the midst of chaos, and that in turn caused his senses to intensify at that juncture in his life. He entered that period possessing such a rich knowledge of the elements of the universe that, although some of those elements

evanesced when he was struck with the darkness of death, others were transmutated through his skill in writing his impressions, into a full spectrum of colors.

Explaining Technicolor in Black and White

In another interview with Risa Sodi, Levi said: "A very intelligent friend of mine once said to me, 'that period [referring to his internment in Auschwitz] was in Technicolor and the rest of your life has been in black and white,' and that's pretty close to the truth" (*A Dante for Our Time* 88, Note 9). This outlook explains well Levi's ability to recollect and record the events of the Holocaust, and the first fruits of that was Levi's narrative, *Se questo è un uomo*. One interpretation for the comment about Technicolor is that he was acutely more aware of the things going on around him during that time, and that the tension of living continually in the uncertain zone between life and death, stimulated him to an attention for detail that would contrast with the less dramatic events during the rest of his life. Because he has acknowledged that period of his life as having been in Technicolor, Levi has inadvertently divulged his superior ability to interpret those events. He was one of the best in simply recording those events, and one of the best when he later began to interpret the numerous ramifications of the Germans' actions during the war. Referring to that same period, and perhaps having in mind what Levi's friend had said about him, Carole Angier adds in her biography of Levi: "Primo was almost more alive than he had ever been before, or would ever be again: more open to experience, to thought, to memory" (Angier 336).

Levi also writes in *The Truce*: "Nulla era vero all'infuori del Lager" (*Opere II* 423) (Nothing was true outside the Lager). He reports that impression because it was there that he came to possess an intensity of purpose (chiefly, that of staying alive), and as a result those

events lingered. At that time, he lived daily with the awareness of the closeness of death. That awareness, in turn, brought him into a deeper consideration of the meaning of life. His intense focus on the events of the Lager is indeed a "full-color" experience, whereas his years after that are better rendered by black-and-white, or monochrome. That is not to say that the events after Auschwitz were less important to him, but rather that they were not charged with such energy as the preceding events had been, and thus could not captivate his writer's mind to the same extent.

Levi's ability to understand and describe his surroundings in the concentration camp was directly connected to his linguistic skills. The two considerations of translation and interpretation became major challenges for Levi. In fact, he became quite adept at both translation and literary interpretation during his career as a writer. An analysis of these two particular facets shows that Levi went beyond the literal recounting of events (as seen in his first narrative) to the representative truths behind the motivational strategy that produced the events.

When Levi acknowledged the veracity of his friend's statement about his life being characterized by color and lack of color, he was not acquiescing to a placement of value on those two periods. It would be presumptuous to apply that appellation in order to place a higher value on his experience in Auschwitz than, for example, on the experience of meeting (and later marrying) Lucia. To assign an interpretation of color as being superior because it is richer, and thus somehow more complete versus black-and-white as inferior either because of its relative simplicity or because it is more archaic would be erroneous. The validity of differentiating between Technicolor and black-and-white holds up only as it relates to Levi the writer, as he attempts to render with words what a painter might do with colors. (For example, Levi, as a writer, not an artist, expressed himself with black ink on white paper.)

He was able to remember, as though it had been in Technicolor, the events of the concentration camp. He expressed those events with clarity in print. Levi was a humble man, and did not make any pretense that the details of his own life after Auschwitz were of an importance that merited writing a book about them. His awareness of the uniqueness of the Auschwitz experience points to how important the lives of the other prisoners were to him. He wrote of their experiences, and their experiences are still present in full color for those who read his account.

From Reader to Chronicler to Interpreter

Throughout his life, Levi read many texts in their original language, and some of them he read in both the original languages and in translation. When he began to compile his personal anthology, he had to make a few choices regarding the use of translations. Since some of the selections he excerpted for The Search for Roots had more than one translation, he had to decide which available translation he would employ. In the case of the *Book of Job*, there were several translations in Italian that would have been available to him. The more popular ones in Italy at that time could have been easily found in local bookstores. However, he did not use the translation that a more traditional Jew would use in the synagogue. Neither did he avail himself of any of the several Catholic versions. He chose instead one that was relatively recent, that of Ceronetti, published in 1972. Levi's choice of Ceronetti's translation has ramifications that not only point to Levi's peculiar predilections, but also additionally brings up issues regarding interpretations of inter-textual material of the same period.

One consideration as to how Ceronetti's translation had attracted Levi was that it was not accompanied by the other books of the Bible (or Old Testament), but rather was a “stand-alone” edition. Ceronetti had formatted it as poetry, and it has been categorized by many theologians as the first of five books in the Christian canon (the other four are the Psalms, Proverbs,

Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. Ceronetti likely considered that the poetic approach provided a more readable format. It also offered him more latitude as an editor and translator, but it is also possible that another motivation for him might have been that this formatting provided much “white space” and extended the length of the volume. In addition to the translated text, he wrote a long essay that could have been of interest to many readers, with the supposition that it could not only explain various aspects of the book of Job, but might also stimulate readers to enter into a more serious study of the book.

One explanation for Primo Levi's choice of Ceronetti's translation could be traced to Levi's "serendipitous" reading style (*Roots* 4, 221, 222). Levi's father had influenced him greatly in his youth in the formation of his reading habits. His father read so much and on so many subjects that Primo himself found it a challenge to categorize his style. Primo acknowledged that in his own reading he had become like his father. Certainly, his personal anthology reflects that variegated pattern of reading. Italo Calvino described it like this: "The principal quality of Levi the anthologist consists in establishing relations between texts which could not be more heterogeneous" (*Roots* 221).

Levi's readings covered a broad spectrum that included fiction, poetry and non-fiction, with special emphasis on scientific writings. He declares in the preface to Roots that he "read confusedly, without any plan" (*Roots* 4). For a man whose academic and professional careers were in the sciences, this seems out of place. If one follows the necessarily logical patterns of a scientist's reasoning, Levi does not appear to want to be taken very seriously as a man of letters, emphasizing that his writing "shows more the effects of having for thirty years followed a technical career than of the books I have ingested" (*Roots* 4). However, his broad interests in reading were likely a major contributing factor to his perspicacity in later writings, his salient

views on world events, his commentary on some of the classical authors (from Homer to Rabelais), and his skill in creative writing, with the result that today, twenty years after his death, he is recognized as one of the most well-known Italian writers.

Levi was quite good at languages. He knew French, German and English well enough to critique some of the translations he had read, although he confesses his limited abilities as a translator. Referring to Villon, Heine and Carroll, he writes: "the existing translations seem to me reductive and I don't have the ability to improve them" (*Roots* 7). As a reader, he could identify translations that, for him, were faulty, and he praises some that were excellent. He refers to the Italian translation of Moby Dick by Cesare Pavese as "exemplary" (*Roots* 118). In most other cases where Levi had read works in translation from a language he understood well, he did not comment on the quality of the translation itself.

As far as his ability to understand languages goes, Levi does make a negative judgment on the quality of some original works. He voiced disapproval of Paul Celan's works in general. He read Celan's poetry in French, and he understood well what he was reading from a linguistic standpoint. Interpreting it, however, was a different matter. Referring to his poetry, Levi confesses a certain perplexity. In the introduction to the selection by Celan that he includes in the anthology, Levi writes, "I have not succeeded in penetrating the sense of many of his lyrics" (*Roots* 198), but declares that he himself felt a closer relationship with Celan than some other writers: Bragg, Gattermann, Clarke, Lucretius, as well as "the sinister unknown author of the ASTM specification concerning cockroaches" (whoever that was), Homer, Rosny, Marco Polo, Job, Mann, Babel, and Sholem Aleichem (*Roots* 6).

Here we find a strange dichotomy: On the one hand, Levi acknowledges that he felt a close relationship with Celan, but on the other he admits that he did not understand most of his

poetry. The one poem that he claimed that he did understand (the only excerpt from Celan included in Levi's anthology), was one Celan himself "repudiated" (*Roots* 198).

Levi acknowledges that Celan fit into the category of those poets who do not write poetry “for everyone” (*Roots* 198). Still, he felt that, generally, the poetry of Celan was obscure: “To write is to transmit; what can you say if the message is coded and no one has the key?” (*Roots* 198) It is quite easy to understand within the context of Levi's experience the line from Celan, “Death is a master from Germany” (*Roots* 199), and also, “He grants us a grave in the air” (*Roots* 200). However, the text “Your golden hair Margarete/your ashen hair Shulamith” (*Roots* 200) takes a little more explanation.

Initially, the beauty of Margarete's hair is contrasted to the transformed color of the Shulamith's hair. Margarete is German. Shulamith is, first of all, the “Shulamite” of The Song of Solomon, who had a lover, Solomon the king. The Shulamite went out into the city at night, looking for her lover, and was mistreated. Celan makes the parallel (not that it has theological validity, however) that the Germans mistreated the Jews in a similar fashion.

Levi acknowledges that Celan did not consider this one of his better pieces, but, in spite of that fact, Levi considered it a personal treasure, stating: "that doesn't matter to me, I wear it inside me like a graft” (*Roots* 198). Its applications spoke to him of the prison camp experience.

Since Levi took Celan's poem, “Death Fugue,” so personally, a further application is that he did not read poetry in a superficial manner. He understood the now generally well-known interpretive distinctions found in the progression of "what a text says, what it means, and then, what it means to me." The difficulty Levi encountered in reading Celan's other poetry does not of necessity signify that Levi had not made an attempt to interpret it properly. Levi, as one who had studied with a watchful eye, faulted the poet for a lack of clarity. Celan's obscure style defied

interpretation, and for Levi, all his lyrics, apart from this one, were “useless to the rest of the world” (*Roots* 198).

In the same way that Levi read many of Celan's works and found most of them meaningless to him, but still managed to discover one that had great significance for him, he diligently searched through the confused world around him for answers to life's difficult questions. He had already become quite competent with the matter of the physical universe, but later he attempted to make sense of the world of words and ideas, of dark motives conceived to the hurt of many. His thirst for understanding, coupled with his perplexity upon discovering that an evil master plan had been implemented to achieve what he saw enacted at Auschwitz, created for Levi a pivotal moment in the arena of language that accelerated his mental development in that arena.

It had been in the concentration camp that Levi came to understand very quickly just how important the knowledge of languages could be: life and death were in the power of those in authority in the camp; an inmate's ability or inability to comprehend what was being said around him often determined his fate. Thus, understanding the German language became paramount for the prisoners. Many of them suffered additional torment because they were ignorant of simple facts being communicated around them, and some died sooner than they would have otherwise, because they could not understand what the German guards were saying to them, or were unable to express themselves adequately to the guards.

Understanding their environment became crucial for the prisoners. The most basic instinct, self-preservation, occupied their minds to the extent that yet another prisoner discovered that life had more meaning during imprisonment than at any other period of life. One woman testified that it was that realization which helped her survive.

> Io ho resistito, ma non so perché; forse perché amavo la vita piú di loro, o perché credevo che la vita avesse un senso. È strano; era piú facile crederlo laggiú che non qui. In Lager nessuno si uccideva. (*Opere II* 462-3) (I was able to endure, but I do not know how; maybe it was because I loved life more than the others, or because I believed that life had a purpose. It is strange; it was easier to believe it there than it is here. In the Lager nobody killed himself or herself.)

This survivor analyzes the experience in the Lager and contrasts it to her life afterward. She does not assign a value to belief outside the concentration camp, but does for the time spent inside it. Her reaction does not contradict Levi's. On the contrary, the fact that Levi recounts her experience confirms that he too had considered this factor. He has said that life was better for those who believed, and that he had exerted himself to be a believer, but without success. Survival in a place dedicated to putting people to death stimulated so much thought in the minds of the prisoners that some of them did not want to forget the experience. Levi in particular applied his scientific mind to probe these elements long after his return to Turin. The moral weight of it all never allowed him to be completely distanced from the "why." As a chemist, Levi never tired of analysis, and he applied that discipline to the recollection of his experiences at Auschwitz. The application of various chemical elements was so intense in him that the material world even became the foundation for his understanding of the moral universe he began to explore. Giuliani cites a passage from *The Periodic Table* that shows the blending of these two worlds. This reference comes from the period when Levi was still in school as a very young man, but is recollected much later when he penned this particular volume.

> For me [Levi], chemistry represented an indefinite cloud of future potentialities which enveloped my life to come in black volutes torn by fiery flashes, like those which had

hidden Mount Sinai. Like Moses, from that could I expect my law, the principle of order in me, around me, and in the world. (*The Periodic Table*, note 14, Hydrogen, 23, quoted in Giuliani, 23)

Were Levi to have been a pure materialist, it would have been very easy here to avoid the allusion to Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai. This is a deliberate insertion of a biblical reference. Levi was demonstrating how important chemistry had become to him in school, and likened his discovery to one of the most miraculous moments in the history of the Jewish people. Neither should it be supposed that he is being sacrilegious with this allusion. This was as a matter of fact a very sacred moment for him. Although he is writing about it many years after the experience, he not only has a vivid memory of the occasion, but he does take the opportunity as an older man to belittle his youthful impression.

Levi has given a remarkable description of his commitment as a teenager to learn all he could about the material world. With his friend Enrico he had in common the same career, but in Enrico's case, he only wanted to use chemistry for his personal material gain (Periodic Table Primo, on the other hand, had more noble goals. His thirst for knowledge was independent of, and greater than, the requirements placed on him in school. If his general reading habits in the arts were haphazard, he later developed an effective method of study in the sciences, and there he became clinically accurate. This constituted the realization of a precise plan, one that Levi worked out in a meticulous fashion. He studied science with a purpose, and his study in that discpline was surely not "serendipitous."

It is ironic that, while Levi was developing clear objectives in his personal study of the sciences, he learned that he could not have great confidence in the motives of his teachers in the public schools in Turin at that time. For him, they were following an agenda prescribed by the

Fascist government. Regarding the books imposed upon him at school, he wrote, "I was fed up with books, which I still continued to gulp down with indiscreet voracity" (*The Periodic Table* 25). After his commitment to a career in chemistry, he saw that he would have to work against the authoritative establishment. He searched through a realm in which his teachers had not taken him: "[I] searched for another key to the highest truths, there must be a key, and I was certain that, owing to some monstrous conspiracy to my detriment and the world's, I would not get it in school" (*The Periodic Table* 25). According to his description, he had a vision of Moses, who not only was forced to get away from Egypt in order to experience a first encounter with God; later he even had to separate himself from God's people. Because they feared approaching the living God, Moses had to leave them at the base of the mountain while he ascended the stormy mount of Sinai, where he received the tablets of the Law (which here represented for Levi his desired knowledge) (Exodus 19:16-25).

Levi had heard his teachers attempt to treat philosophical concepts, but their reasoning did not convince him. "It was enervating, nauseating, to listen to lectures on the problem of being and knowing, when everything around us was a mystery pressing to be revealed" (*The Periodic Table* 26). His rejection of those who would impose their limited knowledge upon him is complete when he bursts out with a strong statement (which resonates as that of a creationist): "Would all the philosophers and all the armies of the world be able to construct this little fly? No, nor even understand it; this was a shame and an abomination, another road must be found" (*The Periodic Table* 26).

Of course, this diatribe did not constitute a total rejection of all the knowledge dealt with by writers, teachers and philosophers of the era of the Fascists. Levi took issue with their

manipulation of knowledge. While he looked to some of their sources in classicism and accepted them, he did not come to the same conclusions as the indoctrinated *brownshirts*.

B. CHALLENGES IN INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION

From a literary standpoint, Levi went to a linguistic Tower of Babel and returned a writer. The fact that there were so many nationalities represented in Auschwitz constituted a “confusion of languages.” Since Levi was immersed so quickly into that environment, he soon became "obsessed with linguistics and its powerful secrets" (Giuliani 40). That, along with the primal desire to survive, led him to focus particularly on the German language. Levi was already familiar with many terms and concepts because of his studies in chemistry. This provided him an academic working knowledge of the language. In Auschwitz, however, he applied himself diligently to comprehend the everyday language of what was going on around him.

Levi nurtured the desire to write while in the camp. Langbein described it this way: "Primo Levi ha scritto che i suoi ricordi bruciavano in lui e che già ad Auschwitz aveva cominciato a scrivere, sotto sguardi diffidenti, nel suo gelido laboratorio, a Buna-Monowitz" (Langbein 64). (Primo Levi wrote that his memories burned in him and that while still at Auschwitz he had begun to write, under diffident watchfulness, in his cold laboratory, at Buna-Monowitz.) It was not as though Levi went into captivity thinking that he would get material through the experience to write books. There was another element that predated any consideration of writing about his experiences.

Almost all of the prisoners were Jews, and that gave them a base of mutual understanding. But there were so many ways in which these prisoners were different that it had taken enormous effort to bring them together. Quite apart from the linguistic differences, there were many things that Levi did not understand simply because the prisoners came from such varying cultural

backgrounds. Those from Eastern Europe were quite distinct from all the western Europeans Levi had ever met. Generally, their first language was that of the country of their recent provenance. Some could speak other languages, as did Levi, but many did not. Those of Germany and some of the eastern European countries spoke Yiddish, but it was not common among the prisoners. After a few months in the camp, the one language they came to have more in common than any other was, ironically, German.

Levi studied German for a while after returning to Italy. He was quite serious about those studies. He took courses at the Goethe Institute, and made some work-related trips to Germany. Additionally, Levi made an attempt at learning Yiddish. Although he never became very good at it, his knowledge contributed significantly to his understanding of the various levels of Jewish assimilation into other cultures.

It has already been noted that Levi attributed the symbolism of full color to his experience in Auschwitz and characterized his life afterwards as being in "black and white." However, it would be an error of superficiality to interpret Levi's acceptance of Auschwitz having been in "Technicolor" to mean that he *treasured* that memory above all his other experiences. The estimation of color in opposition to gray tones was a quality that came to him initially, as though it struck him in his passivity. It was only later that he made the choice to recollect for further writing (beyond *Se questo è un uomo*), and it is clear that it was also inherent in that choice that he would retell more of his experiences to posterity.

Levi had already become a serious young man before the war, but afterwards that seriousness was further intensified. Levi's seriousness should not intimate that he never experienced happiness after he had witnessed the awful atrocities of the death camps. On the contrary, even when he returned home to Turin from Auschwitz, he records: "Ritrovai gli amici

pieni di vita, il calore della mensa, la concretezza del lavoro quotidiano, la *gioia* liberatrice del raccontare" (*La tregua* 422). (I found my friends full of life, the warmth of the dinner table, the solidity of daily work, and the liberating *joy* [italics mine] of storytelling.)

It is noteworthy that the particular observation Levi made regarding happiness was associated with storytelling. That joy proved to be a sort of rebirth for him it was an initial burst of joy. Later, he would experience an enduring happiness after he became acquainted with Lucia, the woman who became his wife. Besides the evident warmth Lucia brought to Primo with her companionship, she also provided much intellectual impetus for him to write. She also encouraged him during the long, difficult period of getting his first work published. Of course, Levi's desire to write had been there for a long time, but it was certainly enhanced by the influence of his new bride.

The strong impulse Levi had to tell his experiences to others has a triple aspect. One has to do with his nature, his love of life and the adventure of a man who wanted to stay young and was ever learning. That could be phrased simply as "The joy of telling." Another aspect of Levi's desire to tell has to do with his training and education, which could be seen as emanating from his choice to be a scientist, and the ensuing disciplines that are a necessity for the laboratory worker. A third has to do with the family and culture into which Primo Levi was born and lived. Sometimes he describes his awareness of his own Jewishness as an identity that was forced upon him initially by the Fascists and then later by the Nazis, but the fact is that he was deeply influenced by the Jewish faith before the events of 1944 and 1945. He did not speak to others of his informal training (that is, his "serendipitous" reading style inherited from his father), in the same way that he had not talked about his *bar mitzvah* to any of his companions in the *liceo* or at the university. He endeavored to have an identity simply as an Italian. However, after so many

personal struggles (the greatest of which, but not the only one, was Auschwitz), he eventually came to grips with his Jewishness. He had tried to repress it during his youth, and so was able to identify with non-Jewish Italians, but Auschwitz changed him. Not only did that experience thrust him into writing, something he clearly acknowledged, but it was there that he accepted the weight of being a Jew in a world that was not kind to Jews.

Levi's Jewish ness is demonstrated in bold relief in some of his writings, and his awareness of that dimension of his life is the clear motivational impetus of numerous articles that he eventually wrote, so that it can be said that Primo Levi's awareness of his own Jewish ness can be traced back to both that moment that he declared himself to be "of the Jewish race," made at the moment he was taken into custody as a member of the resistance. It was to become the very essence of who he was as a man. This he could not resist, because, as he would realize later, it had been there throughout his life. So, then, his identity as a Jew was both a choice and a discovery. This contributed greatly to his seriousness as a public figure, and also helps explain his colorful view of the forced amalgamation of nations and tongues at Auschwitz, as well as his ability to perceive and later describe the intensity of hatred directed at people like himself.

Of course, it would not be accurate to say that the only stimulus Levi had to tell (and write) of his experiences was derived from the release he experienced at being able to articulate what so many survivors would not, or could not, express. Later, with the settling effect of having become an accomplished writer, Levi felt yet another weight: the responsibility for what he had written, and the role of *witness*, for which he was perhaps not thoroughly prepared. It seems that he become aware of the prophet Jeremiah's experience as an unwilling spokesman. Risa Sodi sees the similarity between Levi and Jeremiah, and quotes the passage of Jeremiah's inability to resist that impulse to announce his burden in this way: "there is in my heart as it were a burning

fire/shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in,/ and I cannot" (*Jeremiah* 20:9, quoted in Kremer 49). Sodi goes on to say, "[Levi], like Wisely, has come to assume the antonomastic mantle of 'survivor' and is increasingly invoked as a 'watchman' of Holocaust memory" (Kremer 49).

A parallel to the sensation of the irresistible desire to speak to others is found in Levi's poem, "Il superstite" ("The Survivor"), inspired by Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner." The first line of Levi's poem is actually a quote directly from Coleridge's English: "Since then, at an uncertain hour," then translates it, "Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta/ Quella pena ritorna/E se non trova chi lo ascolti/Gli brucia in petta il cuore" (*Opere II*). (Since then, at an uncertain hour, That burden returns/And if he does not find anyone who listens/His heart burns within his breast.) Levi shared the experience with the ancient mariner in two remarkably clear episodes in his life. First, when he attempted to get the manuscript for *Survival in Auschwitz* published, no publisher wanted to hear him. He managed to get it accepted by a small and fairly unknown publisher, and it was not very successful. When the publishing giant Einaudi finally accepted the book, he watched as its popularity ran its course, then his entire message suffered two different kinds of setbacks. First, there were those who denied the enormity of the Holocaust, and even though they were not many, it had a profound effect upon Levi. Then, Levi suffered again as he saw a generation that did not want to be reminded, and it was that apathy that stimulated him to include the lines of "At an uncertain hour." He had foreseen the need to remind his generation with "Sh'ma," the frontespiece for *Survival in Auschwitz*, and it constituted for him a burden that he did not set aside. Levi carried that burden to his death, and many consider that it could have been that burden that precipitated his untimely death. In similar fashion, then, with the ancient mariner of Coleridge, Levi became identified with his message.

Primo Levi was one of the most notable witnesses of the "Dark Pit of Auschwitz" who learned to narrate. He did not attempt to overtly correlate his own experiences or his observations of others' sufferings to the symbolism of descending into a pit. Still, there are numerous examples in his writings that allude to such a connection. In Risa Sodi's book, *A Dante for Our Time*, in she drew out many elements in Levi's writings that point to Dante. There is the well-known effort made by Levi to instruct a Frenchman in *The Divine Comedy* during his time in Auschwitz. The allusion of Dante's descent into the *Inferno* to Levi's own experience in the concentration camp is the subject of Levi's article, "The Black Hole of Auschwitz" (*Opere* iii).

There are several elements in Levi's first full-length novel *If Not Now, When?* that help explain his perceptions in the realm. Levi's clearly identifies with one of the characters in that book as he relates a few of that character's personal experiences. One critic notes a basic link between this book and Levi's own short stint as a partisan: "The lives of Mendel the watchmaker turned gun mender and his other fellow partisans were not based on Primo Levi's personal memories, though his writing was inspired by the brief period in his life when he was an Italian partisan" (Eliach 27).

I would agree that part of Levi's inspiration for the book, perhaps the initial spark, came from his own experiences, short-lived as they were, as a partisan. However, there are other elements in that novel that mirror experiences in Levi's life. For example, in the novel, Mendel lost his wife when she was killed in his home village and thrown into a pit with other victims. The first woman that Levi truly loved was killed soon after being taken by the Nazis to Auschwitz. In addition, many of the ideas and expressions that Levi has the protagonist pronounce are so closely aligned to Levi's own way of thinking that it would be very difficult to make the case that Mendel is not Levi's *alter ego*.

Levi's own experience of being with eastern European Jews in Auschwitz could have provided him with enough material to later pen *If Not Now, When?* In addition, he encountered more Jews from eastern Europe after the war, and heard their stories of survival as they had trekked across much of the continent. In addition, Levi's own experience of being rescued by the Russians may be taken into account, as they transported him on a very circuitous route from Auschwitz, in Poland, deeper into eastern Europe before sending him by train back through the Ukraine and eventually to Italy. This experience by itself provided Levi with much of the material and inspiration for the novel he would later write.

From Mendel's recounting of his wife's death, it could be understood that Levi related Mendel's experience of the dark pit into which she was thrown to his own experience. Mendel told how he still could see that pit in his dreams. In a similar way, Levi retained the image of the pit of death into which he had been thrust. Mendel's wife was murdered in a pit in his hometown. Levi's first true love had died in a figurative pit after her imprisonment. Levi never forgot her.

Levi associated numerous events to the numbered identification tattoo the Germans had etched on his arm. Those experiences were even more indelibly etched in his mind. The duration of Levi's imprisonment was around a year, but the events remained in his mind for the duration of his life, well over forty-five years. Levi would struggle over how best to continue to describe those events, but the recollection of the sheer reality of it was something he kept at all times. The interpreting of those events was where he had to apply his skill.

There is, first of all, the "gray zone" between victim and executioner, but that represents more the unclear image, such as a blurring or being in a fog. So, it is not an artistic or emotional expression, but rather the nebulousness of inability to judge. This was a difficult matter for Levi to treat. Somehow, for him, for a prisoner/victim to be placed in the situation in a *lager* with his

executioner, the victim would actually appropriate some of the guilt for his own otherwise unjust condemnation. Giuliani describes it like this:

> The tragedy is in the fact that the victim is not victim because of guilt; nonetheless s/he is not innocent, because s/he is involved in the same history of the executioner, sharing with him the same human substance. Being victim or executioner are two so close human possibilities that are interchangeable. There is not an empty space between them, but a *gray zone* of the conscience and behaviors, a zone made up of compromises, terrible compromises due to necessity. (Giuliani 45, note 11)

There is, in a manner of speaking, a blurring of values, a devaluation of principles of faith that dissipate due to the blending of different value systems, which beg the question of whether those distinctions which make up society have any validity in the extreme conditions into which both the executioners and the victims were placed. Of course, to validate that particular argument, one would have to view the actual executioners as victims on the basis of their being subject to orders from above. Should they not carry out the sentence, the executioners would certainly become victims themselves.

Yet Giuliani emphasizes another parallel in reference to the sufferer:

> These meridians refer closely to the traditional (biblical) character of Job, and seem to underscore the relationship between Job (and in general the traditional religious culture) and the black hole of Auschwitz, where the modern Job experiences the negation of human dignity and the "truth" of the unjust suffering. (Giuliani 33-34)

Levi had already been in the black hole of human spirituality, and somehow had managed to escape. The awfulness of that experience would seem to be indescribable, but Primo Levi comes close to relating it in such a way that many are able to conceive the swallowing of human

existence into nothingness in a fashion much more descriptive that astronomers have so far been able to explain the black holes far away in the physical universe.

C. ELEMENTS INVOLVED IN CHOOSING A TRANSLATOR OR INTERPRETER

Levi had a strong belief in the printed word. He described it as "il supporto sicuro della carta stampata" (the secure base of the printed word) (*I sommersi e i salvati* 112). As an amateur linguist, it is clear that his ability to read texts in other languages than Italian far outstripped his ability to speak them. In fact, he reported about himself that he did not speak any language well, other than Italian. Of course, he could be somewhat demurring about his abilities in speaking languages (as opposed to reading knowledge). However, it was his ability to speak German in the camp that spared him great difficulties at times, and by his own reckoning, was, more than once, a key element in saving his life. Beyond the ability he acquired in the Lager, he also studied German at the Goethe Institute sometime after his return to Turin. Still, there is no evidence anywhere in my research contrary to the idea that Levi's ability to read and comprehend written texts was superior to his speaking ability, whether it be German, English, French, Yiddish, or any other language.

Levi depended on translations for many of his readings. As already noted here, he had great esteem for Pavese's translation of *Moby Dick*. The particular challenges that come with rendering a novel, poem or intellectual treatise from one language into another can be daunting, as Levi readily acknowledged after he finished translating Kafka's *The Trial* from German into Italian. Some reviewers have not been kind toward Levi's version (see David Mendel's article), but at least they acknowledged that he made some choices that were more indicative of his professional perspective and temperament than a pure issue of inability. Levi was nonetheless

not considered a master craftsman as a translator, but he did possess good basic skills, and anyone not expert in that trade should pay him his due respect.

Translators face a unique challenge. They must take a text that has usually already been well received by readers in the original language, and then render it into another language that may not accommodate all the author's portent. Facing this daunting endeavor, translators regularly have to make hard decisions, tendering one grand theme quite appropriately while knowingly having to let some nuances escape.

Levi had quite a lot to say about the results of those decisions for himself. A few other writers have expressed their thoughts on both Levi's works that have been translated and on Levi's own attempts at translation.

There are some particular skills that every translator should possess which are worth enumerating here. A translator should be able to capture the overall intent of the original work in order to evaluate the multifarious difficulties translators encounter. In addition, there is yet another examination necessary for good translations. It is that of considering whether the spirit of the translator matches that of the author of the original text. That has two implications, first in the nature of the two characters, and second, in the understanding that the translator has of the original message as well as his or her willingness to fully convey it. Of course, the first consideration for a translation is typically whether the translator was skillful enough to render a "faithful" translation. But, in some cases there should be yet another consideration, that of the translator's willingness to render the full meaning according to linguistic ability and spiritual understanding. This is especially significant when considering the translation Primo Levi used for his personal anthology, Ceronetti's *Giobbe* of 1972.

Although Levi believed firmly in the power of the written word, he also acknowledged his awareness of what could potentially become some of the weaknesses of that word rendered into other languages. So then, at the outset, Primo Levi knew that translation was a difficult matter. Levi expressed concern that "a story would suffer by being translated," for example, from the Piedmontese dialect into Italian (*Opere I*, xii). He then proceeded to point out some distinctions between Piedmontese and modern Italian to illustrate the difficulties a translator would face. So, Levi was well aware of the value of good translations, the requirements for anyone who would attempt them, and the importance of affinity between the translator and the author.

The need and requisites for translators according to Goethe

The most outstanding figure of German literature, Goethe, offered a practical admonition on the usefulness of translations. "People can say what they like of the inadequacy of translation, it is and it remains one of the weightiest and worthiest of employments in the general life of the world" (*Goethe*, frontespiece). This statement, coming from a writer who has proved to be very difficult to translate, owing at the same time to the weight of his own subject and the complexity of his style, is quite a generous defense of professional translators who have suffered abuse from those readers and critics who have more than a fair ability in the two languages, that of the original work and the language of the translation.

There can be no question about the great German poet's appreciation for the skills of good translators. Certainly, he realized that his own works would not go far beyond his homeland without the help of a translator. He had to understand, also, that the inherent difficulty of rendering poetry from one language into any other language would put his works at the mercy of translators. Goethe had a clear idea of what was needed in translators. Another useful

statement from him (poetic and graceful in its English translation) is full of implication for anyone who would read any poet's work: "Whoso the Poet would understand/ Must go himself to the Poet's land" (*Goethe* i, by Van der Smissen).

There are clear indications here for any aspiring translator. The two lines could have implications that are contradictory. First, it could be a caution against reading works in translation, as in, "If you really want to understand a work, you must know, not only the writer's country, but also his language." However, it must be excluded that was his real intent, because of the previous statement about the worth of the translator. We extrapolate that it is the translator who must know both the culture and the language of the "Poet." So, those who would want to help others understand the "Poet" must surely have "been to the Poet's land." If one has not imbibed the culture and language of the poet long enough to hear and understand the everyday expressions, for example, how can he expect to appreciate (much less translate) a poetic embellishment when it comes along? There is quite a difference between knowing, in two languages, the word for "salt," which is, after all, a substance which does not change much from one country to another, and then being able to grasp the intensity of Faust in his devilish drive to achieve his heart's twisted desires.

Primo Levi, of course, had been to that "other land," and was competent to bring back a report, in Italian, of what he had experienced and observed there. He was judicious in his textual renderings, though not judgmental, as he wrote Se questo è un uomo. In his work of translating Kafka, whether his particular translation rose to the level of art may be questionable, but the accusation has not been raised as to the possibility that Kafka's thoughts might have been purposely brought from German into Italian in an inaccurate fashion. Therein lies the integrity and ability of the translator, as separated from the consideration of the finished work as art.

So, then, was Levi's translation of *The Trial* a masterpiece as a translation? Perhaps it was not. Levi may not have helped his own case by confessing his own differences with Kafka, which could constitute the breaking of one of the most fundamental of all rules for a translator. A very common question that has arisen about Levi's translation of Kafka is why did he do it in the first place? There might not be general agreement on the answer. Two elements seem to dominate: this was a project offered to Levi by his editor, and also Levi's financial needs at the time. Still, the translation was a serious, well thought-out work, which no doubt enabled many Italians to better understand Kafka.

Taking Translators' Philosophy (or Agenda) into Account.

It is a common occurrence that some translators will render a word or expression quite inaccurately. It may be supposed that in many instances, this occurs without the translator realizing the mistake. Another kind of inaccuracy may occur when thoughts are translated in such a fashion that they err from the "general tenor" of the context, in which case it could also be assumed is a result of lack of expertise. Still other inadequate translations may come simply because the translator has a presupposition that may run counter to the primary purpose of the original author. This may lead to sending out messages, through the translated text, that are contradictory to the intent of the original text.

It is currently a registered phenomenon that many writers are *engagés* who write from the prospect of advancing a very particular social agenda. Perhaps it is not the case that much research has been done on the subject of translators who have their own particular agenda to advance. It would be time-consuming to uncover and explain to what extent translators might manipulate original texts to further their own agenda. My research has brought up some interesting choices made in the translation of specific texts. Also, in Levi's anthology, there is a

multiplicity of translations, and, given the various languages the thirty selections represent, there is a resultant complexity that requires some unraveling.

Levi possessed the ability to read many of the thirty excerpts in their original language, and we may suppose that he did just that. It is also likely that he read them in translation as well. There is proof that he had read several works both in Italian translation and the original language. This is found in his comments on Villon, Heine and Lewis Carroll, where he writes that he knew their languages, and was also able to criticize the existing translations (Roots 7). A clear distinction should be made between those who would consciously put into effect an overlaying plan to subvert the thesis of the author and those who might do somewhat the same type of work through what could be reckoned as a sincere philosophical basis that does not allow them a consciousness of the overall effect of their variants. The first would be manipulation, while the second could be considered sincere activism. Abraham Joshua Heschel expresses somewhat of the essence of those who might be categorized in the latter of these two descriptions: “The chief danger to philosophy, apart from laziness and wooliness, is scholasticism, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category” (Heschel 269). So, there are those who, because of long and laborious endeavors, which are consistent and perfectly coherent within their own context, could be blameless as they translate from that perspective.

Following is a treatment of Primo Levi's choice for the translation of the *Book of Job*. I sustain that it is "reductive," and will take considerable space to demonstrate how that is so, by Levi's own line of reasoning. I will also give some explanation as to why he might have made that particular choice, which may shed light on Levi's purposes for his anthology as well as to

solidify the stage of development his own thought was at the time he compiled *The Search for Roots*.

Whether the translator, Ceronetti, fits into the first of the abovementioned categories or the second is conjectural at this point. Several aspects of the decisions he made will be considered, as well as the decision Levi made in using this particular translation in the first place.

Certainly one of the more complex translation issues in *The Search for Roots* comes up with the translation of the book of Job. Levi was not a biblical Hebrew scholar, so he was relegated to reading it in translation. Levi would have access to several different versions in Italian. We can understand why he may not have wanted to use the Catholic C.E.I. version. Why he did not select a version such as is used in the synagogue he does not explain. He instead chose Ceronetti's translation, published in 1972. It would have made for a more interesting anthology if Levi had taken some time to comment about this choice.

Levi had gone out of his way to commend Pavese's "excellent" translation of *Moby Dick* into Italian, he offers no such comment about the quality of Ceronetti's Italian version of the book of Job. Of course, Levi's limited knowledge of Hebrew, countered with a high level of ability in English, could easily explain that difference. Still, there could be another reason why he did not mention Ceronetti's translation. It could be because it is "reductive," as he has said about the existing translations of Villon, Heine, and Lewis Carroll (*Roots* 7). If that were the case, Levi would possibly not want to call attention to that fact.

But why would Levi want to employ a translation that is not in the best tradition of faithful rendition from original texts? An explanation is needed here. Since Levi did not possess a high level of skill in Hebrew, he could not have compared Ceronetti's Italian version with that. However, he had most likely read, and was possibly quite familiar with one or more existing

Italian versions of the book of Job. When a comparative study is made, there do seem to be some notable differences in the translations that would have been available to Levi.

For example, in describing the hippopotamus, the C.E.I. translation refers to the huge animal's tail and thighs, whereas Ceronetti's version speaks explicitly of its sexual organs. One could speculate as to why a committee of devout believers went for one rendering, while a modern poet wanted the other translation. Ceronetti does not attempt to explain any nuances here, but given the context of the passage, it would be difficult to sustain his version.

It might be interesting to consider whether this text had any personal significance for Primo Levi. He only excerpted five full chapters and part of a sixth (chapter forty) from the entire text of the book of Job. The description of the hippopotamus shows up in chapter forty. Levi seems to have chosen that passage along with another, which describes the crocodile, to show how God's creation was much more understandable to the Creator than to any man. Either translation, it could be reasoned, would have served that purpose.

There is another passage, considered to be very significant for Christians, in which a marked difference is found between Ceronetti's translation and others. In his accompanying essay, Ceronetti does comment extensively on this distinction. It is found in Job, chapter nineteen. Whereas the C.E.I. says, "Io so che il mio Vendicatore è vivo e che, ultimo, si ergerà sulla polvere!," (I know that my Avenger is alive, and that, at the last, he will stand upon the dust!). The corresponding passage in Ceronetti's translation is, "Chi mi difende è forte io so, e l'Ultimo oltre la polvere sta" (He who defends me is strong, I know, and the Last One beyond the dust is) (Job 19:25). It is not yet at this point that we see anything "reductive" as Levi had attributed to translations of other works. Ceronetti treats the following verse in this fashion: "E dietro la mia pelle strappata vedo con la mia carne Dio" (And beyond my torn skin I see God in

my flesh), while the C.E.I. has "Dopo che questa mia pelle sarà distrutta, senza la mia carne vedrò Dio" (After my skin is destroyed, without my flesh I will see God) (Job 19:26).

It is quite possible at this point to see and appreciate the nuances evident in either translation, but they are not yet clearly distinguishable. The distinctions come outside the biblical text. In the case of Ceronetti, it is found in an explanation of this passage, in the case of the Catholic version, it is simply in two notes.

First, Ceronetti attributes a messianic factor to the translations of others (Ceronetti 261). But he goes to great lengths to distinguish between the uses of the future tense in other translations and his ever-present renderings. At the root of his argument, there seems to be a strict denial of a resurrection, thus no future tense. In the notes to the C.E.I. translation, it is written, "Nell'altra vita, Giobbe vedrà Dio eternamente benevolo" (In the other life, Job will see God as eternally benevolent) (note to Job 19:26), but there is the additional acknowledgement, "Il testo ebraico è oscuro" (The Hebrew text is obscure). It is worth noting that Levi did not include chapter nineteen of Job in his anthology. It is perhaps prudent to not read too much into that, because he often avoids the more well-known passages in order to bring out elements from his own canon that, while they are not the most well-known nor considered the more important, hold a special meaning for him. That is what makes this anthology more personal for Levi, and also unique among the many other anthologies that exist.

Ceronetti makes reference to chapter thirty-seven of Ezekiel, and in so doing, intimates the possibility of a resurrection. He places emphasis on the question God directs to the prophet, and seems to de-emphasize that God does in fact cause them to come back to life (Ceronetti 266). So, Ceronetti argues against the Christian hope from chapter nineteen, and prefers to lean on death as God's "final solution" as found in Job chapter three. He writes: "Iob 3, 13-22, è uno

dei più begli elogi della tomba come fine di tutto" (Job 3, 13-22 is one of the most beautiful elogies of the tomb as the end of everything) (Ceronetti 263). He also admits that it is his own personal interpretation that Job, instead of dying "full of years" (as the Hebrew text more clearly reads) was, rather, simply "tired of living" (Ceronetti 266).

To begin to get an idea of how Peter Forbes, the translator of *The Search for Roots*, viewed the translation by Ceronetti, one has to look at the peculiar English translation in Job that he used. While the text itself is the "Authorized Edition" (as noted on page 11), one sees in the acknowledgements on page (*Roots* 232) that he particularly used the Canongate Edition. The interesting thing about the Canongate Edition is that the publisher has inserted brief introductions written by well-known British personalities. The various introductions are irreverent at best, and at worst a "biblically blasphemous game" by one reviewer (Amorosi, Canongate Edition). Canongate even had an atheist introduce the book of Genesis, and his tone was milder than that of some of the other celebrities.

Now, Forbes could have used the King James Version of the Bible (the "Authorized" version) without even asking permission from any copyright holder, since the King James translation was done in 1611, in Elizabethan English, and is in the public domain. So, why did he choose the Canongate Edition, which has the exact biblical text that so many other publishers had already printed?

The answer could be as simple as this: Peter Forbes came across the edition by Canongate (fairly new around the time he would have been preparing the translation of Levi's anthology), read from it and liked it, and decided that would be the edition he would employ. That is the simple answer.

Another possible answer to the question as to why Forbes chose the Canongate Edition is only a little more complex. As a competent translator, he went beyond the credits which show that Levi had used Guido Ceronetti's Italian translation of Job, did a little research and discovered that Ceronetti had written an extensive essay to accompany his translated biblical text. Ceronetti entitled this essay, "Sulla polvere e sulla cenere." It is a very long and interesting essay. He makes numerous references to the Hebrew language, texts to be found in Germany, the Septuagint, cave paintings in the New World, and cites the *Koran* more than once, then finishes by recounting an imaginary personal experience of coming across a theatrical performance of the life of Job. The end of that play has the divine director (God) hating Job, but Job himself feels greatly beloved (Ceronetti 274).

Ceronetti does not demonstrate any blatant irreverence, much less blasphemy, in his version. However, with his analysis of several passages, he takes the stance of an unbeliever, first refuting a messianic interpretation of Job 19:25, and then giving a negative interpretation of the end of the book. So, after reading Ceronetti's essay, Forbes decided that the Canongate edition, with its commentaries by "bad Christians" and unbelievers, was the one closest to that of Ceronetti.

On this issue, we may not point to Peter Forbes as "traduttore-traditore." There is no reason to believe that he concocted anything that would be inconsistent with the higher values in faithful translating. Nor may we fault Ceronetti on the overall work of his translation. He gives his renderings, and he even goes to great lengths to justify them in an essay. Finally, the larger question of Levi's own thoughts regarding translations employed in his anthology remains an open issue. Of course, Forbes' translation of *The Search for Roots* was done some ten years after Levi's death, so the above reference to Forbes' decision could be seen as a moot point regarding

Levi personally. However, Levi's own choice of Ceronetti's translation in the Italian language edition points to Levi's identification with Ceronetti's theology, and raises some interesting points with regard to whether Levi was undergoing a development in his own faith.

The most reasonable explanation is that Levi chose the translation by Ceronetti because he had an affinity with him. As I stated at the beginning of this section, Ceronetti’s translation is reductive. He chose to diminish interpretations of passages in Job that other have magnified. Seen through this optic, one can only deduce that Levi either shared the several varying interpretations of Ceronetti, or else he did not read or study his version of the Book of Job sufficiently to distinguish his (own) interpretation. I conclude that there is not enough evidence to put Levi squarely in Ceronetti’s camp or that of the orthodox. We are left with Levi the analyst, whose many thoughts on this subject do not allow anyone to fit him neatly into such differing categories.

CHAPTER 3

COMING TO GRIPS WITH REASON

A. TAKING UP THE MENTAL BATTLE

The power of reasoning became increasingly more evident in Primo Levi's writing style, from his first narrative, *Survival in Auschwitz*, all the way to his last published full-length book, *The Search for Roots*. While there are subtle hints in *Survival in Auschwitz* that indicate a high capacity for reasoning, the intricacies of expression found there do not belie the fact that the overall style Levi employed was quite straightforward. It is primarily a simple narrative. For that book, he was a clinical reporter.

Later, he considered the responsibility of man for the condition of the world, and many of his writings are a call for change in the behavior of individuals and governments. Also, Levi began to ponder the role of divinity in the affairs of man. A conflict was born in his thinking, and his reasoning entered more actively into his writing. He became less a reporter and more a moralist. How would he view the nature of God when such horrible things occur to people who do not deserve it?

There is a basic premise that anyone who takes up the matter of divine intervention in the affairs of men must consider. Risa Sodi enters into the thinking process of Primo Levi in her work that focuses on the similarities between Dante and Primo Levi. One of the foundational principles, for her, is the popular notion of how God is perceived in the Bible. She writes, "According to traditional Christian theology, the Old Testament featured a jealous, wrathful, severe and rancorous God, while the New Testament concerned itself more with pardon and

grace" (*A Dante for Our Time* 16). Focusing on Dante, in what appears to be a summation of the poet's theology, Sodi declares: "Dio, per lui, è soprattutto la potenza sovrana che punisce i malvagi" (God, for him, is above all the sovereign power that punishes the wicked.) (Sodi 15, note 25). That statement is more in line with the Lawgiver of the Old Testament than the gracious Forgiver of the New Testament. However, if we follow Sodi's thesis, we find that both Dante and Levi spend ample time expounding the side of grace. One has only to spend more time in Paradiso than in Inferno to assimilate that reality regarding Dante in *La Divina Commedia*. Several of Levi's later writings attest to the same for him.

<u>The Severity of Man</u>

Rather than focusing excessively on the severity of God, Levi points to the nature and choices of men in extreme circumstances. There is a brief passage in Survival in Auschwitz in which he attempts to explain the thought pattern of the German commanders in the concentration camp as they assigned to prisoners their various tasks: "the SS command [..] showed itself in such choices to possess satanic knowledge of human beings" (*Survival in Auschwitz* 89). Here Levi is ascribing to the devil himself the origin of the wickedness found in his German captors. He himself was quite perceptive to pick up on their reasoning as they placed individuals in their daily work according to their attributes of character rather than following a professionally prescribed pattern. Those who were "particularly pitiless, vigorous and inhuman individuals" (*Survival in Auschwitz* 89) were assigned to a level of importance that was higher than that of doctors. His allusion is to a "wisdom" that was directed more at controlling the minds of the prisoners than to getting specific tasks accomplished. That philosophy is now seen to have been at the base of their true purpose.

While the predominant religions of Germany were both Christian, it is clear that Levi did not hold to the view that those with the military and political power in Germany were observant Catholics and Protestants. On the contrary, he recognized in them opposite characteristics, that of satanic inspiration. He saw in them a great severity towards those they held captive. Levi also understood very well what was happening to those who were disappearing. Had he taken the hypothesis that, since the prevailing religions in Germany were Christian (Catholic or Protestant) and that practitioners of that faith committed those atrocities, then he would have experienced a great amount of repulsion for their faith. It would then follow that if men could be so severe, then the Creator-God who allowed such atrocities (indeed, who had possibly sponsored them) was even more severe? Yet, in fact, Levi, who considered himself always a secular Jew, was able to distinguish between the prevailing faith of a nation and the many of that nation who were not practitioners of that faith.

Levi's Struggle Intensifies

When Levi first began writing upon returning to Turin, it was a simple impulse, like something overflowing in him. He wrote often in his free moments, and would stay in his office at night to write. He told Risa Sodi that his first book was no effort at all (Sodi 366). He did not consider style because his writing was a stream of conscience. Only later would another style develop when he began to apply his clinically rational abilities in order to convince and influence his readers. He realized the necessity of planning and employing a distinct style in his writing because of the tension between his experiences in a world of violence and the comparatively peaceful environment in which he found himself as he settled down after the war.

So, while his initial writing poured out of a mind filled with information he felt he had to discharge, Levi's later writing came forth as he struggled with opposing concepts. Giuliani sees

the art of writing in general as a struggle. Referring to Levi, he says: "But even at his desk, as in the Lager and the chemical laboratory, Levi has been the antagonist: writing, indeed, is struggling with the meaning of the words" (Giuliani 96). The reason for this, he continues, is "because the words do not have univocal meanings and because all communication is ambiguous and exposed to misunderstandings" (Giuliani 96). Indeed, Levi had confessed to struggling "a little" when deciding how to order chapters in his anthology (*Roots* 8). In facing what would become for him the grand theme of that book he discovered a much greater conflict than merely how he would order the selections. Levi entered into the great conflict between universal good and evil as they are personified in the various works, and then applied them to the world in which he was living. That took him, eventually, to a conflict with God. He became a more astute judge of human affairs as a result of entering into that great moral and spiritual debate.

There are several notable personages from Levi's literary world who answered the question, "Will a man contend with God?" in the positive. So, in his introduction to his own anthology Levi confessed clearly and openly to a small measure of struggle regarding basic elements in editing, but he was careful to leave room for his readers to think and analyze the mighty struggle he had with the heavier matters of life.

As if the actual experience of Auschwitz were not enough for Levi, a friend suggested to him that he had survived for a divine purpose, in order to tell others (Tullio xiv). But that idea not only seemed absurd to Levi, he rejected it outright as blasphemous. While it is undeniable that Primo Levi and other survivors did indeed devote much of their energy in that capacity, to suggest to him that somehow there was divine intervention to preserve his life while so many others had not been spared was outrageous. Levi's friend happened to be a Catholic believer, and even though Levi did not cut off their friendship after this statement, it had the effect of

distancing their relationship. In his writing, Levi does not make a point of pronouncing many expressions as blasphemous, but this stands out as being the second most extreme.

While the assessment of Levi's Catholic friend had been very revolting to him, it was a view adopted by many concerning the survivors of the Lager. It is true that he wrote with a clear purpose. What is more, he found a measure of joy in returning to a peaceful life in Turin, and he also experienced both joy and fulfillment in writing his first book. But the implication of there having been a divine purpose behind the whole experience of Auschwitz was excessive. In the same way that he could not tolerate an elderly man's thankfulness for his own life being spared while a young man beside him was chosen to die, Levi could much less attribute to Providence his own salvation from death in the Lager.

The Initial Acceptance Of Bitter Fate

There is an interesting parallel between the way in which Primo Levi reacted to his first realization of the calamity that was about to occur to him and that of Job when his extreme suffering began. A further examination of this parallel provides yet another perspective. At first it had been experiential, later it related to Levi's power of reasoning. The first reference had to do with searching for some indication of the time frame during which he was first attracted to Job. How much help that discovery might have been is hypothetical. The focus now is on Levi's own attempt to explain this arrangement. Why did Levi question his own choice?

In the preface, he wrote: "To Job I have instinctively reserved the right of primogeniture, although I then find myself struggling a little to find good reasons for this choice" (*Roots* 8). The subject of "primogeniture" has already been treated, but there is another thought within this quote that merits further attention. Levi somehow could not bring himself to explain to his readers the prominence he gave Job. While he confesses to have made the decision to put Job as the opening

selection without really understanding the reason behind it, that statement contradicts Levi's own declaration elsewhere that writers should be above all else clear, and in this case he is obscure, not clinical at all. He says he did it "instinctively." It would be an interesting exercise to chase the thought that he could have put Job last instead of first, especially since his own interpretation of the book of Job (as served up by Ceronetti's peculiar translation) was quite pessimistic and fatalistic.

There is still good reasoning behind Levi's placement of Job in *The Search for Roots*. By placing Job first, Levi could be demonstrating that the battle of reason into which man has been thrust (though not his own doing, he would argue), is the very experience that projects man into debate in the first place. We can see parallels between Job and Levi in the sense that both of them were happy to stay out of common civil litigation before tragedy came to them.

Levi made very deliberate choices in phrasing two particular statements, but there is no need to enter into linguistic interpretation in dealing with them. He never intended to be accepted at face value in the first place. One is found in the introduction to the excerpt from Roger Vercel’s book. He wrote that he did not know if Vercel was still living. Roger Vercel was in fact no longer alive at the time Levi was compiling his anthology (he died in 1957). It would have been very easy for Levi to ascertain that. One could assume that Levi was either a lazy researcher, or for some reason that he did not explain, he purposely did not search for more information about the then-current status of Vercel. Vercel had been a well-known author in the French-speaking world. It is unacceptable that Levi, ever the diligent researcher in his scientific studies, who was so thorough as an expert in paints and varnishes in his other career, could simply mention Vercel in passing as though he could never find anything about the author in the intervening years between his first reading of *Remorque* and his "confession" (some thirty-four

years later) that he knew "nothing about him." It cannot be that Primo Levi was incapable of obtaining, for research purposes, the information that would have allowed him to report more fully on this author in his own introduction in The Search for Roots. This is a deliberate omission, and the fact that Levi called attention to the void of further information about Roger Vercel only serves to accentuate a point that Levi masterfully makes: his only acquaintance with the French writer was through a novel left by a doctor fleeing with the Germans from Auschwitz upon the arrival of the Russians. Anyone who reflects on the profundity of that reading for Primo Levi will afterwards have to consider the book not as an introduction to eventual further reading by the same author, but rather as one of many powerful symbols that remain for the survivors of the Shoah. That was reason enough.

The Influence of Lucretius in Levi's Reasoning

The basic reasoning pattern of Primo Levi is demonstrated further by his inclusion of Lucretius in *The Search for Roots*. Lucretius was important for Levi in several ways. First, as a Roman philosopher, he represents one of the earliest writers/thinkers included in Levi's personal anthology. Lucretius had a special place because he is considered by many to be the father of modern chemistry. It was his reasoning and questioning that gave rise to research that developed many of the fundamental principles for scholars, not only during the early Renaissance, with the renewed emphasis upon Greek and Latin writings, but in the latter Renaissance, as the fledgling discipline began to flourish.

Primo Levi found a friend in Lucretius in his readings outside school. Lucretius' methodology, pattern of reasoning and study of the most basic elements of the universe intrigued the young student of chemistry. While the Italian government during Levi's years in high school and university suppressed the writings of Lucretius, Levi still was able to gain access to them. He

understood quite well the reasons given for not promoting the study of Lucretius in the public schools (Lucretius was considered impious and irreverent with some vulgarity, according to the standards of the day). However, Levi found a soul mate in Lucretius, above all, because he had a questioning nature. Giuliani records:

> Levi in only a few sentences expresses his great admiration and approval of the naiveté of the impious Lucretius who was long considered dangerous [..] His stubborn faith in the possibility of explaining the universe is the same as that of the modern atomist. His materialism, nay his mechanisticism, is naive and makes us smile, but here and there, with some surprising intuition questions emerge: why is oil viscous, a diamond hard, and the sea salty? (Giuliani 90)

Levi recognized the source for the rejection of the Latin writer: a combination of the ultra-nationalistic movement of the Fascists which culminated in its overextending influence upon the Catholic Church brought a severe scrutiny for many ancient texts. Lucretius happened to be the author of some of them. So, while Levi was attracted to Lucretius as a pioneer in atomic studies, he also took some delight in his style, which was indeed sometimes *risqué*.

Levi writes in his introduction to the selection from Lucretius in The Search for *Roots*: "He sought a purely rational explanation of nature, had faith in the evidence of his own senses, wanted to liberate man from suffering and fear, rebelled against all superstitions, and described earthly love in lucid poetry” (*Roots* 136).

It should be emphasized that Levi's initial interest in the Roman poet had to have been from his consideration of Lucretius as a scientist and not as a poet or moralist. The phrase, "a purely rational explanation of nature" is in harmony with Levi's declaration when he made his original commitment to become a chemist.

In seeking to arrive at a more perfect understanding of nature, Levi wanted to employ his own reason, with "faith in the evidence of his own senses." As he searched for answers to things unknown to him, he would in effect employ the empirical method. He actively desired to understand relationships between chemical elements. He would find how it was that the things in existence came to be organized as they were, explaining that his affinity with Lucretius was embedded in a scientific curiosity.

There is a need to explain the odd positioning of some texts. There are several characteristics that Levi has built into his personal anthology that show his own particular approach to making choices and organizing. These might reflect some aspects of his reasoning in purposefully blending texts within the entire work. A sampling of these follows, as well as one example in which he couples one of his own writings with the selection from one of his designated authors, Carlo Porta.

It is quite curious that Levi has included, between his introduction to, and the selection from, Carlo Porta, almost an entire page from his own story, "The Park." He calls this gesture "a mark of renewed homage" (*Roots* 48), and it seems somewhat quirky for an anthology of this type. However strange it appears, it actually enhances understanding of the character in question, Giovannino Bongeri. Here, Levi was not attempting to take away from the other author's work; on the contrary, he adds to it in a respectful way, thus demonstrating not only his admiration for the Milanese poet, but also his keen understanding of the overarching themes treated in the work.

Levi's anthology is of course a compilation of the writings of others, which would of necessity limit his own writing in that volume, but even in his preface and the thirty introductions he wrote for all the selections, his own thoughts are very pronounced. In addition, the choices themselves constitute a strong reflection of Levi's own thoughts, associated as they

are with the extracts from each author. It is likely that most readers of *The Search for Roots* will find numerous authors that are already known to them, although perhaps Levi's particular excerpts employed in this collection are often passages that seem remote to the main themes of the authors. That seems to be the point in some of the selections that Levi chose.
One clear example of this is seen when he avoided the more classical excerpts one might normally expect to see from *Moby Dick* and rather chooses the personal description Melville gives of Captain Ahab's first mate Starbuck. In that example, Levi has given the reader a very personal perspective of his own tastes and judgment, especially considering what he has skipped over in order to emphasize what would appear to be a less significant element in the novel.

While Levi has included some authors that are well known by the average reader, no one would be familiar with all of them. That is one of the aspects about this anthology that makes it uniquely Levi's. He has offered up a collection that is inimitable. Looking at the dual aspect of Levi's professional identity in this light, as chemist and literary figure, the ramifications from each field call out their questions. What other man of letters could have ever chosen Ludwig Gattermann or the American Society for Testing Materials as sources for a personal anthology? On the other hand, what other chemist could have ever found pertinent a description of Captain Ahab's chief mate Starbuck, or a letter to an editor written by a Jewish Cossack in the Russo-Polish War of 1920?

Levi himself explains the ordering of the passage from Isaac Babel, which follows that of Lucretius. For him, it is foundational to his own character. In the introduction to "The Jew on Horseback" he writes, "I know of nothing more boring than an orderly reading curriculum, and believe instead in the unlikely juxtapositions" (*Roots* 140). While at first glance this expression could be construed to mean that the avoidance of boredom was a worthy motive to juxtapose

readings that Calvino deemed "could not be more heterogeneous" (*Roots* 221), it is obvious that Levi was not merely succumbing to personal capriciousness. He calculated the positioning of each excerpt carefully before allowing it to enter into his own canon, and moreover, that each "pairing" as well as the overall organization had a specific purpose. He gave a very carefully prepared rationale for some of his choices. The others he leaves, since as a teacher he would have his readers learn from the models, then apply the principles to the other selections as an intellectual exercise.

B. WORLDS TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Levi confesses to a certain amount of confusion reflected in the selections and ordering of excerpts in his anthology when he says: "I am well aware that in these pages there are many pages of worlds turned upside down" (*Roots* 172). He writes this in his introduction to the selection from Frederic Brown's works, but it is a statement regarding any number of incidences of peculiar choices in the anthology. It is this thought, "worlds turned upside down" that is also a hint alluding to how Levi's own world had been turned upside down, and leads a researcher to consider how that influenced Levi's thinking.

Levi attempts to explain his usage of "worlds turned upside down" by alluding to painters, who by "looking at a painting upside down one can see virtues and defects that were not at first observed" (*Roots* 172). In Frederic Brown's short piece, entitled "Sentry," the narrator is in fact the alien. He kills an enemy combatant, whom he describes as one of the many "repulsive creatures" (*Roots* 173). The repulsive creature in question, one discovers once the combatant describes him further, is a human being. The alien has described what was alien to him.

This, for Levi, represents worlds turned upside down. His own title for this excerpt is "We are the Aliens." His reference to painters in this introduction is literal, and his view of

Brown's creation is figurative. For Levi, whether one turns a canvas upside down or holds it in front of a mirror, it offers a perspective that is different from what one normally sees. It is a beneficial exercise, and it is one that Levi acknowledges that he stumbled across rather than concocted after careful planning. He writes, "I swear that this was not premeditated; it is a result I had not foreseen" (*Roots* 172). Even though it was not a result that Levi had planned, it is one that is nonetheless quite useful.

In Primo Levi's own professional career as an industrial chemist he was a specialist in paints, but here he has alluded to the paints of artists. This adds another dimension as he mixes components from his own two careers, that of chemist and writer. That consideration goes a step beyond the experience of Auschwitz to emphasize the great upheaval that came decades later to Levi when he made the transition from scientist to full-time writer.

Levi spoke often of his dual identity as a professional man and a writer. However, he had actually begun to write in his youth; it just took him a while to get *published*. When his first work finally gained acceptance, he became, as I wrote earlier, typecast as a sufferer. There was a similar occurrence of this in the book of Job as we see that Job's friends came to him when they heard of his great grief, and shared that grief with him with strong crying, then with a compassionate silence. They maintained the role of fellow sufferers for a period of seven days. It seems that they were able to sustain simple feelings for their friend as long as he was crying and moaning. However, when he turned to the mental struggle and began to reason aloud, it eventually stirred them up and they began to pose arguments to Job's discourse. According to this thinking, mourning and lamenting were permissible, but God did not permit complaining and self-justification. It was at that point that they began to speak against him, and the philosophical base from which they operated consisted in their own assurance of adequate

knowledge of God to counsel Job. Bob Sorge points to the inadequacy of Job's friends, as well as the young man, Elihu, to address Job as though they were God's appointed teachers: “The problem with Elihu and Job's friends is this: they pontificate on subjects in which they have no learned life experience. They try to teach Job on suffering when they've never gone through a fraction of what he's experienced” (Sorge 52-53).

So, while none of them had ever experienced anything even close to the tragedies Job had just gone through, they immediately began to argue with him when he voiced complaint and testified that he had made great efforts to lead a just life. He suffered what seemed at the time the ultimate catastrophe, while others, who had not even desired to be righteous, were spared this level of suffering.

It is important to note that Job's friends began picking at his life, and an assumption is at the base of their discourses that is patently false. They believed, as many did in that epoch, that when negative things happen to people, it is a sure sign of divine retribution. In the case of Job, who had no open sin that is *ever* declared in Scripture, his friends reasoned that the root cause for the coming of the calamities was due to some secret sins.

Nor were Job's three friends the first to turn against him. Before they arrived, ostensibly to share his grief, his wife spoke out in her distress, and it pulled on his heart She exclaimed to Job: "Curse God, and die!" Job's reaction to her was: "You speak as one of the foolish women. Should we receive good from the hand of the Lord, and should we not receive evil?" (Job 2:9-10). This is the last time direct reference is made to Job's wife in the narrative portion of the book. Her attempt to get Job to speak out against God tore at the principle that was most dear to Job. It was something he simply could not conceive of doing.

In the same way, there was a moment in Primo Levi's life when he, like Job, he was asked to consider that God was somehow responsible for the genocide at Auschwitz. A friend proposed that, by some grand design, God wanted to communicate a message to the people through Levi, so he had been spared for that purpose. This view elevated Levi's own status to that of a God-called messenger, a specially appointed witness straight from Auschwitz. Levi's reaction to that statement was instant and forceful. He would not tolerate any consideration that he was a chief figure to speak out for God in a tragedy of the magnitude of Auschwitz. He found that thought revolting. He felt that he simply did not deserve that status. He perceived the danger and risk of allowing such a statement to stand. Giuliani states it like this:

> He considered it a blasphemy, an antireligious attitude, offensive both to human reason and to authentic religious faith. Several times he expressed the opposite opinion: for my surviving there are no theological or religious reasons. I survived only by luck, by good fortune. In Hebrew, the term for this luck is *mazal*. By insisting on the *mazal* Levi denied and excluded every idea of surviving by divine will or Providence. Luck is set against every divine plan, against any religious understanding of history. (Giuliani 47)

One of the key expressions in the previous passage by Giuliani is that Levi considered the thought of attributing his particular survival in Auschwitz to divine intervention "a blasphemy." This is an indication of reverence on his part. Furthermore, it was "an antireligious attitude." Levi did not pretend to *be* religious himself, but he most certainly did not want to be considered antireligious, according to Giuliani. He was consistently respectful towards religion. Lastly, it was "offensive both to human reason and to authentic religious faith." Levi also held reason in high esteem, and he was personally quite particularly committed to advancing human knowledge. Giuliani thinks that he was honoring "authentic religious faith." So, following that

line of reasoning, Levi intimated that there were examples not just of false religious faith, but also true religious faith.

Giuliani also sees Primo Levi's stance on the condition of humanity as being a blend of the Jewish-Christian hope for eternal salvation and the urgency of doing all that is necessary in the span of one's lifetime to change the world. He interprets Levi's development of this philosophy to be what he denominates "salvaction" and takes considerable care to demonstrate that this was a core belief of Primo Levi. For him, it was a blend of faith and social commitment.

> Without this struggle, without the acceptance of this conflict--that is, confrontation and risk, dialectics and strategy--what he called 'salvaction' does not come about: neither the 'salvaction of understanding,' nor the 'salvaction of laughing' that accompany the comprehension, nor the 'salvaction of transforming the world' through manual and intellectual work. If our survey of Primo Levi's innermost evolution of thought and art is correct, it has reached a conclusive point. This point seems to me well conveyed in both the positive and the tragic idea of the necessity for human reason to define itself in *agon* (in Greek, struggle), in antagonism, in resistance against the course of things. In other words, to define itself in a perennial search for an order, a meaningful interpretation, a plausible account, and even a pleasurable one, for what instead--as experience proves--is disordered and meaningless. (Giuliani 96)

Of course, what Giuliani has done here is to apply his own terminology in the place of Levi's. Whereas Levi, in his graph, has written "salvation," Giuliani substitutes his own coined term, "salvaction." By inserting one additional letter, he has transformed the word "salvation' used by Levi into an amalgamation of two words, "salvation" and "action." The idea would be one of

"putting faith into action." The emphasis, logically, would be on the *action* rather than the *faith.* There is some validity to this interpretation.

It is interesting that Giuliani has employed the term "evolution of thought and art." As far as Levi's public identity is concerned, he had been an industrial chemist who *became* a writer; one could view that in itself as representing a transformation. There was indeed a gradual evolution in Levi's thought. It cannot be accepted that Levi was simply a chemist for thirty years, who then suddenly became a writer upon his retirement from the paint industry. There was a steady development occurring in Levi's mind as he continued to observe what was regularly occurring around him, then analyzed those events and finally wrote on those various themes.

A study of the chronology of Levi's literary output provides a perspective of his development in the various genres he employed. In his youth he wrote some poetry. During and shortly after his time in Auschwitz, he wrote a sort of documentary narration of those experiences. *La tregua* was the book that followed *Se questo è un uomo*, and is of a similar style. Much later, Levi wrote the novel *Se non ora, quando?* which fits the genre of historical fiction. There are elements of socially committed literature (*engagée*) in evidence there, especially as it applies to the eastern European Jews' longing to arrive to Palestine, as their homeland.

There is a different writing style that is very much in evidence in the many articles and essays Levi wrote after the publication of his first three long works. If, in addition to the graph Levi drew for his anthology, another graph might be permitted, it could be that of charting the development of Primo Levi's thought following a geographical scheme. The case could be made that his longer works represent mountain peaks, while the subsequent articles and essays (which would much later be collected) could be represented by numerous hills, some interspersed between each mountain. Following the third mountain (longer book), there are many hills.

However, they do not go gently down to the seaside. Rather, at a certain point there is another mountain peak. It is that of *La chiave a stella*, a full-length novel. It represents a major event for Levi as a writer. The primary theme is that of *work*. This is a join of the identity of Levi, the writer/thinker, with the chemist/worker. It most definitely represents a further development in his writing style.

While I mentioned Levi's endeavors in poetry as a youth, it should be mentioned that it was a piece of poetry ("Sh'ma") that he employed as an introduction to his prose narrative *Se questo è un uomo*. His poetic production over the years was not insignificant, and his short stories cannot be ignored. They attest to the various literary tools Levi employed over the years.

Another source for research regarding the development of Levi's thought is to be found in the work that he did not finish. His working title for it was *The Double Bond*. It is of special interest to many researchers that Levi's widow has the unfinished manuscript in her possession. To date, it has never turned over to a publisher. Carole Angier thinks it is likely that Lucia will never relinquish the manuscript for publication, and thus may likely be lost to posterity. Angier has done considerable research on that projected book, and has written extensively on Levi's theme. In fact, her own biography of Primo Levi carries as its title, *The Double Bond*, and what she learned of Levi's development of the manuscript makes up a large part of her own book.

In his manuscript, Levi treats, for the first time ever in a big way, a concept that comes from organic chemistry. Originally, he had chosen inorganic chemistry over organic because he felt that he more able manage the less complex one. He liked the fact that inorganic chemistry was more fixed, less susceptible to change. It is interesting that in the last years of his life, Levi was taking up as a theme for a book, that vast area of chemistry that had previously seemed to him to be outside his grasp. What had happened was that Levi's attention had been drawn to

relationships between atoms in organic matter. At the end of the chemical chain, there is a *double bond*, and his own personal discovery of that had intrigued him. It represented for him a link between two elements.

Since Levi had so often been asked to explain the multiple facets of his own "hybrid" nature, especially that of chemist/writer, he regularly searched for illustrations which would help explain, not only the connection, but also the potentially increased value of such a relationship. At one point, he likened the complexity of chemical elements to that of social relationships among human beings, and acknowledged that personal relationships were much more complex than chemical relationships were. They were, in fact, beyond his ability to explain:

> I am a chemist, expert in the affinities between elements, but I find myself a novice faced with the affinity between individuals; here truly all is possible, it is enough to think of certain improbable and lasting marriages, of certain one-sided and fruitful friendships.(*Roots* 6)

Where Levi mentions "certain and improbable marriages," it is indeed possible that he had in mind some civil unions of wife and husband, but within the context of the passage cited above, there is more emphasis on the "wedding" of two unlikely individuals in friendship, and even more, in literary couplings. He goes on to mention Rabelais' Pantagruel and Panurge, who are so exaggeratedly different that one could not imagine greater diversity. (In passing to that particular contrast, Levi mentions his own devotion to Rabelais "for over forty years," and acknowledges that he cannot explain the appeal, since he considered that he did not resemble Rabelais in any way.)

Levi goes on to list three other literary figures (particularly literary, as opposed to the authors in his anthology from the scientific world). These represent for him "even deeper and

more lasting loves" (*Roots* 6). They are Belli, Porta and Conrad, and they "are the hardest to explain." It is apt to say that the scientist Primo Levi had his rational, scientific world turned upside down by the arts. By the time he began writing *The Double Bond*, he had undergone a profound transformation. He came to embrace also the value of Pascal's "reasons of the heart" (*Roots* 6), although even there he made the effort, as ever, to rationalize.

Levi makes it clear that, not only has he not been able to understand these unlikely relationships, he has given up trying to rationalize them. Is this the artistic side of the writer beginning to assert itself, or is it the surrender of the analytical side of the scientist? The answer to this could be both of the above, but, ironically, we only have proof in substance for the surrender of the scientific side, as Levi confesses that, for him, "in human relations, there are no rules" (*Roots* 6).

Levi's hesitancy to approve some of his own writings, particularly in the introductions to selections in his anthology, actually provide an adequate explanation as to what his problem in this regard really was. He made a *heart* decision, in which, although he was thoroughly compelled at the time to include each particular selection, he nonetheless could not confirm these later with a scientist's comprehensible proof. He sounds apologetic when he concedes: "I realize that some of the justifications that precede each piece may carry little conviction" (*Roots* 5). Still, he will not retract his justifications. Though the reader may not detect the strong resolution of a scientist who has to be thorough in his experiments, the pieces will remain.

C. CAREFULLY JUDGING THE WISE

There has been much speculation over the details of Primo Levi's death. The police report declared it to be a suicide. Neither his wife nor children contested that conclusion. Some friends (notable among them his friend and Nobel Prize winner Rita Levi-Montalcini) firmly opposed

that conclusion. Levi-Montalcini's judgment was that it was an accident. But whether by accident or pushed by a "tiredness of living," Primo Levi left yet another enigma that will be difficult to resolve. The speculation that his sudden death (which was not at a very advanced age -- he was sixty-seven, and both his mother and mother-in-law were still living and were in their nineties) might have stimulated more interest in his writings certainly has some merit. There are those who contend that, if he did indeed die by his own decision in suicide, it was a blow against the very things he seemed to believe in most. Carole Angier has remained quite disappointed as she considers the unlikelihood that Levi's last work will never be published.

There are some very personal issues surrounding the life of Levi will be examined. In addition to Levi's recognition of himself as a "hybrid," which not even Angier has claimed to be able to explain fully, there is the preponderance of reasoning on the part of Levi (generally conceded by critics). Levi's firm stance in the arena of reasoning leads us to both Lucretius and Bertrand Russell. Is there a solution to some of the seemingly contradictory claims of reason and faith? I see that Levi came up hard against that challenge. One critic, Frederic D. Homer, treats the stages of thought development in laying out a base to explain Levi's notion (not original with Levi, to be sure) that "we are alone in the universe." Elie Wiesel, who got to know Levi quite well after the war, seems to be at odds with Levi concerning faith and reason. But could it not be that they were working on the same "life project" from different ends of the spectrum? Both traditional Judaism and traditional Christianity seem to place submission as an absolute, thus relegating suffering humanity to abstain from complaining about suffering in the presence of God . But, the idea of questioning God may be introduced not only as a tolerated negative, but one that Divinity might welcome. Rational thought was prominent for Levi, and he had no

qualms about reasoning, even over things that many who professed faith considered untouchable. For Levi it turned out to be the path of discovery for a more mature experience.

Overcoming the expression "There is no why!"

The phrase, "There is no why!" is now well-known, and in modern democracies it is a statement that refers to an age long past. The freedom to question is fundamental to universities, government, and commerce, where one may inquire about the reasons for policies and behavior on the part of those in positions of authority. As Primo Levi quickly learned at Auschwitz, it certainly was not that way for the prisoners in the concentration camps. They learned quickly not to question "why." Levi heard the words “Hier ist kein warum!” early in his stay in Auschwitz (*Survival in Auschwitz* 29). The important thing was for them to recognize the ones who had the authority and that they had to comply. Immediate death was the likely result for any dissenters.

As one who had undergone the harshness of treatment of the death camps, Levi was not quick to begin questioning what was behind the genocidal plot being carried out in Auschwitz. He came to that point eventually, of course, and his writing on that theme constitutes a significant portion of his total output.

Eventually Levi was faced with another query. It came in the form of a declaration of blessing from one whom he considered a believer. Levi made it clear that he rejected that he had been spared death in the Lager in order to fulfill some providential purpose. Betterlheim had a studied answer for his own survival, accompanied by a confession as to his own state of mind concerning

> Why was I saved? One voice, that of reason, tries to answer the question “why was I saved?” with "It was pure luck, simple chance; there is no other answer to the question,” while the voice of the conscience replies: “True, but the reason you had the chance to

survive was that some other prisoner died in your stead." And behind this, a whisper might be heard, an even more severe, critical accusation: “Some of them died because you pushed them out of an easier place to work; others because you did not give them some help, such as food, that you might possibly have been able to do without.” And there is always the ultimate accusation to which there is no acceptable answer: “You rejoiced that it was some other who had died rather than you'" (Giuliani 49).

Levi had thoroughly considered these pertinent questions. For him, the most difficult question of all came in the form of an accusation. For those who had not gone through the experience of Auschwitz, it may be difficult to imagine that a *victim*, who through some chance happened to barely survive, should ever have to face accusation just for surviving. However, that is just the case.

The issue of vicarious deaths in the concentration camps is hardly a fair one to consider. Of course, Primo Levi had such an active mind that that consideration was sure to come to him sooner or later. First of all, it is not as if the German officials within the camps asked for volunteers to meet a quota. Then, neither was it the case that they could have in any event considered some of the prisoners as *worthy* of surviving. For them, and, more importantly, for those in authority over them, the prime requisite for extermination was based on their race, and that was something that they could not alter or recant.

It was the voice of reason that spoke to Primo Levi most often as he considered the possibility of selection. While he roundly rejected the notion of a providential preference for one over another, he could not argue that those in command in the camps had employed some type of prioritization in singling out one, or many, for execution. This was perhaps an arbitrary predilection at times, but the choices made that determined death for some also left what for

those still waiting to die represented a daily reality: they had been spared. Why? This one word re-echoed steadily in some minds. It was the voice of reason that wanted to probe every question that wanted an answer for every possible question that could be formulated.

Levi never ceased to attempt to reason through these big questions of life and death. He applied reason in his study and work as a chemist, and he also went to the rational side of literature for his "serendipitous" reading. Because he eventually moved from the clinical style of writing (as in *Se questo è un uomo*) to a more classical literary approach, although it still contained scientific elements, he is seen as having that dual identity. Giuliani reckons him to be a "centaur."

> If I were to re-describe in a synthetic form not his historical journey but his interior personal attitude (as it emerges from his writings), I would say that Levi's nature as a centaur is shown in the conjunction, on the one hand, of his innate curiosity typical of a Renaissance man and sometimes innerved by a positivistic trust in the rights and claims of human reason, and on the other hand, of a tragic disillusion (due to the mere existence of Auschwitz) about the wisdom that should preside over that reason. (Giuliani 96)

Here, likening Levi's curiosity to that of a "Renaissance man" calls to mind Levi's strong attachment to Rabelais, the quintessential Renaissance figure of French literature, whose thirst for knowledge led him into several major areas that flourished during the Renaissance: medicine, theology and literature. Although Levi has written that he did not resemble Rabelais in any way, he was very much like him in his "innate curiosity."

Levi had declared in his youth, "I will understand everything" (*The Periodic Table* 26). His was a curiosity that went unabated throughout his life. He wanted answers, and he was attracted to others of a similar character. He saw enormous possibilities in every sphere of life

for intellectual exploration, and in several of those spheres, he became an explorer. He acknowledges that he did not venture into the worlds of music and art, at least so far as to include anything in his anthology that fit into those categories. But surely it is no accident that one of the entries in his list was from Marco Polo, which Levi entitled, "The Curious Merchant."

A significant figure in Levi's quest for increased knowledge was the ancient Roman poet/philosopher/scientist Lucretius. Peter Forbes writes that Levi was "an adherent of no preformulated creed, but if you had to characterize his philosophy, it would be closest to the atomic meliorism of the Latin poet Lucretius" (*Roots* ix). Levi resembles Lucretius in several essential ways. First of all, they were both scientists. It has been noted above that Lucretius would have been generally considered as one of the greatest thinkers from his time right up through the Renaissance if only for his atomic theory.

Also, while Levi is certainly not most well known for his poetry, his prose writings have made of him such a large literary figure that one can see the similarities between him and Lucretius in that arena. If Levi understood science better because of Lucretius, Peter Forbes declares that we may gain a better understanding of Levi by looking further at Lucretius. He writes: "It is Lucretius who provides the link between Levi's scientific, moral and aesthetic worldviews" (*Roots* ix).

Forbes also makes direct connections between Lucretius and several other authors Levi chose for his personal anthology. Since it was after having read Sir William Bragg's *On the Nature of Things* that Levi made his life choice to become a chemist, that event was certainly foundational for him. In the first line of the excerpt Levi uses from that work in *The Search for Roots*, Lucretius' name comes up. Bragg continues to write of Lucretius for almost an entire page.

In his introduction to *The Search for Roots*, Forbes refers to Bertrand Russell as a philosopher in the mold of Lucretius. While the selection Levi used from Bertrand Russell contains no reference to Lucretius, Forbes goes beyond this volume to find what he calls a "paraphrase" of the starkness of Lucretius' view of man made from accidental mixtures of different atoms. Russell's work that Forbes cites is *A Free Man's Worship*. Although Russell did not contradict the overriding idea that man is alone in the universe (a quite negative proposal), Forbes is convinced that both Russell and Levi were among "the most eloquent exponents of the positive side of Lucretius" (*Roots* xi).

It is true that the title of the source book for Levi's inclusion of a sample of Russell's writings has quite a positive outlook: *The Conquest of Happiness*. It sounds quite promising, but Levi affixed his own title for that excerpt, calling it "Why We Are Not Happy." It would be the negative aspect of that subject, and Levi does not offer the positive side here.

The pattern of reasoning employed by Kip S. Thorne in Levi's last selection certainly points to a potential paternity in Lucretius. Even more closely related to Lucretian logic, insofar as phraseology goes, is Levi's introduction to the passage from "The Search for Black Holes." Levi describes the implications of black holes. It is, of course, a purely materialistic description. The universe Levi describes does not have man at the center, as some would have it. For the poets and dreamers who have wished for that, Levi's tone is quite pessimistic. Forbes makes the connection between Levi and Lucretius: "It is in Lucretius that we find the first expression of this somber mood" (*Roots* x), then goes on to cite three lines of Lucretius in which there seems to be a logical link to Levi's introduction to Kip Thorne: "… nowhere in the universe can be/A final edge, and no escape be found/From the endless possibilities of flight." (*Roots* x)

CHAPTER 4

A DEVELOPING FAITH AND A PARALLEL GROWING SKEPTICISM

A. CAN A MAN CONTEND WITH GOD?

Since Primo Levi lived in both the secular world of northern Italy and the spiritual world of the Jewish Diaspora (assimilated as it was in the Piedmont region of northern Italy), he held sentiments from both these worlds. With that amalgamation, Levi's base belief was that it is very difficult to approach God. This had been a prevalent sentiment at the time of the patriarchs, which was also the era of Job. At the height of his sufferings, he said, "If one wished to dispute with Him, he could not answer him once in a thousand" (*Job* 9:3). Considering the Almighty as Someone to whom he was ultimately responsible for his words and actions, Job had cried out, as he considered a confrontation with God: "Though I were right, I could not dispute with Him; to Him, my Judge, I could only plead for mercy! If I called to Him and He answered me, I could not believe that He was listening to my voice" (*Job* 9:15-16). This does not sound at all like someone who thought he might get a good hearing with Him who created him. Yet, for all that, Job still had a yearning to be in contact with God in his misery. He wanted to present his complaint to Him, and he expressed exactly that to his friends. "Yet I would speak to the Almighty. I wish to argue my case with God" (*Job* 13:3).

Levi expressed the same desire as Job to "speak to the Almighty" in this way: "[Job's] magnificent and harrowing story encapsulates the questions of all the ages, those for which man has never to this day found an answer, nor will he ever find one, but he will always search for it" (*Roots* 11). If Job's desire to argue his case was heard in heaven, then Levi's oft-repeated

question regarding Auschwitz, as to "why" it had been allowed to happen, must have been heard in heaven, also. There could not have been anything greater in the spiritual realm that mattered to Levi.

However, to question God seemed to be a dangerous thing. How could a Jew, who is taught from youth to hold the name of God in reverence (even awe to the point that Orthodox Jews would not even pronounce the name Yahweh), dare approach God in that way? Christians, who consider themselves under grace and no longer under the harshness of the Law, find it difficult to be anything other than compliant with that which seems for them to be unchangeable, ascribing the worst of situations to a Divine will that they dare not contest. To insist on an answer when it appears that God has already spoken in allowing an injustice was practically unthinkable. On a few occasions, Levi has judged that certain kinds of human efforts to gain access to Divinity constituted blasphemy. Jews and Christians alike share a fear of committing blasphemy. Tullio comments on Levi's rejection of Dallaporta's notion that Providence was involved in sparing him in order that he might return form Auschwitz to be a messenger.

> I found out that he had fond memories and high esteem for Potassium [the chemical name Levi assigned to his friend], but dissented from him when Potassium [Dallaporta], a very religious and sincere ecumenical Catholic, had attributed Primo's survival in the concentration camp to a direct intervention of Divine Providence. Primo very emphatically refused to be among the chosen ones and told me that God had allowed the Nazis to murder people who were far worthier that he. (Tullio xiv)

Since they were friends, Levi agreed with Dallaporta on numerous matters, and he had "high esteem" for him. But the one thing that Levi made particularly clear was that he did not agree with Dallaporta's interpretation of his own survival. Levi's dissent from Dallaporta is

representative of the difference between a confirmed Catholic believer and a Jew who had struggled with his own identity as a Jew, and in fact was still struggling in matters of faith at the time of the encounter mentioned above.

Certainly, if there is no afterlife, then Levi's statement that "God had allowed the Nazis to murder people who were far worthier [than he]" takes on a different meaning. If this life is all there is for each individual, then the highest premium is that the just should live a long and rewarding life. Cutting it short is seen as divine punishment. Levi saw numbers of people go to their death that he esteemed to be more righteous than he in the eyes of God. Dallaporta believed in the resurrection, and as "a very religious and sincere ecumenical Catholic," held that as a believer he should keep his "eyes on Jesus, the cause and completer of our faith who, in view of the joy that lay ahead for Him, submitted to the cross" (*The Letter to the Hebrews* 12:2).

From Dallaporta's point of view, the fact that "Primo very emphatically refused to be among the chosen ones" is not necessarily an indication of rebellion towards God on Levi's part. It speaks more of Levi's high esteem for those who had died. He was in fact their advocate, and thus it could be further advanced that, for Levi, a big question before God was not simply "Why?" but rather "Why them?"

For those who hold the belief that God is intolerant with questioning, Belpoliti and Gordon point out that for Primo Levi, God was a distant and stern figure: "I had been presented with a Ruler God, a punitive God" (Belpoliti and Gordon 274). If one subscribes to that theory, then God would not be tolerant of any of His Creation contending with Him. In the several studies where Primo Levi is seen in association with Dante, particularly in *The Divine Comedy*, there is a consonance with the belief of a harsh and distant God. However scholars view Levi's idea of the nature of God as diverse from that of Dante, there is one respect in which it was

similar: for both Dante and Levi, God was mighty and unapproachable, and it would have been unthinkable for anyone to dare come near Him in a complaining spirit. It was not conceivable that someone might be allowed to "argue with God" and get away with it. However, if that were really a possibility (and if one should get a positive answer), it would be a wonderful thing. There are numerous examples in the Bible of just that.

It is certain that Levi was aware of the example of the patriarch Abraham, who reasoned with God, then petitioned Him to spare the sinful city of Sodom (*Genesis* 18:1-33). God, in what is properly called a theophany, appeared to Abraham to inform him of the coming destruction pronounced upon a city. Since Abraham knew that his own nephew, Lot, upon parting from Abraham's company, had set up his household in Sodom, the uncle was concerned for the welfare of his nephew. He appealed to God for clemency. Thus began a rather extracted time of bargaining, which ends with God making special provisions for Lot. However, the city itself was not spared, because there were so few righteous people living there. Lot himself had to escape with his family. But a precedent had been established: a righteous man had contended with God on behalf of another, and the end result was that God listened to his request. Considering that Abraham is the only person in the Bible who is recognized as " a friend of God" (*2 Chronicles* 20:7; *Isaiah* 41:8; *James* 2:23), and that this recognition only occurred after the previously mentioned encounter. So, it could be deduced that Abraham actually improved his standing with God by speaking out (and by extrapolation, resisting God) in the face of destruction. Levi was aware that not only Job, but also Abraham had disagreements with God, and prevailed.

Another man of faith, Moses, to whom Levi referred on many occasions, was pronounced the most humble man on earth, yet once found himself in a situation where he resisted God. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of the Law; the people were worshipping a

golden calf that they had constrained Moses' brother Aaron to make. In anger, Moses threw the tablets down and broke them. Then, when God told Moses that He was going to destroy Israel, Moses, resisted God. Once Moses showed God that He was willing to be destroyed instead of his people, God acquiesced. The result was that God, upon seeing Moses' care of His people, made new tablets, which Moses gave to the people. Afterwards, Moses' position, both before the people and in the presence of God, in no way diminished as a result of having contested God.

King David also complained to God. In Psalm 2, he wrote, "Why do the heathen prosper, and the unrighteous go unpunished?" The psalms that resound with this sort of complaint constitute an entire category within the Hebrew Songbook, and are called the "Psalms of Imprecation." David wrote several psalms that are in this category. One may learn from the songs of complaint that not only is it permissible to voice discontent to God, it that God also considers it beneficial.

David is an example of a man who formed a habit of living his life in the presence of God. Psalm 139 is dedicated to that thought, as the psalmist declares, "Where can I go away from your presence?" Primo Levi seems as if he too were held to that tenet and that is why he could register his own complaint. Levi wanted to know why God did not intervene in the monstrous experience that was Auschwitz. If Levi had always held to the idea that God was distant and uninvolved in human affairs (as the Deists held, for example) it would never even occurred to him to raise that question.

Levi made a connection between David's complaints and his own with regard to the sensation of God's distance (or absence). One thing is sure, however: while King David is recognized as a worshiper of God for his acknowledgement of the wonder of God in His creation (Psalm 8), Levi, as a chemist, had profound respect for the complexity for the created universe.

After the war, he became particularly interested in the German people of the Holocaust, and his conclusion was that Germans were no different that other people.

King David, as a psalmist, marveled at the infinite detail in his own existence: “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14), and also recognized God in the stellar heavens. Levi marveled at the prospect of infinity, as seen in the stars and the Black Hole, but in his doubt dared declare, “We are alone. […] Every year that passes leaves us more alone” (*Roots* 214). He was right, if we view the material universe only as astronomers. David declared to God: “What is man, that you take notice of him?” (Psalm 144:3). But, for all his wonderings, David attained a personal testimony of approval form God. God said that David was “a man who is after my own heart” (*1 Samuel* 13:14). This is remarkable considering that he was a man who often complained to the Almighty.

Job remains the prime example of one who disputes Divinity’s tolerance for unrighteousness. Levi has noted that Job was submissive to God for a while after the onslaught of misfortune that came to him (Roots 110. But then he began to express his frustrations and doubt as he considered the injustice in his own extreme suffering while at the same time other men were not suffering. An examination of the structure of the book of Job is quite revealing in regard to the great amount of reasoning and complaint in the realms of men.

The fact that the book of Job consists mainly not of narrative but of dialogue between Job and His friends points up the value of reasoning. A full thirty-five of the entire forty-two chapters of Job are dialogue in which God is talked about but is not present. After Job’s lament, his friend Eliphaz begins to speak back to him. His words do not seem to be harsh, but Job discerns immediately that there is a veiled accusation. He responds by defending himself in the face of his calamity. He transitions into proclaiming his own righteousness before God, and

eventually complains to God directly. Thus Job is the most clearly recognizable example of a man who laid strong complaints before God.

The roots of Jacob's great confrontation with God provide a base for understanding Primo Levi's own approach to God. While Job's lengthy contention with God over the injustice He allowed in the world provided with the primordial example of resisting God by using reasoning, there is yet another example in the Old Testament that demonstrates a great power struggle of a man with God.

It is Jacob, Isaac's son, the grandson of Abraham, whose difficulty with his twin brother Esau provides a clear example of man's ability to confront God on the grounds of justice. Levi's inclusion of a section from Thomas Mann's work connects us to that patriarch's dissent from God.

Levi wrote that Thomas Mann was one of his favorite writers, so it is no surprise that he included one of his works among the thirty selections of his personal anthology. Mann's multi-volume series on *Joseph and His Brothers*, is in essence a novelized account of the last of the patriarchs, and is based on an account in the book of *Genesis*. Levi calls Mann's series "the greatest literary flowering of the twentieth century" (*Roots* 89). While Joseph occupies the title role, the stories include the background history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In his compilation, *The Search for Roots*, Levi excerpted the episode of Jacob tricking Esau out of his blessing as the first-born of Isaac.

That particular episode provides us with an essential element to a better understanding of what later became the greatest crisis in the life of Jacob. Since Levi has placed this story among those important to him as a writer, extracting some salient points are instructive regarding one of the greatest power struggles with God in the history of man.

God sent an angel to Jacob the night before he was to encounter his brother Esau. Jacob struggled with the angel throughout the night, and actually prevailed. This could be seen to have been out of character for Jacob. He was quiet and introspective. The resistance Jacob put up may seem contrary to logic since angels are normally thought to come either with power to make some glorious announcement, or else as comforting spirits who minister to God's people. So, it seems that man's place before divine messengers is that of submission. However, on this occasion Jacob did not submit; he resisted.

The encounter in question holds such importance that a nation was born as a result: Jacob had his name changed to Israel after a struggle during which the heavenly messenger had to ask Jacob to let him go. Jacob's tenacity in holding on to the angel was really an effort to grasp God himself. This bout took place during the night before he was to face his vengeful brother Esau. He had not seen Esau for many years. Jacob had fled from him after ha tricked their father into giving him the blessing of the first-born. Esau's bitterness upon learning that their father had blessed his brother was such that he vowed to kill Jacob. It was only the wisdom of his mother Rebekah that saved Jacob from death at that time, sending him away to her original homeland, where Jacob worked for Rebekah's brother Laban for twenty-one years before returning to visit his family. Jacob knew the risk involved in approaching his brother. He cautiously separated his large entourage into three groups. Then night came. It was during that night that he received a visit by God's angel. Jacob wrestled with the angel in his distress over the approaching danger. It was because he knew that Esau was capable of doing what he had vowed that caused Jacob to refuse to let the angel go, even though the angel had told him he must depart.

Here a most remarkable change took place. Jacob declared that he would not let him go until he "blessed" him (*Genesis* 32:26). The angel asked him to tell his name. Jacob told him.

The angel reminded him that his name meant “Supplanter” and “Deceiver.” It had in fact represented an important aspect of the character of Jacob up to that time. Jacob had been named “Supplanter” by his parents, and he had lived up to his name. On two very particular occasions he had vied for, and received, what belonged by right of birth to Esau. The first time was when he struck a deal with Esau regarding his birthright, and later pretending to be Esau, he deceived his father in order to get Esau’s blessing.

When Jacob confessed that he had indeed tricked his brother, the angel announced to him that from that moment on he would be called “Israel,” which signifies “God contended” (Hebrew literal translation) and the angel explains “as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed” (*Genesis* 32:28). There was more than just a name change taking place. Jacob’s character changed from that meeting. Jacob had, in a self-righteous manner, been quite self-serving. But, after he acknowledged the truth of the association between his name and his character, the struggle was over.

B. LEVI’S PREMISES REGARDING ACCESS TO GOD

While Levi had at least one friend who was quite religious, he was not (Giuliani 52). Most interviewers who broached that subject received a negative response. But that did not necessarily signify that he was against religion. Giuliani made a distinction between being religious and being sensitive to religious culture.

> What did ‘being nonreligious’ mean? For Primo Levi, being nonreligious does not mean being insensitive or indifferent to religious culture. On the contrary, he was attracted by the Bible (the *Tanach* and the New Testament) and its extraordinary literary creations. (Indeed, as we have seen, the figure of Job is the starting point of his personal anthology. (Giuliani 52)

Levi was indeed "attracted by the Bible." When studying Levi, however, we should normally make the distinction between Old and New Testaments. While Levi did insert some quotations and allusions to passages in the New Testament, most of his references are from the Law and the Prophets. Of course, citing the Bible is not necessarily an indication that one believes it. But, in most of Levi's many references to Scripture there is a demonstrable reverence.

Levi inserted many biblical references into his writings. While it is clear that his base of reference was the God of the Jews, he did not try to impose the practice of Judaism on anyone, not even himself. But his references are often declarations, manifesting his own character, beyond simply signaling an attraction to the Bible. He was consistently patient with the people of various faiths who associated with him. Regarding his own personal quest for faith, we learn from his writings, as well as the reading selections in *The Search for Roots*, that Levi had some very clear questions regarding faith. He also wrote about this matter in such a way as to show that his high regard for the faith of others (which he did not feign to accept, nor did he deign to criticize) also gives some indication of the level of faith he might have held, although he did not proclaim it from the housetops.

First, one may take into account Levi's selection from Shalom Alecheim's *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* and consider what this could have meant to him. Levi writes that Tevye "seeks the just and the true with the intense courage of the patriarchs" (*Roots* 148) Here, we have an indication that the search for justice and trust held a high value for Levi, so he approved of it in the character of Tevye. The focus that the milkman maintained as he navigated through the fog of different worlds at odds with each other Levi denominates as "intense courage." Beyond that, he makes the allusion to the patriarchs, and we sense the high regard Levi held for their lives as examples.

We also see, within the text of the excerpt Levi chose for this chapter of his anthology, a significant statement about the habits of a Jew. This is, of course, Tevye's expression, not Levi's. "A Jew prays when he must, not when he wants to" (*Roots* 149). This is in accord, it would seem, with some remarks Levi himself made elsewhere. For example, on one occasion when Levi explained that the reason that he did not pray for divine intervention when facing the possibility of being chosen as one of those to be executed on the following day in the Lager, it was not that he did not believe God intervened in human affairs. On the contrary, he relegated his own impulse to pray (which he rejected) as being "blasphemous" only because he had not been praying to God before the crisis arose.

If we see honesty in the dairyman Tevye as he comments on his daily circumstances, many of them quite mundane, Levi's honesty is also manifest in matters that have grave implications. "Levi's honesty in *If This is a Man* is sometimes quite shocking" (Belpoliti and Gordon 39). Naturally, some of the most convincing passages that indicate Levi's honesty would be those in which he acknowledged his own personal thoughts and motives, which might not reflect favorably toward him. In addition, his honesty might stand out in bolder relief as he told of a general selfishness and the base behavior of those reduced to those inhuman conditions. This constituted a confession, and likely could cause the reader to be less sympathetic towards him and his fellow inmates.

Indeed, a clear, if not stark openness seems to be characteristic of Levi. This is so, not just in his first book, but also in the following one, entitled *The Truce*. Precisely, Levi acknowledges that *Survival in Auschwitz* was a product of the overflow of all the experiences he had in Auschwitz. He particularly meant it to be understood that he had not worked at style, nor did he go back later to embellish or edit out anything that might have seemed uncomfortably

revealing. In his subsequent books, even though he did pay more attention to style, as he related to Risa Sodi in her interview with him, his forthrightness does not seem to have diminished at all. As a matter of fact, he went to new levels as he provided even deeper analysis of some of his own values and judgments (Sodi 6,12, 13).

Levi's restraint in recording the events of the Lager gained him the reputation of being quite judicious. Once that is established in reading his better-known writings, his vitriol against Adolf Eichmann in his poem "Per Adolf Eichmann" is all the harsher (*Opere II* 544). In writing that poem, Levi was not at all trying to maintain any *image* that he may have felt that he had attained of being so tolerant of all the evil perpetrated against his race. He showed here that he was not acquiescent about the cruelty. His desire for justice (if not vengeance) goes beyond the judgment of death for Eichmann to a severe judgment: an eternal life in torment to view all those whom he had sent to a cruel death:

O figlio della morte, non ti auguriamo la morte.
Possa tu vivere a lungo quanto nessuno mai visse:
Possa tu vivere insonne cinque milioni di notti,
E visitarti ogni notte la doglia di ognuno che vide
Rinserrarsi la porta che tolse la via del ritorno,
Intorno a sé farsi buio, l'aria gremirsi di morte.
(*Opere II* 544).
(Oh son of death, we don't desire death for you.
May you live longer than anyone ever lived;
May you live sleepless five million nights,
And may you be visited every night by the sufferings of all

You saw enclosed by the doors that took away the way of return,

Around them became dark, the air packed with death.)

Levi demonstrated what strong feelings he had toward those who were undeniably totally absorbed in destroying his race. The fact that at other times he seemed generous toward the German people as a whole is an indication that he himself was not racially biased. He was able to write about what he recognized as general tendencies of diverse nationalities, but he expressed that in such a way as to explain without accusing. This is the kind of mental framework that permitted Levi to identify with the character created by Sholem Aleichem who was the epitome of sincerity.

Levi notes that while "Tevye senses the fracture that divides the world, he is himself sadly divided" (*Roots* 147). We cannot help but make the connection, whether Levi intended it or not, with Levi himself. Elsewhere, he acknowledges his own dual nature: he was "always inclined to a hybrid input" and was of a "hybrid nature" (*Roots* 3). It was such a major issue for Levi that he had even projected (and seemed to be well on the way to finishing) a book on the subject of the *double bond* found in organic chemistry. It is likely that he already had this project in mind when he penned the words "sadly divided" in 1981 ("sadly" because in his view the existent division needed to be eliminated, and the double bond at the end of the molecular structure would join other elements together).

Levi says that in Tevye we have something akin to Thomas Mann's characters. "[L]ike the characters of Thomas Mann, he recognizes himself in them" (*Roots* 148). In similar fashion, Levi was able to identify with the difficult position of Tevye.

Upon presenting for publication the thirty selections from works of literature that had been so meaningful to him, Levi writes, "I felt more exposed to the public, more embosomed, in

making the choices than in writing my own books" (*Roots* 5). His openness there may have been uncomfortable for him, as he confesses. Not to diminish at all the general openness of Levi's character, I would not disagree with Peter Forbes assessment that "[t]he need to reveal too much of himself was a feature of all his writings" (*Roots* xii). Surely, that aspect of his character is evident in his writings. I would simply assert that Levi *does* reveal himself in large measure, but it is simply not on the surface of his writings. Once must dig a little. Nonetheless, it is most certainly there. Levi wanted to be open, but with whom could he be comfortable to bare his soul? He had spoken boldly before, and with time, had learned that not everyone wanted to listen, and some who listened would take issue with his ideas. So, there are large quantities of personal revelation available, but not to the cursory reader. Levi did what many writers who are true craftsmen do in that situation: he began to shroud his deeper thoughts in carefully scripted (or even encrypted) language.

One example of this is found in Levi's historical novel, *If Not Now, When?* His protagonist, Mendel, who may be seen as Levi's own *alter ego*, says, "My name means 'he who consoles', but I never consoled anyone" (*If Not Now, When?* 21). This confession of the man named "Consoler" ("Mendel" being a linguistic variant of the Hebrew "Menachem") that he had "never consoled anyone" could be seen as an allusion to Levi at one point acknowledging that he himself had not lived up to his own name. It would perhaps be useful at this point to remember that the significance of the surname Levi hearkens back to the one son of Jacob the patriarch whose family was ordained by God to become exclusive members of an entire priestly order. They constituted the Levitical priesthood. That the watchmaker Mendel does indeed begin to live up to his name as "Consoler" in Levi's novel could perhaps mirror Levi's eventual acquiescence

to live up to his name as a priest. He acknowledges at one point, referring to Tevye (but it would be applicable to all), that "every Jew is a priest" (*Roots* 148).

In following the theme of openness on the part of Levi, we may see what could constitute significant groundbreaking in an interview with Risa Sodi in 1986. She asks a question regarding a most puzzling statement Levi had previously made. She admits to Levi, "There was a part of your book that I found very disturbing, and that is the concept of useful and useless violence. Can there ever be such a thing as *useful* violence? (*A Dante for Our Time* 13) Levi's answer at first glance may appear to augment Sodi's perplexity. He examines cruelty on two levels, cites examples of both, and ends up by explaining how some of the violence committed on the Jews was senseless and indicated, for him, unnecessary even within the macabre plan of the German hierarchy to eliminate Jews. His point is that there was a reason that the very sick and elderly people were taken on a long trip before their execution. That was because of the Germans' literalness of carrying out the order to take *all* to a distant point. This explanation could be seen as less than helpful, but it was one in which Levi was more intent upon explaining from the German point of view than he was in alleviating his interviewer's concern about the philosophical ramifications of a statement about "useful violence." Thus, Levi made it quite clear that he did not approve of either type of violence mentioned. He merely made a distinction between levels of cruelty.

Levi did manage, in the interview mentioned above, to place his concept of violence alongside an encounter Dante had with one of the damned. He says that "it was Dante's duty to be cruel to him. I think something similar happened in Germany" (*A Dante for Our Time* 14). That is, by extrapolation, that the Germans in charge of the camps felt that it was their duty to be cruel to the Jews.

So while it appears that Levi was introducing a line of thought which was quite distant from what readers had come to expect of him, he was simply showing a parallel. Again, he did not say that he approved. He was rather explaining the mindset of those who carried out the orders. The statement about "useful violence" would have given cause for alarm, had it been Levi's own personal views about inflicting violence on others. Since he was rather only calling for an examination of the reason behind the handling of sick and elderly Jews. Levi, in carrying his complex explanation into a scene from the *Inferno* of Dante, intended to facilitate a reinforcement of his argument. By patiently following his illustration, one may find it quite instructive. It does provide insight into Levi's unique experiences and observations, but it reveals more about his own line of reasoning. The use of Dante to strike a parallel alludes to the significant place he occupied for Levi.

From another part of her interview, Sodi notes that Levi "obliquely refers-–or defers--to divine judgment" (Sodi 21). Many of Levi's references, (and even his thought patterns) may have been the result of the inculcation of his studies in secondary school. Sodi again notes: "Levi received a classical education in Italy at a time when Dante still occupied a central place in secondary schooling" (Sodi 1).

The important place Dante occupied in Levi's mind was not just in his subconscious. It could appear to be so, as Sodi notes, "His conversations were littered with quotations from the *Commedia*" (Sodi 1). But such is not the case when he later shares Dante with a fellow prisoner in the Lager. It was seemingly out of place that Levi became "an 'authority' on Dante for an afternoon" (Sodi 67). Levi recalled a passage from *The Divine Comedy* for Jean, a Frenchman who knew nothing about Dante. It was Levi's choice to share the passage with that particular person. It seemed to be an irrepressible urge because it was out of the context in which the two

men were living. Levi remembers the event many years later, and it held significance for him as having been one his best memories from the camps.

Levi did not have difficulty in admitting his inability to judge certain matters. He defers to authorities such as priests and human judges, but acknowledges that sometimes even those who were chosen from among men are incapable of rendering sound verdicts by themselves. Sodi asks (not in an interview, but rhetorically in writing) if perhaps, "[w]hen Levi turns to rabbis, is he implicitly acknowledging a human link to divine justice?" (Sodi 21). What Sodi is searching for here calls to mind what several others have attempted, that is, to fathom the depth of Primo Levi's spirit in an effort to learn to what extent was a person of faith.

C. THE PLACE OF HUMOR

If it is true that "troubles overcome are good to tell," (Yiddish proverb, from Frontispiece, *The Periodic Table* 2), then it is also good to be able to laugh at some of them. This in no way applies to taking lightly the horrible experiences the Jewish people suffered because of the Nazi's cruelty. Nor would one ever be able to jest about the "satanic knowledge of human beings" some German officials seemed to posses so as to know how to inflict prisoners with even more suffering (*Survival in Auschwitz* 89). But, for many of the occurrences in the Lager, being able to find something humorous that happened concurrently with their afflictions was a sign of stability, and definitely, an effort to maintain one's sanity. It is the capacity to recollect afterwards that while they were in a stressful situation, there were occurrences that inspired humor that helped alleviate the stress.

Primo Levi had a good sense of humor, as many passages in his writings attest. He also gave evidence of that in several interviews. There are fully five entries in his personal anthology that appear to have been chosen primarily because they are comedic pieces. They are: "A Deadly

Nip," "Better to Write of Laughter Than Tears," " An Irrepressible Quibbler," "Pity Beneath Laughter," and "The Measure of All Things." Also, at least three others within *The Search for Roots* contain significantly humorous elements, which obviously appealed to Levi's dry wit, and perhaps were chosen in part because they had that trace of wit about them. This group includes: "A Different Way of Saying I," "The Jew on Horseback," and "Tönle the Winterer." Levi could not have chosen still another inclusion, "The Curious Merchant," without some amusement on his part.

There are either major emphases on comedy or else subtle traces of humor to be found in fully fifteen of the thirty selections in Levi's personal anthology. Lest one should suspect that Levi wanted to establish himself with the reputation of a humorist above all, it should be stated categorically here that it could never be the case. His message is, above all, a serious one, and he wanted to be taken very seriously. So, while he does include the humorous component, it is consistently with a purpose, and the purpose is as serious as life and death. As a writer, Levi is a teacher, and humor, while it is a part of his makeup (as a man, as an Italian and as a Jew), it is never far from the mere utility of service to its serious master. He knew how to wield this tool, and the comic parts of all his expressions are always connected to that serious central part of his nature. The component of entertainment is in evidence, but it has been placed there with a much higher purpose than to entertain.

While traces of humor are to be found in half of the selections of Levi's anthology, half are not. Of that other half, it is safe to reckon that by no stretch of the imagination could it be said that Levi had any intention of including those for any entertainment value. They are serious pieces in their entirety, and Levi takes them very seriously. But of the others, where there are elements of entertainment that are undeniable, we may search for something serious behind the

humor as well. Levi likely had a purpose in choosing so many excerpts which had an entertaining side to them for his anthology: it was integral to what he viewed to be the crux of his message. It is significant that he simply found them entertaining, because he could have found a way to communicate the most serious aspects of his thought to the reader without those comedic elements.

The underlying purpose of these pieces cannot have been far removed from a desire on Levi's part to demonstrate a freedom from bitterness that otherwise could have gripped him for hurtful purpose, whether in his writing or elsewhere. The fact that he was able to demonstrate his dry wit here, in interviews and in daily life with friends and family, is a tribute to the kind of person he was. Several aspects of what humor constituted for him within the context of somber events in the world are attested within his writings.

As a scientist, Levi was quite aware of some of the ridiculous extremes to which tendencies could go with technological advances in the future. The test of a product's resistance to "attack" by American cockroaches could serve as an example. The documented experiment occurred in 1955, and appears to have been a serious test. To establish an entity for testing materials that would be made available to consumers as to their viability is, from the outset, quite logical. Levi wants to assure his readers that the original intent of the scientists was not intended in any way as a spoof. He writes, "What follows is not an invention: it is a 'specification'" (*Roots* 174). For the ASTM (American Society for Testing Materials) to establish a "tentative method" (*Roots* 175) to determine what resistance dry adhesive films could offer to a variety of American roaches seems hyperbolic. What Levi offers us within the context of *The Search for Roots* is clearly a parody on the methodology of having a test for almost *everything* that is going to be marketed in the United States. So, simultaneously, he indicates to us the ludicrous aspect of

our developing society (at which we are free to laugh), and also the serious side of it, thus demonstrating the ever-increasing *need to know*.

A second example that demonstrates a grand sense of humor is the piece from Shalom Aleichem. We cannot help but laugh at the reasoning of Tevye the milkman. The driving force of this work is humor. Levi writes in the introduction to the selection that Tevye "quotes haphazardly" (*Roots* 148). He mixes up biblical personages, substituting Moses for David, including quoting from one passage in the Scripture and injecting a phrase from another totally unrelated passage. This confusion makes up a significant portion of the comic element. But a greater element of humor enters as Tevye describes his miserable condition, which is regularly directed as a complaint about, and to, his God. He narrates: "In those days, with God's help, I was poor as a devil" (*Roots* 148). Levi extracted most of the first chapter of the book*, Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories,* for inclusion in the anthology. For Levi, he was an "irrepressible quibbler" (Levi's own title for the excerpt), but still, one who could get to the point and who eventually was able to attribute good to its highest source. The surprising benefit that came to poor Tevye in this chapter was what he called "the miracle God helped me to" (*Roots* 148). He begins by lamenting his personal situation, then argues with, contradicts, and all but rejecting the two women who eventually become the means by which he receives a great "blessing."

If one were to only read, or worse, to read and only remember, the monologues of Tevye in the first chapter, those steady negative comments could certainly leave the impression that Tevye *only* "quibbled." However, the essential happening of the first chapter is that the fortunes of Tevye's family changed considerably after the act of great kindness on the part of another family. Certainly, Tevye was not quibbling once he began to understand that the family for

whom he had performed a charitable deed was going to repay him far beyond any measure of the "marketable" value of his service.

Tevye had been reflecting on his personal financial situation as he returned home from a day of hard and relatively unproductive labor. When the two women ask him a favor, he very begrudgingly helps them. He allows them to get on his cart, and proceeds to take them to their destination, which just happens to be in the opposite direction from which he was going. Upon arrival at the home of the woman, Tevye begins to learn that the family is quite wealthy. The father shows hospitality to Tevye, invites him to have a brandy with him (which Tevye cannot refuse—such a noble gesture!), and subsequently offers him food. He refuses to eat, since he is mindful that his wife and daughters are at home without any succulent food, and he would have felt guilt feasting under such circumstances. When the man of the house perceives Tevye's predicament, he looks around for a solution.

The result is that the father, and subsequently all the family, show Tevye great generosity. They give him a large quantity of food from their splendid table, but that it does not end there. They want to pay him for bringing the mother and grandmother home safely, so the father offers to pay Tevye for the service rendered. So the father asks him how much he should pay. Tevye is embarrassed because he does not know what would be an appropriate amount. When he finally tells the father the amount, the man laughs because it seems such a small sum to him. So he gives him much more, then encourages each of the family members to contribute. Even the children take from their own "private funds," and the total collected represents an abundance of money for Tevye. He returns home jubilant. His family has a wonderful meal, and he and his wife discuss what they will do with the money they have received.

This episode sets the stage for the purchase of a cow, which projects Tevye into another line of work. He begins to sell dairy products, becoming Tevye the Dairyman, and in the stage production (and subsequent movie) that many millions of people have seen as "The Fiddler on the Roof," is the only identity he will ultimately have. That part of his career was launched as a result of "the miracle God helped me to."

Levi has included this slightly abridged chapter here for a distinct purpose. This is a story of grace and human warmth, in his eyes. It is a story, in Tevye's words, of a "miracle," and nowhere does Levi ever deny that aspect of it. In the hands of Levi the anthologist, the story is symbolic of a bright light in a time of darkness, and could be compared to some of the heart-warming experiences he had at Auschwitz. As comical as the telling of his story is, however, anyone who reflects long upon Tevye's adventures will come sooner or later to consider how difficult his situation was. Levi writes, "he is a Jew of the Diaspora: his destiny is to be wrenched in two" (*Roots* 147). In thus placing this piece near the middle of his anthology, Levi has declared his own identification with a man who has found himself sadly divided.

Surely, both Sholem Alecheim and Levi wanted the humorous element to be felt. But the feeling was not the message. Levi remarks in his introduction to the narrative of Tevye, "[H]e suffers, but by virtue of his long experiences, he distrusts change" (*Roots* 147). There is an obvious parallel between the two of them as one considers the end of Tevye's long story and the beginning of Levi's adult life.

About Tevye's reaction to the many unfortunate things in his life, Levi writes, "the only words on his lips [Tevye's] are those of resignation [. . .] he is not one of those submissive" (*Roots* 147). To whatever extent Levi intended to characterize Tevye as not being one who was submissive, I do not agree. It is easy to see, and perhaps even feel, his resistance, it is true, but

his resignation is more than tiredness in the face of recurring adversity. He is resigned to many aspects of his own plight, but at the same time he underlines good fortune, when it comes, as a blessing (even a “miracle”) from God. It is true that he is not submissive to the point of chronic pessimism, but in the long run, there are numerous aspects of his personality that point to him as one of the most submissive of all those around him. He complains, but does not rail against God. He reacts to the situations that befall him. He speaks as he thinks. Sometimes his actions, or reactions, are not what others might imagine that they should be, but he does not rebel. In the episode of the two stranded ladies, he does try to resist their cries for assistance, but he ends up doing exactly what they ask him to do. He does it, after complaining (indeed, while continuing to complain), with a submission that could seem to be more than just the acquiescence of a grouchy man. He reasons as he goes, and those accompanying him are going to hear his reasons. Here, as in all of his dealings, he earns the respect of those around him. The higher part of this virtue may be seen in Primo Levi as well.

Why Levi liked Rabelais

Francois Rabelais was a unique figure in the field of letters. Levi declared that his own like for him went back to his youth, and it seems he never wavered in his appreciation for him. But there was something Levi could not explain, and that was why he held a special place for him. Levi had to admit in the preface to *Roots* that he could not explain some of the selections' ordering, and then has to confess that he did not know at all why Rabelais had been so important to him for so many years.

Again, it could be that Levi is provoking the reader for the answers. One might suppose that Levi took particular pleasure in passages that are somewhat *risqué,* since he includes such a one from Rabelais in his anthology. In a similar fashion, his selection from Lucretius contains a

playful sexual nuance (*Roots* 138). At any rate, it seemed absurd to Levi that exposure to Lucretius had been suppressed in schools by the Fascist regime during his youth.

Did Levi take pleasure in the fact that he was able to reproduce a selection from Lucretius around forty years later, in 1981? If any of that held value for him, then it makes the excerpts from Rabelais all the more meaningful, since one of the passages Levi chose is loaded with, and indeed has as its main thrust, a bold sexual theme ("How Panurge Fell in Love with a Noble Parisian Lady," *Roots* 80).

It is undeniable that a large part of the appeal that Rabelais held for Levi was simply that he represented for him, as Giuliani has written, "his open and interminable source of laughter" (Giuliani 33). A good reason for Levi's own inability to explain why he was drawn to Rabelais could have been because the roots for that show up more in Levi's genes than in his *ratio*. Giuliani refers to the "Yiddish *witz*—which is a Jewish way to live the Diaspora life" (Giuliani 33). One can certainly see Rabelais' lively wit continually in evidence in the selections Levi has included. To what extent the ribald nature of much of Rabelais' writing was really essential for Levi may be left up to conjecture. Levi himself declared that he did not resemble Rabelais "in the least" (*Roots* 7). Still, the element of humor there held enough importance for Levi for him to entitle his selections "Better to Write of Laughter than Tears" (*Roots* 77).

There is a deeper, more serious and professional reason, why Levi could have been drawn to Rabelais. Rabelais, as a physician, was a serious scientist. So, like Levi, he had a dual aspect to his career: he was a man of letters and a man of science. Indeed, Rabelais went even beyond that dual nature. Levi describes him in his introduction in this way: "monk, doctor, philologist, naturalist, humanist and traveler," all the while beginning his description of the work for which Rabelais is most well known today, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as a "popular comic epic" (*Roots*

77). Levi makes sure that the reader understands that although Rabelais was acquainted with "human misery well enough; he keeps quiet about it because, a good doctor even when he is writing, he doesn't accept it, he wants to cure it" (*Roots* 77).

In the dimension of his own religious identity, Rabelais made fun of those who claimed to have faith while their words or actions demonstrated something else. Certainly, he could have been aiming at sincere criticism of those he considered hypocrites, and not those devout believers who sincerely lived out their faith. What is closer to the heart of the matter is that he was correcting believers who were too indulgent of the selfish and carnal aspect of their own lives. In a more positive sense, it could be said that he was showing the human side of the divine institution. Levi may have had appreciation for the didactic benefit of ridiculing foolish people as well as those figures of authority that abuse their office. Could he have seen some parallels between France in the 1500's and Italy four hundred years later?

It has already been stated that, because of governmental control during the Fascist rule, students in Italy were not allowed to read Lucretius. That brings up an interesting note. While both Rabelais in the 16th century and Primo Levi in 1981 were able to write as they did, the original intent of Levi's publisher was for Levi to prepare a student edition anthology for the public schools. As it turned out, it was the editor (and not the Italian school system) who made the decision not to offer *The Search for Roots* for use in the public schools. It is highly probable that the inclusion of such excerpts as those from Lucretius and Rabelais figured into the decision. (The editor made no specific mention of any of Levi's choices as being at the root of that decision). Whatever the details may have been, Levi has nowhere made the case that his anthology should have been accepted for use in the public schools. Neither has he at any point been apologetic for the humorous selections found in *The Search for Roots*. One can be sure that

his choices to include humor in this work were very purposeful, and that they demonstrate very serious issues.

CHAPTER 5

HOPE BEYOND THE BLACK HOLE

A. SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF LEVI'S GRAPH

The graph Levi has drawn showing the routes one may take with some of the authors he has chosen for his anthology could cause some perplexity. He begins with Job, has two routes passing through *methods* of salvation (knowledge and laughter), then one treating the stature of man and finally, one entitled "man suffers unjustly." Since one component is mentioned twice (salvation), it might be more significant, and the ending would be more positive. But, in Levi's graph, *all* the routes lead to the Black Hole, which represents annihilation. The only conclusion that may be drawn is that the graph is pessimistic if one interprets the popular rendering of Job (Levi's starting point) in conjunction with the utter obliteration of matter in the Black Hole. Still, a more careful investigation of individual texts shows this was not Levi's full intent in producing the personal anthology.

Italo Calvino tells us, in his Afterword to Levi's anthology entitled "The Four Paths of Primo Levi," that Levi had "a keen sense of the moral and social component of all experience" (*Roots* 221). Surely, *The Search for Roots* offers us more than just Levi's personal reading experience. He has gone far back in recorded human history, stretched out to the future (in his science fiction) and has attempted a global application. He begins with Job and Homer, then finishes with Langbein and the Black Hole.

In this section, the problem of a seemingly total negativity is central. Also, it is important to take Levi's assessments of the hybrid selections of his anthology and their peculiar placement

into account. What are the implications of these texts with his "paths to salvation"? Levi's own assessments of man's limitations, coupled with his hope in man's potential, are key to a higher understanding of the overall purpose of his collection. Finally, since Levi has obviously wanted to emphasize the element of salvation, some texts with his selections will help clarify his own definition of the term. Beyond that, what he himself writes in his commentary on the selections, while sometimes more veiled than the texts he references, should help further explain to what extent his own beliefs are presented here.

From Distress to Destruction

Calvino declares that "what prevails in the body of the book [*Roots*] is the systematic element, the 'encyclopaedic'" (*Roots* 221). This element would certainly bespeak any notion that Levi has been "serendipitous" in compiling the anthology (as he says that he had been in his leisure reading over the years). On the contrary, it does speak of a master plan, carefully structured and then carried out with strict self-discipline.

It appears that Levi has organized his personal anthology in such a way as to present the reality of chaos, but with the determination that he will not leave the reader there. The placement of texts side by side that are in stark contrast to each other seems to intensify the sensation of chaos. Italo Calvino reckons that Levi arranged the texts for a purpose. He writes: "The principal quality of Levi the anthologist consists in establishing relations between texts which could not be more heterogeneous" (*Roots* 221). Thus, Levi the "hybrid" gives us a collection of texts that are in turn "hybrid."

Giuliani thinks that the "encyclopedic" in Levi has a cryptic dimension to it. "It is an encyclopedism of the anti-encyclopedia, of those arbitrary and subjective things that are constantly held back, constantly hidden and masked" (Giuliani 90). More particularly, he sees

Levi's insertion of the long passage from Mann's *Tales of Jacob* to be foundational in explaining Levi's own sense of identity when writing in the first person. According to Giuliani, Levi often struggled to avoid the express usage of "I." It is interesting to note that he called the selection by Mann, "A Different Way of Saying 'I'."

Giuliani further writes:

> It is as if being both the object of narration and the "I" elected to narrate is a sin. The guilt of being the only "I" of the world cannot be atoned in a world that looks at us from multiple perspectives, seeking a salvaction. Who will save whom in this *Babel* of perspectives? Levi's and Calvino's writing share the awareness that literature is a powerful means to "make virtue emerge" from a chaotic, casual, and multiple world (Giuliani 90).

It appears, then, that Levi did not want his readers to be left irremediably perplexed. His final goal was not to recount the horrors of destruction simply to leave all of humanity in a Black Hole of nothingness. His desire was to come back from chaos.

If Levi has been cryptic in some of his writings, that characteristic was certainly not in evidence when he began, as Giuliani tells us, "refuting the so-called historians that deny the historical existence of the Nazi extermination camps, or who dilute their significance in the ocean of comparative claims" (Giuliani 32). So, then, as Calvino refers to the difficult relationships Levi attempts between Homer and Darwin, then between Conrad and Gattermann (*Roots* 221-222), we sense a hyperbolic distinction, representing the cryptic. Levi's opposition to the historical revisionists represents clarity: it is a bold declaration.

Implications of Levi's judgment

Levi was quite clear in much of his writings. Indeed, in his introduction to the selection from D'Arrigo, he shows that as a fundamental component in his hierarchy of values for himself as a writer. He even considers he was "constructing [his] own private Decalogue" (*Roots* 178). One law, which he does not designate with a number (but which happens to come first) is: "Your writing shall be concise, clear, composed" (*Roots* 178). So, he aimed at clarity. I have pointed out that some of his work may contain cryptic elements, but would not go so far as to suggest that he had organized any complex code in any of his writings. In fact, his pronouncements of judgment on major issues are very forthright, and could not be more concise or clear.

While we have seen that at one time Levi renounced the intimation that it might have been providential that he was spared for the purpose of telling the story of Auschwitz, it is nevertheless a theme that he inserts into one of his novels. There is a clear relationship between the song attributed to Martin Fontasch that Levi's fictional character Gedaleh sang: “Only we few survived for…witnessing” (*If Not Now, When?* 168) and the four messengers who came to Job, each of whom declared: “I only have escaped alone to tell you” (*Job* 1:15,16,17,19). That which Levi had renounced so forcefully while still alive seems now to have some valid resonance. Fontasch’s words were actually stronger than that of a simple message. Gedaleh’s band was destined for more. It was: “For the honor of our submerged people/For revenge and to bear witness” (*If Not Now, When? 168*). Certainly Levi, in writing that historical novel, was not alluding to what he thought he should do, but rather brings out the disposition of a group of European Jews on their way to Palestine.

Elsewhere, Levi offers a strange evaluation of St. Exupéry in the introduction to the selection from *Wind, Sand and Stars*. He says that “he died in silence, somewhere in the sky,

defending his country and all of us" (*Roots* 122). This can be reconciled simply enough. We would imagine that Levi saw in St. Exupéry someone like himself in several ways. Both had the hybrid nature: Levi as chemist and writer, St. Exupéry as aviator and writer. Levi attempted to become active in the Italian resistance near the end of the war and was quickly captured. St. Exupéry piloted an observation plane early in the war, but not for very long. It is thought that his plane went down in the Mediterranean in 1940. We may see a close relationship between Antoine de St. Exupéry and Primo Levi in that their roles both had a strong element of being "observers." Levi obviously liked St. Exupéry's writings, and his inclusion of a passage from *Wind, Sand and Stars* fits in well with one of the several major themes of Levi's personal anthology. Two pilots of a mail plane go down in the desert. They trek across the wastelands, but they have no hope of rescue. A Bedouin appears, who gives them water and gets them to safety. It is their "salvation." He is their "savior."

It is interesting that their rescuer is neither Jewish nor Christian. Of course, since the narrator says, "I will never be able to remember your face" (*Roots* 128), there is no intimation that this salvation comes from a representative of the other major monotheistic world religion, either. "You are Man, and you appear to me with the face of all men together" (*Roots* 128). St. Exupéry is super-narrator. Levi reads this and acquiesces.

Still, Levi critiques the piece in a manner that is unusual for him. He attributes to the author "a displacement between the thing lived and the words that recount them" (*Roots* 122). Here, more than most any other place in his writings (even in his commentary on Celan's poetry), Levi almost becomes a literary critic. His tone causes doubt as to his being able to enter into the text he himself has chosen to excerpt. One could wonder why he selected it in the first place. There are some indications that it was a theme which attracted him because it was so similar to

what Levi had experienced. The pilots are rescued from a situation in which it would have been more likely that they perished than that they stayed alive. Levi himself assigns the title "Survival in the Sahara" to this chapter in *The Search for Roots*. The terms "salvation" and "Saviour" are found numerous times in this passage. This flows back to his graph, in which salvation has a prominent place.

Levi has pronounced judgment, in a couple of instances, on the appropriateness of prayers. The first was his own impulse to pray when faced with the possibility of immediate selection for execution the following day. He reckons that he was "tempted" to pray, but it was a desire that he quickly repressed. He repressed it on grounds of high principle, considering the danger confronting him.

> Una preghiera sotto queste condizioni sarebbe stata non soltanto assurdo (quali diritti potrei avere? e da chi?) ma anche sarebbe una bestiame, caricata con la più grande impietà di cui un noncredente sia capace (*Se questo è un uomo*. xxx). (A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a nonbeliever is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise, were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.)

This illustrates the character and integrity of Primo Levi, from one perspective. He did not feel, at the time, that he was truly a Jew, and certainly not one of "God's chosen people." He placed the limits on approaching God as depending on justice (a right standing) and relationship ("what rights could I claim? and from whom?") The integrity of Levi is perhaps no place as evident as here. Yet, there is another example, in my view, and it too deals with prayer.

The episode in which an older prisoner discovered that while a younger man had been selected for execution the following day, he himself had been spared. He subsequently thanks God in a loud voice for allowing him to live. At this, Levi declares, "If I were God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer." Here, Levi's ire is kindled for at least two reasons. First, while Levi himself did not even dare breathe a silent prayer to the Almighty for his own salvation, he felt enormous compassion for the man who was to be executed. It is obvious that the old man did not, and his indiscretion in expressing his joy and thanksgiving misses the heart of the matter. In fact, it seems to totally efface any possible manifestation of acquaintance with the mind of a just God. Levi, in writing this passage, cannot contain himself. His outrage shows his own virtue. Here, by coupling together these two scenes, we see that Levi's outburst (though not expressed until much later in a written form) was something that would later cause him to be ashamed.

Further insight to Levi's assessment of Kuhn's thanksgiving may be gained by how he saw the death of each individual. He writes:

> È l'impressione che gli altri siano morti al tuo posto; di essere vivi gratis, per un privilegio che non hai meritato, per un sopruso che ha fatto ai morti (*Opere* II 463) (It is the impression that others have died in your place; of being alive without paying, for a privilege that you did not deserve, for having taken advantage of the dead.).

So, Levi had high regard for those who had died in the Lager. He clearly felt that their suffering was above him. He acknowledged the dimension of vicariousness without fully understanding it. It is at this point that one could feel that Levi was even stronger in judgment against himself as a survivor than he was against the perpetrators of the heinous crimes.

Levi's unique position as a witness who had also undeniably undergone great suffering made it possible for him to think in such terms. It had to do with geography, blended cultures,

meeting of religions, but more than that, it takes into account how an astute observer comes to take what he considered the best of humanity, and fasten himself like an anchor to values that people from various cultures and faiths can understand and appreciate.

Levi's background as a Jew growing up in northern Italy certainly had a marked influence on him. Although the Jews of Piemonte were considered to be the most assimilated of all of Europe, they were distinct, and were not totally assimilated. Neal Ascherson writes that the Jews of Piemonte had a "subtle detachment from their Christian neighbors" (Introduction, *Periodic Table* xi). So, then, "assimilation" did not mean total immersion into their neighbors' culture. They conformed in part, but definitely maintained many distinctive qualities of their own culture, of "subtle detachment."

Levi said, more than once, that he was not religious. However, it would be useful to consider more precisely what he meant by that.

> For Primo Levi, being nonreligious does not mean being insensitive or indifferent to religious culture. On the contrary, he was attracted by the Bible (the *Tanach* and the New Testament) and its extraordinary literary creations. Indeed, as we have seen, the figure of Job is the starting point of his personal anthology (Giuliani 52).

Not only is Job the "starting point" in *The Search for Roots*, it has already been pointed out the numerous other incidences in which Levi used, wittingly or unwittingly, the figure of Job. In several of his other works he uses Scripture (whether citing passages clearly and directly, making references which an uninitiated might not grasp, or, in the case of Mendel, whom Levi had quote biblical lines).

Some might see the above as a possible hint that Primo Levi had a small measure of faith. The regular citations of Scripture by Levi could be seen as evidence that, for him, the roots of

faith were there. However, whatever one's predisposition might be, it has to be acknowledged that Primo Levi had a significant amount of appreciation for the faith he saw in other people. This could lead to some speculation as to how small (or large) a faith he himself might have ever had, and, of course, what he believed at the end, which would be of importance to devoted Jews or Catholics. Of course, this is the man that denied (in response to a Catholic friend's assertion) that "Providence" was involved in his own particular survival as a witness. But here he does not deny the existence of God.

Both in principle and in practice, Levi honored the faith of others. Commenting about his observation of believers during his time in the Lager, he wrote:

> Not only during the crucial moments of the selection or aerial bombings but also in the grind of everyday life, the believers lived better, both Amery and I observed this. It was completely unimportant what their religious or political faith might be. Catholic or Reformed priests, rabbis of various orthodoxies, militant Zionists, naive or sophisticated Marxists, and Jehovah's Witnesses -- all held in common the saving force of their faith. Their universe was vaster than ours, more extended in space and time, above all more comprehensible: they had a key and a point of leverage, a millennial tomorrow so that there might be a sense to sacrificing themselves, a place in heaven or on earth where justice and compassion had won, or would win in a perhaps remote but certain future: Moscow, or the celestial or terrestrial Jerusalem" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 145-146).

So, "the believers lived better." This, Levi acknowledged verbatim. But, in addition, it might be said that they died better, too. However, it would be risky to try to make more of Levi's words than he put in them. Regarding the faith of others, there was respect. Beyond that, he even expressed admiration.

In one encounter with a Frenchman who was not familiar with the *Divine Comedy*, Levi's Passion for Dante came to the fore. While he was never known to be an expert on Dante, Levi was able to guide someone totally unknowledgeable of him into a rudimentary understanding.

> Samuel was staggered that Dante had meant so much to Levi at Auschwitz; if anything, the Frenchman had been faintly bemused at the time by Levi's attempt to interest him in a 600-year-old medieval poem that culminates in the mystical revelation of God in Paradise. Instead, Samuel's enduring memory of Levi in the camp was of their half-hour conversation during an Allied air raid, when they had spoken of their mothers. (Smith, 239-40)

This, more than anything else, demonstrates Levi's intensity as he attempted to share his knowledge of Dante with someone who would not particularly remember it much later. It shows that it was important to Levi. What was there about Dante that could have been so special to him? Was it simply that the most significant work of literature in the Italian language represented his strong identity with his Italian nationality and nothing more? Or was it possible, as Smith intimates, it had yet another meaning to Levi, with its "mystical revelation of God in Paradise"? It would be interesting to attempt a connection between Dante and St. Exupéry at this point. Both St. Exupéry's two pilots “seek salvation on foot” (Roots 122). But not only St. Exupéry's two pilots sought salvation on foot. Dante did, as well. He was guided by a poet, Virgil. Dante's guide showed up at the beginning of his trek, while the Bedouin appeared to the pilots only when they had gone by foot over a vast terrain.

B. LORENZO’S ROLE IN BRINGING LEVI OUT OF OBLIVION

Levi stated in *Survival at Auschwitz*, “The conviction that life had a purpose is rooted in every fiber of man, and it is property of the human substance” (71). He limited that purpose at

the time he was describing to simply "reach the spring" (*Survival at Auschwitz* 71), but it is clear that his life had a purpose beyond merely surviving for a few months more at that time. His rich mind and character are testified to by many who have known him either through personal acquaintance or reading and studying his works, and many have profited from the experience. I am one.

Lorenzo, the Italian man who was neither Jewish nor technically even an inmate at Auschwitz, gave Levi extra nourishment for his body as well as hope for his soul. Levi's question, "Is this a man?" was often implied but rarely expressed, but it found its answer in Lorenzo. Lorenzo also gave Levi clothing and facilitated some communication with Levi's family (*Survival at Auschwitz* 119). Levi did not just recognize Lorenzo for the physical help he passed to him; rather, he emphasized that it had been because of the spiritual dimension of the man that he had survived the concentration camp. It was, Levi admitted, "something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving" (*Survival at Auschwitz* 121).

As positive as Levi was regarding his assessment of Lorenzo, however, he did not hesitate to pass judgment on many other persons he knew inside the death camps. He explained the philosophy of Henri, a particularly hard-hearted Frenchman, and others like him who manifested a moral degradation during their time in Auschwitz. He described their actions, discerned their motives, and concluded by declaring that he did not respect them, nor had he emulated them. Summarizing his description, he wrote, "The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offence received or inflicted on someone else" (*Survival in Auschwitz* 121). However, Primo Levi declared, "But Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of

negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man" (*Survival at Auschwitz* 122). Finally, it must be said that if Levi was so ready to give such a high approval of another man, one who had shown him kindness in his time of need, it would be appropriate, in that same spirit, to speak well of such a man as Levi proved to be over a lifetime of good works, several of which have been enumerated here. Neither Lorenzo nor Levi ever descended to the lowest forms of sub-human behavior that seemed to be their destiny once they entered the *lager*.

CONCLUSION

My research has taken me through all of Primo Levi's published works. Those collected works, for all their succinctness, have revealed a great variety of ideas and writing styles. One facet of Levi's works that became prominent was a consistent treatment of values. Primo Levi was a man of principle, and he demonstrated that from his early youth right up to the end of his life. His acumen for observing events around him in a detached, yet concerned manner was one of the constants in his life that made him an excellent narrator. He gained fame as a witness of the Holocaust, and while he never really sought it, he certainly earned that fame. His desire to read the written word may be attributed to his father and uncles, but Primo put his skill to use for a higher purpose than simply making knowledge increase, and raised his writing to a high art form. His multifarious works, sprinkled with references and allusions to multiple works of literature, are attributable to the serendipitous reading habits established in his youth. Those readings, along with his intense experiences in war and work, constitute Levi's roots as a writer. His sound narratives, his deep yet clear poetry, accompanied by his solid fiction, all with some measure of morality, flourished into the healthy branches that make up the rich bibliography that a steadily increasing number of readers are discovering.

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