

Introduction

When an act of violence or an offense has been committed it is forever irreparable: it is quite probable that public opinion will cry out for a sanction, a punishment, a "price" for pain; it is also possible that the price paid be useful inasmuch as it makes amends or discourages a fresh offense, but the initial offense remains and the "price" is always (even if it is "just") a new offense and a new source of pain.

—Primo Levi

In his comments addressing the issue of whether there can be forgiveness for acts of violence, Primo Levi also implicitly raises the more general question of exactly how one ought to respond to that destructive impact upon another that can never be undone. History is full of such moments of violence, moments in which the perpetrator's attack upon her or his victim proves so overwhelming that the very idea of a restorative restitution becomes ludicrous. Particularly endemic to our own time in this regard is the violence of genocide, of a devastating assault upon the very existence of a people that often includes the mass extermination of its particular members. Even as these words are being written, such violence is breaking out yet again in Kosovo, just as it has occurred in the Americas, Turkey, Germany and Eastern Europe, Cambodia, Tibet, Rwanda, Bosnia, and a variety of other sites during the progress of the twentieth century.

Within this context Levi's remarks direct our attention to that particular instance of violence that is called the *Shoah*. In doing so, he is not to my mind implying that it alone serves as the primordial instance of violence to which one must singularly attend in order to understand what violence has now become. Levi's remarks make clear that each instance of violence is already singular and commands a singular response. Even if one lists the Armenian or Cambodian genocide in the same sentence as the *Shoah*, one should not make

the mistake of thinking one's first responsibility is either the comparison or contrast of these events, *as if* what is most important about them is their structure and shape. What first commands one is not our power to describe a particular moment of violence but our responsibility in regard to those who suffer within that moment. How have we been addressed by those who suffer? In what manner might we be in complicity with he or she who perpetrates this violence? Only in the aftermath of these questions can we responsibly take up with any determination of the particular features of a historical moment of violence.

Thus we are called upon to determine the extent of violence only in the aftermath of having felt its irremediableness. To list diverse instances of violence is to find each of them commanding a unique responsibility. Each of them makes a particular claim for our attention that is incomparable with all other claims. One should not become obsessed with the uniquely destructive or evil character of a single instance of violence, *as if* the suffering of one moment could count more than the suffering of another. All moments of violence transcend our accounting for them. And in confronting them, our first duty is not to classify and compare but simply to respond. First it must simply matter that irremediable harm has occurred.

With this thought in mind, the following essay turns to the *Shoah*, that particular historical moment of irremediable violence that Levi himself endured and survived to recount. And even if suffering universally transcends our description of it, we must also admit that the *Shoah* in its own particular fashion has posed the question of how we might react to and take on the real impact of the violence occurring when not only one human is victimizing another, but also a people is conspiring to annihilate another. The violence of the perpetrators of the *Shoah*, as well as of the suffering caused by them, has given the generations coming after the dissolution of the Third Reich and its death camps much pause for consideration. In turning to this particular suffering, we have found ourselves called upon to regard a time in which the extremity of violence undergone by the victim revealed only too clearly the transcendence of the victim's suffering, which is to say, its irremediableness. In turning to this violence, we find we are asked not only to affirm that the other has suffered but also that this suffering continues to trouble any possible account of it. In particular we are called upon to pose the issue of how our very affirmation of the other's suffering might yet again betray the extremity of that suffering.

Burdened by the other's suffering, we are called upon not only to understand or, at the very least, to give a historical record of a particular act of

violence, but also and in the first instance to witness it. By witness is meant a mode of responding to the other's plight that exceeds an epistemological determination and becomes an ethical involvement.¹ One must not only utter a truth *about* the victim but also remain true *to* her or him. In this latter mode of response, one is summoned to attentiveness, which is to say, to a heartfelt concern for and acknowledgment of the gravity of violence directed toward particular others. In this attentiveness, the wounding of the other is registered in the first place not as an objective fact but as a subjective blow, a persecution, a trauma. The witness refuses to forget the weight of this blow, or the depth of the wound it inflicts.

But what becomes of one's witness, when the wound that obsesses it is, in Levi's words, "irreparable"? In this situation, one confronts a suffering that once undergone can no longer be taken back, no matter what one does. For this reason, one's very attentiveness to the victim is incapable of being discharged. Here attentiveness only begets yet more attentiveness; the witness is called to insomnia. Part and parcel of the twisted logic of victimization is the denial of this insomnia; indeed, it can be argued that the perpetrator's aggression is in fact a manic flight from the gravity of insomnia, of its incessant call to righteousness.

The attempt to turn away from the other's suffering, *as if* its resolution were simply a manner of reversing the outcome of an event through later actions or insights, or *as if* the victim's suffering, once it is in the past, need no longer be treated as an occurrence having an actual significance, are equally abhorrent to a witnessing of the irreparable. Precisely the expectation that one can treat the victim in one of these two manners is the very gesture that comprises the original act of victimization. The victim is that person whose suffering will not have mattered, whose violation will have already been forgotten. Whether this forgetfulness is brought about by callous indifference or by the more subtle means of a rationalized justification, by the sublimation of a particular victim's suffering into the so-called "larger picture," makes no ultimate difference. In either instance the singularity of the particular victim's suffering is ignored—the outrage of an injustice and the compassion that is called for by that outrage are lost either in a pose of feigned indifference or in a rush to explanation.

The victim, and in this case the victim of the *Shoah*, does not allow life to return to normal. Indeed, the succumbing of persons to violence reveals that the notion of a normal temporality—in which possibility always stands by to supplement and ameliorate the vicissitudes of actuality—was always a delusion at worst and a temporary compromise at best. What the victim's suffering

continually tells us is that our own time is already irreparably ruptured, that no resource stands at our call whereby this rupture might be repaired, that whatever else our witness might hope to accomplish, it cannot undo that which it seeks to witness.

In what manner then should a witness's response to a suffering that is transcendent or irreparable occur? And what should be the particular response of those who now in this later moment, in the very moment of this reading of this text, witness the witnessing of the witness, that is, those who inherit the legacy of Auschwitz through the words of those who were there? And if this latter response also involves attentiveness to the victim, what precisely is meant here by it? These are questions to be posed with increasing urgency and quandary in the following chapters. In posing them, the discussion turns in the main to a small number of what could be termed exemplary testimonies concerning the suffering of the *Shoah's* victims and the violence of their victimizers: Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, and the poetry of Paul Celan, particularly those poems found in the volume *The No-One's Rose*.

In treating these texts, the emphasis is not, as it would be in a more literary analysis, upon a thoroughgoing reading that would consider the full range of metaphors, literary tropes, and semantic structures of which each text is comprised. Nor has one turned to these works in order to provide a series of variations on how a theme or question might be given a literary form. This text is not meant to be an introduction to the study of Holocaust literature as a genre of literary *poiēsis*. Nor is this study meant to offer literature as a mode of accounting for the historical dimensions of the *Shoah* (if by historical is meant either a chronological or hermeneutic account of its facts, its empirical events). Rather, the intent of this essay is to consider the initial stance of witnessing that each of these texts and inevitably all the texts of the *Shoah* (whether they be historical or literary) in one manner or another require of those who read them. What exactly is commanded of the reader so that she or he might step *responsibly* through the portal of any of these texts, so that she or he might read them in attentiveness to those who have suffered? One could characterize the book that follows as an uneasy meditation upon Levi's prologue to his *Survival in Auschwitz*, a prologue in which the author demands his reader consider the command to witness the suffering of the victim to be addressed within the text *before* any reading of the text itself is to occur.

Attendant on the question of how one is called upon to witness the suffering of the *Shoah* is the growing realization that one is already caught up in this act of witnessing whether one wills it or not. Thus, the purpose of this

work is not one of elucidating a structure of reading that a particular genre happens to require of its readers, a structure they may or may not assent to, but of making sense of the *factum* that the very genre exists only because its readers have already been submitted to suffering, *regardless of what is to be written and regardless of whether the reader reads or ignores this writing*. From this perspective, Levi's commandment is not simply given to those who continue to read his text but to all those as well who neglect or refuse to read it.

We, the generations who come after the death camps, are already reading the *Shoah* whether we will it or not. As we pick up the texts of Levi, Borowski, Celan, and a multitude of other witnesses, we find we too have already been submitted to a witnessing of the other's suffering that we are not free to dismiss. We find that our witness of the other who suffers is itself suffered. But this suffering is not one of empathy, which is to say, a suffering that would find in its own discomfort a comparison to what the victim has suffered. The suffering of the victim, particularly the victim of the *Shoah*, is revealed in one's witness to be incomparable to one's own. We suffer, so to speak, the impossibility of suffering the other's suffering. Our account of that victim comes to know itself as always having arrived too late and having said both too much and too little.

Even the naming of the *Shoah* is fraught with the ambiguity and impossibility of a witness that is suffered for the sake of the other.² What terms should one use to indicate, to name, to witness this incomparable event? For example, some have chosen to refer to the *Shoah* as the "Final Solution." But as Fackenheim suggests, to employ this term would leave one's own witness indebted to a name coined by the very perpetrators of the victim's suffering. This very phrasing of the event implies the ethically outrageous assumption that the extinction of a human type can be regarded in some twisted manner as a positive accomplishment. Ultimately, this name could be invoked only in a tone of macabre irony. But irony seems a questionable effect when one considers it would be had only at the expense of distancing oneself from the inability of the victim to be distant from her or his suffering. For the victim in extremity, no time was given to be ironic, to mount a defense against the victimizer that would gain the victim some dignity, that would preserve some notion of autonomy in spite of the onslaught of the victimizer. To name the *Shoah* the Final Solution smacks too much of an avoidance of suffering by those who would use the name.

Holocaust, a Greek term denoting "burnt sacrifice," has been used by many survivors and most of the media in an attempt to acknowledge the religious implications held in the destruction of so many innocent lives. Yet

Fackenheim rejects this term too, since it glosses over the inhumane and blasphemous nature of the Nazi atrocities and assumes that murdered Jewish children functioned as a sort of sacrificial victim:

It is true that, like ancient Moloch-worshippers, German Nazis and their non-German henchman at Auschwitz threw children into the flames alive. It was not, however, their own children, in acts of sacrifice, but those of Jews, in acts of murder. (TH, 236)

Although in a manner different from the *Final Solution*, the term *Holocaust* also distances the witness who names the suffering from the suffering that is named. To use either name as the principle mode of referring to the *Shoah* is already to be involved in a denial of the irremediableness of the other's suffering. Whether one chooses to name in irony or in a straightforward attempt to affirm the suffering of those involved, the name one authors seems destined to betray what it names.

In an attempt to resolve this dilemma, Fackenheim turns to the Hebraic term *Shoah*, which can be translated as "total destruction." This term would purportedly name the suffering of the other without irony or glorification. But does not the reference to a total destruction in turn entail that what occurred in the death camps was itself the annihilation of a mass of individuals in such a manner that their particular deaths could no longer be witnessed as an "event"? Thus, *Shoah* names an event that is itself the canceling out of the event; it also names a name that is the erasure of the name. To name an event that annihilates both names and events doubly burdens those who would witness that "event" with that "name." One finds that the suffering of one's witness is so extreme that even she or he for whom one is to witness, as well as their suffering, lies beyond the scope of being named. Levinas in an article referring to the victims of the *Shoah* simply cites them as "the Nameless." And this occurs in a text titled *Proper Names*, a text dedicated to one's election to the uniqueness of the other's address, to his or her particular angle of existence. Thus, the name of the *Shoah* names one's incapability to witness as one's act of witness. One names it because even in one's incapability to provide a witness, one is still called upon to witness gratuitously. Only in the tone of a humility that has already been deprived to its very core of an active capacity to grasp the other, to set out his or her place under the sun, can the *Shoah* find its witness.

What follows traces out a witness of witnessing, at times a description, at times an interpretation, at times an argument, and in all cases a registering of a burden in thought exceeding that for which an argument or de-

scription or interpretation might adequately be given. Methodologically, one begins in a phenomenological analysis of one's already having undergone a command to witness him or her whom Levi names as the *Häftling*. In working out this analysis, the issue of the twofold nature of the attack upon autonomy in the death camps is also to be treated. In Auschwitz not only the *Häftling's* personal autonomy was to be crushed but also her or his capacity to offer her or his own life to a succeeding generation. In its shame for the other's humiliation, one's witness of the *Häftling* finds itself in a double bind, in quandary.

In the middle chapters one turns to Levinas's account of the face-to-face relationship in order to argue for the transcendence of the victim's address. No matter how radically the autonomy of the *Häftling* is rendered servile in the death camp, her or his plight continues to command its witnesses to resistance. But as the argument progresses, one understands one must also witness the victim's address within a historical context by a filiation of witnessing. One inherits one's witness of *the Nameless* through texts written by other persons. How then is one to understand the truth of this witness? And how is one to place the writing of history in relationship to the writing of witnesses like Levi, Celan, and Borowski? These chapters argue for a Levinasian notion of prophetic witness and prophetic writing, in which the indexicality of historical witness is superseded and troubled by a witnessing under the aegis of an address toward and by the other that is "exposed like a bleeding wound."

By the end of this text, one is engaged in a rereading of one's own witness that finds itself under accusation, involved in incessant correction. The poetry of Paul Celan in particular provokes this mode of discourse. To witness the other's persecution is to find one's words already ringing in tones that implicate one in a history permeated with shame and violence. No scene elaborated in a poem or philosophical text is without the resonance of those tones. To take responsibility for one's words, one must take responsibility for the history of their address. Not the argument per se but its address of the other becomes the most pressing issue in this moment of rereading.³ One's language suffers a turn toward the victim that leaves it in a state of cellular irritability, in a discourse of ambivalence that addresses and is addressed by many voices and many times.

But Levi raises the issue not only of witness but also of forgiveness. In moving from witness to forgiveness, one poses the issue of what tone one's witness will adopt in regard to those who perpetrate violence, of whether

outrage over the victimizer's actions can also become compassion for her or him. In raising this issue, Levi responds to that particular moment of Simon Wiesenthal's internment in a concentration camp when he was brought to the bed of a mortally wounded Nazi soldier who had been involved in atrocities against Jews. Asked by the youth for a word of forgiveness, Wiesenthal refused to offer him any explicit pardon. Yet Wiesenthal also continued to listen, continued to suffer the dying man's address. And after this other man's death, Wiesenthal himself remains burdened by the question of whether he acted justly or compassionately.

What many respondents to the question of Wiesenthal's silence have pointed out is that more important than any words he might have facilely offered the other was his attentive silence. In his thoughts on Wiesenthal's story, Matthew Fox argues that this already is compassion—"to stay and listen and even to remain silent and refuse to offer cheap forgiveness to so heinous a crime" (*S*, 144). For Levinas as well, this silence would be that moment of the victim's persecution in which the very suffering of the other's hatefulness and its effect upon the persecuted is rendered back to the persecutor's face as an address that reveals for the persecutor the extent of his pitifulness, the impotence of his hate.

Wiesenthal himself remarks that his original desire "to get away" from the youth's grasp is miraculously transformed: in his desperate gesture the boy is revealed to be "so pathetically helpless that all of sudden I felt sorry for him" (*S*, 35). Could not one argue that in this particular context Wiesenthal's silence transcended violence, which is to say, a play of force against force, by means of an election, a vocation, that seized him before he himself could have accounted for it, let alone resisted it? Wiesenthal is helpless before the perpetrator's suffering at precisely the moment when he might have reasonably been tempted to cruelty, to cold revenge, or at the very least, to a lasting indifference. From Levinas's viewpoint this turn in Wiesenthal's address of the youth provides not a full-blown act of forgiveness but an "expiation," a making possible of conversion and forgiveness in a world where it had reasonably seemed impossible.⁴

Yet Levi's own thoughts on the matter disturb any facile resolution of this moment of transcendence. He points out that the youth's actions can also be seen as "impudent," as "using the Jew as a tool, unaware of the danger and the shock his request must have constituted for the prisoner" (*S*, 183). And Wiesenthal's response to this other, this Nazi youth, must also give witness to all the other others, to the slaughtered youths of the Jewish ghettos and death camps for whom no sunflower would be planted, for whom no public

memory of their individual deaths remains possible. Forgiveness, no matter how transcendent remains infected with the burden of atrocity, with an irreparable harm. Compassion cannot leave outrage behind but must somehow honor its urgency even as it is seized by the perpetrator in his or her impotence and pitifulness. Forgiveness in the aftermath of the *Sboab* is as impossible and yet as necessary as its witness.

CHAPTER ONE

The Imperative to Witness the *Häftling*

I commend these words to you
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may you house fall apart
May illness impede you
May your children turn their faces from you.
—Primo Levi

The Phenomenology of a Command

Carve these words into your heart. But first carve into your heart that these words must be carved into your heart. The prologue from which the passage above was taken stands at the portal of the reader's entry into Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (SA, 8). Before Levi begins his story, before any fact is imparted by him concerning Auschwitz, the reader must be addressed. The reader Levi has in mind is he or she who lives "safe" in her or his "warm house," who comes home at night to "hot food and friendly faces." These readers, Levi's words charge, live outside the confines of Auschwitz. But they do not live beyond its implications, nor dare they live in ignorance of its legacy. For this reason Levi begins his account with a twofold command, as well as a curse: Listen to me. Meditate upon what I say. If you do not, may you lose your home, your health, your children.¹

My students and I, when confronted with this prologue, find ourselves immediately disturbed at its implications. "What right does the author have to curse me?" is our question. "What have I done personally to have deserved these harsh words?" "Why can't I read this simply for my own personal edification or to learn about the historical truth of what occurred?" "What difference does it make what I do?" These questions come at times from persons

who often have only a minimal, vague knowledge of what occurred during the *Shoah*. Not only were they not alive during that time, but their parents often were not as well. Further, in most instances, the members of the class are not even remotely related by family to the perpetrators or the victims of the *Shoah*. How then can one be so involved in, so commanded by an event for which one is not even remotely guilty?

These objections to Levi's tone presume that one has responsibility for the *Shoah* only if one is guilty of having perpetrated it. But Levi's address to his readers implies that one's personal guilt in regard to the suffering that occurred in Auschwitz is not what is at issue in reading his text. Beyond the *guilt* of those involved in victimizing millions of human beings is the *responsibility* to respond to that victimization *regardless of one's guilt*. Being guiltless does not excuse one here. Further, responsibility is not reducible to or attendant upon guilt. Whether one was a perpetrator or not, one ought to be aware of and concerned about what happened to human beings in Auschwitz.

The prologue already implicates one in carrying out a phenomenological reading of its command. Because one is commanded from beyond guilt, from beyond what might seem a reasonable notion of one's personal involvement in a morally questionable matter, one finds oneself struggling with the very significance of what it means to be commanded. As in Kafka's *Trial*, one is brought before a tribunal in which not the explicit charges against one but the very structure of one's responsibility is at issue. One is commanded *before* the issue of the truth or falsity of the commandment can be raised, as well as *before* one's personal involvement can be determined from a consideration of what actually occurred. Thus, the ethical as it is commanded in Levi's command already involves an *epoché*, a shearing away of the determination of a matter's truth from one's responsibility for whatever that truth may turn out to be or to have been. Before there is knowledge, before the exact shape of the world and its entities can be fixed, *one must already have considered that one is obliged to consider*. Before one can determine exactly for whom one is responsible, one is already responsible. No longer able to justify one's actions by an appeal to normally accepted truths, one is cast out of the naive attitude, out of the edenic assumption that the world must be and has been placed before one before any other consideration can begin. Levi's command reverses the normal relationship between ontology and ethics: before the world could have existed, one was already responsible.

In this phenomenology of a command, one's heart is found to be carved upon twice. In the first instance, one takes the words of the text Levi has

written, the words lying beyond the prologue that one has yet to read, and inscribes them in one's flesh. In the second instance, the very words, "carve them in your heart," are to be carved into one's heart as well. But the second instance is in fact the first. Before one's heart attends to Levi's description of his life in Auschwitz, one must already have attended to the command to attend. One's responsibility here is doubled—one must hear Levi precisely by hearing *how* one must hear him. It is not enough to simply let his words be said. One must ask if in their saying one has *really let* them be said. And in asking this question one is brought to acknowledge that one never had the choice to *let* these words be said but that the words to which one attends have claimed one even *before* one could let them be said. Put more concretely, Levi's words will not find his reader, unless that reader realizes these words have already found him or her before she or he had the chance to decide to be found or to listen.

Carve into your heart that you are to carve these words into your heart. The disturbing fact is that no one who comes after the *Shoah* can justifiably protest a lack of responsibility concerning it. One is born into the world already involved, already claimed, already addressed by Levi's prologue. Whether or not one *knows about* the events at Auschwitz or any of the events that occurred in what Antelme has called *l'univers concentrationnaire*, one is *already responsible* for them. The "you" of Levi's prologue picks out each and every reader uniquely. Not just any reader but I who now read this text am in particular enjoined to meditate upon and to repeat the words I am about to encounter. I am to do so for the sake of those whose annihilation or survival is recorded in what follows. Who exactly these others are is itself expressed ambivalently: "if this be a man . . . if this be a woman . . .". I am not sure for whom I am responsible, but I am responsible nonetheless. I must eventually admit that my indifference to the *Shoah* was only an illusion, that I was already involved regardless of my intentions in the matter.

Thus, Levi's prologue claims its reader *before* he or she could have had any conscious or self-critical interest in the historical event of the *Shoah*. This claim does not occur simply because in the normal course of events I have ferreted out a series of historical details concerning National Socialism and the Final Solution and am now prepared to entertain its pertinence to my own existence. Paradoxically, I ought to search out these details, from the perspective of Levi's voice, precisely because I have been always commanded to be faithful to those who have been annihilated, even if I was not aware of them, even if they have ceased in the aftermath of this event to be immediately recognizable as a man or woman. For this reason, the reading of *Survival in Auschwitz* does

not revolve around encountering a text for the sake of that text. As one enters its domain, an obligation ensues that claims one from beyond art and artistry, as well as beyond a mere knowing for the sake of knowing.

Faithfulness to the victim precedes any determination of the historical truth about the victim. This does not imply that Levi is indifferent to such historical truths. Indeed, the whole point of his writing corpus was to give an orientation to the very fact that the *Shoah* had occurred and that its occurrence had a particularly disturbing shape. But the fact of that occurrence was inevitably secondary. What was primary was the victim. In the words of Philip Hallie: "The victim is the authority."²

The Phenomenology of a Curse

The discussion so far has concentrated upon the command, but there remains a curse. What makes Levi's prologue particularly provocative to its addressee is its menace, its threat, its malediction. The prologue promises an unbearably violent outcome for he or she who reads it, unless the prologue's command to remember the victim is heeded. Even more than the command, the curse prohibits the reader from assuming a pose of naiveté, of an unquestioning goodwill toward the author of what is to be read. I hear the curse and ask myself: What could I possibly do in the reading of this book that would make me so inimical to its author? Why am I the possible target of such hatred?

The very comfort in which I live, my assumption that friends and food are a normal course of my existence is held up as evidence against me. I am, so it would seem, incapable of listening, already disposed to indifference, precisely because I read this document in a modicum of comfort. The very normality of my life makes me irresponsible. For how can he or she who comes home to warmth and friends understand the man "who fights for a scrap of bread," or the woman whose eyes are "empty," whose womb is "cold like a frog in winter"? But the issue transcends simply my ability to understand. Implied in the command, as well as in the curse, is the possibility not only that I will not understand but also that I will avoid the attempt to understand.³

The pose of innocence referred to above—acting *as if* the memory of the *Shoah* merely involved the question of one's own personal guilt or innocence—is revealed to be the real object of Levi's curse. To act *as if* all that is involved in responsibility is one's guilt or innocence is already a *pose* of innocence! For in the assumption that one need no longer be responsible if one is not personally guilty, one has already assumed a pose of indifference in regard to the

other's suffering. This indifference can be arrogant and self-justifying, or simply preoccupied with other pressing matters, or perhaps bored at the thought of attending so minutely to sorrows so distant from one's own time and place. In all of these cases, this indifference actually sustains the perpetrator's original betrayal of her or his victim. Like the Nazi, one prefers to forget the reality of the other's suffering. One is so ashamed of the *Häftling's* shame that one prefers not to consider it.⁴ The Nazi depended upon exactly this troubled indifference to the past, and, in particular, to the victim, the powerless, and the marginal, to ensure the success of their so-called *Endlösung*, their final solution. For those indifferently aiding this betrayal, for those furthering an indifference to the memory of those who were annihilated, Levi commands a repetition of the *Shoah*, in which the indifferent will now be submitted to annihilation.

For the Sake of the *Häftling*

But by whose authority does Levi command? This issue cannot be resolved by a merely phenomenological approach to Levi's text. Simply to describe how one is commanded, to work out the manner in which Levi would call each reader to a particular responsibility for those who suffered at Auschwitz,⁵ does not resolve the issue of why this command obligates. In fact, to remain in a mode of declarative discourse, *as if* one could simply talk about the structure of this command *as command*, *as if* one had the time and leisure to engage in a phenomenological reduction of the command in order to uncover its *eidōs*, utterly misses the commanding aspect of the command. The command is not given in order to be appreciated and questioned but to be listened to and followed.

In giving the command as he does, Levi throws the very issue of its authority into crisis. By making the command prior to providing the truth for the sake of which the command is given, Levi risks allowing his command to become absurd. In play, children give absolute commands for which no reason can be given. So too did the camp guard who commanded Levi to remain silent rather than asking questions about the rules by which he and the other inmates were to be governed (*SA*, 25). If the reader is put under a command whose reason she or he cannot question, why is the reader not already in Auschwitz with Levi, already submitted to an authority that would undermine the dignity and integrity to be had in the fact that one is a reasoning being?

But above a hint was given to how one might answer this question about the irrelevance of the question in the face of the command. Levi claims that he

does not command for the sake of himself, or by the measure of some arbitrary passion or anger, or even by the measure of his reason, but for the sake of the victim her or himself: the victim is the authority. Levi's very command would bring the reader before this victim in a mode of obsession for his or her torment, dehumanization, demolition. We are commanded later in the text to "imagine" that human "deprived of everyone he loves and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses." This man (or woman!) is "hollow . . . reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself" (SA, 23). Levi terms this human the *Häftling*, the "prisoner," a German term actually used in the camp to denote all its inmates.⁶

On the one hand, Levi's command commands a phenomenological reduction, but on the other hand, the very same command cuts off, implodes, interrupts this reduction. On the one hand, one is commanded to consider the command *as command*, shorn of its reasons and prior assumptions. In this consideration of the command one discovers that because the command leaves no time for asking why, one is to be submitted in the command to the command itself. One discovers that the command remains before one without one's having recourse to one's reasons, to one's notions of how the world might be. One discovers that even to discuss these issues one must already have been commanded to be faithful to the victim, the *Häftling*. One comes to these conclusions about the command, *as if* the very precipitousness of the command were something one could reflect upon in leisure. But on the other hand, the command is not given in a discourse *about the command* but in an imperative *to oneself*. The command *already* places one, as Emmanuel Levinas would put it, "in the accusative." One finds oneself *already* under a responsibility to act that interrupts even that gesture of considering the structure of one's being commanded.

The very urgency of the command is what the command articulates. This urgency has no time except for the *Häftling* by and for whom one is commanded. Given this urgency, the very gesture of the phenomenological reduction is reoriented away from knowing the other and toward responsibility for her or him. In the wake of this responsibility, the very structure of the reduction, in which one forgets for the moment or *neutralizes* the assumptions that the phenomena before one signify the presence of a real entity, of another being, is revealed as a form of murder.⁷ If one forgets the actual existence of the *Häftling* to whom one is obligated, one forgets the very resistance to one's spontaneous and self-serving inclinations that is given in being obliged. The command has *already* commanded that one not forget the

Häftling for whom one is responsible. Yet the command also precedes any determination on the part of oneself concerning exactly who is this *Häftling* to whom one is obligated.

In the interruption of the command's phenomenological structure, the reader is brought before the *Häftling*. But one is not brought before the *Häftling* in order to determine for oneself who she or he might be, or to make clear to oneself what is the explicit structure of one's own intentional consciousness of the *Häftling*. Rather, one is brought before the *Häftling* in order to attend to her or his suffering. The *Häftling* commands insofar as she or he suffers. Levi's command to reflect upon the *Häftling*, to imagine the human deprived of everyone he loves and of everything that nurtures him, is directed not to the identity of the *Häftling*, not to the determination for one's own satisfaction of the qualities by which the *Häftling* is a person. Instead, one is directed to imagine about the *Häftling* what cannot be imagined positively, namely, the submission of the *Häftling* to that undoing, that undergoing without remission, that constitutes her or his suffering *in extremis*. Further, in bringing one before this suffering, Levi's command already assumes one has forgotten that suffering.⁸ As the last section pointed out, one is called by the command to question the very sincerity of one's sincerity, to ask whether one might already have found a manner of forgetting that suffering to which one was always already submitted. One comes to admit that one's approach to the *Häftling* is haunted by a pose of innocence.

For Levi, the *Häftling*, more than any other victim, resists my approach of her or him. This resistance to my approach is precisely what Levi would have the reader approach in her or his imagination of the *Häftling*. In her or his suffering, the *Häftling* is shorn of every possible capacity, of every possible grace, of every possible resistance to his or her fate. Perhaps the most disturbing instance of this reduction of human being to consuming pathos comes from an observation made in the very last entry of Levi's account: "January 27th. Dawn. On the floor, the shameful wreck of skin and bones, the Sómogyi thing" (SA, 156). Levi's insistence that we confront what has become of human beings at Auschwitz does not console, would not offer the reader a false sense of security, of hope, of confidence in the world's goodness. Indeed, Levi is intent upon confronting the reader with the realization that the human personality is "fragile" and far more in danger of being destroyed than one could ever imagine. His command to imagine the *Häftling* in actuality commands one to imagine beyond the limitations of one's imagination.

Thus, in the prologue, the command for reflection upon the *Häftling* is doubled. One is to consider not only *that* the *Häftling* has suffered, but

also and more disturbingly *whether* she or he remains human: *Consider if this be a man.* . . . Who or what could be possibly left in “the Sómogyi thing,” Levi asks his reader, that would command one’s respect, one’s attention, one’s responsibility? It is as if the very dehumanization of the victim might end up cheating one of any possibility for empathy with her or his fate. One can feel empathy with those who both suffer and resist that suffering with some small shred of dignity intact, but what compels respect before the face of one who suffers to the point of abnegation? Elie Wiesel, in his account of his internment at Auschwitz, recounts the story of a father being choked to death by his son, just so the son might take a piece of bread from the father’s mouth to satiate his own hunger. Even as the son grasps for the bread, other prisoners fall upon him and murder him in turn (N, 105–6).⁹ Even more than in the case of Sómogyi, who in his last cogent moments a week before his death *took bread from his very mouth* in order to share it with his comrades, the moment recounted by Wiesel seems utterly shorn of moral or ontological dignity.

The Reader in Crisis

Confronting the Servile Soul

How then can the victim, precisely in his or her victimization, command one’s attention to him or her? Levi’s insistence on emphasizing the dehumanization of the *Häftling* does not allow the reader an easy out, which is to say, does not allow the reader to rely on that sort of rationalization coming from the world of safe houses and warm food in which one would argue some intrinsic power of autonomy still resides in the victim. No matter how deeply one is dehumanized, goes the wisdom of a normal world, one can still resist with one’s will, with the smallest gesture of one’s body, with the thought in one’s mind. To allow this sort of interpretation of the *Häftling*’s plight, from Levi’s viewpoint, would be to encourage the reader to forget the reality of Auschwitz, its shameful, its attack not only upon human life but also upon the human personality. One must not romanticize the condition of the victim, particularly the victim of what Levi calls extermination. For extermination has a doubled sense for Levi—it involves not only the eradication of lives but also of any sense that those lives have an intrinsic worth.

“That one can create a servile soul is not only the most painful experience of modern man, but perhaps the very refutation of human freedom” (FC, 16).

Emmanuel Levinas, like Primo Levi, is eminently aware of the ability of tyrants and torturers to undo that knot of human dignity founded upon a capability of resisting force with force. The torturer has become all too adept at claiming the body and mind of her or his victim, of dominating the victim's consciousness, of reducing it to a pure delirium of need: "Fear fills the soul to such an extent that one no longer sees it, but sees from its perspective" (FC, 16). In a similar vein, Wiesel remembers a time when

Bread, soup—these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time. (N, 50)

Levi too remembers that moment when he continued to share his hospital bed with the deceased Sómogyi in order to continue receiving an extra portion of bread. Of that experience, Levi reports: "It is a man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; it is no longer a man who, having lost all restraint shares his bed with a corpse" (SA, 156). In all these instances, the victim had become so possessed by his victimization that he no longer was capable of even seeing it as victimization. One did not see one's victimization because one saw so thoroughly with the eyes of a victim.

If this be a man . . .

Levi's command—not only to look upon the victim but to consider whether he or she is human—torments the reader. One would rather look away than admit the degradation of a human being. But even if one manages to turn toward the victim, one still experiences the tendency to reduce her or him to a mere spectacle, a mania of appearance in which no focal point resides, for which no meaning can be given. One looks away, even as one looks. But this too Levi not only forbids but also curses.

At this juncture the reader begins to sense an infectious quality in Levi's discourse. Not only is one commanded to confront the torment of the victim, but one finds that torment somehow communicated to one. One is infected by these victims, one is wounded by them. One's confidence in the meaning of one's own existence is not only put into question but mysteriously sapped. One feels at times as if one's very affect has been emptied out, as if one no longer could feel, or as if all of one's normal feelings had been disrupted by an overwhelming sense of shame.

In classes where Levi's witness and others like it have been encountered, one comes to a moment where the very notion of discussing or analyzing that witness seems offensive. For the ultimate significance of these testimonies is not to be found in their ability to provide a structure or a collection of cate-

gories for what they would address. The testimony exists in the first place in order to bring one into an immediate and compelling contact with those who have been degraded, suffocated, victimized. The text is the voice of one who would witness for the sake of an other who remains voiceless even as he or she is witnessed.

Discussing Levi's text, or writing about it as is occurring here, ultimately fails to carry the actual significance of what Levi himself has been commanded to do and in turn commands us to do: to attend to the inmates of Auschwitz, and most specifically to the *Häftlinge*, to those inmates who did not survive, who died unmourned and in utter degradation. At moments, the urgency of the claim these others makes upon one becomes overwhelming—my classes sometimes react against any discussion whatsoever of Levi's text and descend into a troubled yet committed silence. As the book *Testimony* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub itself gives testimony to, following Levi's command to reflect upon the victims of the *Shoah* leaves one and one's students in crisis.¹⁰

Ethical and Ontological Silences

The reader's silence before Levi's testimony in this matter is not ontological in its structure. One is not drawn in wonder by the poetic spirit of a literary work toward a humble and renewed attentiveness to a particular being. In ontological silence, a being fulgurates, suddenly comes near, as it emerges against a background of uncanny depths. The overall mood of such an encounter involves the fecundity of a mystery that continually withdraws from any ultimate revelation. One becomes silent in respect for the very actuality of what one confronts. Shakespeare's sonnets continually make use of this sort of attentive silence as the metaphor of the beloved's beauty:

And more, much more, than in my verse can sit
Your own glass shows you when you look in it. (103)

Or again:

There lives more life in one of your fair eyes
Than both your poets can in praise devise (83)

In these poems the poet's silence before the beloved is itself the chief metaphor and proof of the beloved's beauty and worthiness, as well as of the poet's faithfulness and veracity. For centuries, readers have taken up with these poems in order to cultivate this silence as a type of humility before the ineffable dignity