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Minna Vuohelainen

The concentrationary universe: Primo Levi's spatial consciousness

The spaces of the Holocaust

"I've always thought that bridges are the most beautiful work there is," remarks Tino Faussonne in Primo Levi's 1978 book *The Wrench (La chiave a stella)*.¹ Levi's rigger-protagonist appreciates bridges because "they'll never do anybody harm; in fact, they do good, because roads pass over bridges, and without roads we would still be like savages. In other words, bridges are sort of the opposite of boundaries, and boundaries are where wars start."² The nomadic Faussonne enjoys seeing the world while "going from one construction site to another," appreciating the diversity of the planet: "the world is beautiful because it's all different."³ Typically working at interstitial places such as shorelines, riverbanks, or on an offshore oil rig that is "like an island, but . . . an island we had made," Faussonne is a "*Homo faber*" who finds meaning in work performed well: for Faussonne, the rigger's wrench is also a key to the stars whose dust he finds on top of the tall constructions he has helped to erect.⁴ A celebration of the "freedom" attainable from "being good at your job and therefore taking pleasure in doing it", Faussonne demonstrates Levi's argument that freedom means "not having to work under a boss."⁵

Bridges and boundaries--freedom and spatiality--are also central to Levi's Holocaust testimony. Ever since Theodor Adorno's often misunderstood 1951 statement that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," studies of the Nazi genocide have typically approached testimonial literature from the perspective of the impossibility of representing trauma, the notorious ineffability of the Holocaust.⁶ This "linguistic turn" has, to an extent, hindered

alternative attempts to understand what happened in the camps. The spatial dynamic of the Nazi genocide is one element of the Holocaust that has thus far received limited scholarly attention: as Andrew Charlesworth notes in his pioneering essay, “geographers have neglected the Shoah,” while literary critics, as Dalia Kandiyoti observes, tend to conceive of the spaces of the Holocaust in terms of absence and erasure--as “[v]acuums and voids.”⁷ Yet, as Alberto Giordano, Anne Kelly Knowles and Tim Cole argue in their innovative recent study *Geographies of the Holocaust*, the Holocaust was in fact “a profoundly geographical phenomenon” that “destroyed communities, displaced millions of people from their homes, and created new kinds of places where prisoners were concentrated, exploited as labor, and put to death in service of the Third Reich’s goal to create a racially pure German empire.”⁸ Trevor J. Barnes and Claudio Minca see the Nazi regime’s “obsession” with space resulting not so much in a vacuum as in a “dark” “reactionary modernism” that followed acts of “detritorialization”--destruction of communities--with “reterritorialization”--settlement and rebuilding in keeping with Nazi spatial theory.⁹ For Giordano, Knowles and Cole, the Nazi state created “a comprehensive geography of oppression” that was “ideologically, racially, and economically motivated; explicitly enunciated; and materially implemented at all scales of human experience.”¹⁰ Mapping this “geography of oppression” involves not only research into the spatial logistics of the Holocaust--train routes and the location of the camps--and into “territorial ideas such as *Lebensraum*” that were at the heart of Nazi ideology but also into the planning work involved in the construction of “Germanified cities, Jewish ghettos, and concentration camps” and into “the material landscapes” that “people created, occupied, passed through, and endured.”¹¹ The overwhelming machinery and oppressive spatial imagination of the Nazi state must, then, be pitted against the human scale of the Holocaust--the “mappings, topographies, wanderings, unbidden travels, exiles, and incarcerations” of the victims that Kandiyoti sees as characteristic of Holocaust literature.¹²

Giordano, Knowles and Cole's project of mapping the geographies of the Holocaust is part of a wider "*spatial turn*"--an enquiry into questions of "space, place, and mapping"--in the humanities in the aftermath of the Second World War.¹³ As Robert T. Tally notes, spatial questions became increasingly pressing after the war as "the massive movements of populations--exiles, émigrés, refugees, soldiers, administrators, entrepreneurs, and explorers--disclosed a hitherto unthinkable level of mobility in the world" and as "traditional spatial or geographic limits were erased or redrawn" due to "the transformational effects of postcolonialism, globalization, and the rise of ever more advanced information technologies," which "served to suppress distance while also augmenting one's sense of place or of displacement."¹⁴ The postwar period, thus, "called for a serious rethinking" of the teleological tenets of western civilization, which "could not be maintained in the aftermath of concentration camps and atomic bombs."¹⁵ The resulting "spatial turn" in social and critical theory draws on Henri Lefebvre's ground-breaking study *The Production of Space* (1974), in which Lefebvre argues that space is "neither a mere 'frame' . . . nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind" but a "social morphology," a socially constructed and manipulable product that informs human behavior, and thus a legitimate subject for study: "*(Social) space is a (social) product*" that "can be decoded, can be *read*."¹⁶ Spatial theorists thus believe that analyzing the material spaces of a particular society can help us understand the nature of that society and the experience of the people living in it.

Primo Levi was born in Turin and lived there for his entire life, with the exception of his period of imprisonment in Auschwitz in 1944–45. In the essay "My House," which opens *Other People's Trades* (*L'altrui mestiere*, 1985), Levi describes himself as "an extreme case of the sedentary person" who yet "harbour[s]" a "never satisfied love . . . for travel," hinted at by "the frequency that a journey appears as a *topos*" in his writing.¹⁷ Discussing his "profound relationship" with the "unadorned and functional, inexpressive and solid" house in

which he was born and lived his entire life and which sustained “some slight damage” during the war, he wryly notes that his “favourite armchair occupie[s] the precise spot where, according to family tradition, [he] came into the world.”¹⁸ He suspects himself of being “less sensitive than the average person to the suggestions and influences of the environment,” and yet confesses that he “would suffer like an exile” if he had to live elsewhere.¹⁹

In spite of Levi’s characteristically modest assessment of his spatial consciousness, Tally is right to observe that “displaced” individuals are often peculiarly “attuned to matters of place.”²⁰ In this essay, I read some of the spatial imagery in Primo Levi’s work in light of the analytical framework provided by spatial theory. Drawing on *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault’s classic study of surveillance and social control of deviance in modern society, I begin by examining the dehumanizing world of the concentration camps, as represented in Levi’s earliest testimony in *If This is Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947, 1958) I chart the attempts to police and crush the deportees through rules, regulations and a brutal machinery of categorization, incarceration and fear. I then explore instances in *If This is a Man* and *Moments of Reprieve* (*Lilít e altri racconti*, 1981) in which the camp regime is subverted through clandestine “organization” or rare moments of humanity, applying Michel de Certeau’s arguments in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) to a recent analysis of “Auschwitz as a city.”²¹ I briefly discuss the transitory picaresque of *The Truce* (*La tregua*, 1963) before concluding with an analysis of Levi’s attempt at a bird’s-eye view of the Holocaust in his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986).

“On the bottom”: the camps

In the preface to *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi describes the camps as “an extensive and complex system which profoundly penetrated the daily life of the country”--a system styled a “concentrationary universe” by David Rousset in 1946.²² The Nazis’ grandiose dreams of an ordered and methodical Final Solution--embodied in the Carbide Tower in Buna, which Levi characterizes as “the insane dream of grandeur of our masters”--have been extensively discussed by historians.²³ Michael Marrus lists the mainstays of the “camp experience” that emerged as a tool of extermination as “the systematic dehumanization of the victims, the assembly-line process of mass murder, and the bureaucratic organization on a continental scale that brought people from every corner of Europe to be killed.”²⁴ The genocide was as comprehensive as it was because of the careful logistics that supplied the network of camps with human material.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre influentially argues that the spaces in which we live are the product of social forces and practices, that “every society . . . produces a space, its own space,” which can be analyzed.²⁵ Social space, Lefebvre argues, is a tool of “control, and hence of domination, of power,” and influences the ways in which people interact with one another.²⁶ In “[v]erticality and great height,” Lefebvre detects “the spatial expression of potentially violent power,” of absolute political space.²⁷ This intimidating “dominant space,” Lefebvre argues, is “the realization of a master’s project” that transforms existing space by introducing, typically, “a rectilinear or rectangular form” that “dominate[s]” space by “clos[ing], steriliz[ing], “empt[y]ing” it.²⁸ The ceremonial spaces of the Nazi state are one example of this kind of overwhelming, intimidating dominant space in which the individual is dwarfed into insignificance by the scale, symmetry and height of construction.

As Robert T. Tally observes, if “space was both a product and productive” for Lefebvre, Michel Foucault suggests that “it produces us, in fact.”²⁹ Foucault analyses nineteenth-century urban, penal, medical and military spaces as illustrative of the

“disciplinary mechanism” that ensures that “each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed” in social space through branding, codification, and spatial exclusion and containment.³⁰ Foucault’s most powerful example of the disciplinary “panoptic mechanism,” “visible and unverifiable,” is Jeremy Bentham’s model prison the Panopticon, an “enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised” by “an omnipresent and omniscient power,” which, to the powerless prisoner, appears almost godlike.³¹ Perfect visibility is essential to the “disciplinary society” because “a state of conscious and permanent visibility . . . assures the automatic functioning of power,” the problematically anonymous, sinister social forces that in Foucault’s scheme attempt to control the individual through self-regulation.³² The citizens of the surveillance society thus become docile and obedient almost in spite of themselves.

The ideal of containment, surveillance and control described by Foucault was, of course, carried to an extreme in the Nazi concentration camps. For Levi, the drive to destruction within “the concentrationary world” represented “a version, an adaptation of German military procedures . . . or, more accurately, its caricature” that followed the distorted logic of Nazi social and spatial policies: “inside the Lager, on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics, was reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible.”³³ Levi’s conclusion that the “world around us was upside down” is, in some respects, close to the arguments of Dan Diner that the Nazi system was “*counterrational*” and of Giorgio Agamben that the camps represented “*the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule.*”³⁴ Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca have recently drawn on Agamben’s reading of the camps as thresholds signifying the political space of modernity to examine the spatial ambiguities and paradoxes of the Auschwitz complex, while

Paul B. Jaskot, Anne Kelly Knowles, Chester Harvey and Benjamin Perry Blackshear analyze the spatial dynamics of the development of the Auschwitz complex through the tools of Geographic Information Science.³⁵ The site, they note, had been carefully planned as “a complex administrative and urban entity” in keeping with “the city-planning strategies of Albert Speer and other Nazi urban planners” and with “penal designs extending back through Majdanek and Dachau, and beyond to common prison and industrial prototypes.”³⁶ The civilian parts of “the camp-city” were dwarfed by the adjacent network of camps, which thus dominated the spatial horizon of the area.³⁷ The initial plans for the complex, Jaskot *et al.* note, were clear and logical, “evidenc[ing] a rationalized distribution of function and a clear spatial hierarchy,” although their subsequent findings agree with Giaccaria and Minca’s reading of the ambiguities of the camp-city.³⁸

This analysis of Auschwitz as “an urban site” reads well against Levi’s description of the complex as “the concentrationary capital,” “as large as a city,” but a city whose citizens are slaves.³⁹ Passing through Birkenau after liberation, Levi describes the camp as “a boundless metropolis” whose very architecture is intimidating, oppressive and exhausting with its “innumerable gloomy, square, grey stone edifices, three floors high, all identical; between them ran paved roads, straight and at right angles, as far as the eye could see.”⁴⁰ The extent of the Auschwitz complex, then, comes to Levi as something of a shock, and he acknowledges that the role of inmate was “not always a good observation post” for deciphering the complex world of the *Lager*: “overwhelmed by an enormous edifice of violence and menace,” the prisoners were prevented from “acquir[ing] an overall vision of their universe” and “in no position to evaluate the extent of the slaughter” because their “eyes were fastened to the ground by every single minute’s needs.”⁴¹ Only privileged inmates could command a “better observatory” that “was located higher up and hence took in a more extensive horizon”—and the testimony of these *Prominenten* was not representative, as Levi

would later acknowledge.⁴² Robert Gordon agrees with this assessment that the inmates, “who had seen the camps from below and in conditions of extreme deprivation,” could not be expected to “kn[o]w the camp world in its every aspect.”⁴³ Levi’s spatial consciousness in his earliest testimony provides, therefore, a grassroots perspective. Although he manifests remarkable detachment and analytical ability even in *Auschwitz Report*, coauthored with Leonardo de Benedetti almost immediately after liberation, this early testimony looks at the *Lager* from the bottom.

In keeping with Foucault’s description of the Panopticon as “a laboratory” that “could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals,” Levi describes the camps as “a gigantic biological and social experiment” that saw “[t]housands of individuals, differing in age, condition, origin, language, culture and customs . . . enclosed within barbed wire” and forced to “live a regular, controlled life which [was] identical for all and inadequate to all needs.”⁴⁴ The system, whose “primary purpose” was “shattering the adversaries’ capacity to resist,” did so by pitting the internees one against another and by confusing their expectations.⁴⁵ Levi notes that upon arrival the deportees, who had often experienced “years of segregation, humiliations, maltreatments, forced migrations, the laceration of family ties, the rupture of contact with the rest of the world,” were “desperate, disoriented people, exhausted from the journey, bereft of resistance,” and felt themselves in a liminal situation, “on the threshold of the darkness and terror or an unearthly space,” when entering the camp.⁴⁶ The camp’s backward logic confused and disorientated them, and people who feel lost are often unable to reason and function. In this abnormal world, it was “the normal order of things that the privileged oppress the unprivileged,” and the new arrivals’ survival depended on their speedy ability to grasp this “human law” that governed the “social structure” of the *Lager*.⁴⁷

Levi notes that deportees' memories of passing through "the famous threshold," "the gate to slavery," are typically preceded by the image of "the train which marked the departure towards the unknown . . . the sealed boxcar changed from a commercial vehicle into an ambulatory prison or even an instrument of death."⁴⁸ The train takes the deportees, feeling for the first time "the ancient grief of the people that has no land," on "a journey towards nothingness, a journey down there, towards the bottom."⁴⁹ The train, that representative mode of transport of modernity, assumes Charon's place, conveying them in one uncomfortable journey to another world that is "outside the world."⁵⁰ As a number of essays in this collection note, Levi makes frequent literary references in his testimony, in particular in his earliest attempts to represent the spatial logic of the camps. Especially notable are the numerous direct and indirect references to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, particularly the *Inferno*.⁵¹ Auschwitz, in these Dantesque references, is "hell," "the bottom," "*anus mundi*, ultimate drainage site of the German universe," lower than which "[i]t is not possible to sink."⁵² The camp regime of pointless rules, surveillance, brutality and violence, "slave work," "public and collective nudity," "[m]alnutrition, despoilment, and other physical discomforts," and the banning of "that most precious communication, contact with [the prisoners'] country of origin and their family," is designed to reduce the inmates into docile slaves incapable of the least resistance, and in most cases it succeeds.⁵³ In these conditions, Levi writes, "[t]o sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way."⁵⁴ In the upside-down world of the camp, *Arbeit* does not make one *frei*, nor does an obedient prisoner secure privileges. Indeed, the innocent prisoner, often a heroic or admirable figure in western culture whose condition of imprisonment is seen as "illegitimate, abnormal: in short, as a disease which must be healed by escape or rebellion," loses his integrity and becomes instead the

“demoralised and depleted” *Muselmann*, one of the drowned, devoid of country and home, and thus of identity.⁵⁵

“No barrier is ever without a flaw”: moments of reprieve

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi writes that “[s]ome form of reaction” exists in all totalitarian regimes.⁵⁶ Jaskot *et al.*’s recent analysis reveals that despite the careful planning of the Auschwitz complex, “ideal plans, even brutal ones backed by a vast military apparatus, are never fully realized.”⁵⁷ The “rationally planned total environment” of the initial “idealized conceptualization” of the camp was out of keeping with “the messy reality of plans and buildings that were actualized in fits and starts over time.”⁵⁸ Instead of a “regimented, rational, static” space, Auschwitz appears to have been “a highly unstable, even chaotic, site of activity” that is likely to have been “visually confusing.”⁵⁹ This “spatial confusion” of the camp-city may have led to breaches of regulations and to escape attempts.⁶⁰

The French philosopher Michel de Certeau’s analysis of the “spatial practice” of walking in the city charts the pedestrian’s ability to subvert panoptic surveillance. While the pedestrian may lack an overall cartographic understanding of the space through which he moves, his very restlessness simultaneously puts him beyond the panoptic impulse because “[t]o walk is to lack a place.”⁶¹ If, thus, “one of the primary objects of discipline is to fix; it is an anti-nomadic technique,” the pedestrian, with his fragmentary impressions of his surroundings, is both the opposite of the “space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer,” and thus the real if unwitting author or “ordinary practitioner” of urban life.⁶² De Certeau thus sees pedestrians as potentially subversive figures who can resist and disrupt the “totalizing” “panoptic power” of urban planning because walking, “an elementary form” of experiencing the city, identifies illegitimate, unmarked routes and itineraries and thus

represents a disruptive “delinquent narrativity” that “permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded.”⁶³

In the polyglot world of the *Lager*, Levi’s narrative persona quickly learns that he is not “à la maison” and there is “kein warum”: “in this place everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose.”⁶⁴ In the world of the camp, the deportees have to learn quickly “that man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means.”⁶⁵ Yet Levi agrees that “no barrier is ever without a flaw” and charts numerous examples in his work of individuals who were able to resist the totalizing experience of the camp--“the few, the different, the ones in whom (if only for a moment) I had recognized the will and capacity to react, and hence a rudiment of virtue.”⁶⁶ Such survival depends on a rapid readjustment of the prisoner’s “cognitive mapping” of his place within the complex social organism of the camp.⁶⁷ As Michael Ignatieff notes, these individuals retained “the capacity to remain an agent, to have plans, intentions”--the capacity, in other words, “for a certain exercise, however tiny, of freedom” within a system designed to produce slaves.⁶⁸

The *Lager* represented a steep learning curve--a perverse “university.”⁶⁹ As already noted, camp discipline had to be resisted or subverted if one were to survive. As Levi and Benedetti observed in their *Auschwitz Report*, the internees were provided with no tools with which to perform many of the tasks required of them, and the work set was often of a kind of which they had no previous experience.⁷⁰ In *Moments of Reprieve*, Levi attempts to explain to the saintly new arrival Bandi “that down there, in order to get by, it was necessary to get busy, organize illegal food, dodge work, find influential friends, hide one’s thoughts, steal, and lie; that whoever did not do so was soon dead.”⁷¹ The economy of the *Lager*, based on a “complex network of thefts and counter-thefts” fuelling a “very active” “Exchange Market,” represents a grotesque caricature, “a distorting mirror,” of the capitalist economy operating in

the outside world.⁷² Here, one must learn to complement the “underground art of economizing on everything, on breath, movements, even thoughts” with opportunistic and persistent theft.⁷³ Above all, “one must always avoid being a nobody” because “[a]ll roads are closed to a person who appears useless, all are open to a person who has a function, even the most fatuous.”⁷⁴ Only those who are particularly ruthless or practical or can offer useful professional skills or attractive sexual services will survive: “Whosoever does not know how to become an ‘Organisator’, ‘Kombinator’, ‘Prominent’ . . . soon becomes a ‘muselman.’”⁷⁵

Many of the “saved” are occupants of what Levi would later term the “gray zone.”⁷⁶ They include Templer, “not only a good organizer, but an exceptional soup-eater” because of his enviable ability to “empty his bowels at his own desire”; Schepschel, “not very robust, nor very courageous, nor very wicked” but good at petty acts of *kombinacje*; Alfred L., “the determined and joyless dominator”; Henri, an attractive homosexual; the illiterate but “very ingenious” gypsy Grigo, who “definitely knew his way around” since he has been able to smuggle a photograph and a pocket knife into the camp; the vigorous, animalistic dwarf Elias Lindzin, “the human type most suited to this way of living” who “has survived the destruction from outside, because he is physically indestructible” and “has resisted the annihilation from within because he is insane”; and the “admirably armed” and “[s]hrewd, violent, and happy” Leon Rappoport, who “lived in the Camp like a tiger in the jungle, striking down and practicing extortion on the weak, and avoiding those who were stronger; ready to corrupt, steal, fight, pull in his belt, lie, or play up to you, depending on the circumstances.”⁷⁷ Next to the “ancient, incarnate weariness” of the bulk of the internees, the “vitality” of men like Rappoport appears to Levi “out of place and insolent” but “not despicable or repugnant.”⁷⁸ These inmates have the agency and the skills to survive in the camp environment and are therefore the “fittest” in the extreme Darwinian struggle that characterizes the concentrationary universe.⁷⁹

Although Levi describes himself as “not made of the stuff of those who resist” because he is “too civilized,” “thinks too much,” and “use[s] [him]self up at work,” Ignatieff is correct to argue that Levi survived not only because of luck, his command of some German, and his training as a chemist, but also “because there was something unbreakable inside him, a modest, vigilant, capacity to understand what was happening around him and to make use of any available resources that came his way. He also showed courage and organizational capacity of a high order.”⁸⁰ Examples of this capacity for “organizing” deals include repairing Frau Mayer’s bicycle in exchange for a boiled egg and three lumps of sugar, the cerium rods stolen from the laboratory and transformed first into flints and then into bread; the “tight bond of alliance” with Alberto “by which every ‘organized’ scrap is divided into two strictly equal parts” and which results in a successful business in brooms, files and shower tickets, and, perhaps most poignantly, the theft of pipettes, which earned Levi a half-eaten bowl of frozen soup infected with scarlet fever.⁸¹ This final theft, which seemed unfortunate, was in fact what saved him in the end, since at the evacuation of the camp he was left behind while Alberto, who had immunity and thus did not fall ill, would disappear during the death march. Levi’s ability to adapt to his conditions quickly enough, and to acquire new modes of behavior appropriate for his new circumstances, are an extreme example of de Certeau’s spatial practice, and thus a small breach in the panoptic discipline of the camp.

Levi writes that only a “very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints,” were able to retain their humanity in the camp “without renunciation of any part of [their] moral world.”⁸² To “resist” the “infernal order,” one needed “a very solid moral framework.”⁸³ Another, more positive, group of individuals commemorated in *If This is a Man* and *Moments of Reprieve* consists of prisoners who were able to resist the totalizing experience of the *Lager* not so much because of their ruthlessness or organizational ability

but because of an irrepressible humanity or sense of culture within them. This group of individuals resist the *Lager* by clinging on to culture, “the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization,” and by doing so they refuse to be reduced to the subhuman creatures that Nazi racial theory assumes them to be.⁸⁴ Levi represents this process of resistance in spatial terms, referring to “[m]an’s capacity to dig himself in, to secrete a shell, to build around himself a tenuous barrier of defence, even in apparently desperate circumstances,” which, he claims, is “based on an invaluable activity of adaptation, partly passive and unconscious, partly active.”⁸⁵ This capacity, then, has something in common with the spatial practice of de Certeau’s delinquent pedestrian, who resists the totalizing eye of power by navigating the urban space in unpredictable ways.

In the world of the *Lager*, Levi offers two recurring examples of this resistance as a striking contrast to the survival strategies of the *Prominenten*. One is the consolation provided by culture, education and civilization, by the maintenance of some vestige of the old life. Examples of this kind of survival include Wolf, “a reserved, dignified man in his forties,” whose love for music sustains him and inspires jealousy in the other inmates, and the devout Lithuanian Jew Ezra, “heir to an ancient, sorrowful, and strange tradition,” who inspires admiration by refusing food on the eve of Yom Kippur.⁸⁶ It is perhaps best exemplified by Levi’s recollections of his attempt to explain the momentous significance of the Canto of Ulysses to Pikolo Jean and of the chemical examination, during which his “reservoir of knowledge . . . responds at request with unexpected docility,” confirming that he is indeed “the B.Sc. of Turin” who had taken his degree “*summa cum laude*.”⁸⁷ The second humane strategy of survival is the insistence, first articulated by Steinlauf, on the maintenance of human dignity against all odds: even if the prisoners are “slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death,” they still possess the “power to refuse [their] consent” to being reduced to “beasts,” and so, Levi agrees,

[W]e must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die.⁸⁸

This maintenance of human dignity is “a symptom of remaining vitality, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival.”⁸⁹ Among the prisoners he remembers as possessing this humane vitality are the “brisk” and “alert” Tischler, who “never succumbed to lethargy” and who tells stories and sings during moments of rest, and Bandi, with his “unique talent for happiness,” an “inborn capacity for joy,” who shrugs off “[o]ppression, humiliation, hard work, exile” and whom Levi teaches to steal.⁹⁰ Above all, however, there are Levi’s friend Alberto and the Italian civilian worker Lorenzo. Alberto, “the rare figure of the strong yet peace-loving man against whom the weapons of night are blunted,” is introduced as someone who is adaptable and practical, a virtuous man who “entered the Lager with his head high, and lives in here unscathed and uncorrupted.”⁹¹ The Italian civilian worker Lorenzo brings Levi soup, which he shares with Alberto, every day for six months, despite the grave danger to himself. “In the violent and degraded environment of Auschwitz,” Levi writes, “a man helping other men out of pure altruism was incomprehensible, alien, like a savior who’s come from heaven”--and, in fact, Levi ultimately credits Lorenzo with his survival, partly because of the additional ration of soup, but most of all “for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own.”⁹² Lorenzo’s “pure and uncontaminated” “humanity,” he writes, was “outside this world of negation” and thus helped Levi to survive as a human being.⁹³ The “miraculous” letter from home, which Levi was able to receive thanks to Lorenzo, “represented a breach, a small gap in the black universe that closed tightly around us, and through that breach hope could pass.”⁹⁴

Towards the gray zone: an ethics of the borderland

In Levi's curiously life-affirming message, the "aims of life are the best defence against death: and not only in the Lager."⁹⁵ Yet Levi viewed his practical ability and his subsequent survival with growing unease, noting that while he "felt innocent," he was nonetheless "enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification" since the "worst survived" while "the best *all* died."⁹⁶ During the collapse of the camp administration, Levi was ill, confined to *Ka-Be*, because of the scarlet fever he had contracted from the infected soup he had purchased with stolen pipettes. "The Story of Ten Days" depicts the state of limbo between German flight and the arrival of the Russian troops, a limbo characteristically punctuated by reading and reflection and by practical organizational activity in search of food and sources of energy. The "sequel" to *If This is a Man*, *The Truce*, vividly depicts the apocalyptic chaos that characterized not only the abandoned camp, inhabited by ghostly, dying inmates, but also postwar Europe, torn apart by "the fearful tragedy" of which Levi was a survivor, but which had left "Vienna undone and the Germans broken."⁹⁷

The "unforgettable" "vagabondage" of *The Truce* stands, seemingly, in stark contrast to the spatial confinement of *If This is a Man*.⁹⁸ This is a book of fitful and uncertain "transit" as Levi and his compatriots set out on an "interminable and inexplicable journey" from Auschwitz, through Eastern Europe, to Italy.⁹⁹ The book is saturated with images of the "immense, heroic space of Russia," of the "itinerant dwelling" of the "train, with its cargo of hope," and of "the confused vortex of thousands of refugees and displaced persons," like Sore and her sister "abandoning themselves to the wind" "like feathers."¹⁰⁰ The often humorous descriptions of intercultural communication and nomadic travel to an extent align this journey of transition with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze's concept of nomadic boundary-crossing as

a form of resistance to totalizing state power. Embarking on “an adventure . . . impelled by the attraction of movement, of what lies outside,” Deleuze’s nomads resist administrative attempts to fix them in space, just as Levi and his companions leave behind the destructive order of the camp, but the Italians are returning *home*.¹⁰¹ However exhilarating some of the picaresque descriptions in *The Truce*, in a poignant commentary on Levi’s anticipation of the “inhuman joy” of the return journey near the beginning of *If This is a Man*, just three of the 650 deportees on Levi’s convoy return.¹⁰² When the train reaches German territory towards the end of its circular journey, before it passes through the Brenner, the passengers wonder uneasily whether they may not be headed north, back to Auschwitz, after all. Levi’s narrative, unlike the train, does come full circle: as Lucie Benchouiha points out, “[w]hat appears to be a post-Auschwitz text both begins and ends with its author inside Auschwitz.”¹⁰³ The expansive travelogue of the book, significantly named *The Truce*--a state of temporary rather than permanent peace--is fenced in by Levi’s nightmare that he is “in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager.”¹⁰⁴ This chilling conclusion is one of many “cyclical return[s] in Levi’s writing to the issues of his first work of testimony.”¹⁰⁵

Levi’s final book *The Drowned and the Saved* is “a work of reflection and explanation” produced “[a]t a distance of years.”¹⁰⁶ In it, Levi moves from the grassroots perspective of *If This is a Man* towards a more comprehensive analysis of the Holocaust. This analysis is most strikingly represented in the spatial image of the *Lager* as “an intricate and stratified microcosm; the ‘grey zone,’” which exists between the victims and the perpetrators, its boundaries “ill-defined” and shifting.¹⁰⁷ It was the very ambiguity of this “indecipherable” world that had confused the already disorientated deportees upon arrival in Auschwitz: instead of the “terrible but decipherable world” represented by the “simple model” of “a sharply defined geographic frontier” between “us” and “them,” the concentrationary world proved incomprehensible because “the enemy was all around but also inside” and instead of

“a single frontier” there were “many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers” that precluded any hope of finding “solidarity” amongst “companions in misfortune.”¹⁰⁸ This ambiguous space, Levi insists, is “never” “empty,” but its very crowdedness tells us uncomfortable truths about humankind.¹⁰⁹ The “confused creature” that is man, Levi writes, “becomes even more confused . . . when he is subjected to extreme tensions: he then eludes our judgment, the way a compass needle goes wild at the magnetic pole.”¹¹⁰ Levi insists that “the greatest responsibility” for the existence of such a zone of ethical ambiguity rests with “the very structure of the totalitarian state,” because “regimes based on terror and obsequiousness” have a tendency to corrupt their victims.¹¹¹ To judge the citizens of the gray zone is difficult even if one has lived in “a state of coercion” oneself.¹¹²

The radical ethical uncertainty of the *Lager* is conveyed spatially, in keeping with the notion of Auschwitz as a “chronotope” bringing together recollection and geography.¹¹³ At a remove of forty years, Levi’s conception of the gray zone thus accords well with Michelle Balaev’s contention that “place is not only a physical location of experience, but also an entity that organizes memories, feelings, and meaning because it is the site where individual and cultural realities intersect.”¹¹⁴ The “ethics of the ‘borderland’” that Levi creates in his final book appears even to swallow up himself, as he is one of the survivors, “who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom.”¹¹⁵ In spite of his final insistence that “the survivors . . . are not the true witnesses,” Levi’s body of work constitutes, of course, a significant testimonial narrative.¹¹⁶ Narrative, spatial theory suggests, is “a form of world-making” as much as “a mode of world-representing.”¹¹⁷ For Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, “Auschwitz demands to be theorized in terms of heterogeneous, disjunctive space.”¹¹⁸ If the concentrationary universe was built on principles of othering, codification, separation and segregation, it is, then, significant that while Levi’s testimony is spatially articulate, it resists a totalizing cartography of the *Lager*. In the end, Levi’s “still, small

voice” attests to the ambiguous, hybrid ethics of the liminal “gray zone” in opposition to the absolute distinctions of his former oppressors.¹¹⁹

¹ Primo Levi, *The Wrench*, trans. William Weaver (London: Abacus, 2013), 145.

² Levi, *Wrench*, 145.

³ Levi, *Wrench*, 2–3.

⁴ Levi, *Wrench*, 53, 100.

⁵ Levi, *Wrench*, 111, 198.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 281.

⁷ Andrew Charlesworth, “Towards a Geography of the Shoah,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 18.4 (1992): 464; Dalia Kandiyoti, “‘Our Foothold in Buried Worlds’: Place in Holocaust Consciousness and Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*,” *Contemporary Literature* 45.2 (2004): 306.

⁸ Alberto Giordano, Anne Kelly Knowles and Tim Cole, “Geographies of the Holocaust,” in *Geographies of the Holocaust*, ed. Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole and Alberto Giordano (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 1.

⁹ Trevor J. Barnes and Claudio Minca, “Nazi Spatial Theory: The Dark Geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103.3 (2013): 671, 681.

¹⁰ Giordano *et al.*, “Geographies of the Holocaust,” 3–4.

¹¹ Giordano *et al.*, “Geographies of the Holocaust,” 2–3.

¹² Kandiyoti, “Place in Holocaust Consciousness”: 304.

¹³ Robert T. Tally, Jr., *Spatiality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 12, 112.

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- ¹⁴ Tally, *Spatiality*, 3, 13–14.
- ¹⁵ Tally, *Spatiality*, 12–13.
- ¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 17, 26, 93–94. Emphasis in the original.
- ¹⁷ Primo Levi, “My House,” in *Other People’s Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, 1–5 (London: Abacus, 1999), 1.
- ¹⁸ Levi, “My House,” 1–3.
- ¹⁹ Levi, “My House,” 2, 5.
- ²⁰ Tally, *Spatiality*, 13.
- ²¹ Giordano *et al.*, “Geographies,” 11.
- ²² Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 2012), 5.
- ²³ Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Everyman, 2000), 84.
- ²⁴ Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (London: Penguin, 1993), 23.
- ²⁵ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 31.
- ²⁶ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 26, 82–83.
- ²⁷ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 98.
- ²⁸ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 165.
- ²⁹ Tally, *Spatiality*, 120.
- ³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 197.
- ³¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 197, 200–01.
- ³² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201, 209.
- ³³ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 31, 92.

³⁴ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (London: Penguin, 2002), 99; Dan Diner, “Historical Understanding and Counterrationality: The Judenrat as Epistemological Vantage,” in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 77; Giorgio Agamben, “What is a Camp?” in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 253. Emphasis in the original.

³⁵ Agamben, “What is a Camp?” 255; Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, “Topographies/ Topologies of the Camp: Auschwitz as a Spatial Threshold,” *Political Geography* 30.1 (2011): 3–12.

³⁶ Paul B. Jaskot, Anne Kelly Knowles and Chester Harvey, with Benjamin Perry Blackshear, “Visualizing the Archive: Building at Auschwitz as a Geographic Problem,” in *Geographies of the Holocaust*, ed. Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole and Alberto Giordano (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 167.

³⁷ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 180.

³⁸ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 167.

³⁹ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 165; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 108; Levi, *If This is a Man*, 84.

⁴⁰ Primo Levi, *The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Everyman, 2000), 225.

⁴¹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 6.

⁴² Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 7, 63–64.

⁴³ Robert S. C. Gordon, “Introduction,” in *Auschwitz Report*, by Primo Levi, with Leonardo de Benedetti, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon, trans. Judith Woolf (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 14.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203; Levi, *If This is a Man*, 102.

⁴⁵ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 24.

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- ⁴⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 35, 58.
- ⁴⁷ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 48.
- ⁴⁸ Levi, *Truce*, 224–25; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 85.
- ⁴⁹ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 13–14.
- ⁵⁰ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 125.
- ⁵¹ Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 12; see also Risa Sodi, “La terza via: Dante and Primo Levi,” *MLN* 127.1, Italian Issue Supplement (January 2012), S199–203.
- ⁵² Levi, *If This is a Man*, 20, 26; *The Drowned and the Saved*, 47.
- ⁵³ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 58, 81, 90, 96.
- ⁵⁴ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 105.
- ⁵⁵ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 123–24.
- ⁵⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 31.
- ⁵⁷ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 160.
- ⁵⁸ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 180.
- ⁵⁹ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 181–82.
- ⁶⁰ Jaskot *et al.*, “Visualizing the Archive,” 185.
- ⁶¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), 103.
- ⁶² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 218; de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.
- ⁶³ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93, 95, 130.
- ⁶⁴ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 29.
- ⁶⁵ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 9.
- ⁶⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 36; *Moments of Reprieve*, 10.

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- ⁶⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 409.
- ⁶⁸ Michael Ignatieff, "Introduction," in Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (London: Penguin, 2002), 4.
- ⁶⁹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 114.
- ⁷⁰ Primo Levi, with Leonardo de Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon, trans. Judith Woolf (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 39, 45–46.
- ⁷¹ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 52.
- ⁷² Levi, *If This is a Man*, 91, 99; Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro: Marlboro Press, 1989), 20.
- ⁷³ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 157.
- ⁷⁴ Levi, *Truce*, 275.
- ⁷⁵ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 105.
- ⁷⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 9.
- ⁷⁷ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 88, 109, 112, 115; *Moments of Reprieve*, 19–20, 70.
- ⁷⁸ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 22.
- ⁷⁹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 63.
- ⁸⁰ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 123; Ignatieff, "Introduction," 5.
- ⁸¹ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 91, 165.
- ⁸² Levi, *If This is a Man*, 109.
- ⁸³ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 171.
- ⁸⁴ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 44. Bruno Bettelheim similarly writes about occupying himself with psychological theories about the camp experience in order to forget his circumstances. See Bruno Bettelheim, "Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 38 (1943), 417–52.

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- ⁸⁵ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 63.
- ⁸⁶ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 58, 82.
- ⁸⁷ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 126–27.
- ⁸⁸ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 44.
- ⁸⁹ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 43.
- ⁹⁰ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 38–39, 51.
- ⁹¹ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 64–65.
- ⁹² Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 155; *If This is a Man*, 145.
- ⁹³ Levi, *If This is a Man*, 145.
- ⁹⁴ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 54.
- ⁹⁵ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 120.
- ⁹⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 63. My emphasis.
- ⁹⁷ Levi, *Truce*, 294, 447.
- ⁹⁸ Levi, *Truce*, 244.
- ⁹⁹ Levi, *Truce*, 350; “In Memory of a Good Man (1983)”, in *Auschwitz Report*, by Primo Levi, with Leonardo de Benedetti, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon, trans. Judith Woolf (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 92.
- ¹⁰⁰ Levi, *Truce*, 333, 339, 354, 446, 453.
- ¹⁰¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Nomad Thought,” in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1977), 148.
- ¹⁰² Levi, *If This is a Man*, 15; *Truce*, 452.
- ¹⁰³ Lucie Benchouiha, *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust* (Leicester: Troubadour, 2006), 35.
- ¹⁰⁴ Levi, *Truce*, 454.

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- ¹⁰⁵ Benchouiha, *Primo Levi*, 132.
- ¹⁰⁶ Benchouiha, *Primo Levi*, 136; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 6.
- ¹⁰⁷ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 9, 27.
- ¹⁰⁸ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 23.
- ¹⁰⁹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 25.
- ¹¹⁰ Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 167.
- ¹¹¹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 28, 41.
- ¹¹² Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 29.
- ¹¹³ Michael Rothberg, paraphrased in Larson Powell, "The Meaning of Working through the East," *German Studies Review* 37.3 (October 2014): 606.
- ¹¹⁴ Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic* 41.2 (2008): 160.
- ¹¹⁵ Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, "Auschwitz and the Remains of Theory: Toward an Ethics of the Borderland," *sympleke* 11.1–2 (2003): 25; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 64.
- ¹¹⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 63.
- ¹¹⁷ Tally, *Spatiality*, 49.
- ¹¹⁸ Levi and Rothberg, "Auschwitz and the Remains of Theory": 36.
- ¹¹⁹ Gordon, "Introduction," 11.