

Primo Levi's *Afters*

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Reading Primo Levi Theologically after God

Primo Levi's *Afters*

Primo Levi theologisch lezen na God

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in het Nederlands

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List of Abbreviations

AM	<i>L'altrui mestiere – Other People's Trades</i>
AOI	<i>Ad ora incerta – At an Uncertain Hour</i>
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i>
CS	<i>La chiave a stella – The Monkey's Wrench</i>
CW	<i>The Complete Works of Primo Levi</i>
L	<i>Lilìt e altri racconti – Lilith and Other Stories</i>
NIV	<i>The Holy Bible, New International Version</i>
RR	<i>La ricerca delle radici – The Search for Roots</i>
SE	<i>Stories and Essays</i>
SES	<i>I sommersi e i salvati – The Drowned and the Saved</i>
SN	<i>Storie naturali – Natural Histories</i>
SNOQ	<i>Se non ora, quando? – If Not Now, When?</i>
SP	<i>Il sistema periodico – The Periodic Table</i>
SQU	<i>Se questo è un uomo – If This Is a Man</i>
T	<i>La tregua – The Truce</i>
USE	<i>Uncollected Stories and Essays</i>
VF	<i>Vizio di forma – Flaw of Form</i>

One – Introduction

1 – Introduction to the Research Question

The creation of the first human beings is narrated in the opening book of the Bible, the “Book of Genesis,” meaning origin or beginning. The creation is told in two differing stories, both of which envision the creation of humanity in a different way. In chapter one of the “Book of Genesis,” which presents one of these two stories of creation, God creates the heavens and the earth while the earth was formless and empty and there was darkness over the surface of the deep. On the sixth day of creation God creates mankind to rule over his creation: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27, NIV). The second creation story envisions the earth as a place where no plant has grown and where there is no one to work the ground. No rain has yet fallen but streams watered the ground. “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). God plants a garden and appoints man to work it and take care of it. In this garden there is only one command: the man is free to eat from any tree but “must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Gen 2:17). Then, God realizes that it is not good for the man to be alone and that he needs a suitable helper—so God creates a woman using a rib He takes from the man while he is in a deep sleep. This man, called Adam (meaning “earth” because he was created from mud), and his wife are both naked and do not feel any shame while living in the garden that they have to maintain.

In both Jewish and Christian theology, these two creation stories are the recurring sources of inspiration for thinking about what it means to be human. Where do we come from? What were we created for? What is a good life on earth? How do we relate to each other? In these narratives, God is the actor of creation, deciding that the earth needs human beings and creating them in the way He en-

visions. Hence, these stories invite thinking about humanity in relation to God the creator, while giving way to different imaginings of this relationship and creation itself.

In this dissertation, *humanity* and *God* are two main topics under investigation, with a focus on the multiple and diverse descriptions of both humanity and God in the work of Italian writer Primo Levi (1919-1987). Primo Levi grew up as a non-religious Jew in Turin and graduated as a chemist in the early 1940s. Soon afterwards, he joined an unarmed group of partisans in the mountains of northern Italy. They were caught and, after a short period spent in the camp of Fossoli (Italy), Levi was deported to Auschwitz. Levi survived and lived through the liberation of the camp. After returning home, he wrote a testimonial account based on his experiences and observations in the camp, called *If This Is a Man*.

He opens his testimony with a poem in which he presents two prisoners to his readers and asks: is this a man / is this a woman?

Consider if this is a man
Who toils in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for half a loaf
Who dies by a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
With no hair and no name
With no more strength to remember,
With empty eyes and a womb as cold
As a frog in winter.¹

Levi presents the man and woman—Adam and Eve (Moudarres, 2014, 92)—of Auschwitz, toiling in the mud, without hair and name, asking whether they are human beings.

In his poetry collection, *L'osteria di Brema* (1975), the opening poem I just quoted is titled “Shema,” referring to the Jewish daily prayer that professes the unity of God. In this poem, however, it is not the command to love God with all your heart, soul, and might

that must be on our minds always, as in the religious Shema, but the questions “is this a man?” and “is this a woman?” In Levi’s poem, the narrator commands the audience to “ponder that this happened” and to “carve [these words] in [their] hearts” and tell them to their children (CW, SQU, 7). The poem concludes with a malediction, “Or may your house fall down, / May illness make you helpless, / And your children turn their eyes from you” (7), which is inspired by passages from the “Book of Deuteronomy” found in the Bible, where God curses those who are unfaithful to the covenant between God and His people.

Opening his testimony with this poem, Levi does two things that are of special interest. First, he wonders about what “being human” means. I aim to reflect on how Levi thinks and writes about what it means to be human, on whether humanity is something that can be taken away from a person, and on whether one can regain it and how. Second, he testifies about his experiences in Auschwitz through language that is inspired by, and transforms, a religious prayer. In this manner, he relates the question of what humanity means to that of what God means in the face of Auschwitz. It is important to add here that Levi presented himself as an atheist—he did not believe in God, neither before nor after his experiences in the camp. It is this combination of writing about humanity in reference to a religious tradition while rejecting theistic belief that inspired the following research question:

How does Primo Levi write about humanity and God; how can his representations be read theologically “after God,” and in what way does that challenge and inspire contemporary theology?

This introductory chapter presents the theoretical framework supporting this question. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 explain why I think it is important to look at both humanity and God in Levi’s work. In the second part of the research question I use the word “representations,” which reflects that this research does not search for definitions of *humanity* and *God*, but for the multiple ways, hence the plu-

ral form, in which both are represented in Levi's work, with the help of testimony, stories, and different vocabularies.² In section 2.3, the theological "after God" debate—in which I position this research—is introduced. In this research I ask how Levi's representations can inspire and challenge contemporary theology. This reflects the aim of this research – which is focused more on the possible contribution of Levi's work to theological thought, than vice versa. Levi's poem "Shema" serves a constant point of reference in this chapter and a more in-depth reflection on the poem is presented in its third section, connecting various parts of the theoretical framework. The final section (4) introduces the layout of the book.

2 – Theoretical Framework

2.1 – Humanity

This first part of the theoretical framework introduces the question of humanity in the work of Primo Levi by discussing his view on something that is both essential and unique to human beings—language.

Language in Auschwitz

By asking "is this a man?" and "is this a woman?" Levi seems to suggest that the words he knows are unable to describe what had happened to human beings in the concentration camp. On the other hand, language is also Levi's way of expressing himself afterwards, through his testimony. This dissertation examines the shortcoming of language and its potential for describing what took place in Auschwitz. We will see that, in Auschwitz, language was used to destroy humanity, making it an even more precarious topic.

I begin with a quote from *If This Is a Man*, which shows the deficit of language in describing human destruction: "Then for the first time we become aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man" (22). This quote comes from a

chapter that describes the first encounter that Levi and his fellow arrivals had with the camp world of Auschwitz. They find themselves “On the Bottom,” as the name of the chapter indicates. Shortly after their arrival to the camp, they were separated from their parents, from women and children, and met a group of prisoners:

They walked in squads, in rows of three, with an odd, clumsy gait, heads hanging forward, arms rigid. They wore comical caps and were dressed in loose striped coats ... We looked at one another without a word. It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood. This was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them. (16)

Indeed, shortly after entering the camp, they underwent this metamorphosis themselves. After Levi and the others were placed into a room without water, where they had to undress, get shaved, shower, and put camp clothes on, they were “transformed into the phantoms we glimpsed yesterday evening” (22). They reached the bottom, they cannot go lower than this. “Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listened, they would not understand” (22).

Not understanding and not being understood is a recurring topic in Levi’s testimony. Language is a prime form of human communication, a function that was complicated in the camp for several reasons. The first is that there was a great variety of nationalities among the prisoners. Italians, in particular, had a great disadvantage because of their limited knowledge of languages other than their own. This complicated their understanding of orders and explanations of the situation by other prisoners. And, if you do not have anyone to share your impressions, questions, and feelings with, “your speech runs dry in a few days and, with it, thought” (CW, SES, 2475). In the chapter “Communication” in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi describes how the linguistic barrier was a death condemnation (Segre, 1990, 86):

Most of the prisoners who did not know German – almost all the Italians in other words – died within the first ten to fifteen days of their arrival: at first sight, from starvation, exposure, exhaustion, or disease; but on closer examination from insufficient information. (2476)

One of the things that helped Levi survive was his knowledge of the German language. However, although the language that the officers of the camp spoke was German, it was not the everyday German of civilians. This also complicated communication. It was a harsh language, meant to articulate the sharp distinction between them and the prisoners. It was a deceiving language; a well-known example of this is the text above the entrance gate of Auschwitz I, “*Arbeit macht frei*,” meaning “Work sets free.” Entering the camp they had to work, indeed, but freedom was taken from them completely. Words became disconnected from reality, obtained new meanings; taking a shower meant the fate of dying. In the camps, a new type of language was constructed to diffuse the prisoners’ thinking in order to make them cooperate. Language was deformed in such a way that the prisoners were addressed as non-humans, as excrement, as animals, as beings unworthy for anything other than slave work. The guards did not utter more than shouts—short, harsh, destroying shouts to accompany their blows. In a radio interview, Levi formulates this in the following manner:

It is curious how this animal-like condition³ would repeat itself in language: in German there are two words for eating. One is *essen* and it refers to people, and the other is *fressen*, referring to animals. We say a horse *frisst*, for example, or a cat. In the lager, without anyone having decided that it should be so, the verb for eating was *fressen*. As if the perception of the animalesque regression was clear to all. (Toaff, 1983, online source)

If This Is a Man shows how language played a crucial role in the destruction of humanity in Auschwitz. As Philippe states it: “Levi

shows that language is the first and foremost feature of humanity, and therefore the one to destroy if one wants to destroy humanity” (Philippe, 2005, 139).

Language after Auschwitz

Levi lived through the liberation of Auschwitz, returned to Italy, and had to speak about his year in the camp. Strangers and loved ones alike needed to hear about what had happened. He wrote poems in those days, some of them already created during his imprisonment. Soon after his return, *If This Is a Man* was written, driven by a strong internal need to tell his story to others, which was an important impulse both before and after the physical liberation from the camp. “The book was written to satisfy that need: in the first place, therefore, as an interior liberation” (CW, SQU, 5). The story needed to be told—but how? What words could describe what happened in that place?

Just as our hunger has nothing to do with the feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a special word. We say ‘hunger,’ we say ‘tiredness,’ ‘fear,’ and ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived, in happiness and in suffering, in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have come into being. (CW, SQU, 117)

It was the German philosopher, Theodor Adorno, who stated that “You cannot write poetry after Auschwitz” (Adorno, 1951, 34). He regarded it as a brutality to write anything poetical or nonhistorical. Many agree that this expression shows how the Shoah has changed our view about the art of poetry and its connection to reality. Poetry cannot grasp what had happened and, therefore, silence is appropriate. Words lost their former significance, none could express what happened, and it would be wrong to use the old words for the incomparable event of Auschwitz. However, Levi’s aim was to acquaint his readers with the history of the Shoah because

knowledge and understanding is the only way to prevent it from happening again. That is why he corrected Adorno by specifying that “it is a brutality to write poetry after Auschwitz that is not about Auschwitz” (Farell, 2004, 10).

We can draw a preliminary conclusion that, for Levi, language is, first, crucial to being human, second, that it could be manipulated by the Nazis to dehumanize prisoners, and, third, that it also has great potential as a tool for testimony. In extensive reflections on language made by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, we can recognize the three aforementioned components of Levi’s description of language in and after Auschwitz. Agamben understands language to be essential to being human; he points out that language can be manipulated by the powerful but that it can also function as a tool for challenging the powerful and that language “is the medium for creative expression, and is therefore the object of literature” (Murray, 2010, 5). In his philosophy, Agamben frequently turns to literature as a guide for the most pressing ethical questions and it is noteworthy that he discusses Levi’s *If This Is a Man* in this context. He recognizes Levi’s troubles with the capacity of language to represent the reality of Auschwitz and links this to ethics.

The Muselmann: Between Human and Non-Human

According to Agamben, philosophy has always occupied itself with the question of the best way to live, an intellectual endeavor that is challenged when facing great evil like the Holocaust. Agamben’s discussion of the ethical task in the face of evil is complex and multifaceted but could be understood as “a matter of attempting the impossible task of remembering and representing those to whom the greatest injustice was done” (117). Agamben points to the need to remember and to represent those who suffered under the oppression of a sovereign power but also calls this an “impossible task” (117). This brings us deeper into the discussion of the complexity of language in the wake of Auschwitz.

Ethics is often understood as “an openness to those who are ‘other’ than us” (188).⁴ Agamben redirects this center of ethics by

focusing on language and bearing witness through testimony. Agamben tries to suggest a “new ethical territory,” “one that is not tied to a phenomenological account of the other, but to the question of language, bearing witness and to the very idea of the human” (120). Thus, Agamben focuses on the difficulty of bearing witness and communicating the experience of the camp (121). This has to be understood in the context of Agamben’s rejection of the attempt to fix meaning:

We should not scour the testimonies of survivors looking for some sort of meaning, for a nugget of ethical truth that could help us to understand, instead, for Agamben, we should look for the moment in which language breaks down, becomes inoperative and cannot bear witness to anything other than ‘that which does not have language.’ (120)

In the preface to his book, *Remnants of Auschwitz, The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben observes that some thinkers “after” Auschwitz tried to understand too much too fast, while others refuse to understand at all. Agamben tries to correct some of the doctrines in the field of ethics that were developed in the wake of Auschwitz. For him, “this is also a way – perhaps the only way – to listen to what is unsaid” (Agamben, 1999, 14).

According to Agamben, we can only understand the ethical implications of Auschwitz if we understand who the *Muselmann* is (Agamben, 1999, 52). In a footnote, Levi explains the use of the word *Muselmann*⁵ in the camp—a name that was used by the “senior” prisoners to describe the weak prisoners who were doomed for selection (CW, SQU, 94-5). In his *If This Is a Man*, Levi describes the *Muselmann* as those who are disintegrating and all have the same story, which is no story. As soon as they entered the camp, they were overwhelmed before they could adapt and “followed the slope to the bottom, naturally, like streams running down the sea” (85).

Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always the same, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death—in the face of it they have no fear, because they are too tired to understand. (85)

This passage is central in Agamben's thought, because "in Auschwitz ethics begins precisely at the point where the *Muselmann*, the 'complete witness' makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man" (Agamben, 1999, 47). They are dead while still marching and laboring in silence and, hence, they mark "the threshold between the human and inhuman" (55). Agamben consequently asks what it means for a human being to become non-human. Here, we return to the main question of this chapter and the entire dissertation. Levi is central to Agamben's argument because he "begins to bear witness only after dehumanization has been achieved" (59). According to Agamben, Levi's testimony "after dehumanization" does not mean that human beings are inhuman but shows how insufficient the limit between human and non-human is. The *Muselmann* lives in a zone between death and life, between humanity and non-humanity, and thus challenges a fixed definition of what it means to be human. Levi shows that there is "still life in the most extreme degradation" (69), which is why Agamben understands him to be the cartographer of a new ethics. We must understand this against the background of Agamben's effort to dismantle some of the ethical doctrines that were created after Auschwitz. In the words of Agamben,

the *Muselmann*, as Levi describes him, is the site of an experiment in which morality and humanity themselves are called into question. The *Muselmann* is a limit figure of a special kind, in which not only categories such as dignity and respect but even

the very idea of an ethical limit lose their meaning ... This new knowledge now becomes the touchstone by which to judge all morality and all dignity. (Agamben, 1999, 63-69)

I have introduced Agamben because his reflections on the *Muselmann* are important in order to grasp Levi's considerations regarding humanity in the face of Auschwitz. Levi's testimony confronts its readers with an image of a human being that is beyond our comprehension and challenges definitions of *humanity*. This explains why I look at Levi's *afters*, asking what *humanity* and *God* could mean after Auschwitz. I aim to show a wide variety of images of the human in Levi's work, which could have been inspired by his experiences in Auschwitz, his education in different cultural traditions, his trade as a chemist, or his literary imagination. It is the complexity of Levi's representation of humanity *after* that I return to time and again in this dissertation.

Now, I expand the theoretical framework by discussing how Levi's representations of humanity in and after Auschwitz show continuity and discontinuity with his beliefs "before" Auschwitz. This provides a grounding for the title of my dissertation, which discusses Levi's *afters*.

Humanism before and after Auschwitz

Levi is regarded as a writer whose idea of humanity was highly influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which presented a strong belief in reason and universalism (Druker, 2009, 15). Previous pages introduced how Auschwitz challenged language, testimony, and ideas about what it means to be human. This section explores how Levi was imbedded in the tradition of the Enlightenment and how this could have influenced his ideas in the wake of Auschwitz.

Turin, Levi's home city, had been the center of the *Risorgimento* that led to the unification of Italy in 1861. The Jewish community was also influenced by this—they were granted equal citizenship and "willingly exchanged much of their Jewish particularity for Ital-

ian nationalism and the Enlightenment's principle of universality" (17). Growing up in such milieu, Levi "deeply imbibed the values associated with science and humanism that were strongly embraced in Turin" (17). One of the central ideas of the Enlightenment is that everyone is the same, which serves as the foundation for the idea of the equality of all human beings. The consequence of that thought is that everyone must be judged by one criterion, which can endanger those who do not fit within it: "Enlightenment universality is committed to sameness and is intolerant of any diversity" (3). In his book, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz, Posthumanist Reflections*, Druker reads Levi's work in light of posthumanist thinkers who understood fascism to logically result from the Enlightenment and, thus, the Holocaust as a result of the European civilization (9). These "posthumanists" believe

That the social and political structures of domination serving totalitarian regimes are implicit in Enlightenment thought; and that the principle of universality, while purporting to emancipate the individual, crushes cultural and ethnic difference of every kind while revitalizing forms of intolerance like anti-semitism. If true, these claims demand a rethinking of the origins and meanings of the Holocaust and, in addition, a rereading of Holocaust literary texts like Levi's that are framed by humanist assumptions. (3)

The fact that Levi's thought was influenced by the Enlightenment and the presupposition that the Enlightenment had led to the Holocaust, brings Druker to the question of how Auschwitz has influenced Levi's position toward Enlightenment values, such as universalism, humanism, and ratio. Druker sees a tension in Levi's account on the Holocaust: his story knows both "continuity and rupture, humanism and a post-Holocaust sensibility" (6). According to Druker this tension is hardly recognized in earlier readings of Levi, where the continuity with his pre-war thought gets full emphasis. Levi is traditionally understood to be an example of a secular hu-

manist, one who applies ratio and traditional Western literature in order to reconstruct the enlightened idea of the universal “Man.”⁶

The first aspect of Enlightenment thought that we can detect in Levi’s work is universalism. According to Druker, Levi endorses this value in his testimony when he tries to defend the universal human (“Man”) and not the particular (Jew) (16). This shows in his rewriting of the Shema—he universalizes its meaning and focuses our gaze on the human instead of God. “It is the death camp’s ferocious assault on humanity-at-large -not just individuals, not just the Jews? that spurs Levi to write his testimony” (19). Here, there are different moral universals at play (the value of the human, universalism, no God), from which Druker compiles a list of Levi’s propositions:

That nothing is more valuable than human life and that every life is of equal worth; that inhumane action can have no rational basis and can never be justified; that differences in race, religion and ethnicity are much less significant than what unites humanity; and that divine powers do not decide human affairs. (18)

At least two values important to Levi as a humanist were attacked by the Nazi regime—ratio and ethics. First, the attack on rational thought is discussed. The section on language already described how the regime had tried to frustrate the prisoners ability to understand. *If This Is a Man* shows that Levi resisted this complete destruction of thought and language and tried to comprehend and express what happened. “Thinking about the camp, its function, and its meaning was a modest form of resistance to Nazism and also a process for turning negative experience into positive knowledge” (21). In the chapter “The Drowned and the Saved” Levi describes the camp as a “gigantic biological and social experiment” (CW, SQU, 81). This shows that, for him, knowledge can be gained by examining what happened in Auschwitz. In a cynical tone, Levi states “No one could have set up a more rigorous experiment to determine what is inherent and what acquired in the behavior of the human

animal faced with the struggle of life" (82). For him, the experiment does not prove that "man is fundamentally brutal, egoistic, and stupid in his conduct once every civilized institution is taken away" but that "the only conclusion that can be drawn is that, in the face of driving need and physical privation, many habits and social instincts are reduced to silence" (82). Auschwitz also shows that there are two categories of human beings that are most distinct. These are not the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, or the cowardly and the courageous—but the "drowned" and the "saved." This division normally does not show itself so clearly but, in a place where one is so incredibly alone, it is easy to lose oneself and drown.

But things are different in the Lager: here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone. If some *Null Achtzehn* totters, he will find no one to extend a hand; on the contrary, someone will knock him aside, because it is in no one's interest that there be one more *Muselmann* dragging himself to work every day. And if someone, by a miracle of savage patience and cunning, finds a new expedient for avoiding the hardest work, a new art that yields him an ounce of bread, he will try to keep his method secret, and he will be esteemed and respected for this, and will derive from it an exclusive, personal benefit; he will derive from it an exclusive, personal benefit; he will become stronger and so will be feared, and he who is feared is, ipso facto, a candidate for survival. (83)

Here, Levi shows the extreme situation in the camp in which a ferocious attack on ethics took place, another aspect of Levi's humanism. In Auschwitz, there was no ethical obligation to others but the idea of the survival of the fittest ruled, "To he who has, it will be given; from he who has not, it will be taken away" (84). This strong Darwinist rule is turned upside down in Levi's poem "Shema," where the readers are reminded of their ethical obligation toward "the drowned" prisoners of the camp. "Levi not only testifies to the

suffering of the other but also, in the language of religion, witnesses the covenant that ethically binds humanity to itself” (Druker, 2009, 76). Druker emphasizes the final lines of the poem—the curse on those who do not hold the command of remembering the anonymous sufferers, showing that “one’s humanity can only exist in reciprocity” (77). According to Druker, Levi shows, in his “Shema,” the deficit of Kantian (Enlightenment) ethics, whose categorical imperative can be understood as: “we ought to judge every person by an eternal standard admitting no shades of gray. You either are or are not a human” (3). Levi shows his readers the dehumanized man and woman and makes us responsible for them even though we cannot easily define them as human beings.⁷

Conclusion

In this first part of the theoretical framework, I have tried to show how the experience of Auschwitz challenged Levi to rethink what it means to be human in relation to his beliefs “before,” as I reconstructed them above. I reflected on the role of language in and after Auschwitz and on the complexity and necessity of bearing witness. With this section, I wanted to underline that it is important for Levi to ponder over what it means to be human, especially because Auschwitz placed humanity and its core values under pressure.

When Levi speaks about humanity in his work, he regularly also refers to God. An example of this is his poem “Shema,” where language about humanity becomes linked to language related to God. The next section explains why and how the search for Levi’s references to God in his work is conducted in this dissertation.

2.2 – God

In October 2015, I organized a reading group on Levi’s *If This Is a Man*. I hoped that discussing this book with several first-time readers could help me see the book “anew,” after having read it several times for research purposes myself. It touched me, again, how Levi’s testimony impresses its readers, who were seven young pro-

fessionals from a big city in the Netherlands in this case. Some could not stop reading, while others found it hard to continue because it shocked them too much. During a two-hour meeting, the participants shared their reading experiences, discussed the significance of several passages, and participated in a lively conversation on being (non-) human in the camp. A friend, who helped me organize this meeting, is a protestant minister. All participants were people she knew either from her church community or from when she studied theology.

I first asked the participants to reflect on their experience of reading the book. Many called it a powerful testimony, making it seem as if the reader is standing next to him and looking around the camp. This observation led to a discussion of the credibility of the testimony—is it romanticized or not? His precise and unsentimental writing style provoked a strong involvement in one of the readers, to which another added that, because of all the rituals reenacted in the Netherlands each year, one becomes a bit immune to the intensity of the story of the Holocaust. But reading Levi and walking around with him in the camp, one cannot but allow it to touch you. Although one may prefer to close oneself off, someone confessed, because one knows this really happened and it is so shocking. A young mother said that she could only read on because it is a book about men in which the women and children soon disappear from the eye of the male prisoners and, thus, from the story. The passages that did narrate the fate of the children were too confronting for her to read.⁸

Subsequently, I asked them to reflect on being human and non-human, inspired by the title of the book and the focus of my research. Here, I want to highlight a few things we touched upon during our conversation. We talked about how Auschwitz was a contrasting experience and how painful it was for Levi to think about home:

When one works, one suffers and there is no time to think: home is less than a memory. But here [in the infirmary] time is ours;

despite the prohibition, we exchange visits from bunk to bunk, and we can talk and talk. The wooden barrack, crammed with suffering humanity, is full of words, of memories, and of another pain. *Heimweh*, the Germans call this pain; it's a beautiful word that means 'longing for home.' (52)

Additionally, the nightmare of returning home and not being heard came up, serving as a reminder of the fact that it is essential for us to be heard and acknowledged. The contrast is also tangible in the law that governs the camp, where individual survival is the main priority and selflessness is rare. Many participants were shocked by reading that Kapo Alex, who discovers that his hand is greasy, wipes it—the palm and the back—on Levi's shoulder.

Levi's poem "Shema" was interpreted by the participants in different ways: as an appeal to acknowledge the prisoners as human beings; as a curse for humanity; and as a testimony to the fact that this can happen to any of us. We also discussed the passages in which we encountered glimpses of humanity, of civilization and reciprocity—where prisoners could exist without being a means to some other goal. Levi dreams of this when a train passes and he imagines he could ride it all the way to Italy:

At a certain moment, the train stopped and I would feel the warm air and smell the hay and get out, into the sun; then I would lie down on the ground to kiss the earth, as one reads in books, with my face in the grass ... It's over. The last car has passed, and, as if a curtain had been raised, there before our eyes is the pile of pig-iron supports, the Kapo standing in the pile with a switch in his hand, and our haggard companions, coming and going in pairs. Alas for the dreamer: the moment of consciousness that accompanies waking is the most acute suffering. But it doesn't happen to us often, and they are not long dreams. We are only weary beasts. (41)

I found it notable that, while everyone spoke about the way in which reading Levi's testimony had touched them personally or intellectually, no one referred to how it had affected their identity as "believers." Of course my surprise had to do with my expectations—I know how many readers have written letters to ask Levi religious questions and, in interviews, the "God question" popped up regularly as well. Now, I was sitting in the living room of a minister, surrounded by her parishioners and colleagues, and no one brought it up. At the end of our meeting, I decided to tell them of my surprise. The first answer came from a young woman who said that if she would let Levi's testimony in as a believer, then nothing would remain of her faith and life would become too hard. Another woman said that the group had not brought it up "because we all have thought about it before." A third woman said that, because Levi's story differs so much from her own experiences in life, her faith is also very different from the questions that Levi's testimony brings up. It seemed to me that all three women actively tried to keep the question at a distance. The input from one of the participants, who is a female theologian, provoked a discussion on "the power of God" and "inequality." She told a story about a colleague who performed pastoral care after his entire town was hit by a great disaster. This pastor had been shocked by the dissimilarity between the stories he heard: one family was certain that an angel had protected them, the other family asked him why God had not been there for them. We discussed whether this apparent "arbitrariness" and dissimilarity between how fortunate human beings are makes us question who God is, question God's power and goodness.

It is important to note that the participants came up with two possible solutions for the challenges to faith that Auschwitz provokes—one either believes against better judgment or one lives with unsolved questions. Together, they came to the conclusion that the only way ahead as believers is to do justice to different stories and to let all those stories "be," without trying to give a definitive answer. In the church, they search for community in midst of the "unfinishedness" and incomprehensibility of life. They do not need

answers to all their questions—rather, having faith is a matter of living with these questions.

The findings obtained from this reading group serve to illustrate the questions that Levi's work can bring up in the context of a first-time reader group. They show how Levi's story about the destruction of human beings also touches upon questions about who God is in relation to human beings and their extreme suffering. Levi himself often uses the word "God" and refers to biblical texts or religious themes. In the English version, we can count eight appearances of the word "God" in *If This Is a Man*, while *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* gives a total of 174 hits.⁹ Hence, we can begin our inquiry into God in Levi's work by observing the co-existence of the literary appearance of God and the denial of His existence.

I am not the first to acknowledge that Levi refers to religious texts and themes in his work,¹⁰ but my specific aim is to investigate how and when Levi refers to religious language, what meaning this language has in the context of his work, and how these references influence or inspire the story he tells about "humanity after Auschwitz." I do not discuss all references to God, religion, or the Bible but, instead, focus on three themes—human suffering, chaos and creation, and good and evil. These three themes originate from close readings of Levi's texts in which they appear as central topics related to the question of what humanity is in the face of Auschwitz. In this research, human beings are central; the study reflects on their suffering, their fate, their calling to a new creation after Auschwitz, and their ethical task to discern between good and evil. In Levi's work, the three themes are also related to the notion of God. In the course of this dissertation, various representations of human beings in relation to God will be discussed. The word God can have many meanings and it is this plurality and creativity that I want to point out as being a characteristic of Levi's work. It is, of course, no coincidence that the three main themes also are central to theology, as it is my aim to relate Levi's description of humanity and God to this academic discipline.

In this dissertation, I am interested in exploring the ways in

which Levi's work challenges and potentially inspires contemporary theology. The Holocaust has had a great influence on Jewish and Christian theology of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, it was a central topic of theological writings due to the fact that most survivors had, by then, started to testify for the first time, challenging theological thought. Furthermore, the Holocaust still has a significant influence on contemporary theologians because theology always takes place in and engages with the context of the world we live in, which is highly characterized by the history and burden of Auschwitz. In the following section, I give one example of a philosopher who begins by pointing out what he cannot say in the wake of the Holocaust before searching for "God after God." This serves as an introduction to the second part of my research question: *How does Primo Levi write about humanity and God; how can his representations be read theologically "after God," and in what way does that challenge and inspire contemporary theology?*

2.3 – God after God

In the chapter "After Auschwitz Who Can Say God," philosopher Richard Kearney starts with the question: "what do we mean when we speak in the name of God?" (Kearney, 2011, 57). He introduces the thoughts of Jewish and Christian thinkers in the wake of the Holocaust, identifying what is lost and what might be said about God. I focus here on Kearney because he introduces us to some essential "no's" with respect to who God is, just as Levi was very clear about his no's against God.¹¹ However, Kearney also asks what comes after the "no," which is in congruence with the observation that the name God keeps reappearing in Levi's work. What does Levi mean, then, when he writes about God? It is Kearney's turn to literature after the "no's," in particular, that proves to be useful for my theoretical framework.

Let us start with the no's. To say it clearly and bluntly—God is dead. But which God has died? Kearney emphasizes that it is a

specific understanding of God that is no longer maintainable. “The God who died was the Omni-God of celestial Might: the divine grand master who sustained triumphalist notions of religion for millennia” (58). Long before Auschwitz, the doubt existed that the world is not ruled according to a grand divine plan. But, especially since the Holocaust, “the idea that God orchestrates good and evil alike was no longer tolerable” (58). Kearney says no to “the God of metaphysics and theodicy,” the way in which God has been thought of for centuries, which “is no longer convincing; if anything is dead, it can only be the traditional thought of God.”¹²

During my research, I discovered that scholars refer to the traditional concept of religion when arguing that Levi’s work cannot be related to religious and theological thought. This is, for example, the case with Joseph Farell who states: “there is no trace of any theology, no hint of the numinous in Levi, never” (Farell, 2004, 122). Farell sustains this position by emphasizing Levi’s focus on humanity, which can explain his attention to morality and the concept of evil. But one of Farell’s arguments is specifically interesting, when he points to Levi’s belief that the Judeo-Christian concept of a deity is no longer sustainable after Auschwitz. As we will see in this section, the loss of this concept must not be regarded as the endpoint but as the starting point for many twentieth century theologians to think God anew. Kearney points out that “It says yes to all these no’s and asks what, if anything, comes after” (Kearney, 2011, 57).

Hence, what conceptions of God can come after the death of the traditional idea of God? Kearney begins his book with the observation that the “God question” is topical nowadays, urging theologians to consider what they mean when they speak of God. During his studies, Kearney learned to understand atheism to be indispensable to any wager of faith. He presents letting go of the idea of the “old God” as something positive, as something that makes it possible to open oneself to an “Other God” (63), who comes to one as a surprise. God’s absence or death is even a necessity in Kearney’s view: “God has to leave in order to come back. He has to die before he can live again” (27). Kearney pleads for an “anatheistic space,” a

form of post-theism in which God is only possible “because it allows for the alternative option of its impossibility” (xiv). In a cautious definition of God provided in the preface of Kearney’s book, we can detect several essentials of how he wants to speak about God “anatheistically”:

If transcendence is indeed a *surplus* of meaning, it requires a process of endless interpretation. The more strange God is to our familiar ways, the more multiple our readings of this strangeness. If divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism. (Idem)

First: strangeness. God is a stranger, a sacred stranger, whose identity is not certain when this stranger knocks on the door. This corresponds to the need for hospitality, as human beings must wager whether to open themselves to this stranger or not. The “ana” in Kearney’s “anatheism” shows that this wager is not a onetime experience and decision. “Ana” signifies “again,” indicating that the choice to believe in God is never an absolute decision. Again and again faith is lost and again and again we can choose either to believe or disbelieve. Losing one’s firm convictions gives way to meeting God as a sacred stranger. In that meeting, one is free to choose either hospitality or hostility and to see the stranger as either a possible friend or an enemy.

Second: human autonomy is crucial. Kearney emphasizes human choice in the wager between God and human beings. Without human hospitality, God cannot come into existence, cannot enter our world. In his chapter on post-Holocaust thought, Kearney presses the vulnerability and powerlessness of God. He also thinks of God more in relation to and dependent on human beings and the way they act against injustice. God and human beings respond to each other, co-create. It is the weakness of God that calls into action the strength of humanity. “That we move beyond religious forms disfigured by otherworldly metaphysics to a faith in the di-

vine potential inherent in the everyday life of action and suffering, of attention and service to others” (93). He turns to Christianity to detect two traditional vocations of the Christian: a pilgrim and a sacramental vocation. The first is called to protest and prophesy, envisioning and working for a kingdom yet to come. The second focuses on the kingdom that is already here: a “hosting of the transcendent in the immanence of the present” (85). This brings us to the third essential we can see in the quote from the epilogue: transcendence as a surplus of meaning.

Third: Kearney pleads for “a sacramental return to the holiness of the everyday” (85). Here, we find Kearney’s yes after the no. His sacramental move “marks an opening toward a God whose descent into flesh depends on our response to the sacred summons of the moment” (86). This is, of course, inspired by Christian images of the divine in which Christ becomes a human being—the incredible image of a deity made flesh. Kearney presses the importance of the body as being “our most intimate ‘element’” (98). Inspired by the work of Merleau-Ponty, Kearney rediscovers the divine “within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world’s body, becoming a God beneath us rather than a God beyond us” (91).

Fourth: another important aspect of Kearney’s atheism is interreligious hospitality. “I am wagering here on the possibility of a spiritual acoustics capable of reinterpreting the oldest cries of the religious heart in both our sacred and secular worlds ... The Master God must die so that the God of interconfessional hospitality can be born” (52). The sacred can appear and be known in many ways, interreligious atheism wards against absolutism.

Fifth: interpretation is the last essential aspect I want to point out. It implies that the meaning of “God” must be interpreted and imagined, that it does not have a fixed meaning or shape. To Kearney, religion is about imagination. This explains his appreciation of art in the atheistic wager, since “art reminds us that religions are imaginary works, even if what they witness to may be transcendent and true. Faith is not just the art of the impossible but an art of endless hermeneutics” (14).

Kearney looks at the work of three writers—Proust, Woolf, and Joyce—who “bore witness to the return of the sacred” (101). In their work he recognizes sacramental imagination (a hosting of the transcendent), taking place in a space somewhere between theism and atheism. This space between theism and atheism in literature is mostly defined as “agnostic” but Kearney regards “anatheism” as the right term to describe the complex paradoxes and ambivalences when speaking about God in modern literature (101). He chooses these three writers in particular because “a sense of transcendence is alive in their work ... but it is one inscribed in everyday immanence” (101). They

eschew the received divisions between sacred and profane, religious and secular, transcendent and immanent, in favor of a retrieval of the sacramental in the sensible. Whether this mutual traversal of the sacred and secular in modernist fiction is a matter of sacramentalizing the secular or of secularizing the sacred is, of course, central to our discussion. What I am wagering here is that the anatheist paradigm may allow it be both at once: religion as art and art as religion. (102)

Kearney uses a rather catholic term to capture the sense of transcendence in their work—namely, “eucharistic events,” which are “the consecration of ordinary moments of flesh and blood thisness as something strange and enduring” (102). In the eucharist, a transubstantiation occurs: bread becomes the body of Christ, wine becomes his blood. The ordinary becomes something sacred. “Each writer bears witness to a special sacredness at the heart of the profane” (128).

In the Practical Theology research group at the Protestant Theological University, we have a particular interest in those practices that question the boundaries between the religious and the secular. In theology, the awareness has grown that “religion” can be understood as a human construct, introduced in modernity to oppose “the secular” in order to protect a certain confessional community.

Brent Nongbri writes about the history of this concept in his book *Before Religion*, detecting its roots in “a mix of Christian disputes about truth, European colonial exploits, and the formation of nation-states” (154). Religion is not simply a characteristic of being human but is a concept whose meaning is imbedded in a certain cultural context. This gives way for theology to take for its object of research phenomena outside its traditional domain—for example, the so-called atheist literature. Kearney is especially interested in writers who question the boundaries between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. This recalls the philosophy of Agamben, who searches for the space in which contradictions come together. In the work of Levi, he detects a zone in which the human and the non-human coincide, which opens up the way for a new ethics. As a theologian, I detect the coinciding of two other opposites in Levi’s work—of the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. In midst of the absence of every transcendence, of every meaning, “God” appears as a literary character in Levi’s testimony. The paradoxical movement of the sacramentalization of the secular and the secularization of the sacred can, for example, be encountered in Levi’s poem “Shema,” which will be discussed in the next section. It is my aim to add understanding to the language about God between the religious and the secular in a narrative context, thereby acknowledging and appreciating the complexity of this language. This is where Kearney might be of assistance.

I position this research within the theological debate of “God after God,” because it wants to question fixed meanings of God, especially after the Holocaust. In the title of this dissertation, I introduce the neologism *afters*, which indicates the challenge Auschwitz provoked in thinking about humanity and God in Levi’s work but also in theology in general. I appreciate Kearney’s focus on imagination and interpretation and his turn to literature when searching for a new language for God because we cannot ignore that the name God appears in literary writings. The appearance of God in Levi’s literary writings does not mean that Levi believes that a God actually exists. Also Kearney acknowledges that: “The Gods in-

voked in religious myth are no longer seen as real ‘explanations’ for our universe but as imagined beings who might or might not exist. They become gods who may be if we choose to believe” (10).

Here, I deviate from Kearney’s atheism because in my theological reading of Levi I am not interested in whether we should believe the images he presents us with or not so that we can gain new faith “after God.” Therefore, my goal is neither to plead for a religious reading of Levi’s work nor to argue that he can be regarded a religious man. Instead, the aim of my research project is to do justice to Levi’s self-understanding and to the diversity of images of God he presents, and to read these theologically “after God.” I expect this to be a contribution to theology and to the scholarly work that analyzes Levi by offering a new perspective on his work.

To illustrate what a theological reading of Levi’s language for humanity and God could look like, I present a brief study of Levi’s poetical rewriting of the Shema, applying the presented framework to the poem with which I opened this chapter.

3 – Sacred Language in Levi’s “Shema”

The Jewish Shema has a long and complex tradition in which it is certain that it has always been recited as part of the morning and evening prayers. The original prayer is constructed from three different quotations found in the “Book of Deuteronomy” of the Bible and is significantly longer than Levi’s poetical variation. The first verse can be translated as “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one,” where the focus placed on the one God is usually understood as a confession of monotheism. However, “one” can also mean unique: God as the Supreme Being, different from anything else He created in the universe. The reciting of the Shema is also connected to witnessing, as the believer testifies to God’s unity or unicity when he recites this daily prayer (Jacobs, 2007, 455-456).

The testimonial character of the Shema could explain why Levi decided to write a poem in analogy of it. The prayer starts by ad-

addressing the people of Israel, urging them to listen: “Hear, O Israel.” For Levi, it was of great importance that his readers would listen to him, that they would understand what had happened, and that they would prevent it from happening again because the threat is still there and we are not immune to its danger. However, as I already pointed out in section 2, the possibility of testifying through words is not undisputed. Levi frequently refers to the disconnection between words and reality in Auschwitz. The dehumanization in the camp was partly the result of the abuse of language by the perpetrators, through yelling, shouting, and deceiving. In this context, Levi refers to the story of Babel, the biblical narrative in which God curses the megalomania of the people of Babel, who built a giant tower. God provoked a confusion of tongues so they could no longer understand each other. Similarly, the prisoners had to build a tower in the camp:

it's bricks were called *Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, mattoni, téglak*, and they were cemented by hate, hate and discord, like the Tower of Babel: and that is what we call it, *Babelturm, Bobelturm*; and we hate it as our masters' insane dream of grandeur, their contempt for God and men, for us men. (CW, SQU, 69)

In addition, the tower of Auschwitz is cursed, just as the Tower of Babel:

And today, just as in the ancient fable, we all feel, and the Germans themselves feel, that a curse – not transcendent and divine but inherent and historical – hangs over the insolent structure, built on the confusion of languages and erected in defiance of heaven like a stone curse. (Idem)

The contempt for the humanity of the prisoners and the conscious constructed confusion of languages hangs as a curse over the tower of the Buna factory, which caused many deaths but “never produced a kilo of synthetic rubber” (Idem). In contrast to the ancient

fable from the “Book of Genesis,” this curse is felt in the here and now by the prisoners and they suffer from it. The translation in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* is not completely accurate because it uses the word “curse” twice, while Levi concludes this sentence with the words “*una bestemmia di pietra*,” meaning “a stone blasphemy.” Thus, the confusion of languages provoked by the Nazis is to be understood as blasphemy, which can also be understood as an excess or abuse in which “the name of God is pronounced without relation to semantic content” (Moudarres, 2014, 93). According to Laura Moudarres, this misuse of language and the breaking of the bond between language and reality explains Levi’s turn to biblical language, “to the indissoluble bond between word and truth which is always present in Scripture” (95).

In her interpretation of Levi’s use of biblical language, Moudarres is inspired by Agamben’s book, *The Sacrament of Language, An Archeology of the Oath*. For Agamben, language is central to religion, which is demonstrated in the phenomenon of the oath. He explains the oath as a “sacrament of language,” “an oath means rendering something sacred” (89).¹³ What is essential to an oath is that it establishes a link between words and deeds, having a performative power, “what the oath says is” (90). According to Moudarres, Levi is inspired by the Jewish prayer Shema because of its sacred nature. Moudarres regards “sacredness” as an essential characteristic of scriptural language, which Levi needs for his human and, thus, fallible language. Levi seems to be in need of an extra dimension to make his readers “consider,” “ponder,” “carve,” and “tell.” He displays the urge to transfigure his poetical text into a sacrament of testimony, transforming his human words into sacred language, thereby trying to do the impossible: bear witness to Auschwitz. For Moudarres, there is a connection between this urge to transfigure human language into sacred language and Agamben’s understanding of the oath, which he explains as the attempt to connect human language to divine speech.

Another Levi scholar, Alberto Cavaglion, regards Levi’s poem “Shema” as a sacred poem in which he parodies the Jewish prayer

and universalizes its message (Cavaglion, 2006, 12). Cavaglion argues that Levi's testimony shows that he was not "insensible of transcendence, to the problems of faith, to Scripture" (83). He states that Levi's testimony was actually written for believers and agnostics but that the readers have become insensitive for the voice of God and the way it can speak to us. He points out that, in *If This Is a Man*, Levi speaks multiple times "in the name of God." In the opening poem, this voice of God comes to the fore in an interesting variation because Levi seems to transform his own voice into God's by writing "I command these words to you" (84). This reminds us of Moudarres' argument, according to which Levi transforms his human language into sacred language. Hence, Cavaglion directs us to the ways in which Levi seems to entangle the human sphere with the sacred one.

This "sacramentalization" of human words can be compared to what Richard Kearney calls "transubstantiation": the transforming of one substance into another (Kearney, 2011, 127). Where transubstantiation occurs, "our own world as readers is ... enlarged by new meanings proposed by the text. It constitutes an event of semantic re-invention where the impossible is transfigured into the newly possible" (102). Kearney shows how several modern writers question the divide between the sacred and the profane and present art as religion and religion as art (101). Kearney explains their artistic sacralization of the everyday using the aforementioned term "transubstantiation." Transubstantiation can, according to Kearney, take place on three different levels. I would now like to apply these levels to analyze Levi's poem. First, transubstantiation takes place when one character is being transfused into another. We can see this when Levi takes up God's voice to, mirroring God in the "Book of Deuteronomy", curse those who do not listen to his command to consider whether this is a man or a woman. Levi's voice becomes God's voice or vice versa. The second form of transubstantiation is the transmission of one narrative into another. In one episode, Levi describes the prisoners' stories of suffering as stories of a new Bible: "They are simple and incomprehensible like the stories of the

Bible. But aren't they the stories of a new Bible?" (CW, SQU, 60). In the ancient stories of the Bible, Levi discovers the destiny of the Jewish people to be a destiny of suffering (Baldini, 2003, 47) and identifies suffering in the camp with the story of a new Bible. This conflation of stories could be regarded an act of transubstantiation in which one thing, or story, turns into another. The third aspect Kearney discerns is the moment in which the text points beyond itself, calling the reader into action beyond the text (Kearney, 2010, 128). This calling into action could be understood as the essential core of Levi's Auschwitz testimony. Levi's "Shema" bears witness to the *Muselmann* and urges us to teach this new truth after Auschwitz to the future generations.

We could say that both Moudarres and Cavaglion draw attention to a form of literary creativity in Levi—the same creativity that Kearney detects in the work of many modern, nontheistic writers. In the case of Levi, this creativity can be detected in two contrasting movements. The first is a way of secularizing the sacred, making the Jewish prayer into a testimony to the *Muselmann*. The second shows a sacramentalization of the secular, making the everyday, the immanent, into something sacred. As stated above, Levi performs this sacramentalization by transforming his human testimony into sacred language. Moudarres calls Levi's rewriting of the lines from the "Book of Deuteronomy" as a paradoxical antidote to the blasphemy of the Nazis: "Levi proposes a non-divine answer with divine features" (Moudarres, 2014, 95).

In conclusion: this reading of Levi's poem "Shema," as a sacramentalization of human language, draws us directly into the central questions of this research. It first shows that, in his writings, Levi responds to the destruction of humanity performed by the Nazis. Their attempt to destruct humanity is connected to the destruction of language and thus has the effect of complicating the act of testimony. The suspicion that human language is fallible can explain why Levi recourses to divine language, speaking from God's position, as it were, when he curses those who do not follow the commands he presents in the poem. The adaption of the poem from a

religious prayer suggests that Levi needs to transform his words into “sacred language” in order to turn them into a powerful testimony. Interestingly enough, Levi does not incorporate the lines from the “Book of Deuteronomy” literally but he creates his own “sacred language.” He transforms an ancient prayer and universalizes its meaning by incorporating the entire human community, not just the Jewish one. This shows how Levi is very creative while incorporating religious texts in his work. In this dissertation, I examine those passages in which Levi creatively plays with religious texts while speaking about humanity and God in the face of Auschwitz. Subsequently, I ask how to read his representations theologically “after God,” reflecting on the meaning of religious language after losing the belief in a *Dio Padre*, a God who comes to the rescue when human beings suffer, and ask how this theological reading of Levi’s work can challenge and inspire contemporary theology.

4 – Methodology and Dissertation Layout

In this dissertation, I perform close readings of a great variety of texts in which Levi writes about humanity and/or God. Close reading is a formalist approach to a text that, in its basis, does not entail much more than an intensive reading, during which the researcher “is sensitive for all the denotative and connotative values and implications of words” (Guerin, 2011, 74). The so-called “close reading” approach was initiated in the first part of the twentieth century and came to be known by the protagonists of “New Criticism.” This method comprises four steps without a predefined sequence. The aim of close reading is to carefully examine the words of a text and their meanings, with the expectation that the examination of words would lead to the discovery of structural relationships and patterns and a certain tone or mood that the text embodies and provokes. The position of the narrator and the reader, and their relationship, forms the last part of the close reading method (Idem).

Due to its emphasis on careful reading, I regard this method to

be a useful tool for examining Levi's works. "New Criticism" has inspired various methodologies up to the present day but has been criticized as well. An awareness of the limitedness of human constructs, in which sign and signification can be understood as arbitrary relationships only, can question the search for structure in this literary method. Nevertheless, even though the exact description of meaning cannot be reached, Wittgenstein inspires the possibility to say that words do have a reliable usage and meaning in a specific context of a community of language users (Stiver, 1996, 196).

In each chapter, I also introduce theology to help me interpret Levi's language for humanity and God, and to trace the ways in which Levi's work might contribute to contemporary theological thought. An important selection criterion for these theological voices is that, in some way, they connect to the "after God" discourse I situate this research in. Therefore, in this dissertation, I construct a dialogue between Levi and theology, where discontinuity between both can be just as fruitful as continuity.

Resulting from the need to restrict the scope of this research, I chose to center my discussions around three topics¹⁴—unjust suffering, chaos and creation, and good and evil. All three recur in more than one work, which was an important topic selection criterion. Additionally, the fact that all three topics are central in the field of theology contributed to this selection. Each chapter focuses on one topic, resulting in the following layout of this dissertation:

Chapter two presents a close reading of Levi's anthology, *The Search for Roots*, zooming in on "humanity" and "God" in both the work of his literary inspirers and Levi's introductions. The book narrates the journey of human life in a hostile universe, marked by unjust suffering. This anthology is a literary array of small, deviating, fragmented, dialogizing testimonies to what the words "God" and "man" can mean in this context. It is the dialogizing, narrative character of this work that inspires me to rethink the practice of theologizing in the face of suffering.

Chapter three focuses on the theme of “chaos and creation,” to which Levi often refers and which reflects the intriguing dynamic of the “before” and “after” in his work. Levi describes Auschwitz as the return to chaos, which shows itself in the active destruction of prisoners and the lack of language and ethical relationships. He also narrates the recreation of human life from this chaos, after the liberation. This new creation comes in a hybrid form—not completely absolving the complexity of the chaos. I place Levi’s creation narratives into a dialogue with the theological tradition of “theopoetics,” which reflects on the creative potential of both God and humanity.

Chapter four takes up the challenging question of how to speak about good and evil in and after Auschwitz. Levi saw Auschwitz as the evil of his time, carrying in it an important message for future times. The relevance of Levi’s writings for contemporary thought on evil is recognized by many because Levi corrupts our sense of a clear separation between good and evil and challenges us to rethink the idea of human responsibility and freedom. Levi’s references to the story of Cain and Abel induce a discussion on the complex entanglement of humans in evil.

Chapter five summarizes the previous chapters and formulates an answer to the research question. It also broadens the discussion of humanity and God after atrocities by placing the findings of this research into dialogue with theology after Gulag and after apartheid.

Two – God’s Indifference to Human Suffering

1 – Introduction

Poor, bereft of his children, covered in boils, he sits among the ashes, scraping himself with a potsherd, and contends with God. It is an unequal contest: God the Creator of marvels and monsters crushes him beneath his omnipotence. (Levi, 2001, 11)

With these words Levi describes the fate of Job, the just man oppressed by injustice, in the book *La ricerca delle radici* (*The Search for Roots*, in this chapter abbreviated as RR).¹ Levi’s choice to open his personal anthology with the biblical Job who cries out to God because of his unjust suffering could surprise us. In what way does Levi, the Auschwitz survivor, identify with Job? Does Levi address God for his suffering?

In this chapter, I perform a close reading of RR to discover what images of humanity and God Levi presents in this work. I argue that the rarely known interview from 1984, “*Io e Dio. Non l’ho mai incontrato, neppure nel Lager*,”² provides an interesting perspective on these images. Reading this interview and the anthology together leads to a discussion of Levi’s ideas about God, humanity, ethics, and science in the face of suffering. The fact that both the anthology and the interview are utterances from the early 1980s supports me in the approach to read the two together.

In 1980, Levi and several other Italian writers were asked to assemble anthologies for Italian middle school students. In the autumn of the same year, Levi had already finished his contribution to the project, the book *The Search for Roots, Personal Anthology*.³ In the introduction, Levi writes that he regarded it an experiment to find out in what way the things he read can be connected to the things he wrote. Despite this curiosity, Levi is highly aware that his career as a technician might have influenced his writing to a greater extent than the reading of literary texts did. Hybridity is a key concept in Levi’s thinking and refers, in the first place, to his own iden-

tity as both a scientist and a writer (Levi, 1997, xix), an Italian and a Jew. *RR* itself has a hybrid nature as well, which is evident from the topics under discussion. Levi's collection goes back and forth between some oppositions that are fundamental to the life of the curious man: fault/truth, laughter/tears, sense/nonsense, hope/despair, victory/defeat (xxiii).

RR consists of thirty chapters, each of which starts with a short—approximately one page in length—introduction by Levi, followed by a selection of pages from an author who had inspired Levi in some way. The book contains a great variety of authors, from those who are his “hard to explain loves” to those with whom he has a “professional affinity,” “a shared love of travel and adventure,” “a remote Jewish kinship,” an “affinity in writing style,” and a connection to his time in Auschwitz (Levi, 2001, 6). According to Levi, all the choices he made occurred almost automatically and, in the final phase of the composition only, did he notice a pattern. The authors are not ordered chronologically or by argument. Sometimes, the sequence reflects when Levi first encountered the work but, more often, they are placed in contrast. Contrasting writers are placed together to discover what a dialogue between, for example, Homer and Darwin would look like.

The work can be regarded as a self-portrait in which the author figuratively feels himself almost naked, lying on a table to be opened by a surgeon (Levi, 1997, xxi). Marco Belpoliti, who wrote the introduction to the Italian edition, describes how the anthology discovers roots under the surface, showing the hidden and unconscious themes that makes Levi himself wonder: is this really me? (ix). Levi, in his preface, reflects on this unconscious process of choosing the pieces for this anthology: “While writing is—at least for me, at least in my intention—a lucid, aware, and daily work, I realized that the choice of my own roots is instead a nocturnal work, a visceral and almost subconscious job.”⁴

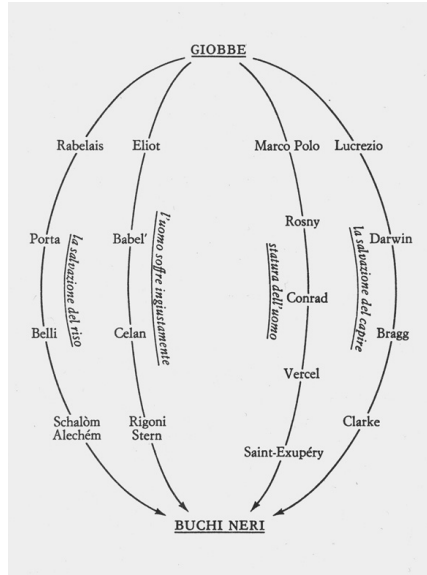
The book opens with an intriguing oval shaped graphic⁵ that deserves our close attention. The lines indicate a movement, starting from “Job” (in capitals). There are four lines moving down, which

Levi indicates to be the “four possible roads across some of the authors in the field” in his introduction (xxiv). The roads are named: “the salvation of laughter,” “man suffers unjustly,” “the stature of man,” and “the salvation of understanding.” These four roads lead from “Job” to “Black Holes,” again written in capitals. The sequence of the authors in the graphic follows a different order than the book itself. In his introduction, Levi gives his readers one other clue to understand the graphic: “to Job I instinctively reserved the right of primogeniture, searching now for good reasons to explain this choice.”⁶ It is a graphic that prompts many question: who is Job and what are Black Holes? How do they connect to each other? How can these four roads be understood?

Chapter Layout

In the course of this chapter, I first focus on the point of departure (2.1) and the end point (2.2) of the graphic to understand the contours that shape the book. In section 2.3, I perform a close reading of the four roads that connect these two poles. The consequent effect is that many interesting chapters outside the graphic are not taken into consideration, but I decided to focus on the chapters included in the graphic because they give an adequate representation of the main topics of the book. Section 2.4 presents the concluding part of this chapter in which an interpretation of the anthology is formulated based on the findings of the preceding sections.

This chapter interprets *RR* as a book about man’s position in the universe. Levi takes us with him on the journey of life filled with chaos and suffering but not without adventure, moral greatness, and scientific discovery. It is the sentiment represented by Job and the Black Holes (the start and end point of the book and graphic) that prompts the question of how to be human in a life filled with suffering. I will show that the problem of life in a chaotic world brings up the name God, leading us to the main themes of this dissertation—in this chapter focused on the question: how does Levi write about humanity and God in the face of a life filled with suffering?



Alongside my close reading of passages from RR, I also introduce secondary literature to enhance the understanding of the literary works Levi has taken up in his anthology. The references to philosophy and theology in this chapter help to detect and give meaning to the fundamental concerns when speaking about humanity and God in an enigmatic universe.

2 – Point of Departure: Job, the Solitary Man

2.1 – Levi and God

“*Io e Dio*” (“God and I”) is the title of the conversation transcript between Primo Levi and Giuseppe Grieco, from the year 1983, presented in Grieco’s series of interviews on God. In the interview, there are four elements on Levi’s mind: continuous search, unanswerable questions, unjust suffering, and an ignorant God. It repre-

sents Levi's thoughts from the same time period as *The Search for Roots*, which was first published in 1981. Due to its congruence with the topics under discussion in this chapter, the interview serves as a guide for introducing Levi's thinking about man and God in RR.

When the interview takes off, Levi straightaway takes a stand:

I think I'm an extreme case: up till now I have never really worried about the problem of God. Mine is the life of a man who has lived and who lives without God, indifferent to God. God is a problem with which until today I have never really occupied myself. Mine is the life of a man who survived, and lives, without God, indifferent of God. (Belpoliti, 2001, 272)

Many of Levi's readers that I have met refer to phrases like these when I tell them, to their surprise, that I am a theologian who is writing her PhD on the works of Primo Levi. Their response is to verify whether I am aware that he was an atheist and whether I take this fact seriously in my research. The raised eyebrows show me how my interlocutors fail to hide their suspicion toward my project or intelligence. This happens to me both when drinking *caffè* in one of the bars of Turin and when meeting Italian historians or Levi scholars. It is as if they want to assure me that I am never going to succeed in making a religious man out of Levi. I see a correspondence between their response and Levi's statement, before Grieco has asked him even one question. Claiming Levi for the "religious-camp" is not allowed and everyone who gives the impression of attempting to do so must be discouraged immediately. It is impossible to set forth my intentions during the short period of time during which an Italian drinks his coffee; instead, this second chapter on RR, is my first attempt to explain my search for God in Levi's work.

Grieco responds to Levi's statement on his indifference to God by asking: "And this leaves you unperturbed?" Levi's answer is: "It allows me to go on with no illusions" (Idem).

We can understand this response by connecting it to Levi's inter-

pretation of the “Book of Job.” Despite the fact that Job is a pious and just man, he becomes the victim of an unbearable amount of suffering—and, while he cries out to God, he gets no response. God is indifferent to man’s suffering; in his omnipotence he is not able to reach out and hear the cries of the just. I read Levi’s “go on with no illusions” as having an awareness that it is better not to believe in God because believing in God can never be a consoling enterprise—God most likely does not exist, but if God does exist, he will not hear us, we are alone. The phrase “We are Alone” is revisited later on in our discussion and is the title of the last chapter of *RR*.

Inconsistencies

Levi sees people consoling themselves with a belief in a God until they are confronted with inconsistencies because a consoling image of God is not consistent with everyday experience. According to Levi, God must be omnipotent to be called God but asks, in the interview with Grieco, “But if he exists, and is thus omnipotent, why does he allow evil?” (275) The only possible explanation would be to say that God is a cruel God but this idea is repellant to him. Thus, it is easier to confirm a simpler hypothesis—the non-existence of God (276).

In another interview, with Alberto Gozzi, Levi speaks of Tewje, the protagonist of *Shalom Alechem* whom we encounter in chapter 19 of *RR*. The poor and uneducated Tewje (Yiddish for Tobia) becomes inflicted with everything that a man could possibly suffer. With the little knowledge of science and theology he has, Tewje tries to “*tappare le lacune dell’universo*,” to stop the gaps in the universe. According to Levi, this is the fate that a believer is destined to, constantly repairing the tears caused by the inconsistency between belief and experience. He says it is harder to be a believer than a nonbeliever because you constantly have to seek to justify the unjustifiable. The nonbeliever is spared this painful occupation (Gozzi, 1997, 98-99).

Marco Belpoliti states, in a radio broadcast, that Levi is an agnostic, which signifies that “religion as has been said by Bonhoeffer,

God as stopgap, he does not accept.”⁷ Belpoliti relates this to Levi’s firm denial of a friend’s statement that he survived because God wanted him to tell his story. Levi always objected to the idea that God had saved him and not others—for him, only luck can explain his survival. Belpoliti uses the word *tappabuchi*, which can be translated as a stopgap/quick fix for the questions we do not know how to answer. This concept was first introduced by Henry Drummond and indicates the tendency of some believers to search for gaps in science, only to attribute these phenomena to God (Holder, 2009, 117), “as if God lived in gaps?” (Drummond, 1894, 426). If God were the answer to our unanswered questions, this would mean that God would signify less with every new discovery. This denial of God as stopgap shows the relationship between Levi’s understanding of religion and his belief in science. Levi trusts in the scientific ability to enlarge our knowledge of the universe.

Grieco asks, however, whether Levi never envied believers because, for example, of the support they get from their faith? The fact that Levi, as he puts it in the interview, always stays with his “*non fede*” did not prevent him from envying believers. He did try to be like Elie Wiesel, who stated that he “can live with God or against God, but not without God” (Belpoliti, 2001, 273). However, belief in God is something you either have or do not have, “You cannot invent your own God for your own personal use. It would not be honest” (Idem).

When Levi is asked about the (non-)existence of the relationship between him and God/religion, the interviewer mostly distinguishes between three time periods: his childhood, his time in the Lager, and after Auschwitz. This explains the following subdivision in my description of the interview.

A Jewish Youth

In the interview with Grieco, Levi confirms he had a religious upbringing but one that did not leave behind many marks.⁸ His mother followed the Jewish tradition but did not give it much attention. He describes his father as the real believer, a curious one, who feared

God. His father tried to respect the Law but not the whole Law as he, for example, liked his *prosciutto* (Idem).

For Levi, being a Jew formed a part of his identity, he was born as such. As a young boy he received a Jewish education in preparation of his bar-mitzva at the temple (synagogue) of Turin but he never felt part of the elected Jewish people. He does admit that God had occupied his mind during that time, that he tried to make contact but that it had lead him nowhere. It is a recurring topic in the interview—the incongruence between wish and reality. Levi would have liked to be a believer but did not succeed in it. He tells the interviewer that the image of God he was taught is that of a master God, a punitive God, which left him indifferent, like an infantile idea. Levi never felt the urge to question God and shared his indifference with many of his Christian friends at the time (274).

God in Auschwitz

Levi experienced his imprisonment in Auschwitz as the confirmation of his indifference to God (Idem). He did feel the urge to pray to God in Auschwitz, just once, during the selections in October 1944. He tried to recommend himself to God but rapidly realized that he did not have the right to do so.

First, because you don't believe in God; secondly, because asking for favours, without having a special case, is the act of a mafioso. The moral of the story: I gave up the doubtful comfort of prayer and I left it to chance, or whoever else it might be, to decide my fate. (275)

God after Auschwitz

At a certain moment in the interview, Levi states that his situation regarding God has not changed in comparison to when he was 15, 20, or 40 years old. However, there is a kind of curiosity, a dissatisfaction, and he tries to think in new ways about the hidden knowledge of the cosmos:

When I think about the cosmos, the universe, I begin suspecting that behind the enormous machine of the universe, there might be a driver who controls its movements, maybe even built the machine itself. But rest assured, my suspicion does not affect my conviction that the driver, if he exists, is indifferent to the matters of mankind. In short, he isn't someone to pray to.

I detect a certain regret in your voice...

You're not wrong. I would like the driver to exist, and I would like him still more to be a driver God. To have a father, a judge, a teacher would be good, calming. But this desire of mine does not authorize me to create a God built to order, it is not strong enough to push me as far as to invent a God to talk to. (276)

As was said, Levi was taught of a dominating God, which he found to be an infantile idea. The idea of God that comes to his own mind is that of a God as a machinist behind the grand machine that is the universe, one that proves Himself to be indifferent to the suffering and praying of human beings.⁹ Levi does recognize the longing for a consoling belief in God, a belief in having someone to address your prayers to, someone who listens to them. We might be able to say that Levi's position at the beginning of the interview is turned around here—it is not Levi who is ignorant of God but it is, in the first place, God who is ignorant of man. As a result of this awareness, Levi decides that he is better off to live without this God because believing in Him brings us nowhere.¹⁰

Then, the interviewer asks Levi to respond to the “return to God” movement that was taking place in the 1980s, after the declaration of the death of God in the previous century.

We are living in a time of crisis in our values, and the return to God is typical of such moments of crisis. The more things collapse around people and the more we feel alone and unarmed in the face of the enigma of the universe, the more man looks for

clarity, for an answer to his questions, for someone to reassure him. The search for God thus becomes a search for protection, for a way out of loneliness. In short, the risk God runs, in this instance, is the risk of being seen as a short-cut, leading us beyond the void of our existence. (277)

The solitude of man in the universe is a recurrent topic in this interview and, as we shall see, the basic premise of Levi's thinking about humanity in *RR*. Levi opposes the logical consequence of inventing a God for exclusive use to seek justification for the unjustifiable and to search for God as a "road out of the solitude" (Idem). Levi turns this thinking upside down—God is not so much the consoling way out of solitude but can be better understood as the source of it: a machinist who is indifferent to the concerns of man (276). It is this metaphysical awareness expressed in the interview that serves as the right introduction to Levi's speaking about humanity and God in *RR*. I now turn to a close reading of Levi's first *RR* chapter, on Job, the biblical character whose fate can be understood as the exemplary illustration of the previously mentioned relationship between man and God.

2.2 – Levi on Job

"Why start with Job?"¹¹ With this question, Levi opens his first chapter. According to Levi, the story of Job

encapsulates the questions of all the ages, those for which man has never to this day found an answer, nor will he ever find one, but he will always search for it because he needs it in order to live, to understand himself and the world. Job is the just man oppressed by injustice. (Levi, 2001, 11)

With the story of Job, we find ourselves at the core of human existence and facing the question of the position of man in the universe. We, human beings, need to search "in order to live" (11), to under-

stand ourselves and the world we live in. However, this is a search without end, as we will never find the answers. Levi presents Job here as the archetype of the unjust suffering that happens to just men and women. The suffering inflicted on the just Job is the result of the actions of God and Satan; man is victim of a cruel bet between these two powers and is degraded to an experimental animal. How does Job respond to this undeserved pain?

Job the Just ... comports himself as any of us would, at first he lowers his head and praises God ("Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"), then his defenses collapse. (11)

Interestingly enough Levi seems to regard Job's lowering of his head and praising God as the universal human response to suffering. As if all human beings accept good and evil to come from the same, divine hand. Yet, there is a limit to this acceptance without protest—sitting in the ashes, poor, bereft of his children and scraping himself with a potsherd, Job contends with God. Despite Job's efforts to reason with God and change his fate, he has to bow his head:

It is an unequal contest: God the Creator of marvels and monsters crushes him beneath his omnipotence. (11)

God's absolute power does not leave any room for the effort and good will of man; in this manner ends Levi's introduction to the quotation of chapters 3, 7, 14, 38, 40, and 41 of the "Book of Job". If one reads the "Book of Job" as a whole, 7 voices can be identified along its 42 chapters: an all-knowing narrator who opens and closes the book; Job, who speaks in exactly 50 percent of the poetic strophes;¹² his 4 friends; and God. Interestingly enough, Levi chooses three chapters that give the perspective of Job and three that give God's response, thereby constructing his own dialogue, leaving out Job's discussion with his friends about his claim of being a right-

eous man. In the following section, I present a close reading of the six quoted chapters, focusing on the way Levi's selection creates a specific understanding of the dialogue between man and God in the "Book of Job".

2.3 – Job and God Speak

Chapter 3

In chapter three, Job curses the day he was born and wishes that he had died before birth. It is an appealing idea to him to be laid to rest, to sleep in peace, and not to hear the voice of his tormentor. This chapter is Job's prologue, which precedes and introduces the debate between him and his friends. Job moves from intense anger about his birth, through a desire for death, to complaint and complete agony about the present (Fokkelman, 2009, 140).

Verse 7 stands out in particular because of its deviating structure.¹³ It is the only verse in this chapter with a one-word sentence:

Solitudine
Nessun grido di gioia
Per quella notte¹⁴

Solitude
No cry of joy
For that night

We meet a solitary man, who longs for an elusive peace, truce, or rest. *Solitudine* seems to be the guiding word through Levi's book, which concludes with the chapter "*Siamo Soli*," meaning "we are alone".

Chapter 7

Non è una vita da soldati
Quella dell'uomo sulla terra?
Non vive forse come un
 mercenario?

Is it not a soldier's life
That of man on earth?
Doesn't he live like a
 mercenary?

The life of man on earth is presented like that of a soldier, a slave, a hired man, who yearns for rest and waits for his salary. The suffering man finds himself to be a dependent being, who cannot determine his own ways. He feels his life slipping away and warns God that he might not be there anymore if God would come to search for him.

Chapters six and seven contain Job's answer to his first friend, bringing to the fore that he is sure of his righteousness (Fokkelman, 2009, 147). Chapter seven oscillates dialogically between Job's depiction of his suffering and God's role in it (149). In the eleventh verse, we see the situation to which Levi refers in his introduction—Job, covered with sores, starts contending with God about his fate:

E allora mia bocca sfrénati	Therefore, I will not refrain my mouth;
Il mio respiro strozzato parlerà	I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
L'amaro della mia gola ragionerà	I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

Job will not give in without raising his voice and asking God:

Cos'è un uomo per dargli tanto peso	What is a man, that thou shouldest magnify him?
Perché tu metta su di lui il tuo cuore?	And that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him?

...

Col mio peccato che cosa ti faccio	I have sinned; what shall I do unto thou
O creatore dell'uomo?	O you creator of man?
Perché mi adoperi come un bersaglio	Why did you take me as a target
E fai di me il centro del tuo tiro?	Made me the center of your shot?

Here, again, the structure carries meaning—the white space builds up the tension: what can man do unto God? He seems not to receive an answer but to only find himself to be the center of God’s undivided and destructive attention. In his anthology, Levi uses the translation by Guido Ceronetti: *Il Libro di Giobbe, Versione e Commento di Guido Ceronetti* (1972). The cover text of this translation describes the Book of Job as a text that narrates the inflexible manifestation of the necessity of evil—man cannot escape from it. Job understands his suffering as caused by his human guilt. God seems to be unable to forget Job’s trespasses, which means the end of Job’s life:

Perché non tolleri la mia mancanza	Why do you not pardon my failing
E non lasci correre la mia colpa?	And let go my transgression
Tra poco mi stenderò nella polvere	Shortly, I will lay down in the dust
E tu bramoso mi cercherai	And you will search for me covetous
E io non sarò piú	But I shall not be

Chapter 14

In chapters 12 to 14, Job formulates his answer to his third friend. He has little hope left that God will refrain from continuing this destruction. The structure of the first verse focalizes our attention to the topic of “humanity” and provides a summary of human faith:

L’uomo	Man
Cavato da una donna	Born from a woman
Corto di giorno	few of days
Stipato di dolori	drenched in pains

In verse four, we see the powerlessness of man:

Chi dall' impuro fa uscire il
puro?
Nessuno

Who can bring a clean thing out of
an unclean?
No one

In verse 10, a man's end:

Ma un uomo che muore è finito
Dopo l' ultimo soffio dov'è
l' uomo?

But a man who dies is finished
After the last breath, where is man?

...

Ma un uomo morto rivive?
Per tutti i giorni miei di soldato
Aspetterò un cambio da venire?

But a dead man will live again?
For all my days as a soldier
Can I expect a coming change?

Death, as certain fate of man, is one of the central topics of this chapter. This is in correspondence to the Black Holes, as the end point of Levi's graphic; death is the state to which all human beings hurry. Verse 19 nullifies every hope that man may still have in this mortal life and identifies God as the destructor of man:

Come l'acqua scava la pietra
E il ciclone devasta il suolo

Like the water edges the stone
And the storm devastates the
ground

Così tu schianti
La speranza dell'uomo

Thus you break
The hope of man

Chapter 38

Following the speech of his last friend, the debate between Job and his friends comes to an end. It is the voice of God Himself that is presented in chapters 38-41. He answers Job in a storm by saying:

Chi è quell'uomo
Che con parole insensate oscura
I disegni divini?

Who is that man
That with foolish words obscures
Divine plans?

Man is defined from God's perspective. In a cynical way, He asks: "*Chi è quell'uomo?*" "Who is that man?" God's speech knows an almost endless set of rhetorical questions about the wonders of creation. The ignorant Job has to answer these questions, as they keep coming at an increasing tempo with the pressure on Job rising accordingly (Fokkelman, 2009, 244-245). In this chapter, God crushes man in His omnipotence and displays the finiteness of man by asking one rhetorical question after the other. For example, in verse 18:

La distesa terrestre l'hai scrutata?	Have you perceived the breadth of the earth?
Potresti dire che ti è tutta nota?	Can you say all is known to you?

With every verse, man becomes smaller.

Chapters 40 and 41

In chapters 40 and 41, we read God's words to Job in which he describes the two creatures he has created himself: Behemoth and Leviathan. The fact that God has power over these two potent beings completes the image of God that we have developed through these six quoted chapters—in comparison to and in the eyes of God man is nothing. God seems to only be interested in showing his own omnipotence in comparison to man's futility. God is the creator of heaven and earth and looks at man only to confront him with and punish him for his fault.

Così tu schianti	Thus you break
La speranza dell'uomo	The hope of man (14:19)

Levi begins his quotation of chapter 40 at verse 15, thereby leaving out the first verses in which God challenges Job to question His righteous law and to show that he is God's equal. These words of God indicate a turning point for Job, after this he no longer protests but becomes silent. Levi, however, chooses to start with God's de-

scription of His two powerful creatures, the second part of the chapter: “God creator of wonders and monsters crushes him under his omnipotence” (Levi, 2001, 11).

Chapters 38-41 have given rise to many theological discussions on the question of how to understand God’s speeches and the image of God represented in the “Book of Job.” As Newsom argues in her book, *The Book of Job, A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Job demolishes the traditional image of God in his speeches (Newsom, 2009, 31), wherein God is understood to be righteous and concerned with the well-being of man. After the Holocaust, the “Book of Job” became an important text used to discuss the fundamental enigma of unjust suffering and a good God. In the following section, I introduce different interpretations of Job after the Holocaust.

2.4 – Job after the Holocaust—Is There Meaning in Suffering?

In the “Book of Job,” the idea that man’s misery is the result of human sin is represented by Job’s friends, who protest against Job’s claim of being innocent. They state that Job must have sinned to deserve his suffering, thereby attributing a form of meaning to suffering and explaining how suffering and God can exist alongside one another. This voice of the friends is explicitly absent in Levi’s use of the book. The following section introduces the question whether we can speak of meaning and God in times of suffering, therefore discussing different post-Auschwitz interpretations of the Book of Job.

The question why we are confronted with evil while presuming the existence of and believing in an omnipotent and just God has become known as the problem of theodicy. For centuries, many attempts have been made to find a theoretical answer to this fundamental enigma, primarily in reference to a certain interpretation of the Bible that explained (original) sin as the source of evil (Van Riessen, 2007, 113). Auschwitz, however, announced the defeat of a

theoretical¹⁵ understanding of suffering, “the disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity” (Levinas, 2000, 97), a manifestation of evil that could not be reconciled with the belief that suffering has its comprehensible role in the historical progress toward the Good (Druker, 2009, 29). We have reached the end of theodicy, as Levinas called it in response to “the destruction of all balance between the explicit and implicit theodicy of Western thought and the forms which suffering and its evil take in the unfolding of this century” (Levinas, 2000, 161). This brought the attention of twentieth century theologians back from speculative metaphysical theory and explained their return to Job’s humane complaint that offers no answers, just the cry of man to God.¹⁶

Many post-war writers have wondered whether the use of the “Book of Job” was legitimate while speaking about suffering after the Holocaust because of the suspicion that it presents suffering as redemptive and meaningful.¹⁷ C. Fred Alford, in his book *After the Holocaust, The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction*, reads the story of Job as a “journey through affliction by which Job learns his proper place in the universe” (Alford, 2009, 39).¹⁸ Job learns that there is an order in the universe “that culminates in a sublime beauty,” which transforms his suffering into an experience of transcendence (129), filled with meaning. This is presented as the fundamental incongruity between Job and Primo Levi who, in *If This Is a Man*, describes the following episode: “‘Warum?’ I asked in my poor German. ‘Hier ist kein warum’ (there is no why here), he replied, shoving me back inside” (CW, SQU, 24). Following a psychological approach, Alford argues that Levi was unable to attribute any meaning to his experiences in Auschwitz despite the fact he described Auschwitz time and again as “his university” (Alford, 2009, 110).¹⁹

Emmanuel Levinas gave an interpretation of Job’s search for meaning in suffering in his previously mentioned essay “Useless Suffering.” Levinas’ experiences of suffering as a victim of the Second World War forced him to think about the (im)possibility of

speaking about God after the Holocaust (Van Riessen, 2007, 101). He is known for his critique on the primacy of ontology in the philosophical tradition and for stating that the core question must be: “what is the meaning of this suffering?” (116). Levinas presents pure suffering as “intrinsically senseless and condemned to itself with no way out” (Levinas, 2000, 93). In Job, he reads a refusal of theodicy right to the end of the book but sees Job remaining faithful to God and ethics despite pointless suffering. The essence of faith holds no promise in itself and offers no comfort (Van Riessen, 2007, 102); the infinite²⁰ is a disruption of order and no easy escape from the darkness of life (147). Yet, this does not self-evidently lead to the absence of meaning since “a beyond appears in the form of the interhuman” (Levinas, 2000, 94).

Is not the evil of suffering – extreme passivity, helplessness, abandonment, and solitude – also the unassumable, whence the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the half opening that a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh slips through – the original call for aid, for curative help, help from the other me whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation? (93)

This implies that for Levinas the ethical acquires meaning when the suffering of the other has significance for the subject (Van Riessen, 2007, 124). It is the moment in which the subject is being touched by the suffering of the other that Levinas indicates as the new possible finding place for a meaningful experience and understanding of God (125). We no longer wait for divine intervention and salvation from suffering but, according to Levinas, the inescapable obligation to the suffering of the other “brings us close to God in a more difficult, but also more spiritual, way than does confidence in any kind of theodicy” (Levinas, 2000, 94).²¹

With the discussion of the experience of meaning and transcendence in connection to suffering in the work of post-Auschwitz thinkers, I have offered an introduction to my argument on Levi, human suffering, and God in RR. Despite the suspicion that Levi’s

roads in RR do not, indeed, offer hope nor a redeeming solution for our solitude in the universe, I would like to explore whether RR could nevertheless be a source of meaning. The following section hopes to show the complexity and temporality of the absence and presence of a meaningful life and God in Levi's work—either found in ethics, laughter, or science—by performing a close reading of a selection from the 29 other chapters of RR. This is, in the first place, a decision to which I am obligated by my methodological choice to use the close reading approach to bring Levi's speech about humanity and God to the surface. However, it is also a reflection of my fundamental epistemological position, which makes me present Levi's language for humanity and God not as a truth that can be summarized with the help of a single theological concept but as a polyphony, which is a literary term developed by Mikhail Bakhtin.

Newsom, in her book *The Book of Job, A contest of Moral Imaginations*, uses the work of Bakhtin to deal with the problem of unity in the Book of Job (Newsom, 2003, 3). There is much discussion about the question whether the great diversity in styles, themes, and clashing conceptions of God in the “Book of Job” force us to the conclusion of multiple authorship. Newsom uses Bakhtin's idea of dialogic truth and polyphonic texts as a way to hold open the possibility of one author, who has actively brought into dialogue different visions of the world, aesthetics, and value structures (16). She uses Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, where he distinguishes three elements of the polyphonic texts: “it embodies a dialogic sense of truth (1); the author's position, although represented in the text, is not privileged (2); the polyphonic text ends without finalizing closure (3)” (21). There is a fourth aspect as well, which points to unfinalizability—dialogic truth is always open. It is to be defined more as an event than a system (23).

The fundamental core of an anthology is that it represents a plurality of voices, where—following Bakhtin on multiple-voiced discourse—words obtain their meaning through dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1984, 202). It is like Levi says in his introduction about the

order of RR chapters: “As if I was staging a dialogue across the centuries: as if to see in this way how two neighbors can react to each other, what would come (for instance) of an interaction between Homer and Darwin” (Levi, 2001, 8).

In the introduction to this chapter, I referred to the hybrid nature of Levi himself and his work. Marco Belpoliti calls RR, specifically, the book that is in virtue of this hybridity (Levi, 1997, ix). It is a book in which a wide variety of voices are brought into dialogue by Levi the chemist, technician, inventor, survivor, and poet. In imitation of the internal structure of the book, I look at those places where certain images of humanity and God are mentioned—not in order to search for a uniting truth, a theology of Levi, but to embrace the fragmentary and dialogizing character of this work in my theological interpretation. I now turn to the last chapter of the anthology, drawn at the opposite site of Job in the graphic.

3 – Ending Point: We are Alone

Levi says the following about the graphic in his interview with Alberto Gozzi:

That graphic was a joke. In the origin it was more than anything a quite serious joke, an attempt to collect a few of the human routes in one image. Put seriously, not that you have to believe in it that much, but the black holes do exist, not those of the astronomers, but ‘our’ black hole is death, the human itineraries all converge to that communal destiny. (Gozzi, 1997, 99)

The concept of Black Holes itself can suggest the inescapable dead end of our human lives but it represents an image of hope as well. According to Levi, the work that is performed by astrophysicists is to be described as nothing less than the greatest of all cultural revolutions. It is a revolution carried out in silence and we can do nothing more than “accept the vastness of the new celestial bodies, sup-

press fresh shudders, keep quiet and reflect” (Levi, 1997, 229). A deportment that reminds us of Job, who could do nothing more than accept that there are things that go beyond his influence and understanding. The astrophysicists have found proof that there is no life on the moon, on Venus, and on Mars.

We are alone. If we have interlocutors, they are so far away that, barring unforeseeable turns of events, we shall never talk to them; in spite of this, some years ago we sent them a pathetic message. Every year that passes leaves us more alone. Not only are we not the centre of the universe, but the universe is not made for human beings; it is hostile, violent, alien. In the sky there are no Elysian Fields, only matter and light, distorted, compressed, dilated, and rarefied to a degree that eludes our senses and our language. (Levi, 2001, 214)

The feeling of solitude is not only based on our suffering and certain death but also on our position in the universe as it is made known by scientists. However, the continuous expansion of our knowledge about the universe is a source of hope for Levi:

The heavens are not simple, but neither are they impermeable to our minds—they are waiting to be deciphered. The misery of man has another face, one imprinted with nobility; maybe we exist by chance, perhaps we are the sole instance of intelligence in the universe, certainly, we are immeasurably small, weak and alone, but if the human mind has conceived Black Holes, and dares to speculate on what happened in the first moments of creation, why should it not know how to conquer fear, poverty and grief? (214)

These are Levi’s own last words in the book, while introducing six pages by the scientist, Kip S. Thorne, about the search for Black Holes.²² Humanity is not only defined by its misery but by nobility as well. This nobility returns in each of the 30 chapters of the book;

being truly “humane,” standing up for humanity, proves to be a response to useless suffering. In the words I just quoted from RR, we see that Levi has special faith in the ability of science. For him, science is a source of hope—if scientists are able to think of Black Holes, why would we not find solutions for human misery? The ignorance or nonexistence of God does not have to make us desperate; man does still have his own abilities to move through life and make the world a better place.

I return, once again, to the “*Io e Dio*” interview. Grieco refers to Levi’s utterance about belief as a consolidating shortcut from emptiness by asking:

Grieco: Can’t this voice be filled by science?

Levi: No. Science studies the great machine of the cosmos, it reveals to us bit by bit its secrets, but it gives no answers to mankind’s big questions. The grand illusion that science could, in some sense, take God’s place faded some time ago. If you ask science about the ‘aims’ of life, it will reply: ‘Nothing to do with me.’ And leave it at that. (Belpoliti, 2001, 277)

Although science can fill the gaps of our questions about the universe and represents our great human potential, this quote shows us that speaking about the ends of life requires the courage to stare into the darkness beyond our knowledge and to dare to give words to that infinity. But how to answer the ultimate questions of man? I now turn to a close reading of the four roads that connect Job and Black Holes. Leading in this discussion is the aim to search for enrichment of the possible meanings of the words *humanity* and *God* in this particular book.

4 – In-Between: Four Possible Roads

4.1 – Introduction

We have now come to the four roads that connect Job and Black Holes. There the reader encounters a great diversity in authors, which reflects the breadth of Levi's areas of interests and experience.²³ As has previously been said, when opening the book the reader's eyes are immediately captured by the intriguing graphic that precedes the first chapter on Job. Does this graphic offer a clue for a possible interpretation of Levi's selection? Levi himself gives quite a nonchalant comment in his introduction: "The diagram that opens the anthology suggests four possible routes through some of the authors in view" (Levi, 1997, xxiv).

In the introduction to this chapter, I depicted *RR* as a book about man's position in the universe. The subsequent sections on Job and Black Holes have shown that man's life on earth is fragile, due to an indifferent universe and an omnipotent destructor, who is indifferent as well to the unjust suffering of humans. Alford interpreted the graphic as four roads without an exit, they rush down inescapably toward the Black Holes (Alford, 2009, 148). According to Alford, this means that there is no redemption but this does not self-evidently mean that life in itself cannot have any meaning. How to live in a world in which suffering, solitude, and the prospect of the black hole of death is our communal fate? Many interpreters have pointed to how the four roads remind us of the capacities of man—laughter, science, and ethics—to make life in this universe meaningful.²⁴ As Italo Calvino puts it in his afterword: "four lines of resistance to all despair" (240). Agreeing with Calvino that *RR* presents its readers with different forms of resistance to suffering, Parussa sees human action at the center of this resistance. He links this to Levi's "secular re-appropriation of Judaism" (Parussa, 2008, 134), while referring to Judaism's understanding of truth not as something that is known but done (136).

Massimo Giuliani also refers to "action" in his explanation of the

four roads. His book, *A Centaur in Auschwitz*, makes us aware that Levi does not provide any clues about how to understand the intriguing names he assigns to the four different lines: *la salvezza del riso*, *l'uomo soffre ingiustamente*, *statura dell'uomo*, and *la salvezza del capire*. Giuliani warns us against easily translating “salvezza” as “salvation,” which is too explicitly a religious concept to him, referring to the idea of redemption. “Salvation” is, thus, as Giuliani states, “inadequate to convey what Levi has in mind” (Giuliani, 2003, 33). In order to come to the right understanding of the two lines that refer to “salvezza,” Giuliani presents the term “salvation”—as a fusion of “salvation” and “action.” To him, this neologism has the advantage that it does not refer to the interference of a deity but points to “those peculiar actions that belong to and only to human beings: understanding and laughter” (33).

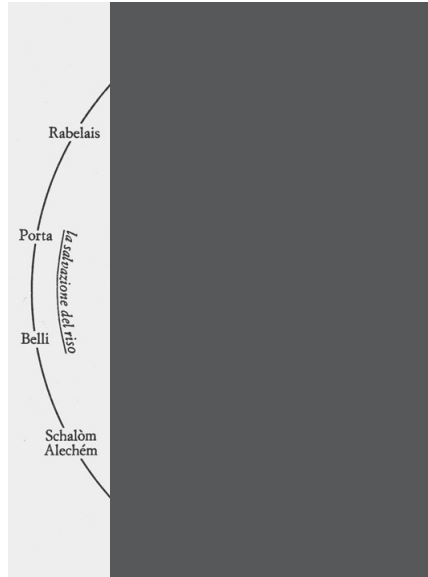
The image of God depicted by the “Book of Job” makes it undeniably clear that Levi does not expect the interference of a deity to save us from suffering and death, which prevents a misunderstanding about the signification of “salvation” already by reading the first pages of the anthology. It might even be likely that Levi uses the word deliberately, as a symbolization of the “after”: in this time in which the name “God” has lost its redemptive power, new sources of salvation are searched for. We see, during the close reading of the following pages, whether and how the capacities of man can indeed be called “ways of salvation.” I now want to link the four roads of the graphic to the interview “*Io e Dio*,” in which Grieco pulls the “spotlight” away from God and focuses our attention on man’s evildoing. This is in correspondence with the theologian Safranski, who suggested that we might be obligated to restate the theodicy question and turn our attention to the capacities of man: if God allows evil doing, how could man prevent it? (Safranski, 1997, 314). In the interview, Grieco asks Levi how to escape from this dead end in which we are caught and suggests that, instead of processing God—like Wiesel (and Job, JR)—we could hold man responsible for the evil of the world. Levi responds in the following manner:

This is how it is, we cannot do more than accept it. We are nothing more than a detail in this grand machine of the universe. And we cannot understand what is the margin of the autonomy that is reserved for us in this machine. We can, and have to, invent us a moral, and behave ‘as if’, never forgetting though that we are ‘guests’ of Nature, and strange guests which bring disorder all around. (Belpoliti, 1997, 289)

It is the combination of the human potential to cause suffering and our impossibility to escape unjust suffering, as represented by Job, which makes us into strange guests of the universe. However, in this interview Levi also commands us to the “as if”: “we can, and have to, invent us a moral, and behave ‘as if’” (Belpoliti, 1997, 289). According to Belpoliti, we can understand Levi’s graphic as a drawing of a “world map of resistance to suffering” (Belpoliti, 2015, 310). RR may, indeed, be seen as an attempt to search for a map of the labyrinth of life, although always postponing a systematic and complete whole (Giuliani, 2003, 14). I choose to approach RR as an intrinsically multi-voiced and inconclusive search for humanity in a hostile universe in which the two central roads represent the intriguing opposites of human existence: man suffers unjustly – the stature of man. I interpret the two outer roads as the “as if” roads of salvation, representing the human potential to, although temporarily, escape suffering, the absence of meaning, and solitude.

4.2 – The Salvation of Laughter: A Divine Comedy

The four assembled authors on the road of “the salvation of laughter”²⁵ all write abundantly about theological themes, God, and faithful characters. The occurrence of God on this road is less surprising than one may expect, as we see when looking at Kearney and Levinas on God and comedy. Can laughter be a source of salvation to man? When becomes laughter in the face of suffering a *divine* comedy? These are the two leading questions of this section.



Humor is known to have great effects on people. Being a form of entertainment that challenges our imagination (Bosman, 2012, 20), it enables us to put things into a new perspective. Giuliani calls laughter both a secular rite and a mark of Judaism; as laughter helps the Jews to live the Diaspora life (Giuliani, 2003, 33). Jewish humor can be understood as a source of salvation: “by laughing of their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them” (Cohen, 1990, 4). A famous Jewish proverb in response to suffering jokes: “If you want to forget all your troubles, put on a shoe that’s too tight” (5).

The humoristic response refuses to exalt suffering and empowers humans to transform their circumstances and alter their response to them (5). With this potential, we discern ourselves from the animal world—it is a fact that only humans are able to laugh. It has to do with the “playful” character of our human nature; we have the capacity to deal with two or more realities at the same time (Droogers, 2011, 81). This playfulness shows itself in our language

as well, which we shape “to communicate, to teach, to command. Language allows him to distinguish, to establish, to state things; in short, to name them and by naming them to raise them into the domain of the spirit” (Huizinga, 1949, 4). This is related to the function of narrating; we have the possibility to imagine ourselves another ending to our story, which is a uniquely human, hermeneutical, capacity. The fact that man can hold for true two realities “simultaneously and subjunctively” (Droogers, 2011, 81) can be regarded as the first indication of a relationship between humor and religion.

Humor is highly related to the potentiality of language, which is exemplified by the logical and linguistic nature of Jewish humor (Finkin, 2009, 89). Midrash, the commenting on the Torah, could be regarded a play on language, searching for different meanings of the words of the Hebrew text. It is “this basic hermeneutic of reading the multiple meanings of words, phrases, and clauses” that has been depicted as “typically Jewish” (Brotsky, 2011, 14). A perfect example of this Jewish playfulness with words is the work of Sholom Aleichem, of which Cohen writes: “What Tewje does is to turn the tables of tragedy by a verbal ingenuity: life gets the better of him, but he gets the better of the argument” (Cohen, 1990, 6). Reading the life story of Tewje in this way, could help discover that humor enables us to transform our painful present reality through language and laughter, *la salvazione del riso*. Focusing on Levi’s introduction to *Tewye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* by Aleichem, a less hopeful picture appears—after Auschwitz the humor of Tewje is no longer the same.

Levi on the Irrepressible Quibbler Tewje

Levi describes Tewje as a sadly divided man, being a Jew living in the Diaspora “his destiny is to be wrenched in two” (Levi, 2001, 147):

Tewje is a simple man but he has a high and noble ideal of the life of man on earth; he is a priest because every Jew is a priest, but at

the same time he wears his boots, drinks brandy, whips his poor horse, confined in the atavistic misery of the Russian countryside. He lives the contradictions in his own flesh, he does his utmost to resolve them, he seeks the just and the true with the intense courage of the patriarchs, and, like the characters of Thomas Mann, he recognizes himself in them, in a continuity that only the massacre was able to conquer. (148)

Levi, in his works, is always focused on hybridity and dichotomy, which is, as he puts to the fore in the preface, a basic feature of an anthology.²⁶ Alechem's literary character Tewje lives his life doing his best to resolve the contradictions he feels within himself, being a Diaspora Jew, and quibbles irrepressibly about the fundamental riddles of life. One of those riddles is the question of how the belief in God and unjust suffering can exist alongside each other. Where Cohen saw Tewje win his arguments by his "verbal ingenuity" (Cohen, 1990, 6), Levi sees Auschwitz as the destroyer of both the quibbler and his answer:

The irrepressible quibbler, the sharp-witted sage ('God himself can't abide those who have no money. And why? Because if God loved the poor they wouldn't be poor any longer'), is no more. Tewje exists no longer: the gas of Auschwitz and Stalin's camps have destroyed him. (Levi, 2001, 148)

The image of a God who can be understood as the answer to our questions on the universe, and the man who believed in this God, both have been destroyed by the concentration camps of the twentieth century. Tewje represents Eastern European Judaism that is almost completely destroyed by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.

In the next section, I want to find out whether a deepened understanding of humor can give way to a renewed speaking about God and humanity after the destruction of everything that "Tewje" stands for, beginning with Richard Kearney's book *Anatheism, Returning to God after God* in which he uses the concept of humor.

Philosophers on Man's Relationship with God: A Divine Comedy

The concept of a “divine comedy” is used by philosophers to speak about God as a being who is both visible and invisible, graspable and ungraspable. Humor is a central concept in Richard Kearney’s anatheistic wager, through which he searches for a new way to encounter the sacred in everyday existence. He defines humor as: “the ability to encounter and compose opposites: what I see as impossible and possible at one and the same time” (Kearney, 2011, 42). This is a recurring topic in the Bible—for example, in the story of the barren Sarah, who laughs when she hears that she will bear a child. In the event of the impossible becoming possible, laughter is man’s only available response. Humor can thus be regarded a creative response to the experience of enigma, contradiction, and paradox, experiences that remind us that we are creatures of the earth (humus) (42). I have depicted the suffering in *RR* as an image of chaos, the image of an unjustly suffering Job reminds us that we do not rule our own lives—we do act but some things happen to us independent of our influence or consent. “We laugh or weep when we do not know” (43), as Kearney perfectly grasps the state that makes us roar with laughter. He combines this with the idea of a divine comedy:

Humbly acknowledging the earthly and earthy limits of human experience, it makes our relationship to the ungraspable Other a divine comedy ... For example, the famous story of the beggar who approaches the Messiah at the gates of Rome and, tapping him on the shoulder, asks: ‘When will you come?’ (43)

Kearney describes God as the divine stranger who surpasses our self-created and fallible order, who puts everything upside down—the barren woman receives a child (named laughter, Isaak), the first become the last, the master is the servant.²⁷ How to respond to this sacred chaos? What we can do is laugh “at the divine comedy of existence” (43). Levinas also refers to a divine comedy while trying to say something about God. The divine comedy is like

a game in which God makes himself ‘knowable’ and ‘unknowable’ in the shape of the other – neighbor, stranger. In the term ‘divine comedy’ he [Levinas] acknowledges the metaphysical desire always present in man – desire for God, for contact with a transcendent reality, desire for knowledge of this transcendent reality-, but he makes it clear that this desire always runs up against a limit. (Van Riessen, 2007, 2)

The divine comedy in which man finds himself is staged by an intriguing interplay of revealed and hidden knowledge, of the earthly and transcendent reality. The image of a God who is hidden but gets partly revealed, just for a short moment, brings us to the discussion of Carlo Porta, another writer on the road of laughter.

Carlo Porta—As Pleased Another

In his introduction to Porta, Levi explains his choice in the following manner:

I am bound to Carlo Porta by an intense and lasting rapport of which I cannot define all roots [radice]. Perhaps it is because his characters, such as this Giovannin, the Ninetta, the Marchion, are Jobs in miniature, good human material who, for some other’s pleasure, are being worn out, torn apart and finally ripped down to pieces.²⁸ (Levi, 2001, 48)

Here, we see Levi reformulate his interpretation of Job—a good man who is destroyed slowly and completely. The “for some other’s pleasure” must be understood, in the context of speaking about Job, as a reference to God who, in Levi’s interpretation, finds pleasure in Job’s destruction. In Italian, Levi writes: “*come altrui piace*.” Reading this sentence reminds us of the scene in *If This Is a Man* in which Levi, imprisoned in Auschwitz, is on his way to fetch the soup, together with the boy Pikolo, and starts to teach him scenes from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In the context of *If This Is a Man*, Levi interprets Dante’s “*come altrui piacqu*e” as a reference to the why of

their fate, of their being at that particular place at that moment. In both *RR* and *If This Is a Man*, it refers to a deity, a God who has a will of his own and influences the fate of human beings. In *If This Is a Man*, these words are situated in the context of a short revelatory moment through which Levi gets a glimpse of his destiny, of the why of them being there. It is a short moment—it pleases the other to leave again, to reclose the seas. In this moment, Levi learns to see himself connected to a grander whole that determines his destiny and finds pleasure in his fate.²⁹ In *RR*, the *come altrui piace* brings to mind a cruel picture. The other is someone who finds joy in the suffering of Job. This image reaffirms the idea of God as a distant being who is not interested in the needs of man. The comedy of God's hide and seek does not give rise to laughter but is the source of man's suffering.

I want to conclude this section by returning to its other main question: whether and how laughter can become a source of salvation to man? This brings us to Francois Rabelais.

Francois Rabelais—Laughter as Salvation

Francois Rabelais is found in the eleventh chapter of *RR*: “*Meglio scrivere di riso che di lacrima*,” better to write of laughter than of tears. Rabelais is introduced as monk, doctor, philologist, naturalist, humanist, and traveler. His characters are filled with paradoxes, they are both grotesque eaters and drinkers as nimble philosophers (Levi, 2001, 77). What Rabelais can teach us is that to love human beings means to love them as they are, body and soul, warts and all. Levi clearly admires the fact that in Rabelais' entire work a single melancholy page is hard to find and yet Rabelais knew misery well enough. Rabelais keeps quiet about it because he—a good doctor even when he is writing—does not accept it, he wants to cure it:

*Mieulx est de ris quede larmes
escrire*

*Pour ce que rire est le propre de
l'homme*

It is better to write of laughter than
tears

For to laugh is the right of man
(77)

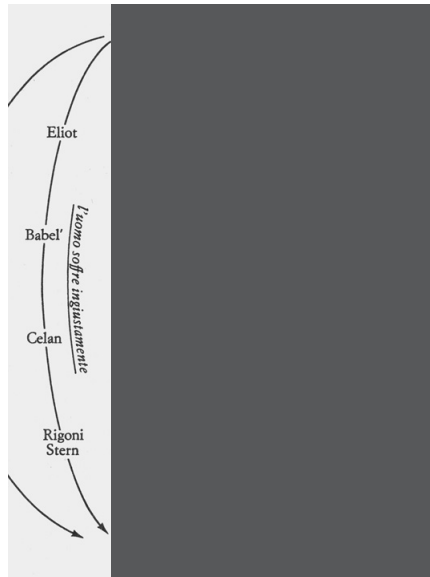
According to Levi the world of Rabelais can be beautiful in the present because the joys of life are available to all human beings—the joys of virtues, knowledge, as well as wine and food. All these joys of life are *dono divino*, a divine gift, even drinking bouts are theologically laden in the stories of Rabelais. In them, suffering does not have the final word but can be cured by laughter. The joys of life transform suffering into laughter—it is the right of man to live life to the fullest—and with that message Levi opens the road of laughter. Joy is to be found in the world, in virtue, intelligence, and bodily pleasures, all gifts of God, according to Rabelais. This is the heart of *il salvazione del riso*: laughter cannot save us from experiencing suffering and heading toward the Black Holes but it makes life worth living in the meantime.

4.3 – Man Suffers Unjustly

Italo Calvino's most important observation, in the essay "*Le quattro strade di Primo Levi*," is that, despite the ordering into four differing roads, all chapters of RR are drenched with the theme of suffering (Levi, 1997, 241).³⁰ Levi's own suffering, which is probably known to any reader of the anthology, stays unmentioned in his introductions of the different authors. Chapter 13 is an exception in this respect; there, Levi explains his personal affinity for the work of Roger Vercel in the following way:

At this point in the anthology there should be a caesura, a discontinuity, which corresponds to my year in Auschwitz, in which, besides the hunger for food, I suffered a hunger for printed matter. Tug-boat is the first book I held in my hands after this long fast, and I read the whole night in the frightening and decisive night in which the Germans hesitated between murder and flight, and chose flight. (Levi, 2001, 110)

This being Levi's own personal experience with unjust suffering, the anthology offers a broad scope of the ways in which human be-



ings can be confronted by suffering. How to be human during and after this experience? And, in the particular context of this anthology in which he honors writers, how is an author able to write about suffering?

The second road is explicitly linked to this theme of unjust suffering. Walking on this road we encounter three writers who themselves have suffered immensely, all in situations of war. The question of how to write “after suffering” receives different focal points in each of the three different contexts—how to write about violence (Babel), how to write for yourself/an audience (Celan), and how not to lose your dignity (Stern)?

Compassion in the Face of Suffering

I first take a look at Isaak Babel, whom Levi introduces in the chapter as “The Jew on Horseback.” As Levi describes in his introduction, Babel was executed by order of Stalin in 1941 and wrote about the Russo-Polish War of 1920 in the stories “Crossing the Zbruc”

and “Salt” (140). Babel is known by his honest descriptions of the brutalities of this war, which can be a shock to his readers. As Levi comments: “The cruelty of these stories leaves us dumb” (140). It makes Levi wonder what is a suitable manner in which to write about violence and the suffering it causes, a question that must have been on his mind during his own writing as well. If you cross the line, “you fall into mortal sins, aestheticism, sadism, prostitution for the cannibalistic consumption of a certain public” (140). According to Levi, “Babel is close to that limit but he doesn’t cross it. He is saved by his compassion, which is modest and swathed in irony” (140). The compassionate hand of Babel legitimizes his description of violent scenes. Compassion of the author for the suffering, misfortune, and misbehavior of literary characters is a virtue that Levi admires in many of his literary inspirers.

The Trauma of Language

In his preface, Levi writes how he feels the nearest kinship with Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot (Levi, 1997, xxii). Celan is one of the most well-known poets after the Holocaust, whose work is a testimony to the trauma, or the impossibility, of language. His work is an answer to the call to testify of the inexpressible (Derrida, 2015, 105) in a “constant circling of language and time around the ‘essential lacuna’ of trauma and testimony” (Moore, 2005, 88). When introducing his poem “*Todesfuge*” it is the impenetrability of Celan’s work that is on Levi’s mind when he wonders to what extent the reader must be able to understand the meaning of poetry.

German philosopher Theodor Adorno states that “You cannot write poetry after Auschwitz” (Adorno, 1951, 34). He regards it a brutality to write anything poetical or nonhistorical about the Holocaust. Many agree that this expression shows how the Holocaust has changed our view on the art of poetry and its connection to reality.³¹ Celan is aware that Auschwitz had disrupted any continuity in the meaning of language, “yet the survivor continues to feel the imperative to speak the darkneses of deathbringing speech” (90). This irresolvable tension comes to expression in his poetry.

Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandrose.³²

It is this fundamental discussion on language after Auschwitz that echoes in Levi's introduction to Celan's "Death Fuge," the only poem of Celan's oeuvre that he could understand and had engraved in his heart, when he writes:

To write is to transmit; what can you say if the message is coded and no one has the key? You can say that to transmit this particular message, in this specific way, was necessary to the author, but with the rider that it is also useless to the rest of the world. I think that this is the case with Paul Celan, the Jewish-German poet, upon whose shoulders fell burden after burden, grief after grief, culminating in his suicide at the age of fifty in 1970. (Levi, 2001, 198)

Dignity

The third writer who suffered immensely is Mario Rigoni Stern, whom Levi admires for his ability to remain authentic and dignified in times of destruction.

The fact that Mario Rigoni exists has something of the miraculous about it. Firstly, there is the miracle of his own survival: this man, so hostile to all forms of violence, was pitched by fate into all the wars of his epoch, and he emerged unscratched and uncorrupted from the French, Albanian and Russian fronts, and the Nazi camps. But what is also miraculous is that Rigoni should be what he is, that he has managed to retain his authenticity and dignity in an era of suicidal urbanization and confusion of values. (201)

In the previously given graphic, Levi honors these three writers who were able to write and to maintain their humanity through writing, despite their incomprehensible and unjust suffering. Levi states, in an interview, that he chose to incorporate Eliot and Babel because he finds something that overcomes despair in their work. In the work of Eliot, it is faith that has this capacity, “which I [do] not share”—Levi does not forget to add (Belpoliti, 1997, 125). I will now give some extended attention to the only author on this road who is not known for his suffering and gets mentioned first—T.S. Eliot, “the great English poet from the twentieth century” (Levi, 2001, 195) and his play *Murder in the Cathedral*.

God Abandons Us

“*Prima dell’assassinio, e dopo*,” before the murder and after, is the name of Levi’s 26th chapter on T.S. Eliot. Celan, Stern, and Hermann Langbein on Auschwitz follow this chapter to end with Black Holes. Levi describes how the argument of Eliot’s play is about Thomas Becket who, before he became a saint, was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century and who was killed by four politically motivated assassins while performing the Holy Mass. Levi takes up two chorus pieces, one from before and one after the act of murder. This chorus is made up from the women of Canterbury—unsophisticated women, who are not particularly pious and are experienced in the hardness of life, who foresee that something is going to happen that goes beyond their understanding. When the murder has taken place, “they sense that something is happened that cannot be repaired, it is an ‘instant eternity of evil and wrong’” (Levi, 2001, 195). This will never be healed, the evil and wrong is instant and eternal, and can only be erased by washing the wind and cleaning the sky. Levi’s introduction to Eliot’s work has several aspects that I find particularly interesting. First, the title Levi has given to the chapter: *Prima dell’assassinio, e dopo*. What does the chorus sing before and after being confronted with this horrendous event?

Second, I would like to look more closely at Levi's description of the women. He writes: "*Ne sono testimoni le donne di Canterbury*" (Levi, 1997, 207). These women of Canterbury are witnesses. This sentence has important implications. On the one hand, it implies a passive role of the chorus—they have no influence on the events, they expect it and mourn over it but are not able to change the course of things. They are helpless in the face of suffering. They are the witnesses, the spectators, who can only but search for acceptance of the suffering that has taken place. Naming the women "witnesses" resonates inevitably with the position of many in and after Auschwitz. They are witnesses of the suffering of others, passively, just as Levi himself said that the real witnesses are those who did not return from the gas chambers, who had actively undergone the event.³³ The voice of the women of Canterbury is the after voice of the ones that survived. The chorus sings two songs, before and after.

The *before* song:

God gave us always some reason, some hope; but now a new terror has soiled us, which none can avert, none can avoid, flowing under our feet and over the sky; ...

God is leaving us, God is leaving us, more pang, more pain than birth or death. (Levi, 2001, 196)

In his introduction, Levi writes about the assassin as, in the words of Eliot, an "instant eternity of evil and wrong." It is a kind of evil that is from another order than the women have ever experienced before, of a greater agony than giving birth or death—like Job who cries out that he wished he was never born because this suffering appears to be unbearable. Two times they scream: "God abandons us, God abandons us." The suffering they expect feels like abandonment by God.

The *after* song:

Every horror had its definition,
Every sorrow had a kind of end:
In life there is not [sic] time to grieve long.
But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,
An instant eternity of evil and wrong. (197)

This horror and pain is not to be compared to that of life on earth, where every suffering knows its end. This one is different, “an instant eternity of evil and wrong.” It is a suffering that must be related to an entity beyond this human life and time, this kind of suffering refers to an eternity, to a God that has abandoned them.

It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled,
but the world that is wholly foul.
Clear the air! Clear the sky! Wash the wind! Take the stone from the stone, take the skin from the arm, take the muscle from the bone, and wash them. Wash the stone, wash the bone, wash the brain, wash the soul, wash them wash them! (197)

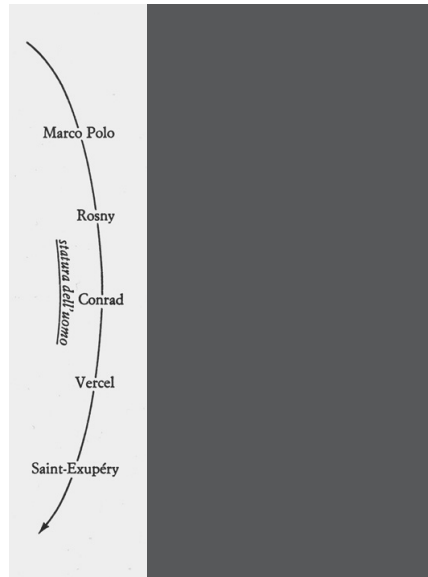
Everything is affected—not only they or their houses or city but the entire world. The women of the chorus express the most intense experiences of affectedness. Everything is changed, everything is affected: the outer description of the experience of “the after.” Everything has to be cleaned: from the skin, to the bones, the stone, the brain, the soul. Wash, wash! It is an utmost impressive piece that Levi quotes here from Eliot, which, written in 1935, could serve as a description of the way in which Auschwitz has infected the entire world and cannot be washed off from the skin (literary), the mind, and the skies. The witnesses can cry it out wholeheartedly but they know it cannot be cleansed.³⁴

Eliot’s play has been interpreted as a piece on martyrdom, sacrifice, and submission to the will of God (Cooper, 2006, 88), events

which the chorus is only able to witness, accept, and consent to (Virsis, 1972, 405). The play teaches the spectators that suffering is only to be accepted and that man, in the shape of Becket, has to consent to the divine will. In the play, God is presented as the “un-suffering first agent,” who is the giver of suffering that man must undergo (Clarke, 1971, 46). Interestingly enough, Robert N. Shorter compares Becket to Job on several levels—both suffered as a result of their devotion to God, regard themselves as sinless, come to recognize their sin through an unexpected fourth visitor, are saved from the brink of damnation, and are found acceptable in the sight of God (88). What is particularly of interest for our discussion here is that Shorter states that the kernel point of the knowledge that both Becket and Job have learned is that God is greater than man (89). This reminds of Levi’s concluding remarks on Job: “It is an unequal contest: God the creator of wonders and monsters crushes him under his omnipotence” (Levi, 2001, 11).

God is depicted as giver of suffering in the face of which man stands helpless. In his play, Eliot pleads for passivity—undergoing and accepting suffering is the only option for the man who suffers or witnesses suffering. In all the stories on the road of *l'uomo soffre ingiustamente*, suffering is explicitly present and indeed inevitable. That is the connotation of “*ingiustamente*,” suffering that appears to come independently of our behavior, sin, or good intentions. And, even if we contest with God, the voice from the whirlwind will have the last word—our suffering is inevitable. The image we get of God is that he is not only greater than man but that he is unjust as well. He does not give us things on our own merit but acts with us as if ignorant of who we are of what we do. The connotation of the unjust suffering man is an unjust God.

With respect to Mario Rigoni Stern, Levi writes that it is a miracle he was able to preserve his authenticity and dignity in times of witnessing and experiencing (unjust) suffering. Who is this man that suffers and how can he become or keep on being a “great man?” These questions lead us to the third road: *statura dell'uomo*, greatness of man.



4.4 – Greatness of Man

Massimo Giuliani translates the name of this road as “dignity of human being.”³⁵ *Statura*, thus understood as “dignity,” refers to the negation of human dignity in the “Book of Job” and in the twentieth century Lager (Giuliani, 2003, 33-34). When consulting dictionaries, Giuliani’s explanation seems to reflect his interpretation of the graphic more than the literal translation of the word *statura*. According to the Italian-English and Italian-Dutch dictionary,³⁶ *statura* refers to stature, to height (in Dutch: *gestalte*). This human height can refer to either the physical height of human beings (or animals) or to the moral greatness or smallness. This “greatness of man” is reflected in Levi’s introduction to Job, where he describes Job’s being in a very physical manner. We first read how Job lowers his head in respect to the free gift of good and evil from the hand of God. Then, we see him sitting down, bereft, among the ashes, scraping

himself with a potsherd; a state which is connected to Job's contending with God. In conclusion, we discover that God destroys all that is left of any stature, or height, of Job: "God the creator of wonders and monsters crushes him under his omnipotence" (Levi, 2001, 11). The height of man gets actively crushed by the omnipotence of his creator.

Job is known to be a just and pious man but how to remain a great man when confronted with suffering? Is accepting good and evil from the hand of God an image of greatness? Or does contending with this God show man's *statura*? Elie Wiesel is known for criticizing Job for resigning himself in confrontation with God. Wiesel himself built his relationship with God on protest and always "sought to maintain the dignity of Job and the Holocaust victims his story represents" (Greenspoon, 2001, 188). The road of *statura dell'uomo* refers most explicitly to Levi's description of humanity; God, on this road, is apparently absent. Sergio Parussa detects a secular ethics in RR that, in correspondence with the Jewish idea of morality, focuses on emancipation and human action. In Levi's oeuvre, it is the human potentiality to work that can help "the individual to maintain his integrity as a subject resisting slavery, annihilation, relapse into the nothingness of matter and the black holes of history"³⁷ (Parussa, 2008, 138).

The Adventurous Man

The first stop on this third road is Marco Polo, whom Levi calls "The Curious Merchant." Levi praises him for his accomplishments and describes Polo as a merchant—he is a specialist and a craftsman, who is attentive, humorous, precise, and curious. A man of stature, so to say.

Knowing oneself to be a man of stature asks for a certain self-confidence (Levi, 2001, 129). The book by Joseph-Henri Rosny (second stop on this road) is, according to Levi, written in a time in which our society had not started to doubt itself yet and had gone in search of its noble origins like those of Italy and Greece. In "The Pact with the Mammoths," it is the tribe of the Ulhamrs that go on

an adventure when their fire is extinguished and they do not know how to light it again. While encountering a great mammoth, they are able to build a pact with this powerful creature, a real accomplishment (38). “Adventure” is the overarching theme of this road and all four stories are tales of adventure in which men are able to do great things.

Adventure books are the favorites of many children. They teach them that life is not to be planned from childhood to adulthood (Palmer, 2016, 180) and dare them to fantasize, explore, improvise, and be courageous. Reading from men who had sailed the seas and survived on deserted islands teaches children and adults alike that they, too, can trust their instincts and human capabilities. Levi is aware that man’s contemporary adventure might not be the same as it was in the pre-technological era. He uses the stories of Roger Ver-
cel³⁸ to show that, nowadays, adventure is still with us and that “the relationship between man and machine is not necessarily one of alienation, but, in fact, can enhance and consolidate the old rapport between man and nature” (Levi, 2001, 101). This sentence is a resonance of the overarching theme of the book—the search for the right understanding of man in the universe. It seems to suggest that the old rapport between man and nature is one in which man is able to “show courage and ingenuity” (101) and to know how to make good use of machines while being confronted with the challenging circumstances presented by the natural world.

The following section tries to answer the question whether God can be found somewhere in the relationship between human beings and nature even without the word “God” being mentioned explicitly.

Encountering the Sacred

Levi takes two stories by Ver-
cel about captain Renaud, who sails a ship called The Cyclone, that is dedicated to saving other ships that are in need. In the first story, the crew of captain Renaud is drifting toward a cliff because of a rope that is wrapped around the propeller, making The Cyclone uncontrollable. The Cyclone, which has

saved many ships, is now drifting ashore itself, leaving its captain powerless. Renaud philosophizes about nature while looking at the rocks that the ship inevitably approaches. Although this seems to be absurd to him, he feels sympathy for the immobility of the rocks, “rocks that stood up to the sea and reappeared after every wave, like a ship strongly anchored” (Levi, 2001, 109). However, the awe and wonder turn into dread when he realizes that he is trapped, that this ensemble of water and sea has

nothing to do with him [but] was simply going to carry him along in its chaotic currents, break him, together with itself, all in a moment, and then, after the end of him, go on crashing eternally against the reef. (109)

Man has an ambiguous relationship to nature—admiring its strength and beauty but, at the same time, knowing that it will always be more powerful and cannot be stopped by human beings—we must be prepared to be “crushed eternally.” Then, however, Renaud gives the command to drop the anchors and it is the boatman Laurant who finally gets the “monstrous rope” (111) clear after half an hour of hard work. Afterwards, the ship’s direction can finally be changed and they rescue themselves from the destructive forces of nature. In this story, we see how human potential can rescue us from crashing ourselves on the “Black Holes.”

In the second story, Renaud and his crew help a burning ship to quench the fire threatening to consume it. They go to the bottom of one of its holds and see the room filled with wooden packing cases. The boxes turn out to be filled with dolls, lying on their backs with their eyes closed:

The presence of these dolls; their sleep, all in a row; the cry of the one which they had disturbed, now lying across the others with her little arms stretched out – all this was so unexpected, in such a spot, at such a time, that the four men hesitated about doing anything or saying anything. They were as abashed as though

they were in church. One of the sailors picked up the doll Renaud had dropped, and gently put it back among its sisters, on its back. (114)

This passage of Vercel's story helps me to introduce another basic element of Kearney's anatheism—sacrament. His plea for a holiness of the everyday can be of great use to understanding speaking about a faded boundary between the sacred and the profane in modern times. Kearney's chapter "In the Flesh" can show how the material, the here and now, can be a source of the sacred. Interpreting the encounter of the boatmen and the sleeping dolls, with the help of Kearney, provides another view of concrete, material life and shows that the sacred can be found in midst of it.

The philosopher Husserl was the impetus behind this type of thinking about the relationship between the ordinary and the sacred (Kearney, 2011, 87). From 1956 until 1960, Merleau-Ponty held lectures at the Collège de France, where he tried to rethink God through nature. In this way, he resisted a theism that removed God from the natural and human world (92). In the work of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf, Kearney sees moments in which the ordinary gets consecrated, moments that, with Joyce, can be called "epiphanies"—acts of transfiguration by which the ordinary becomes the sacred (102).

It can be suggested that the encounter of the boatmen with the dolls can be understood as just such an epiphany.³⁹ An ordinary secular moment and place get transformed into a sacred time and place—the men are so astonished that they cannot move or speak a word, they feel like they are in church, on holy ground. This experience transforms the otherwise solid captain Renaud:

He thought of the fire. He thought of these cases burning like matches, these thousands of tresses going up in flames, these little heads bursting, with their eyes popping out. The idea upset him more than many a valuable cargo he had seen go to the bottom. (Levi, 2001, 114)

The encounter makes an appeal to the four men and they cannot turn their heads away from the boxes—the one disturbed doll must be laid back together with her sisters and the ship must be saved because of their presence. When the boatmen are gazing at the faces of the vulnerable dolls on the burning ship, they are pulled out their being here and now and are called into action to save the ship and the dolls on it. With Kearney's thought on anatheism in mind, we must state that this encounter with the ordinary holiness can only be temporarily; it lights up and disappears as fireflies in the darkness of the night. In the case of "the ship of dolls," it was only a spark that made them sink to the bottom of the sea, just before reaching the harbor.

The religious on this road of *statura dell'uomo* may not be filled with religious practices and references to the transcendental while mentioning God explicitly. Nevertheless, it is apparent that, in the piece on the greatness of man, we see four tough boatmen being awed by the sight of sleeping dolls. The encounter with the faces of the dolls makes them unable to look away and challenges them to come into action, to show their capacities to save the ship and the dolls within it. The sacred encounter challenges them to be men of greatness.

"The Great God Absolute"

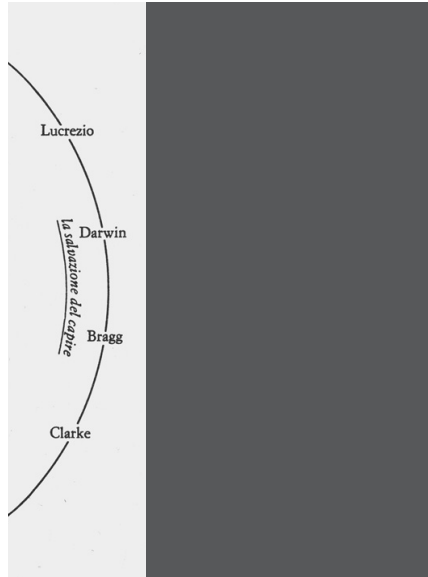
I will move off-road for a short moment by taking our attention away from the graphic and focusing it toward the story of Moby Dick by Melville. There, we read an extended homage to Starbuck—the boatman of a ship that hunts the whale Moby Dick—to his physical strength and courageousness. The narrator warns us that we might become witnesses to the "fall of valor in the soul" (Levi, 2001, 121). We are told that this is the worst of sights, our hearts bleed when looking at the spectacle of a valor-ruined man. This episode reminds me of the confrontation with the *Muselmänner* in the camps—Levi had to witness the loss of dignity of many great, ordinary, men. The men and women of Auschwitz, all of us, have an inner dignity that can be ruined or celebrated. As Melville puts it:

But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wield a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality! (Levi, 2001, 120-121)

In the story of *Moby Dick*, the dignity of man is considered to be given to us by God, a voice that places this turn to the potential of man into a surprising, new perspective.

4.5 – The Salvation of Understanding

On the road of understanding, the titles of the works cited are utterly insightful: “On the Nature of the Universe” (Lucretius), “The Origin of Species” (Darwin), “Concerning the Nature of Things” (Bragg), and “Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible” (Clarke).⁴⁰ Understanding the universe and the position of human beings in it is of fundamental importance for Levi. Reading the work of Bragg at the age of sixteen made him decide to become a chemist—the tools of the scientist reach very far, “perhaps infinitely far? If so, we live in a comprehensible universe, one accessible to our imagination, and the anguish of the dark recedes before the rapid spread of research,” writes Levi about Bragg (31). With every new discovery or invention, man enlightens the obscurity of ignorance. We live in a comprehensible world, a belief held “against the discouraging and lazy herd of those who see matter as infinitely, fruitlessly, tediously divisible” (31). Infinity is a source of fear—it is the material, the knowable that is the source of hope and support for a man living in this universe. Lucretius, the first stop on the road, was silenced at the end of Antiquity because of his search for a rational explanation of the natural world but Levi acknowledges him for his longing to liberate man from suffering and fear (136). Knowledge disarms pain and fear—what can be understood



cannot hurt us or make us afraid or, at the very least, it diminishes it. *Salvezza del capire*: understanding can be life support.

Science and Religion

Looking for “humanity” and “God” on this road, we are directed toward chapter three, on Charles Darwin, a man who is contested by believers because he dismantled many confessional dogmas. For Levi though,

in Darwin’s work, as in his life, a deep and serious religious spirit breathes, a sober joy of a man who extracts order from chaos, who rejoices in the mysterious parallel between his own reasoning and the universe, and who sees in the universe a grand design. (25)

Here, we find a direction sign for Levi’s definition of “being religious,” understood as the mild joy of seeing a certain order in the

universe. It is a religious joy to see a parallel between the ideas of man and the universe we are living in. Levi calls this simultaneity mysterious—the parallel is never to be grasped fully. This is perhaps due to the fact Darwin sees a “grand design,” which indicates that the extracted order is neither random nor reductionist but made by a designer, who could be called God. The religious spirit is connected to seeing order, which Levi sometimes does and sometimes does not. It is as if we find ourselves on the free swinging metal clappers, hanging in the giant clock of life, moving back and forth between order and disorder. In the graphic that directs the book, we see this ambiguous order that begins and ends with the utter darkness of human life. The religious spirit breathes there, where order is presumed but is then lost in search for answers to new, revealed questions: “It is typical of the great answers that they give rise to big new questions” (Levi, 2001, 25). The realm of the religious is no stranger to man’s search for understanding but can be found in midst of it, as Levi’s introduction to Darwin assumes. Darwin seems to acknowledge man’s small position in the universe but does find a way to speak of the greatness of man: “Denying man a privileged place in creation, he reaffirms with his own intellectual courage the dignity of man” (Levi, 2001, 25).

Living life means discovering, at a certain moment, that we are not the center of the universe and have no privileged position. Starting with Job, we became aware that we have no privileged position in the universe when God asks Job where he was as He, God, laid the foundations of the earth. This does not have to be the end point of speaking about the dignity of man. This is what Levi makes clear to us with the help of Darwin and many others, using their descriptions of man as curious, thoughtful, wise, nice to others, etc. RR shows us both the unprivileged position of man and—despite of or thanks to it—the *statura dell’uomo*. We might even regard the stature of man to be understood as a commandment⁴¹ to the reader, like Levi states in the final sentence of his introduction to Bertrand Russell: “The human condition is miserable but ... it is idle to mope around complaining, ... one ought to make every effort to improve it” (163).

5 – How to Understand this Anthology?

In this last section, I formulate an answer to the question of how Levi's language for humanity and God in *The Search for Roots* can be understood. I explain my interpretation of the roads displayed in the graphic as the "as if" roads of salvation by looking at how theologians wrote about the "as if" while thinking about the complex relationship between humanity and God.

The Theological "As If"

In the twentieth century, theologians have used the idea of the "as if"⁴² to formulate a response to the evolving complexity when speaking about man and God in an enigmatic universe. The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writes to his friend Eberhard Bethge in 1944:

And we cannot be reasonable unless we recognize that we have to live in the world '*etsi deus non daretur*' [translation: 'as if there were no God'] ... The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand. (Bonhoeffer, 1972, 300)

Bonhoeffer speaks about the adulthood of humankind; in the (near) future, man might no longer need God to give answers on the ultimate question of humanity. We have science, art, and ethics to guide us and it might even go better now without God than in earlier times with God. "God loses ground," as Bonhoeffer puts it (272), the church is only there to answer the last questions of man about death and sin but what if these questions fall away as well?⁴³ Bonhoeffer sees no solution in pointing man to his unseen misery in order for religion to give the consoling answer. According to him, the assertiveness of modern-day man brings us to the right knowledge of our position before God and we should live as people who organize their lives without God. This gives way to think about God anew: it is the weak God who lets himself be pushed out of life onto

the cross who can truly be with us (300-301). Bonhoeffer speaks of Christ as the Lord of the world, presenting us a suffering God (Kearney, 2011, 67). Interestingly enough, for Bonhoeffer, it is the powerless God that makes “us capable of life, resistance, and rebirth” (66). The absence of a sovereign God and the vision of a suffering One enables man to turn to the other in need (67), giving way for real humanity for the other.⁴⁴

German philosopher, Rüdiger Safranski, writes about the “as if” in his book *Evil and the Drama of Freedom*. He describes how Job doubts the order of things and has seen God change from being the ground (Grund) to being the abyss (Abgrund) of things (Safranski, 1997, 98). Safranski refers to Voltaire, who concluded in a famous poem after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that nature cannot be the source of morality (311). It was Immanuel Kant who stated that the authentic voice of God is not to be heard in nature but in our own conscience. Kant depicted Job as a man who speaks of his despair provoked by his being abandoned by God but is, despite this, faithful to his piety and to his suffering before God. Safranski wants to emphasize that it is, in fact, the strange and impenetrable God before whom we stand, who mirrors our world full of evil—our *Welt zum Abgrund*, the abyss-world in which evil lives. God is as strange to us as we humans are to ourselves but we can only stand before God in his incomprehensibility (314). Based on his interpretation of Job, Safranski presents religion as that which keeps us from fleeing away from the inexplicability of the world, reminding us that we are only guests in the universe. This is in contrast to totalitarian ideologies that want to dismiss the human feeling of insecurity and solitude by offering us an answer to everything (327). The unknowing is our basic feeling, our solitude in an evil world in spite of which we should behave as if:

Eingedenk das Böse, das man tun und das einem angetan werden kann, kann man immerhin versuchen, so zu handeln, als ob ein Gott oder unsere eigene Natur es gut mit uns gemeint hätten. (330)

The “as if” motif has thus been introduced to sustain different theological arguments. In the case of Bonhoeffer, it is introduced in the context of post-religious faith, as if God does not exist, and in the case of Safranski, as if God or our nature has the best intentions with human life. What they have in common is the attempt to postpone all definitive knowledge of God, which leads toward a turn to the suffering God and the suffering other (Bonhoeffer), and the standing before God in his incomprehensibility (Safranski).

Conclusion

I want to present the outer roads of Levi’s graphic as the “as if” roads of salvation, inspired by the way twentieth century theologians, such as Bonhoeffer and Safranski, have introduced this motive. Living in a chaotic world in which God seems to be an ignorant or even hostile being, Levi moves our attention toward man. Can our human potential save us? Can it be a source of coping with our suffering, behaving ethically, and being a “man of stature” and can it decipher our questions about the universe? Despite the fact that we get inescapably crushed under the hostility of the universe, the book offers an impressive collection of examples of human dignity and reflects Levi’s wish to behave as if we are able to be of greatness and find ourselves a moral. It is a fundamental aspect of the book that, instead of falling into despair, Levi feels and expresses the imperative to turn man toward the good and to focus on the potential of man in laughter, ethics, and science. The “as if” also nuances this belief in man, based on the awareness that we are strangers in the universe, subjected to powers beyond our knowing and influence. I argue that the as if roads of salvation in *RR* offer the option of a meaningful existence in the meantime, in between Job and the Black Holes.

In conclusion, I would like to answer the question with which I began this chapter: how does Levi write about humanity and God in the face of a life filled with suffering? *RR* shows that Levi wants to stay far away from the thought that God is to be understood as the answer to the fundamental questions of being in this hostile

universe. We cannot invent us a customized God who offers us a way out of solitude. And, even if there is a God behind this grand machine, he is—in his omnipotence and incomprehensibility—only a part of the problem of our suffering not of the solution. Nevertheless, God emerges time and time again in this book. God is a name that many of Levi's literary inspirers have used to say something about our position in the universe. Some authors have written about God to refer to a being in which they believed; many introduced him as a literary character who is referred to in the complex interplay between hidden and revealed knowledge in attempting to answer the question why we are here on earth.

Three – Creation From Chaos

1 – Introduction¹

Living as an non-religious Jew in Northern Italy, Levi only really discovered his “otherness”—his Jewish identity—by discrimination, through the anti-Semitic laws enforced by the fascist regime of the 1930s and during the year of imprisonment in Auschwitz. As a young man, Levi understood his Jewish identity as a negligible but curious fact; he only really differed from his Christian friends in the absence of a Christmas tree in their home and in learning a little Hebrew at the age of thirteen. However, since the first publication of “*La Difesa della Razza*” (The Defense of Race), a fascist journal, in 1938, there was a lot of talk about purity in Italy and Levi felt proud of being different, of being impure:

I am the impurity that makes the zinc react, I am the grain of salt, the mustard seed ... For the wheel to turn, for life to live, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities: in the earth, too, as we all know, if it is to be fertile. We need dissent, difference, the grain of salt, the mustard seed. Fascism doesn't want them, forbids them, and so you're not a Fascist; it wants everyone to be the same, and you are not the same. (CW, SP, 781)

The necessity of impurity for life itself is here contrasted with fascism, which wants all to be the same or otherwise abhors it. Levi's rejection of fascism is reflected in his understanding of and love for science and scientific truth. The fascist regime had a great influence on the Italian education system, which resulted in the neglect of the scientific disciplines: “the entire education was ... oriented toward the rhetoric of history of philosophy. Spirit overmastered matter, mind outclassed hand in the hierarchy of knowledge” (Giuliani, 2003, 18). This explains his choice to begin studying chemistry—school had taught him the revealed truths of the fascist regime, now he wanted to study matter itself in all its impure complexity. Levi

describes his trade in the following manner: “the chemist’s work consists largely in watching out for these differences, in knowing them from close up, in predicting their effects. Not only the chemist’s work” (CW, 803).

Although the racial laws made it hard to find a professor to supervise him on his thesis, he graduated in 1941. His degree states: “Primo Levi, of the Jewish race, a degree in chemistry, with honors.” For Levi “it was therefore a double-edged document, half glory and half mockery, half absolution and half conviction” (804). Soon after graduation, Levi joined a group of unarmed partisans in the mountains of Valle d’Aosta. They were caught and, during interrogations, Levi admitted that he is Jewish: “in part out of weariness, in part also out of an irrational point of pride” (862). This confession convicted him to imprisonment in Auschwitz, where he remained for nearly a year until the camp was liberated by the Russians.

After the war, Levi refused to fixate his identity and recurrently described himself as a centaur, meaning both an Italian and a Jew; a survivor and a writer; an author and a chemist. A hybrid is the product of a mixture of two different kinds of plants or animals. In social scientific discourse, the concept of hybridity developed growing importance in the context of post colonialism and globalization in reference to the mixture of races, identities, and cultures. This notion of hybridity creates a discourse in which complexity can be acknowledged (Koopman, 2012, 154-155). As Nico Koopman puts it:

Hybridity challenges certainties and essentialisms. It resists monophony and promotes the idea of polyphony. It carries the notion of liminality, which refers to an in-between state where old, certain, clearly defined identities are re-negotiated and the door is opened for the new, imaginative and surprising. Hybridity acknowledges complexity and ambiguity. (Idem)

According to Levi, this complexity is fundamental to human life and endangered by Fascism and Nazism, which want all to be the

same. In the first chapter of *The Periodic Table*, from 1975, Primo Levi gives the history of his Jewish ancestors, who came to the northern Italian region of Piedmont in the sixteenth century. Being a chemist, Levi compares them to inert gasses, the word inert referring to the “inactive” or the “alien”; these gasses are “so satisfied with their condition, that they don’t interfere in any chemical reaction or combine with any other element, and so they passed unobserved for centuries” (CW, 755). They are the aliens who rest in their strangeness. The language spoken by these Jews, though, is an intriguing combination of the Piedmontese dialect and the sacred Hebrew of the Fathers:

This contrast mirrors another, that essential conflict of the Jews of the Diaspora, scattered among ‘the peoples’ (the *gôjím*, that is) and stretched between divine vocation and the daily misery of exile; and still another, more general, and innate in the human condition, for man is a centaur, a tangle of flesh and mind, of divine breath and dust. (Idem)

Here, we see the first indication that Levi understands human beings to be constructed from contrasting features—flesh and mind, divine breath, and dust. The passage itself is also constructed from a mixture of vocabularies, since the mythical figure of the centaur—a creature with an upper body of a human and legs of a horse, inspired by Ancient Greek narratives—is combined with a reference to the creation of Adam from the dirt, who comes to life after the creator breathes life into him. In this chapter, this hybrid nature of human beings and the creative mixture of vocabularies are two recurring topics.

This chapter is about chaos and creation. Levi describes how, in Auschwitz, the world was brought back to the chaos from before creation. After the liberation, a creational wind blows over the earth not absolving the chaos and the pain Auschwitz created. In sections 2 and 3, I examine Levi’s descriptions of the destruction and re-creation of human life in and after Auschwitz, thereby fo-

cusing on his references to the “Book of Genesis.” The fourth part of this chapter looks at the many creation stories Levi wrote, which are not specifically related to his experiences in and directly after Auschwitz. In these creation stories, he envisions the hybrid nature of living beings and the creative potential of humans, which also entails a great responsibility. This leads to a reflection on Levi’s use of creative language in section 5. In section 6, the reflections on the creative nature of human beings are placed into dialogue with the theological methodology of theopoetics, which is a product of a great appreciation of the poetical imagination and the creational potential of human beings and God.

2 – *If This Is a Man*: Humanity’s Return to the Mud

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t quick, but you Germans have succeeded. (CW, SQU, 143)

After returning to Italy, Levi writes his world-known testimonial account, *If This Is a Man*, in which he narrates the destruction of humanity in the Nazi camp. In his testimony, Levi describes the daily life—or better yet, nonlife—in the camp of Auschwitz. In the camp, all was focused on the degradation of the prisoners into non-men and non-women: the shouting, the taking of clothes and personal belongings, the shaving, the tattooing, the daily slave work, and the deprivation of food, water, and comfort. All particularity and individuality was taken from them. We now analyze how Levi uses the vocabulary from the creation narratives in the “Book of Genesis” to describe the destruction that took place in Auschwitz.

2.1 – Auschwitz as Counter-Creation

Anna Baldini, in her article “*Intertestualità biblica nell’opera di Primo Levi*” (Biblical Intertextuality in the Work of Primo Levi), shows how the Bible inspired Levi’s work on three different levels.

The first level is the poetical wind of the Bible that inspired his stylistic style of writing. Second, the Bible was an inspiration at a philosophical level—in the Bible, Levi recognizes the fate of the Jewish people as defined by the suffering and the “great unresolved questions” that are fundamental to human life: the “why?” of Job and the problem of evil. The last sphere of influence she identifies are biblical stories that flow through Levi’s books, “emerging at times, recognizable even if their content does not stay intact like in the case of Job’s question, but are getting translated in a way to generate severe allegorical structures” (Baldini, 2003, 46). The three main themes she identifies are the exodus, the flood, and the creation and counter-creation.

Baldini points out that both creation narratives from Genesis can be recognized in Levi’s description of the camp in his testimony. Genesis 2, verse 7, narrates how God created man from the dust of the earth. This is echoed in Levi’s notion of “*il fango*” (the mud), a prevailing theme in all his works but, in *If This Is a Man*, mostly manifesting as a description of the physical circumstances of the daily life in the camp (Belpoliti, 2015, 158). Auschwitz is a place in which a man is actively destroyed into emptiness, returned to the mud from which he is created. We can see an example of this in the opening poem: “Consider if this is a man / who toils in the mud” (CW, 7). Furthermore, in chapter “The Work,” it is especially a recurring word, describing the working conditions of the prisoners. According to the notes of Alberto Cavaglione, it is one of the key words used to describe the hell—reference to Dante—of Auschwitz: “*Il nostro mondo di fango*” (our world of mud).²

The first creation narrative in Genesis describes how God creates the earth and its inhabitants out of nothing. Man is created in God’s image on the sixth and final day of creation, states Genesis 1:27. Levi describes the camp as dominated by a process opposite of the creation recounted in the “Book of Genesis”: it is a creation of man into nothing, instead of the creation of man out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) (Baldini, 2003, 51). The Germans were successful in the complete destruction of their prisoners, thereby turning the cre-

ation “ex nihilo” backward: “To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t quick, but you Germans have succeeded” (CW, 143). Where Genesis 1 “identifies the creation of man as the supreme end; the purpose of Auschwitz is to the contrary the systematical destruction of man, the cancellation of humanity of those who are from the start being called non-man, in a process of gradual emptying of being human which brings them to being nothing more than a shell,” thereby not different from the animal world (Baldini, 2003, 52). Baldini identifies this work of destruction performed by the Nazis as a *controcreazione*,³ turning the Lager into the chaos from before the creation of the world, to the *tohu wabohu* from Genesis 1:2, “the Lager is the place of mud and the empty man” (52). This empty man is a reference to the prevalent group of prisoners who were called the *Muselmänner* in the camp:

an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always the same, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death – in the face of it they have no fear, because they are too tired to understand. (CW, 85)

Interestingly enough, it is the image of the absence of a divine spark (*la scintilla divina*) that determines these prisoners as empty, as non-men.⁴ In Genesis 2, verse 7, it is the wind that God breathes into the nostrils of the mud-creature that makes man into a living being. This divine spark is missing in these prisoners, they are reduced to sheer matter.

It is important to note that Levi does not use the words *controcreazione*, *caos*, or *tohu wabohu* in *If This Is a Man*. Nevertheless, Sonia Gentili—in her book on the Bible in twentieth century Italian literature—has named her section on Primo Levi as “*Il Lager come mondo tohu wabohu*” (The Camp as a Tohu Wabohu World). In his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi does refer to

these words from Genesis 1:2 to describe the state of the *Muselmänner*:

The fear inscribed in any of us for the ‘*tohu wabohu*,’ for the deserted and empty universe, crushed under the Spirit of God, but where the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already dead. (Gentili, 2016, 98, my translation)

According to Gentili, the concept of “*tohu wabohu*” helps Levi describe the universe as a deserted place, where the Spirit of God is the “only presence which dwells on and determines the emptiness” (89). In this the empty and deserted universe, God the creator creates a suffering *ex nihilo* (89) and an economy of emptiness and drowning (90). Although Levi does not refer to either chaos or “*tohu wabohu*” in *If This Is a Man* and it is only in his final book that Levi explicitly links the condition of the *Muselmänner* to the “*tohu wabohu*” from Genesis, the concept is nevertheless—through his recurring references to the mud and the emptiness of the prisoners in the camp—already developed in his first testimony about his experiences in Auschwitz, as Gentili states (91). Wlodek Goldkorn also states that Levi is most interested in describing the opposite of creation and the way in which Auschwitz has taught us that creation can become transformed into destruction (Goldkorn, 2006, 73, 77).

We can conclude that Levi thus refers to both Genesis creation narratives in order to present the opposite process of creation—that of the destruction of human beings. As we already saw in the quote from *The Periodic Table*, Levi regards humans to be “a tangle of flesh and mind, of divine breath and dust” (CW, SP, 760). This vision of human beings returns in his description of humanity’s destruction in Auschwitz, where dust remains and divine breath is absent. In the last chapter of Levi’s testimony, however, the unimaginable happens—the process of returning man into mud seems to be overturned. Here, we can also find references to Genesis and God.

2.2 – “Like God after the First Day of Creation”

The second last chapter of *If This Is a Man*, named “The Last One,” describes the hanging of one of the prisoners who was involved in the revolt at Birkenau during which a crematorium was blown up. The Nazi’s gathered Levi and the others to watch this hanging, as a warning. “All hear the scream of the dying, ... ‘*Kameraden, ich bin der letzte!*’ [‘Comrades, I am the last one!’]” (Levi, 2012, 130, my translation). A prophetic exclamation of a man whose informants had told him that liberation would take place very soon. Ashamed, Levi admits that he and the others watching the hanging did not respond. Afterwards, the band starts playing again, they line up and march away during the last shiver of the dying man. Then, a sentence follows, to which I referred earlier while discussing Baldini and *controcreazione*: “To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t quick, but you Germans have succeeded” (CW, SQU, 143). The apathetic response of the prisoners proves that the Germans have completed their job. They were successful in the complete destruction of their prisoners, thereby turning creation backward.

But the dying man was right—soon, the Nazi’s began evacuating the camp because of the approaching allied forces. In the last chapter of the book, “Story of Ten Days,” Levi describes how he remained behind in the infirmary because of a non-life-threatening injury, waiting for the allies to come:

JANUARY 18 ... The Germans were not there. The Tower was empty.

Today I think that if only because an Auschwitz existed no one in our age should speak of Providence. But in that hour the memory of Biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity undoubtedly passed like a wind through the mind of each one of us. (150)

Here, Levi reflects on the situation from behind his writing table. He separates his intellectual rejection of Providence from the expe-

rience then and there, in which all prisoners identified with the stories of salvation from the Bible. Again, a natural phenomenon carries significance;⁵ here, it is the wind that connects the fate of the prisoners with salvations from biblical times. In *La tregua* (The Truce), the wind is a returning concept, referring to the creative potential after the chaos,⁶ which also refers to the wind—or *ruach*—that was upon the earth before creation, as described in the first verses of Genesis.

After the flight of the Germans, Levi, together with two Frenchmen, Charles and Arthur, took care of the inmates who were more ill. After they had restored the living conditions in the barrack by repairing the broken window and the stove—destroyed by allied fire attacks—a Polish man, Towarowski, encourages the others to give a piece of their bread to the workers. What seemed to be impossible the day before happens now, bread is shared in the place where there was no space for gratitude, where the law dictates: eat your bread and, if possible, also that of your neighbor.

It really meant that the Lager was dead. This was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment marked the start of the process by which we who had not died slowly turned from *Häftlinge* into men again. (153)

The destructive force of the Nazi regime had been halted and they were re-becoming human beings. The sharing of bread provoked the “resurrection” of man after the hanging of “the last one,” which had symbolized the complete destruction of all the prisoners, as described in the previous chapter. The breaking and sharing of bread in reciprocity is a universal mark of reclaiming humanity and has resonance in many traditions, including the Jewish and Christian ones. Sharing all the bread you possess can be understood as an act of radical hospitality, which brings me again to a short interlude about the work of Richard Kearney.

For Kearney, the encounter with the stranger is “the quintessentially anatheistic moment” (Kearney, 2016, 34). It is a wager: hospi-

tality or hostility? Do I shut the door or share my bread? When Towarowski proposes sharing, the law of the camp is turned around and possibility for interhuman encounter is created. His proposal is “a surplus that makes the impossible possible” (35), to say it in Kearney’s words. In Anatheism, Kearney shows how literature can illustrate his anatheistic paradigm, while the authors he discusses question “the received divisions between sacred and profane, religious and secular, transcendent and immanent, in favor of a retrieval of the sacramental in the sensible” (102). In literature, he detects a secularization of the sacred or the sacramentalization of the secular; the choice here is of no importance, both can be true at the same time (102). What he searches for in stories (broadly understood) is:

a sense that there is more in the less. There is creation and redemption in a piece of bread. This I call the sacramental in the broad sense, not confined to Catholic or Orthodox or any single denominational rite, but extendable to include epiphanic transformations of little things into holy things in our most everyday experiences. (35)

The bread that is shared transforms the rules of the camp, initiates the process that enables the prisoners to become human beings again. They discover there is creative power in the sharing of a piece of bread. In the subsequent scene, this creative human potential is connected to God’s creation as narrated in Genesis:

In the darkness, broken only by the glow of the embers, Charles, Arthur, and I sat smoking cigarettes made of herbs we had found in the kitchen, and spoke of many things, both past and future. In the middle of this endless plain, frozen and overrun by war, in the small dark room teeming with germs, we felt at peace with ourselves and with the world. We were utterly exhausted, but it seemed to us that, after so long a time, we had finally accomplished something useful – perhaps like God after the first day of creation. (CW, 153)

After a day of hard work, they sit peacefully around the fire that they have made themselves and they feel like God who created light and separated it from the darkness, thereby cancelling the *tohu wabohu*. In the description of the following morning's sunrise, the reference to Genesis continues: "January 20. Dawn came" (153), a new day. In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I already introduced Cavaglion's reading of passages in which Levi takes on God's voice in *If This Is a Man*, for example, in the poem "Shema." According to Cavaglion, it is this scene from the final chapter that shows Levi's most explicit identification with God: he sees that it is good, just like the creator does in the first chapter of the "Book of Genesis" (Cavaglion, 2002, 14, 83-89). The start of a reconstruction of the world order in which there is place for man to live is initiated by these creational acts of Levi and his fellow prisoners, who thereby identify with God. I would like to focus on the crucial role of the notions of "place" and "time" in this creation-scene and to interpret them with the help of Kearney.

Looking at Levi's description of place, we read that, physically, the three of them sit together in the darkness around a warm stove, while the place in their lives and history is described as an "endless plain, frozen and overrun by war." Although being situated in this continuous grand story, they sit there and feel at peace with themselves and the world. It is a place of harmony, as the chaotic world around them seems forgotten for a moment. A similar break in the continuum of ordinary time can be detected. They speak about the past and the future and identify with God on the first day of creation, having done something useful after a long period of time spent in the camp. Ordinary space and time here turns into sacred place and time—where good creation is carried out and only the here and now seems to count.

Kearney is inspired by Walter Benjamin, who speaks of "messianic time" as a time in which man is open to the future. Kearney connects this to his understanding of epiphany, "the transformation of little things into holy things in our most everyday experience" (Kearney, 2011, 35), which happens "in the gaps, in the breaks

of linear temporality when an eternal now ... explodes the continuum of history" (105). Chronos is the indication of ordinary time, being linear, one moment following the other. Sacred time, on the other hand, is called "kairological time," superseding the linearity of ordinary time. In Levi's testimony, ordinary time and space are broken open by identifying with God the creator and by the momentous feeling of peace. In this sacred time, the past and the future come together in what seems to be an eternal now.

Spaces can also be sacred, traditionally indicated as "khora," meaning space that is "separated out from profane, one-dimensional space" (16), a temporal safe haven. As Levi writes: "In the middle of this endless plain, frozen and overrun by war, in the small dark room teeming with germs, we felt at peace with ourselves and with the world" (CW, 153).

There is yet another aspect to Kearney's understanding of epiphany. The moment of epiphany is understood as testifying "simultaneously to the event of meaning (it is already here) as an advent still to come (it is not-yet here)" (Kearney, 2011, 109, his emphasis). It is a short moment and place of meaningfulness and peace, while the three of them are still aware of the fearful world around them. This coincidence of meaning and anticipation is identified with the "sacred time" of the Eucharist and the Passover, "that remembers a moment of saving while at the same time anticipating a future ('until he comes')" (Idem). Levi also wrote a poem called "Passover,"⁷ where, in one specific night, the past is remembered and the future is anticipated. I quote the last lines of this poem:

Tonight the wise, the heathen, the fool and the child,

Ask each other questions,
And time changes direction,
Today flows back into yesterday,
Like a river silted up at its mouth.
Each of us has been a slave in Egypt,
Has soaked straw and clay with sweat
And crossed the sea with dry feet:

You, too, stranger.
This year in fear and shame,
Next year in strength and justice.⁸

The concluding chapter of Levi's testimony is written in a hopeful key, built on the experience of the new creation of man after the chaos of the Lager: "This year in fear and shame, next year in strength and justice." In the next section, about *The Truce*, we will see that, as the Jewish tradition contends, "the Messiah has not yet come." In *The Truce*, we read a story of the war that is not over after the liberation but also one of the creational wind that blows over the earth.

3 – *The Truce: The Re-Creation of Humanity*

3.1 – Chaos in *The Truce*

La tregua (*The Truce*) is the story of Levi's return to life after the liberation of Auschwitz, first published in 1963. Just Like *If This Is a Man*, this book consists of a collection of stories written around characters or episodes, through which Levi narrates, chronologically, his nine-month journey home from Auschwitz to Turin. It is constructed from the stories he told to his friends upon his return, who stimulated him to write a book about this episode of his exile as well. The first two chapters consist of stories he wrote directly after returning home; they take up the story where *If This Is a Man* ends. In 1961, Levi decided to take his pen and write down his story after completing his work hours at a paint factory.

Staying at the infirmary barracks during the Nazi evacuation of the camp, Levi and the other ill prisoners were left behind in the camp. Together with his friend Charles, Levi took care of their barrack until the dawn on January 27th, when both of them carried the body of a fellow inmate outside and saw four Russian soldiers on horseback arriving at the camp, as heralds of peace. The liberation

of the camp, however, was far from victorious—the Russians were looking with pity and shame at the scene of death and destruction behind the barbed wire, while the inmates remained in their places behind the fence and did not fall on their knees to thank God, being aware that they will always carry with them the signs of the injustice (CW, T, 216). In this book, Levi describes his growing realization that, even after the liberation, the war is never going to be over.

In *The Truce*, Levi refers to the chaos from Genesis to describe the situation after Auschwitz. It is only at a later moment that Levi decided to change his title into *La tregua*—his initial idea was to name it *Vento alto*, which literally means “high wind.” This is a reference to the wind that was upon the earth before creation, of which we read in Genesis 1, verse 2. This high wind is a motif from the third chapter of the book:

In those days and in those places, shortly after the front passed, a high wind blew over the face of the Earth: the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, defective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion. (234-235)

The initial title marks the central idea that, in Auschwitz, the world was brought back to a primal chaos. Levi encounters many abnormal human beings, defected, homeless, and searching for a right direction. There blows a high wind over this chaos, which symbolizes the possible coming of new creation.

Besides the chaos provoked by the destructive Nazi order, there is also a second form of chaos identified in *The Truce*—the chaos of the Russian army he encounters during his journey. The Russians, seemingly living without any rules of conduct or organization, cause chaos that has little relation to the chaos of the Lager. And, despite the Gulags, which Levi refuses to identify with the Lager of Auschwitz, “The Babel under the Russian rule is colorful and con-

tradictory, but all in all not harmful and often cheerful” (Cases, 1991, 161, my translation). Levi, thus, identifies two forms of chaos, a dangerous one provoked by a strict order and the other a harmless one, resulting from an absence of regulation.

Levi’s choice to change the title into *The Truce* directs the interpretation of the book. The truce is the period between the imprisonment and the free life at home, an interval filled with waiting, confusion about the destination and its detours and a profound longing for his home. He speaks of the great truce when he describes a convoy of Russians, who were in-between two wars, unknowing of the hard times ahead of them. In the final chapter, “The Reawakening,” it is revealed how Levi’s journey itself can be regarded as a year of respite, a truce:

Although the months just passed, of wandering at the edge of civilization, were harsh, they now seemed to us a truce, an interlude of unlimited openness, a providential gift of destiny, never to be repeated. (CW, 396)

Where to find the strength to fight the new fights at home, with what weapons, what energy? Where to find the strength to start re-living? Levi asks himself this while approaching the Italian border by train. After returning to Turin, Levi finds his home, family, and friends unharmed. But the war is nestled inside of him; he walks with his head down looking for food and his peace is shocked by the dreams that visit him at night:

And a dream filled with fear has not ceased to visit me, at intervals now close, now rare ... I am at the table with my family, or friends, or at work, or in a verdant countryside – in a serene, relaxed setting, in other words, apparently without tension and pain – and yet I feel a subtle, profound anguish, the definite sensation of a looming threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, little by little or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and is destroyed around me, the scene, the walls, the

people, and the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Everything has now turned into chaos; I am alone at the center of a gray and murky void, and, yes, I know what this means, and I also know that I have always known it. I am again in the Lager, and nothing outside the Lager was true. The rest was a brief holiday, or a trick of the senses, a dream: the family, nature in flower, the house. Now this internal dream, the dream of peace, is over, and in the external dream, which continues coldly, I hear the sound of a well-known voice: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, 'Wtsawać.' (397-398)

In this recurring dream, his retrieved home and freedom return into chaos again, only the gray and cloudy nothingness of the Lager is his reality. All the good things turn out to have been only a short vacation from Auschwitz; the void returns, his world collapses into chaos time and time again. At the end of the narration of his journey home, Levi is woken up by the morning command from the camp: Rise! "Wtsawać" the final word of the book. It shows the trauma that would stay with him until the end of his life, the war is never over.⁹

Giorgio Nisini wrote an article on *The Truce* in which he interprets Levi's description of Europe as a post-apocalyptic universe. He understands *Wtsawać* as a word in which the primordial chaos and the apocalypse come together in one point (Nisini, 2005, 214). Traveling Europe and encountering a post-apocalyptic universe, leads Levi back to the pre-apocalyptic era, to the primordial state in which order and chaos coincide—the Lager (215). Not the Lager was the truce but freedom was; it is the chaos of the camp that forms his true reality. His reawakening brings him back to the primordial state.

It has been noticed that the structure of *The Truce* closely follows the three stages of trauma posited by Freud: first, the initial shock (Levi cannot absorb its impact); second, a latency period of forgetfulness; and, then, the recurring traumatic memories (Druk-

er, 2009, 89). However, this trauma goes beyond individual experience, as Jonathan Druker points out: “Levi’s ongoing trauma is symptomatic of Europe’s own nightmare: the repressed fear that its civilization produces as much darkness as light, as much violence and destruction as creation” (91).

We can conclude that references to Genesis and symbolic words like chaos, primordial chaos, mud, void, and high wind are important for Levi while he is trying to explain the situation of the world and its inhabitants in and after Auschwitz. Thereby, he gives new meaning to the dichotomy of chaos and creation from Genesis, two notions which are central to theology. In this dissertation, I want to find out how the experience of Auschwitz influenced Levi’s ideas about humanity, God, and religious language and how this can be read theologically “after God.” In order to link Levi’s references to Genesis with contemporary discussions in theology, Levi’s contextualization of the ancient notions of chaos and creation will be put into a dialogue with the book by Catherine Keller called *The Face of the Deep, A Theology of Becoming* (2003). Keller also rethinks what chaos and creation mean, thereby confronting the (Christian) fear of the chaos and focusing on “the darkness of beginnings” from the first verses of Genesis.

3.2 Rethinking the Chaos—Catherine Keller

When in the beginning Elohim created heaven and earth, the earth was tohu va bohu, darkness was upon the face of the tehom, and the ruach Elohim vibrating upon the face of the waters ... (Keller, 2003, xv)

With these first words from Genesis, Keller opens the book in which she tries to rethink the darkness of beginnings. She searches for a theology in which beginning is understood as “an unoriginated and endless process of becoming: genesis” (xvii). Keller’s work stands for a hybrid form of theology—mirroring our own, hybrid, complexity—combining feminist theology, postmodern theology, natural sciences, and philosophy while studying biblical texts and

traditions most closely. It is this combination of a hybrid methodology and attention to the biblical concepts of chaos and creation that makes her work interesting for an experimental reading of it alongside Primo Levi.

I introduced Baldini earlier on, who recognized the narrative of God's creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing) in Levi, which he turns around by describing the destruction of the prisoners into nothing. Keller deconstructs the dogma of the *ex nihilo* by showing that the Bible does not offer support for this idea that is so fundamental to theology. She argues that, both in form and context, chaos was always already there at the moment of creation. Narrating the development of the *ex nihilo* dogma from early church history onward, Keller shows how the traditional dogma of the creation *ex nihilo* could have formed itself, without being based on the biblical text. She argues that this dogma is constructed from a "pure dualism of originating Logos and prevenient Nothing" (10), connected to the belief in an omnipotent God whose superiority overcomes the dangerous chaos. It is a simple calculation: Genesis 1 + God's omnipotence + ontology = *ex nihilo*, as she summarizes most clearly. (64)

Keller detects a strong influence of this way of thinking on more recent theology—for example, on Karl Barth, who presents chaos as a threat to God's sovereignty, and on the progressive theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who developed the "hope *ex nihilo*" (17). The consequence of thinking about *ex nihilo* is that there is a space where God is not, outside or inside God, that must be overcome, an idea that Keller wants to avoid. She tries to present the chaos as neither intrinsically good nor bad but as a theologically meaningful depth from which the new can be created. Keller shows that, in the Bible, there is both a fear and an appreciation of the *tehom*, the chaos, the deep of Genesis: *tehomphobia* and *tehomphilia*. She also refers to stories from Mesopotamian mythology in which god Marduk destructs the sea-monster, the oceanic all-mother Tiamat, to create his universe. Here, we recognize the feminist character of Keller's work, with recurring attention given to the way in which a sovereign masculine deity suppresses the fertile chaos, mostly iden-

tified as female.¹⁰ The tehom has traditionally been identified as human sin as well, “Adam’s womb,” “without all this disorderly human conduct, this revolting flood from ‘down there,’ the creation would have remained beautiful” (36). Keller is inspired by the Confessions of Augustine, in whose work she searches the ground for God generating “order not in opposition to but upon the face of the chaos” (38). She reads his work as neither tehomophobic nor tehomophilic but as rhetorically fluctuating between both currents.

The deconstruction of the dogma of the *ex nihilo* has the deconstruction of the linear line of salvation history as its result. Keller shows how the doctrine of *ex nihilo* places the Christian metanarrative into a single line stretching from the beginning to the end of history (4). Creation has a fixed beginning and a certain end—and we are moving toward it in a straight line. Secular humanism also believed in humanity as progressively developing toward the good, a belief that Auschwitz has shaken profoundly. Where Levi’s first book ends with the hope that Auschwitz was only an exception, a short interlude, after the war he finds out that his free life was the real truce, and that the war is never over.

This brings us to the topic of evil. Recurring question in theology is how God could be responsible for the creation of evil—if he created everything from nothing, then did he not create evil as well? Keller deconstructs the dualism of the *ex nihilo*, in which one is good or evil, almighty or powerless, eternal or temporal (49). As mentioned, she presents chaos as neither intrinsically bad nor good but as carrying the potential for both. She understands evil as “the deformation of freedom. Not as disobedience but as discreation, that is, creaturely relations that deny and exploit their own interrelations” (80).¹¹ This deconstruction of the dualism between right and wrong in the concept of chaos we see in Levi’s *The Truce* as well. Where chaos, on the one hand, represents the state to which the Nazi’s brought back the world, indicating a negative aspect of chaos, on the other hand, Levi describes the chaotic Russian hodgepodge after the war in a very positive manner. Chaos carries within it the potential for both destruction and creation.

But how does creation happen? Keller presents chaos as the between space in which possibilities matter (161), where becoming becomes possible (181). Keller: “to create is not to master the formless but to solicit its virtual forms. When expressed as divine speech, it may sound less like a command than a seduction” (114). The initial title of Levi’s second work, *Vento alto* (High Wind), refers to a fertile wind that is able to create new life. In *The Truce*, meteorology has a great interpretative value. Rain, for example, symbolizes their insecurity during the journey. When the Russian soldiers reach the camp they are accompanied by a humid wind that has a defrosting effect—the first sign of liberation after a cold winter. Descriptions of nature provide insight into Levi’s feelings or, to say it through Druker—the stage of trauma he finds himself in.¹² One biblical natural phenomenon that returns in *The Truce* is the flood, to which Levi refers while encountering Noah in the main camp of Auschwitz. Noah is one of the ex-prisoners who, after the destruction, sees the signs of liberation as his opportunity to spread his life erotically around the earth. Here, there is an explicit link with Keller’s idea of creation as a response to a seductive voice:

Noah wandered through the women’s rooms like an oriental prince, wearing a varicolored jacket with an arabesque design, covered with patches and braid. His love meetings were like hurricanes. He was the friend of all the men and the lover of all the women. The flood was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz Noah saw the rainbow shine, and the world was his, to repopulate. (CW, T, 231)

Anna Baldini points out how—in *The Truce* and *If Not Now, When?* (Levi’s novel on Jewish partisans)—the majority of the protagonists represent the universal hope to find humanity again after the chaos (Baldini, 2003, 61). However, Levi is aware that this never-expected freedom

has not brought us to the Promised Land. It was around us, but in the form of a pitiless deserted plain. More trials awaited us, more labors, more hunger, more cold, more fears. (CW, 238)

“The delusion after the liberation, after the miracle ... is thus presented by Levi through the Biblical model as well ... The salvation has not come and will not come” (Baldini, 2003, 62). For Levi, the biblical chaos can thus symbolize both the ongoing trauma and the hope of new creation. Levi identifies strongly with Exodus, the story of the Jewish people who experience new deprivations after fleeing from Egypt, which, according to Baldini, lays the ambivalent fundament under his book about his return to freedom (64). Keller shows that the creation narrative of the Genesis must be thought of in proximity to the exodus. It articulates a standpoint in the midst of geo-political turbulence. The narrator is searching to establish a home, *eretz*, under conditions of exile. “Under conditions of acute loss, this *tohu vabohu* signals that every fresh world comes from an initial chaos” (Keller, 2003, 186). This is what Levi tries to do as well, searching for a new creation out of the chaos while still being in exile.

I already mentioned the final chapter of *The Truce*, “The Reawakening,” where Levi has arrived home but still reawakens in the chaos of Auschwitz. The reawakening on the last page of the book shows that the “reawakened” man is not triumphant—he carries the scars of the past eternally. Auschwitz had brought the world back to a state before creation and has de-created human beings, returning man to the dust of the earth. The awareness grows that “*Guerra è sempre*,” the war is never over (Levi, 1997, 242). It is the chaos we have to face again and again but this chaos can also be fertile, enabling man, although deformed, to re-inhabit the earth.

3.3 – Who or Where Is God Then?

In conclusion to this section, I will focus on the role of God in Keller’s rethinking of chaos and creation. As pointed out, Levi sees

a correspondence between his experiences and the stories of Genesis, describes the wind (ruach) that blows over the earth, and identifies himself with the God from Genesis while wondering about the recreation of human beings after the liberation. Yet, what role does God play in the creation of the world?

At a certain point in the development of her theology of endless becoming, Keller asks whether the creation from the deep makes us confess “God the creator of Heaven and Earth?” (Keller, 2003, 172). Earlier in the book she states:

At the edge of the specific chaos where we negotiate language about what endlessly precedes and exceeds our language – theologos – the unfinished infinity, the Deep, is never simply identifiable with ‘God’ or ‘Creator’. (39)

In *The Face of the Deep*, God is not a subject and creation itself has “no substantial subject” (178). She constructs a theology in which in the beginning “we hear not just anyone. And not just the One. We hear the Manyone” (Idem). Creation is an ongoing process in which interdependent individuations are “constantly coming, flowing, through one another” (Idem). In relation to this creational process, there is Elohim, the plural name of the God of the first verses of Genesis, who “signifies the effect through whom all causes arise” (181). God is like an eros, a cosmic desire, a lure to novelty that seduces us to respond; “creation takes place as invitation and cooperation” (195). Man can either respond “in creative sensitivity to its own context; or it blocks the flux of its own becoming” (181). The becoming of creation is thus explicitly connected to men’s and women’s own becoming, “our responses *become* us.”

A becoming God, who inasmuch as we have language for it/ them/her/him, is at minimum an irreducible effect of language. But not an effect ex nihilo. For this divinity arises out of those unruly depths, over which language catches its breath. The creation, creating, becomes. In singular plurality. (182)

In a short essay called “Adam’s Clay,” Levi shows that the origin of life is the problem over which many scientific disciplines have pondered intensely and to which they have proposed many solutions. He reviews the book *Seven Clues to the Origin of Life*, by A. Graham Cairns-Smith, in which a new proposal is added that Levi observes with interest. Cairns-Smith begins with the hypothesis that there is a foundation to order but that this foundation is washed away and that we still see the building that was created on it. He also has an idea about the basis of this foundation: “This material is ennobled by an illustrious Biblical reference. Primitive life, proto-life, would be based not on carbon but on clay silicates: yes, that same clay used by God the Father to make the first man” (CW, USE, 2761). Cairn-Smith shows the surprising capacities of clay but his work gets a bit confusing when trying to explain how clay could have become the organic life we know today. Levi presents his work as a possible breakthrough, which could also turn out to just be an interesting working hypothesis.

Levi reflects on the possible role of God in the origin of life, when reflecting on the presence of order:

Bricks are not enough to build a house: a plan, a direction, a design are necessary. The key to life is orderly complexity, and the simple cannot give birth to the complex. Nor did it make much sense to claim that order came from the cosmos, as Hoyle recently stated: if so, who could have introduced order into the cosmos? Either the problem is shifted from one place to another or one must resort to God. Well, scientists respect God and those who believe in him, but they are reluctant to accept a premature intervention on his part, before they have exhausted all other possible explanations. (2761)

This quote shows how, according to Levi, the key of life is orderly complexity, which we could perhaps interpret as an orderly chaos. The question of the origin of order is still to be answered and Levi emphasizes, in this article, that cross-fertilizations between disci-

plines are very important to discover pieces of the puzzle. Resorting to God is not Levi's solution; for a scientist, there are still many possible solutions to be examined. Keller presents her theological solution to the darkness of beginnings, thereby rehabilitating chaos as the possible source of creation. Levi never implies that the creation narratives from Genesis have something to say about the scientifically traceable origin of human life and a comparison between Levi and Keller on this point would never be satisfactory. Where they do find something in common, however, is in their focus on complexity as a source for creation and in an appreciation of the wisdom of Genesis to symbolize this complexity.

We see that complexity and creation are two notions that keep recurring in Levi's considerations about human life and also in his writings, which do not deal explicitly with his experiences in and directly after Auschwitz. In the next section, I examine the many creation narratives that Levi wrote in which he reflects on the creative potential of human beings and the great responsibility that this entails.

4 – Creation Narratives

4.1 – Storytelling

For the first time in this dissertation, we touch upon the short story, which is an important genre in Levi's oeuvre. Levi began to write the stories who would be published in the collection *Natural Histories* after the second edition of *If This Is a Man*, in 1958, during the same period in which he wrote *The Truce*. In these stories, he takes, thematically, more distance from Auschwitz. In order to test the reactions of the readers, he publishes stories in various periodicals and daily newspapers, before publishing them as a collection (CW, XL). Many of these stories show an interesting combination of scientific, mythical, and religious language, focusing on the topic of humanity and creation. In section 4.2 I present close readings of some

of Levi's creation stories in which he reflects on the creation of human beings and their creative potential, which I divided into three main topics—the centaur, the man as maker, and God the creator. I limit myself to the stories that are published in one of Levi's three story collections, which I will first introduce briefly.

Storie naturali (Natural Histories)

In 1966, Levi's volume *Storie Naturali (Natural Histories)* was published by Einaudi under the name Damiano Malabaila. This pseudonym served to designate the difference between Levi's testimonial and fictional work (CW, XLIV). In order to indicate his two natures, he started to call himself a centaur, both scientist and writer, survivor and author from the 1960s onward (Mattioda, 2008, 45). *Storie naturali* is Levi's first collection of stories and indicates a new season for Levi's work, following the two testimonial books on Auschwitz and the return home. It counts 15 stories, almost all of which deal with scientific developments and the moral and ethical consequences resulting from them. Belpoliti characterizes these science fiction stories as rooted in the Italian tradition of magic realism, where fantasy gets the better of purely technologically-focused sci-fi. Magic realism is a narrative genre that tries to draw mystical and magical perspectives from the reality of the modern world. (Ferroni, 1991, 212) Levi himself disputed this term: "These stories are more possible than many others," he stated in an interview (Belpoliti, 2015, 106). Reading the stories in the twenty-first century one does, indeed, recognize the described inventions as touching on challenges that face humanity today, like mechanization, artificial intelligence, cloning or the prolongment of human life.

Vizio di forma (Flaw of Form)

In 1971, Levi published a new collection of stories under his own name for the first time. The book was initially called *Disumanesimo* (Dishumanism), as indicated in an editorial letter (233). In celebration of the second edition, published in 1987 (the year of his death), he wrote the following:

It saddens me because these are stories related to a time that was much sadder than the present, for Italy, for the world, and also for me. They are linked to an apocalyptic, pessimistic, and defeatist vision, the same one that inspired Roberto Vacca's *The Coming Dark Age*. But the new Dark Age has not come: things haven't fallen apart, and instead there are tentative signs of a world order based, if not on mutual respect, at least on mutual fear. Despite the terrorizing, if slumbering, arsenals, the fear of the '*Dissipatio Humani Generis*' (Guido Morselli), whether rightly or wrongly, has been subjectively attenuated. How things actually are, no one knows. (CW, VF, 578)

On the cover, Levi explains that the book's title was inspired by an intuition shared by many during those times: the intuition of a stretch mark in our world, of a leak—small or great—of a “defect of form” that frustrates aspects of our society and the moral universe (Mattioda, 2008, 46). Levi translates the “defect of form” as the lack of attention to the effects of the climate disaster that lies ahead of us and the economic differences between north and south. Mostly, however, it is the lack in human thought to provide answers to the problems of nature and human history, a problem he wants to confront through these stories (46-47).

Chaos is one of the main themes of *Vizio di forma* (*Flaw of Form*), which was influenced by the theory of deterministic chaos developed by scientists from 1963. Mattioda sees a development in how Levi related to chaos in science, a process that began with him questioning the deterministic approach of cause and effect and developing into a theory of chaos to approach complex systems with the most variables (52, 55). The story “*Verso Occidente*,” from *Vizio di forma*, about the mass murder of the lemming fish, is the last story “that proposes a deterministic conclusion. From then on he does not use an idea of cause and effect, but searches to lay out problems, to describe situations, to repeat the memory of the past. This epistemological attitude is fundamental for developing into the approach of the reflections of *I sommersi e i salvati*” (54).

According to Mattioda, Levi applies the chaos theory to many complex systems to understand the many variables that have caused a specific result. He uses it to understand history, human culture, society, and politics, as well as to explain nonrational phenomena, like writing. Levi's focus on chaos in understanding reality leads him into a profound pessimism from 1983 onward, in Mattioda's reading (58). If it is chaos that prevails, the individual is impotent in the face of unaccountable forces, which is a key topic in Levi's writing, according to Ross (Ross, 2007, 112).

Many stories in *Vizio di forma* deal with technologies of creation and reproduction, where Levi combines many vocabularies:

from solemn prose heavy with biblical allusions, to futuristic modes of technologically mediated reproduction, to playful parody of Darwin's theories of evolution. Levi considers the ways in which we do, or might, manage the key moments of our lives from a varied range of perspectives ... Many of the stories point towards a common message: our humanity is being eroded by technology. (114)

The first great sign of this dangerous potential of technological innovation was, of course, the concentration camp system. However, the fact that Levi warns against alarming developments does not mean he believes science and technology to be catastrophic in themselves—it is their “defect of form” that they undervalue their own influence. Levi states in an interview: “I don't for a moment think the error is irreversible and I hope that all of the world's scientists understand that the future depends on their return to conscience” (Belpoliti, 2001, 90). His stories are an important tool for Levi, he “treats fiction as a realm of possibilities in which to try out our future selves, and from which we can learn. If we are to continue as ‘blacksmiths’ of ourselves and our world, we have a duty to each other and to future generations to create with conscience” (Ross, 2007, 116).

Lilith e altri racconti (Lilith and Other Stories)

This book from 1981 collects 36 short stories written between 1975 and 1981 (CW, L). It is subdivided into three parts. The first part is called “Present Perfect” and collects encounters Levi had in the Lager and other topics related to the war. The book is named after the story of Lilith, Adam’s first wife according to Jewish mythology. “Lilith” narrates an encounter in Auschwitz with a young Askenazite born on the same day as Levi himself—Levi’s alter ego from the Eastern Jewish world. The first section of the book displays his conviction that, after his testimony, there is much more to say about his experiences in the camp (Amsallem, 1995, 131). The central topics of the sections “Future Anterior” and “Present Indicative” are harder to identify; they contain stories about a beast in a temple, the conception of hybrids, an escaping poem, an encounter of a villager with two German soldiers, and a schoolboy who paints swastika’s on walls.

The introductions to these three collections show the great diversity of Levi’s work and his preoccupations. He is interested in technological innovations, contemporary issues, Jewish tradition, and stories about Auschwitz that have not yet been told. In many of these narratives, chaos and/or creation are central topics. I discuss these stories further in the next sections, drawing from all three story collections.

4.2 – The Centaur

In those days and in those places, shortly after the front passed, a high wind blew over the face of the Earth: the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, defective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion, anxiously searching for his own place, his own sphere, as the cosmogonies of the ancients say, poetically, of the particles of the four elements. (CW, T, 235)

Auschwitz brought the world back into the primordial chaos and the only humans left are deformed, defective, and abnormal, as shows the above quote from *The Truce*. Many of Levi's stories show how the birth of life comes in the shape of hybrid creatures, beings who represent the boundary breakdown between man, non-man, animal, and machine.

In "*Quaestio de Centauris*," from *Natural Histories*, a boy narrates the story about the origins of the centaur. The centaur, Trachi, whom his father kept in a stall, told the boy this story. Just as the history of man so, too, does the tradition of the centaur begin with a Noah-like figure, named Cutnofeset, although there were no centaurs on his ark. Cutnofeset only saved the key species—"man but not the monkey; the horse but not the donkey" (CW, SN, 511).

How, then, did these species come about? Immediately afterward, legend says. When the waters retreated, a deep layer of warm mud covered the earth. Now, this mud, which harbored in its decay all the enzymes from what had perished in the flood, was extraordinarily fertile: as soon as it was touched by the sun, it was immediately covered in shoots from which grasses and plants of every type sprang forth; and even more, within its soft and moist bosom, it was host to the marriages of all the species saved in the ark. It was a time, never again repeated, of wild, ecstatic fecundity in which the entire universe felt love, so much so that it nearly returned to chaos ... This second creation was the true Creation. (511)

Levi describes a new creation from the mud, a time of a "festival of origins," the origin of every species now alive. He presents this second creation as the true creation, after the flood. Here, again, chaos is not presented as something negative but the result of a wild love overflowing the entire universe. Humans also participated in this "panspermia"—the first generation of centaurs originated from the profligate son Cam, who experienced a wild passion for a Thesalian horse (512). Whoever doubts the credibility of this account has to think twice:

I am afraid that among the readers of these notes some may refuse to believe these assertions, since official science, permeated as it is still today with Aristotelianism, denies the possibility of a fertile union between different species. I must therefore encourage the incredulous to consider that there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. (513-514)

Although perhaps scientifically incredible, this story wants to reveal some essential truths. In this story, some of the key notions we detected earlier return: the mud, the flood, chaos, and creation. There is a flood, which nullifies the old creation, spreading a deep layer of mud. It is this mud that appears to be the source of new creation, for real creation, in the form of hybrid creatures from marriages between different species. I read this celebration of creation as a strong rejection of an order that is based on uniformity and thereby as a literary critique of the Nazi and fascist system that wanted all to be the same.

I already introduced the work of Keller and the surprising connections between her tehomic theology and Levi's literary descriptions of creation. Her theology of the deep—creation out of the mud of the chaos—sees creation as the “birth of new forms, new life through death and decay of the old. A tehomic theology recognizes here an epiphany of the matrix of possibilities” (Keller, 2003, 191). Creation takes place in the “ecosocial web of all life” (191). Levi's new creation after the flood and Keller's creation from the deep both reject an *ex nihilo* creation and propose a relational creational process from the mud with endless possibilities.

“*Quaestio de Centauris*” is not the only story about the conception of hybrids, the story “Disphylaxis,” from *Lilith*, describes species born from any possible seed: “animal, vegetable, or human – that the wind or the water or some accident brought in contact with any ovum had a good possibility of causing the conception of a hybrid” (CW, L, 1436). “Disphylaxis” also shows the urgency for this new creation, however comically described:

Every year, every day, new species were born ... Why not hope for the best? Why not trust in a new millenarian selection, in a new man, swift and strong as the tiger, long-lived as the cedar, prudent as the ant? (1436)

We are going to see that the need for a new creation recurs repeatedly in Levi's stories because the statuses of humanity and the world do not offer hope for the future.

4.3 – Man as Maker

In the previous section on the centaur, I wrote about how the world is in need of a new creation. Humanity is aware of this urgency and consults science, technological innovations, and religious myths in trying to achieve this. However, not everything goes according to plan—our inventions can take over, leaving man behind in solitude, dependence, or devastation.

The “The Synthetics” story from *Flaw of Form* is about Mario who is born in a laboratory and does not have a belly-button, just like Adam, the first man. When one of his friends finds out (he always changes himself in the dressing room with his back turned to his classmates), he is treated as an outsider. But Mario can legitimize the need for humans created by scientists:

If we don't watch out, we'll be eating one another. But even if it doesn't become that dire, the water and air will be contaminated throughout the world ... That is why it's indispensable to give birth to grown men, to engineers and biologists. We can't wait for the children of today to grow up and finish college. (CW, VF, 607)

Also, in the story “The Brokers” from the same collection, the need for another kind of people is presented in order to face contemporary world problems. S. is visited by three strangers—a robust youth, a pretty blond middle-aged woman, and a thin ray-haired

man. They are Earth specialists. Is S. ready to go there? It seems to be a biblical setting with three strangers visiting a man, putting him into an anatheistic-like wager, believe or not, go or stay.

What follows is an advertising talk to seduce S. to go to Earth: “we’ve got to find remedies, and we need people like you ... We’re not here by chance. You were brought to our attention” (630). It turns out that Earth is not the most attractive place to be, taking into account inequality, wars, famine. However, S. is promised weapons to face these problems and offered a solution. “They are weapons that are both powerful and subtle: reason, pity, patience, courage ... You will be one of ours, called upon to complete the work begun billions of years ago, when a certain ball of fire exploded and the pendulum of time began to swing” (632). S. replies that he will go but does not want any preferential treatment:

I accept, but I want to be born randomly ... I prefer to construct myself alone, and to work up the anger that I will need, if I’m able. If not, I’ll accept the fate of everyone. The path of humanity, helpless and blind, will be my path. (632)

The story combines a biblically-inspired setting, the Big Bang theory to explain the beginnings of the planet Earth, and pictures a very specific image of humanity: we live on a beautiful planet, Earth, and have the weapons for peace but our path is one of helpless and blind wandering around.

“The Versifier,” from *Natural Histories*, is written in the form of a play and presents a story about a poet who writes poems on request. Because he and his secretary cannot meet the deadlines for all their assignments, the poet decides to ask dr. Simpson and his versifier to come over. The versifier is a machine that needs only a few suggestions to write the requested poem. The secretary has her doubts—do they really want a machine to take over their work? Here, she touches on the crucial question in the development of machines that can make man’s work easier because they also change human life quite radically. The poet replies:

For me, too, this is a painful choice, and I'm not at all sure about it. There is a joy to our work, a profound happiness, unlike all other kinds of happiness, the happiness of creating, of extracting something out of nothing, of watching right before our eyes, slowly or suddenly, as if by magic, the birth of something new, something alive that wasn't there before ... (CW, SN, 421)

The happiness of creating poetry out of nothing is a rare and precious sensation—are they willing to lose that? In this story we get a glimpse of Levi's idea of the poet as a creator. It surprises the poet and secretary how the machine almost behaves like a human being. "Did you notice how it picked up steam again when it got to the final couplet, when it felt it was out of the woods? It was positively human" (429). In the final act of the play, the poet turns to the public and declares that it was the versifier who wrote the entire piece. Machines have taken over the creation of art.

The last example in this section is a story inspired by the Eastern European Jewish tradition, a world that attracted Levi ever since he returned from Auschwitz. In "The Servant" from *Flaw of Form*, a strong 90-year-old rabbi from Prague builds himself a Golem out of clay, who can serve him and defend the Jewish people from danger. By creating it, he does not try to be in competition with the creator but to imitate him—this creation thus being a very religious act. In most of Levi's stories, the human creators do not have cruel intentions but appear unaware of the forces that they are involved with. In this story, there is also a reference to the centaur to be found:

He was a giant with a human figure from the belt upward. Even this has an explanation: the belt is a frontier, only above the belt is man made in God's image, while below he is a beast. For this reason, a wise man does not forget to wear it. Below the belt the Golem was truly a Golem – that is, a fragment of chaos. (CW, VF, 722)

This centaur is half created in God's image—thus, a man—and half from chaos—thus a beast. The servant did not disappoint the rabbi named Aryeh. Reposing in the cellar, he was a lifeless hunk of clay but whenever Aryeh inserted the Name he was brought back to life. However, after many years it goes wrong. On the Sabbath, man and his servant are not allowed to work, which is why he takes the Name from the Golem every Friday at sunset. One Friday, Aryeh takes the Golem to his house to split a pile of logs. For the first time, the Golem does not obey and refuses to take up the ax, he will do it with his bare hands: "It was like this: the Golem was a servant who didn't want to be a servant" (725). When the sun sets, the Sabbath begins and Aryeh is too late to take out the name—the Golem becomes mad and chops down the entire wooden house. "[Aryeh] praised God in spite of the destruction of his house, because he realized that the fault was neither God's nor the Golem's but his alone" (726).

This story is about the great potential of humans to abstract order from chaos, showing a rabbi who is able to create a Golem that obeys him. Amsallem refers to an interpretation by Abraham Moles, who understands the legend of the Golem not as a magical story but a highly rational one. According to him, it illustrates how a correct interpretation and application of the Law of Moses enables man to recreate every form of the world, even animated beings. The story of the Golem shows man's dominion over matter but without the law the world is nothing but chaos (Amsallem, 1995, 146). The story also refers to the genetic code that is inscribed in us and defines our identity and actions; "the knowledge of the genetic program can provide man with the power of the Creator, in the nearby future" (148). This is also a topic in Levi's novel *The Wrench*, where he writes that man is already capable of doing things that were, before, only in the power of the "Eternal Father" (148). Here, again, it is up to us to use this power in the right way, as Levi writes, echoing the words of the "Book of Deuteronomy": "We hold the key to the greatest boon and the greatest abuse: two doors side by side, two locks, but only one key" (CW, SE, 2370). Levi's creation stories show

and celebrate humanity's creative potential but also warn about the destructive forces that can spring forth from our creations. Creation is thus not good in itself but asks for wise discernment between good and evil, the topic of the next chapter.

However, before we proceed, there is the last part of this section—on God the creator. In the story about the Golem, we saw man creating in the image of God the creator, displaying a great respect for God, and emphasizing human responsibility. Is God the example of wise creation?

4.4 – God the Creator

“The Sixth Day,” from *Natural Histories*, is written as a play and shows the negotiations that preceded the creation of man. It seems as if the reader is a spectator of his or her own creation. Several experts are present, including a chemistry advisor, a psychology advisor, and an economist. The Council of Executive Directors has made a list of requirements for the model Man: a) the skill to create and use instruments, b) the skill to express himself, c) the ability to live under extreme working conditions, d) the tendency to live in community. Agreeing about what this Man should look like appears to be a hard task, though. Should he be subaquatic, a serpent, a mammal, or a bird? The question of reproduction offers a new dilemma because is sexual differentiation not the source for many problems?

What will this creature be? Will he be dual, a centaur, a man as far as the precordium and from there on a beast; or will he be tied to an estrous cycle, and, if so, then how will he maintain a sufficient behavioral consistency?

Let there be Man, Man should be made, even if he is a bird, if that is what you want. But grant me the possibility of dealing with the problem immediately, of extinguishing today the seeds of conflict that will fatally explode tomorrow, so that we will not

have to watch in the foreseeable future the unlucky spectacle of a male Man who forces his people into a war in order to win a woman, or of a female Man who distracts the mind of a male from noble causes and intentions in order to reduce him to subjugation. Remember: he who is about to be born will be our judge. Not only our errors but all of his, for all the centuries to come, will be upon our heads. (CW, SN, 549)

They decide that Man must be a bird but, before they can design the constructive details, a messenger comes in with news announcing the vanity of their meeting: “they didn’t wait for us.”

I don’t know if they consulted anyone, or if they followed any logic, a long considered plan or a moment’s intuition. I know that they used seven measures of clay, and that they mixed it with river water and sea water; I know that they molded the mud into a form that they considered best ... It further seems that the female Man was created from one of his ribs ... (*voices, questions*) ... (550)

At first glance, this play could be read as a critique of the biblical or godly creation, which appears to be irrational and acted out in a wink, explaining the irrationality of our human behavior. Ormuz, one of the men present during the discussion, at one moment expresses his doubts about the idea of Man altogether:

I have never concealed the fact that I have been opposed from the start to the creation of the so-called Man. Already at the time when the Management, rather superficially ... formulated the first draft of the motion just read, I pointed out the dangers associated with this so-called Man’s integration into the equilibrium of the existing planet. (536)

This play expresses that living in this world means to compromise, the creation of a rational super Man seems to be impossible—the

experts simply cannot figure out the perfect conditions. Arimane critiques the experts in their attempts to create such a Superanimal, who is packed with reason and common sense, music, wisdom, and geometry but is incompatible “with the surround environment, an environment necessarily at once putrid and florid, teeming, chaotic, mutable” (536). This play most creatively shows how Levi regards the world to be both cosmos and chaos—chaosmos. Man himself, then, in order to be able to live in that chaosmos, must be hybrid as well. Only a man such as the one described in Genesis, molded from clay, is able to adapt to the conditions of the world.

For Levi, irregularity and imperfection are part of our world order (Porro, 2009, 120). The life created after Auschwitz does not start from nothing; it is not *ex nihilo* but comes from a chaos that can be good or evil and it is up to us to make wise decisions. Levi frequently describes human life to be centauric, created both in the image of God and from the mud. It is this centauric nature that defines us as beings capable of great and evil things. The story of Genesis thus tells us an essential truth about human life and its struggles on earth. In the next section, I discuss how texts are created in dialogue with other texts, thereby providing an explanation of why the “Book of Genesis” might be an important text for Levi.

5 – Writing in Dialogue

As a theologian, I am interested in the relevance of biblical texts in contemporary times. In the previous pages, I have shown that Levi is inspired by the “Book of Genesis” to tell his story about destruction and the rebirth of humanity after Auschwitz. By retelling and recontextualizing the story of Genesis, Levi adds a new voice to the long process of interpretation of Genesis, which already takes place in the Bible itself, in the “Book of Job”. In this section, I discuss Levi’s writing as taking place in dialogue, responding to other texts, creating new meaning.

Let’s start with Genesis, which is itself probably already a re-

sponse to another text. Catherine Keller discusses the assumed parallels between Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian creation myth recorded on seven clay tablets that also narrates about chaos before creation. She asks how Genesis and its pretext are interrelated, focusing on how the *tehom*, the deep, is a derivative of Tiamat, the female god who becomes pregnant from the wind that blows into her mouth. “Did this evil wind really get ‘lost’ within the *ruach Elohim*, and Tiamat behind *tehom*? Or does the *Enuma Elish* (or some Canaanite analogue) lie ‘within’ the text as its prototype?” (Keller, 2003, 108). She thus points us to the question whether, and in what way, other texts are present in new creations.

In reference to the work of Boyarin, Keller introduces the concept of midrash as intertextuality, designating “an alternative historical ‘within’ of the text” (108). The intertextualities present in a text layer and build up the text.

The text is not a void into which prior meanings disappear; nor is it a container carrying prior truths intact. It thus resists any hermeneutical appropriation of its meanings by an interpreting subject, with its particular, contemporary context, complicating its field of effects. (109)

In reference to Bakhtin, she states that texts are dialogical, that “they produce meaning only with the intertextual dynamics of literary-social construction” (116), and this idea of the creational process of texts has consequences for her entire understanding of creation. However, let us first try to grasp what kind of hermeneutics she is constructing. She goes back to Boyarin, who presents a “midrashic hermeneutics,” understanding midrash as the filling of the gaps that the text leaves open to its readers:

It is the gaps in the text which the midrash reads, we have not to do with a nothing – which ever wants plugging – but with a legible matrix of virtual meaning ... The world and the text await interpretation. (118, 119)

Christian theology lacks this midrashic tradition, according to Keller, and maybe that explains theology's fear for the chaos of the *tehom*. Keller, however, wants to face the deep and presents her "tehomitic theology" as being quasi-midrash, resisting a final interpretation, with an open ear for polytonality and "in solidarity with those many and shifted Others marked as the chaos" (121). Here, we can discern the strong political and social core of her work again. Interestingly enough, it is the "Book of Job" through which she illustrates her hermeneutics, facilitating the dialogue between Keller and Levi.

In chapter two, on *The Search for Roots*, we have seen how Levi opens this book by quoting six chapters from the "Book of Job"—Job being the personification of the unjust sufferer who gets crushed under God's omnipotence. Levi chooses to take three chapters that present Job's speech and three that present God's, constructing a unique dialogue between man and his creator. The book of Job shows a problem that is, according to Keller, the fundamental contradiction of monotheism: "if the God of justice is to be counted all-powerful, that (sic) God must be held accountable for all injustice" (127). Keller argues that "YHWH's speech to Job may be read as an exegetical iteration of the creative narrative canonized in Genesis 1 ... The Joban whirlwind recapitulates, alters and amplifies" the narrative of creation (124). In *The Search for Roots*, we have seen how Levi presents laughter as a way to resist the chaotic universe, of which Job is a perfect literary example: "it is the literary structure of the text of Job that lets it be read as creation comedy" (125). Keller emphasizes the parodic elements of Job that function as ways of transforming the perception of the reader. We return to this "parodic" element later on in this section.

Levi opens his quotation of Job with the third chapter, where Job opens his mouth and curses the day he was born: "*Tenebre sia quel giorno*" (darkness will be on that day). According to Keller, this verse shows how the Book of Job is a midrash on Genesis 1; "reversing the order of creation and returning the universe to primordial chaos and darkness," Job "is calling up the powers of chaos to de-

stroy the created order and return the night of his creation to the domain of primordial absence" (128). Keller understands Job as a parable of Israel's suffering and his voice as a prophetic one, amplifying "the (post) exilic heteroglossia we already discern in Genesis 1" (129).

How does God respond to this fundamental question of theodicy? God points Job's attention to the "wild spirit of creation"; He does not command Job to shut up but to look at the wild things and wonder about their immensity. Keller agrees with the many scholars who claim that God's speech in the final chapters deconstructs the "anthropomorphic concept of deity and an anthropocentric construction of his justice" (135). However, she sees something else as well—God's pointing to the Leviathan is not the medium, it is God's message.

Does YHWH annul the specific privilege of our species and sardonically pass it to a monster? Perhaps not so baldly. The final statement implies conditionality: that we lose our special human status when we abuse it. When we mistake dominion for dominance, we fail in our responsibility as caretakers for the earth—ipso facto we abdicate dominion. The chaos monster does not seek vengeance but respect for its domain. (138)

Keller has published extensively about eco-theology and human responsibility for all creatures, from the conviction that all life is interconnected. God's speech from the whirlwind turns the status quo upside down and makes readers aware of the human arrogance "that had learned to trade its sacred dignity against that of the other creatures" (139). She refers here to non-human creatures but, in a book on Primo Levi, we might be able to expand this to the way in which humans have justified themselves for using their power to destroy other creatures, humans, in the camps of the twentieth century. According to Keller, the "Book of Job" is intrinsically ethical—it dares us not to look at God "to right our moral wrongs, to fix our injustices and correct our oppressions ... to abdicate our own

moral responsibility for the earth ... This new image is one of God as a power for life, balancing the needs of all creatures, not just humans" (140). The turn to the responsibility of human beings is intrinsically biblical, we may thus conclude. Who God exactly is remains hidden in the "Book of Job"; God points away from himself toward his creatures: "Whirlwinds in meteorology are complex chaotic systems that suggest not pure chaos but rather the turbulent emergence of complexity at the end of chaos. To Job's question: the answer is still blowing in the wind" (140).

With the help of Bakhtin's *Dialogical Imagination*, Keller defines, as mentioned earlier, the "Book of Job" as a parody—an "intentional dialogized hybrid" (126). Genesis 1 is already resisting a "single and unified worldview" (Idem), which brings me to a discussion of the hybrid nature of Levi's work. Reinier Speelman, a Dutch Levi scholar, calls Levi's short stories Midrashim: "they are not just short stories but have a deeper meaning as well, which may invite the reader to think about them" (Speelman, 2005, 30). His stories have a double nature, being both testimony and narrative, sociological analysis and description. According to Speelman, his stories are "born out of a deep concern for humanity and its fate. Not consoled by the presence of God, we have to cope with life in a world torn apart by conflicts and evil, but governed by the laws of evolution and logic" (30). The four roads from *The Search for Roots* may serve as a relief in this chaotic world. Through his stories and the deeper meaning in them, Levi helps his readers to reflect and become conscious of reality, "in their moralistic aspirations they are typical cases of midrashim" (30).

Also the poem "In the Beginning" could be explained as a form of modern midrash, in which Levi describes the beginning of life as the exploding of a globe of flame. According to Wright, we must use this definition cautiously because midrash normally takes place within a Jewish believing community. He is aware, however, that midrash is not easily defined, the Harper Bible Dictionary moves from "close attention to the meaning of individual words" to "any interpretation which assumes that the biblical text has an inex-

haustible fund of meaning that is relevant to and adequate for every question and situation" (Wright, 2000, 98). It is this practice of intertextuality that makes modern literary theory link to traditional midrash, midrash being "literature that writes not about scripture but with scripture" (101). Here, we see Bakhtin return again and the ways in which texts are constructed in a dynamic tension, thereby confronting the authoritarian theological discourse that tries to claim one specific interpretation of the biblical text. Bakhtin's theory of how the meaning of texts is created by dialogue and in a specific context is, according to Wright, "particularly fruitful in considering what happens to biblical texts when they are assimilated and creatively transformed by modern writers" (108).

In a recent article, Alberto Cavaglion tries to explain Levi's recourses to biblical language as sacred parodies, calling it "*Il sistema parodico*."¹³ Cavaglion states that there is no other account in Italian Jewish literature like that of *If This Is a Man*, where the Bible serves to decipher the chaos. With the opening poem "Shema," Levi writes a parody on an important Jewish prayer but this must be understood as a sacred parody. A parody is never only comical—it is through the comical that a dialogue between man and God can be established.¹⁴ This is comparable to Keller's interpretation of the "Book of Job" as presenting a parodic dialogue between different ideas, an intentional dialogized hybrid (Keller, 2003, 126).

Levi intentionally creates a dialogue between different texts and different vocabularies about chaos and creation. He refers to science, Genesis, and mythical texts to narrate the story of humanity and creation. There is diversity in his descriptions of these two notions, dependent on the genre and time in which he wrote. Keller understands the parody in Job as a medium for resisting a specific theological dogma and presenting an alternative. I think we can conclude that Levi's work is, indeed, an "intentional dialogized hybrid" in which he responds to other texts and combines different vocabularies in order to present a wide variety of recreations of humanity after Auschwitz. In the next section, I reflect on the importance of creative writing for theological thought.

6 – Theopoetics: Humans and God as Makers

In the research question I ask how Levi's language for humanity and God can be read theologically "after God" and how it may challenge and inspire contemporary theology. Focusing on the topics of this chapter, I am interested in the ways in which Levi's creative writings, where Genesis is a recurrent intertext, can be inspiring for theological thought. The theological tradition of "theopoetics" shows an interesting perspective about the role of poetical language in theology and also the creative potential of both humanity and God. It can thus help us interpret Levi's creation narratives and bring them into a dialogue with contemporary theology.

"The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology" was the title of the speech, given by Stanley Hopper at Drew University in the 1960s, in which the first reference to the term "theopoetics" can be found. In it, he argues that, in order for theology to be viable, "we must reclaim the power of myth and imagination, moving toward a poetic perspective of the divine" (Keefe-Perry, 2009, 580). As Hopper formulates it:

The way forward will lead us into a new language where theologies are not rigid, logical assertions, but joyful expressions that plunge us into mystery and a primal being; a theology that is not theo-logic, but theo-poiesis. (Hopper, 1992, 225)

Hopper was highly inspired by the German philosopher Heidegger's thoughts on language, who wrote about man as being poetical: "poetically human beings dwell upon the earth" (Miller, 2010, 9). Hopper thus displays the first initiative for an entirely new way of speaking about the divine, no longer a theological but theopoetical one. This "new way of naming God, world, self and others" asks for, according to Hopper, a three-fold process: stepping back, stepping down, and stepping through. Stepping back means letting go of the -ologies that have dominated Western thought. Here, we return to the "after God" focus of my theological inquiry. Stepping

down means entering the darkness of the mystery of life, “unable to construct meaning because the familiar tools of theology and metaphysics are no longer available” (Keefe-Perry, 2009, 585). The third step, “stepping through,” refers to the re-poetizing of existence, where everything is read poetically, “walking through everything deeply, seeing through life deeply” (585). This has also inspired theologians, such as Kearney and Keller, to see the divine in the everyday (590).

Theopoetics, as “theology taught by poets,” has developed into many different definitions and uses. This plurality is regarded a virtue, as Kearney states in his book *Poetics of Imagining*:

The metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with ‘imaginative variations’ of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to transformation. Semantic innovation thus points towards social transformation. (Kearney, 1998, 149)

This focus on transformation is connected to the theopoetical vision of God—God as the relational creator. For example, Roland Faber sees the theopoetical endeavor as the development of “a worldview that envisions God as a creating event, and the world as shifting creation” (Keefe-Perry, 587), a God always engaged in the renewal of the world (588). Catherine Keller was inspired by theopoetics as well. She states that it is not important whether you believe in God or what you say about God but how you do God. That is how she understands “theopoiesis,” as “God making.” She shows that theopoiesis was introduced by Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century) and that Athanasius had also recognized the need of man to become divine: “theopoiesis as making-divine recognizes a certain cocreativity between the human and the divine” (Kearney, 2016, 59). The Greek term *poiein* means to make, shape, or form and occurs often in the Bible in relation to creation by the divine. The Hebrew root for “creating” is *yzr* which, according to Kearney,

is mirrored both in divine and human creation: *yotzer*, meaning “the divine Creator who creates”; and *yetzer*, “the human power to form and shape according to the secret alphabet of creation (*yetsirah*)” (Kearney, 2017, 32).

It is telling that the Lord did not make anything on the seventh day of genesis leaving it free for humans to complete. The unfinished Sabbath is a gap calling for perpetual recreation – in imagination and action. The play of mutual recreation between human and divine is what we call theopoetics. (32)

Theopoetics makes the claim that first creation calls for second creation. Kearney identifies this with his anatheism, a creation again, the impossible becoming possible: “the yes after the no which repeats the first yes of creation” (36). Creation is a sacred activity for both man and God, creating something out of nothing. The creation by man, the “God making,” is not meant to replace God, as shown by the Golem from the Book of Creation (the Jewish Sefir Yetsirah), which had also inspired Levi. The Golem is a creation to repeat God’s creation “so as to better appreciate the power of divine making ... we are not divine makers but human makers – finite creatures called to collaborate with God in the completion of Creation” (33).

John Caputo also takes a creative recourse to the genre of “theopoetics” in *The Insistence of God*. He opens this book by describing the world as a *chaosmos*, neither pure chaos nor cosmos (order):

The world is neither a neat, divinely run cosmos nor pure chaos but what James Joyce called so prophetically ‘*chaosmos*,’ a dance of probabilities sometimes producing improbable results. That fits with biblical creation: in the Beginning, at the time God was creating the world, the elements were already there, as old as God. (Caputo, 2013, ix)

In this book, he develops the idea of “God, perhaps,” a theology of indecision and suspension of judgment (3), a weak theology in which the name of God (perhaps) indicates an event, an insistence which calls for our response, calls us to take responsibility for the other (15). This theology of events is not a logic but, in Caputo’s words, a poetics—theopoetics. He uses Hegel’s concept of the *Vorstellung*, “a world picture, a world-praxis, a world-formation, a world-creation, an event of *poiesis*, of the creative and recreative” (94). Theopoetics is not about the *Begriff*, the concept, but about the *Vorstellung* of the event. In linking this to the work of Levi, we can state that he, too, does not offer fixed conceptions of God, man and the world in his creation stories, but that, with the help of images, he creates new ways to understand life.

It is important to note that Caputo introduces the term “cosmo-theopoetics,” referring to the entire universe that calls us to responsibility. In the work of Levi, we encounter the intertwinement of man and non-man in the camp, man and animal in the hybrid, and man and machine. Caputo refers to the essay by Donna Haraway—“A Manifesto for Cyborgs”—to explain the modern-day breakdown of boundaries between the human and non-human and the implied growing responsibility for the cosmos. She distinguishes “three crucial boundary breakdowns” that we also encounter in the work of Levi: “the breakdown of the human/animal border, of the border between the living organism and the machine, and even of the border between the physical and the non-physical” (173).¹⁵ This postmodern, continuous boundary crossing and hybridity results in a cosmo-poetics, the entire universe calling on us to respond through responsibility. “This call does not imply a call from “beyond” the world [from a transcendent God, JR], it represents instead another worlding of the world,” states Caputo (177). Just like Levi’s stories on “developments gone wrong” call on us to take responsibility for our own potential to imagine and create a better world.

In the theopoetics of Keller, Kearney, and Caputo, we recognize the responsibility of man to participate actively in the creative ac-

tions of God, to co-create and make the world a better place. Both God and man are poetical, creative, and connected in the continuous creation of the world. Theopoetics also reflects on the nature of meaning-making—not through fixed theological concepts but in stories, metaphors, and myths. David L. Miller, a student of Hopper's, identifies four characteristics of theopoetics in the wake of the death of God, all referring to an absence, a "no." First, no author: "letting go of the pretension to authorship and authority of the theologian." Second, no meaning, implying the letting go of objectivized theological meanings. "No order" is the third characteristic, understanding religion as both ordering and disordering, religion as a continuous questioning of dogmas, theology at the edge of chaos. This theopoetics has "no end" but always implies a next line in the poem, a new surprising perspective (Miller, 2010, 18).

7 – Conclusion

With the help of close-readings of *If This is a Man* and *The Truce* I showed that Levi refers to symbolic notions like chaos, mud, void and high wind inspired by the "Book of Genesis," in order to tell the story of destruction in Auschwitz and the search for new life after the liberation. Both chaos and creation are complex notions in Levi's work: chaos can be destructive and fertile; creation can be good and evil. I linked Levi's rewritings of the ancient notions of chaos and creation to the work of theologian Catherine Keller, who also understands complexity to be a source for creation and takes her inspiration from Genesis, amongst many other texts, to support this.

The notions of chaos and creation also give insight in Levi's understanding of human life. He regards human beings to be hybrids and envisions them to be created both in the image of God and from the mud. Levi's stories remind us both of the great human potential for creation and also the danger that comes with it. Levi's work is creative itself, taking place in dialogue, responding to dif-

ferent texts and combining different vocabularies. By recontextualizing the story of Genesis Levi adds a new voice to the long process of interpretation of the “Book of Genesis.” This interpretation already takes place in the Bible itself, for example in the “Book of Job”. The creativity displayed in Levi’s texts inspired me to introduce the methodology of theopoetics, which opens up the way for the power of stories to teach us valuable things about human life and God. In stories, it is not about the logic but about a new envisioning of the world, which, in their creativity, also express the mystery of life.

Theopoetics regards human creativity as a necessary part of creation, as a response to God’s creation. This entails a great human responsibility because not all creation is good creation, as many of Levi’s stories make perfectly clear. Hence, I think that Levi’s work sharpens the theopoetical discourse on creation, urging us to ask how we can discern between good and evil creation. This is the topic explored in the next chapter.

Four – Good and Evil in and after Auschwitz

1 – Introduction

Anyone with sufficient experience of human affairs knows that the distinction between good and bad faith is optimistic and enlightened, ... The distinction presumes a clarity that few people have, and which even those few lose immediately when, for any reason, past or present reality makes them feel anxious or ill at ease. (CW, SES, 2423)

The network of human relationships inside the concentration camps was not simple: it could not be reduced to two blocs, victims and perpetrators. People who read (or write) the history of the camps nowadays have a tendency, indeed a need, to separate evil from good, to take sides, to reenact the gesture of Christ on Judgment Day: over here go the righteous, over there the wicked. Young people in particular demand clarity and sharp distinctions. Since their experience of the world is limited, they are not fond of ambiguity. (2431)

In the previous chapters, we noticed that Levi emphasizes time and time again that things are often not one thing or another. This also applies to good and evil. Levi calls the tendency to separate good from evil faith optimistic or enlightened and he thus questions the human ability to make clear distinctions. In order to explain the complex ratio between good and evil in the concentration camp system, Levi created the term “gray zone,” to describe a zone in which the perpetrator and victim are less easily separable than might be wished for. As Jonathan Druker describes, Levi coined this term during a time in which it was regarded as misplaced to question the Jewish complicity in the Holocaust because it would re-victimize the victims. However, “as an esteemed survivor and writer, Levi had the moral authority and deftness to state candidly that some of the victims were brutally coerced into significant degrees of complicity” (Druker, 2018, 4).

This chapter continues the course taken in the previous chapters.

It presents a logical continuation of the discussion on chaos and creation in chapter three, where the notions of hybridity and ambiguity showed to be essential in the reconstruction of life after the Shoah. The discussion of creation also urged for the discernment between good and evil creation, in order be able to use our human abilities for the good. While chapter two focused on unjust suffering and the human response to it, this chapter is about the evil-doing of human beings themselves and the consequences of this phenomenon for the understanding of what it means to be human. The question of evil is one of the most challenging questions that have occupied humankind, which shows in age-old sages, myths, philosophical accounts, and religious narratives and dogmas. In theology, the co-existence of the belief in the goodness of creation and the experience of evil (nature- and man-made) has been a source for many debates. In this chapter I will focus on the question of theodicy and the biblical story of Cain and Abel, considering Levi's interpretation of both.

The quotes that opened this chapter are from Levi's last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, in which he again discusses his experiences in the camp to "help clarify aspects of the concentration camp phenomenon that still appear obscure" (CW, 2418). He combines this with a second goal:

I would like to answer the most urgent question, the question that distresses everyone who has the opportunity to read our stories: How much of the concentration camp world is gone and will never return, like slavery and the duel? How much has returned or is returning. In a world teeming with threats, what can each of us do to make sure that at least this threat will be neutralized? (2418,9)

Thus, Levi not only questions the existence of a clear divide between good and evil, perpetrator and victim inside the camps but also, and most urgently, in our ordinary world. Here, the "before and after" theme of this dissertation returns—how does Levi's tes-

timony of Auschwitz challenge concepts (before), shed light on, and inspire our modern-day world (after)? In this chapter, I am especially interested in this dynamic between the particular and the universal character of Levi's description of evil, asking both what made the evil of the concentration camp world unique and what aspects of its evil we might also detect, or are vulnerable to, in the everyday world. I begin, in section 2, with the particularity of evil in Auschwitz, where man was a thing in the eyes of other men. The scale of this evil points us toward questions of theodicy, which are discussed in section 3, on useless suffering and useless violence. In section 4, I explore Levi's conceptualization of the gray zone between victims and perpetrators and ask how this gray zone can also be detected in the world after Auschwitz. Section 5, focuses on Cain as a symbol of human guilt—he who murdered his own brother. Levi also universalizes this guilt by asking whether or not we all share the fear that we have murdered our brother (section 6). By asking how we are all involved in this complex dynamic between good and evil, we obtain new insights into how Levi writes about humanity and God. In the conclusion (section 7), I formulate an answer to the question of how Levi's discussion of evil can be relevant for theology "after God."

2 – "The Evil of Our Time"

They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could encompass all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image, which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, head bowed and shoulders bent, on whose face and in whose eyes no trace of thought can be seen.

(CW, SQU, 85)

For Levi, the evil of his time is expressed in the faceless presence of the dehumanized prisoner of Auschwitz. In his testimony, he describes how this "hollow man" is the result of a system in which everything that is dear to a human being and everything he possesses is taken from him. This reduces the prisoner to a suffering and

needy being and, if you lose everything, you can easily lose yourself too. “He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided, with no sense of human affinity – in the most fortunate case, judged purely on the basis of utility” (23). A man or woman who does not belong somewhere and to whom nothing belongs, is not going to be judged based on who he is but on whether he can be used. Auschwitz was the place in which “man was merely a thing in the eyes of man” (164). The evil of Levi’s time was the conscious destruction of human beings into “things.”

Robert Gordon shows that Levi describes the hollow man as the endpoint of an accumulation of “the denied look, the denied face, the denied answer” (Gordon, 2015, 90). This denial turned them into empty bodies, made them unable to look at each other and to act, as shown in the following lines:

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under *your gaze*. From our side you have nothing more to fear, no acts of revolt, no words of defiance, *not even a look of judgment*. Alberto and I went back to the barrack, and *we couldn’t look each other in the face*.¹ (143)

I referred to this episode already in chapter three. It describes the complete destruction “under the gaze” of the Germans that had left the prisoners empty, “without a look of judgment.” The complete denial of the humanity of their prisoners would make the Nazis free from judgment. No one would remain to judge and no one would return to tell, which was the primary focus of the extermination camps. Levi is unable to look his friend in the face—they were aware of what they had become and were unable to change it.

Evil is present, in the loss of the look, the loss of human contact. The empty look of the Muselmann echoes the refusal of the look in Pannwitz, Alex, Liczba, the Pole, creating a converse image of evil – not radical evil, not theological, but evil historically enact-

ed (the evil of our time), born of the truncated human reciprocity of the face-to-face, inflicted or chosen. (Gordon, 2015, 72)

The evil Levi speaks of is man-made, willingly designed and enacted by humans in the form of an “extermination camp.” Hence, this is a form of moral evil for which human beings can be held accountable. The conceptual distinction between natural and moral evil can be traced back to a historical event—the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, which destroyed the city of Lisbon and thousands of its inhabitants. Earthquakes and the like are natural disasters for which humanity cannot be held accountable. This attempt to divide responsibility clearly meant the start of modernity: “If Enlightenment is the courage to think for oneself, it’s also the courage to assume responsibility for the world into which one is thrown ... Modern conceptions of evil were developed in the attempt to stop blaming God for the state of the world, and to take responsibility for its own” (Neiman, 2002, 4). The history of philosophical thought on evil is understood to have turned radically with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who stated that evil must be seen as related to human action and he consequently warned against the mystification of evil by relating it to an extra-human demon or deity. “With the arrival of Kantian ethics evil ceases to be a matter of abstract metaphysical accounting and becomes instead an affair of human practice and judgment ... Kant brought us face to face with human responsibility” (Kearney, 2003, 87).

In his final work, Levi also refers to “looking” in relation to the dehumanized human being. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi analyses the state of being of the *Muselmänner* and writes that only this group can really testify to the “bottom” of the camp—they are the ones “who saw the Gorgon, did not come back to tell, or they came back mute ... they are the rule, we are the exception” (CW, SES, 2468). In his chapter on Levi in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben tries to explain what Levi could mean by “seeing the Gorgon”. Agamben understands the *Muselmann* as the complete witness who is “unbearable to human eyes. What no one wants to see

at any cost, however, is the ‘core’ of the camp” (Agamben, 2002, 51). The Gorgon is an image from Greek mythology, representing a “horrid female head covered with serpents whose gaze produced death and which Perseus, with Athena’s help, had to cut off without seeing” (53). It is a prohibited face because it produces death but it is also, according to the Greeks, “absolutely inevitable” (53). There is, hence, a paradox in the Gorgon. This paradox is even more visible in the way the Gorgon is represented in sculptures and paintings, being an anti-face represented through a face. “The gorgoneion, which represents the impossibility of vision, is what cannot *not* be seen” (53). Seeing the Gorgon confronts the observer with the impossibility of seeing. “Seeing the Gorgon” by the *Muselmann*, therefore, does not mean that he has seen more than the survivor did but that he has seen “the impossibility of knowing and seeing,” which transformed him into a non-human (54). For Agamben, this paradox represents testimony: “this inhuman impossibility of seeing is what calls and addresses the human, the apostrophe from which human beings cannot turn away” (54). In Levi’s poem “Shema,” which opens his testimony and which I discussed in chapter one, we are, indeed, asked to look at the non-human, at the impossibility to see and grasp, symbolized by the question “is this a man?”

In her book *Precarious Life, The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler writes about the moral claims others make on us by addressing us, unexpected and unplanned, demanding something of us. She connects this to Levinas’ thought on the face and also addresses “unrepresentability”: “there is a ‘face’ which no face can fully exhaust, the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation” (Butler, 2006, 144). Both Robert Gordon and Jonathan Druker see, in Levi’s focus on the look, an explicit link with Levinas, who understood the ethical task of man as “not abandoning the other in his suffering” (Van Riessen, 2007, 115). Druker claims that, in *If This Is a Man*, the will to survive, which was the first imperative in the camp, gets interrupted frequently by “the ethical call of the other” (Druker, 2009, 75). As the opposite, positive, model for the denial

of the look, Levi presents the ethical “looking,” “the governing (ethical) principle of his work as a scientist and more broadly for his engagement with the human and moral matters of the world” (Gordon, 2015, 76).

For Levinas, this human ethical task is deeply linked to his understanding of God. He explains the fact that God did not intervene in the course of the Holocaust as an abandonment: “God covered his face” (Van Riessen, 2007, 107). A variation on this idea of God’s abandonment can be recognized in a passage by Levi in which he tries to grasp the mental state of the *Muselmann*:

To call it ‘neurosis’ is reductive and ridiculous. Perhaps it would be more accurate to see it as the atavistic anguish that reverberates in the second verse of Genesis: the anguish, inscribed in each one of us, of the *tohu vaholu*, the formless void universe, crushed beneath the Spirit of God, but from which the spirit of man – as yet unborn or already dead – is absent. (CW, SES, 2469)

The *Muselmann* reminds Levi of the fear for a chaotic universe in which man is crushed beneath God’s Spirit, while his own spirit is absent. It is a nothingness which we all fear, an atavistic anguish, according to Levi. This can be connected to what Levinas writes about the threat of the *il y a* in response to Heidegger’s philosophy on Being. With *il y a*, Levinas describes “a form of ‘being here,’ *il y a*, a threatening presence without a face. It is there, just as darkness and time in its elusive progression can be threatening to someone who lies awake at night, waiting for the sleep that does not come” (Van Riessen, 2007, 26). It is threatening because you have a feeling you cannot do anything about it, just as if being “has pinned you down, that you are literally subject, subject to anonymous events over which you have no control” (27). When Levi describes the state of the *Muselmann* as the *tohu wabohu*, he emphasizes the tragic side of the evil of his time—the prisoners were unable to escape from it due to external forces that proved to be more powerful.

The paradox in Levinas’ thinking is that, simultaneously with

God's abandonment, He is also present and near. For Levinas, God is "present in instruction, so that man is not abandoned in his search for justice" (108). The name God acquires meaning when one is being touched by the suffering of the other. Levinas' focus on the suffering of the other presents an ethical perspective on evil. For him, suffering is *il y a*, meaningless, when you yourself suffer from evil while being enclosed in your own world. But when you are touched by the suffering of the other, "this meaningless turns into an ethical meaning" (125). Levi also presents an ethical perspective on evil in his testimony. In response to the destruction of humanity that resulted from the denial of the look, Levi opens his testimony by confronting his readers with the face of the *Muselmann*. Hence, he transforms the Shema into an *Ecce Homo* (Gordon, 2015, 63), demanding from us to look and to care. *Ecce Homo* is one of the most depicted scenes of suffering in the history of art, referring to the saying of Pontius Pilate when showing tortured Jesus to the crowd (Laarhoven, 2008, 200). In Levi's rewriting of the Shema as an *Ecce Homo*, I see both Levinas' awareness of the absence of God and turn to ethics. Levi transforms the religious prayer into a new, binding, instruction—to recognize the suffering other.

3 – Useless Suffering and Useless Violence

Today I think that if only because an Auschwitz existed no one in our age should speak of Providence. (CW, SQU, 150)

This was no answer to the cries of the suffering. The reinterpretation of evil as a necessary contribution to the overall picture seemed cruel. (Schaafsma, 2006, 1)

After the Shoah, Emmanuel Levinas announced, echoing Kant, the end of theodicy in his essay "Useless Suffering," which I already discussed in chapter two. According to Levinas, "all evil refers to suffering" (Levinas, 2000, 157) and suffering must be understood

as “intrinsically meaningless and condemned to itself with no exit” (158). Since Auschwitz showed the disproportion between suffering and every form of meaning, the end of theodicy had come. He even calls “the justification of the neighbour’s pain ... [a] source of all immorality” (163). However, making suffering bearable by conceptualizing a theodicy is not exclusive for philosophy of religion. In his essay, he argues how up to the twentieth century it was an aspect of “the self-consciousness of European humanity” and “at the core of atheist progressivism, which was confident, none the less, in the efficacy of the Good which is immanent to being, called to visible triumph by the simple play of the natural and historical laws of injustice, war, misery and illness” (161). Levinas refers here to the Hegelian and Marxist forms of belief in progress. In this section, I discuss whether, according to Levi, there is meaning to be found in suffering. We shall note that Levi restates this discussion by advocating that even the violence of Auschwitz was meaningless.

Druker recognizes the nonreligious theodicy to be implicitly present in *If This Is a Man*, in the belief that, through rational analysis, Auschwitz can be interwoven in a progressive history (Druker, 2009, 32). This theodicy is linked to Levi’s belief in the abilities of language, assuming “that pre-Holocaust language will be largely adequate of describing the new, terrifying world of the camps” (32). However, according to Druker, in the chapter “October 1944,” Levi describes his end of theodicy, both secular and religious. First secular, when he announces that a “new, harsh language” (CW, SQU, 118) would have been born if Auschwitz had lasted longer, indicating that this experience could not be “reconciled with conventional thought or speech” (32). This indicates that the suffering of Auschwitz cannot be meaningfully described and thus surpasses the abilities of human rationality. This chapter also presents a passage about the praying Kuhn and his personal theodicy, which “wrongs his fellow victims yet again” (Druker, 2009, 33). A close look at this episode aims to incite the discussion on the possibility of assigning meaning to suffering.

Levi describes how, in October 1944, a great selection took place

to make room for new arrivals. “The important thing ... is not that the most useless prisoners be eliminated but that free places be quickly created, according to a fixed percentage” (CW, 123). Here, we already detect the irrationality behind this selection. That night in the barrack, Levi sees and hears

the old Kuhn praying aloud, with his cap on his head, his torso swaying violently. Kuhn is thanking God that he was not chosen.

Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see, in the bunk next to him, Beppo the Greek, who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow, and knows it, and lies there staring at the light without saying anything and without thinking anymore. Does Kuhn not know that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty – nothing at all in the power of man to do – can ever heal?

If I were God, I would spit Kuhn’s prayer out upon the ground. (123-124)

The quote at the beginning of this section on the uselessness of suffering and violence shows that, according to Levi, Auschwitz made the idea of providence—the existence of an almighty power controlling human life—impossible. By thanking God for not being chosen, Kuhn affirms and praises God’s hand in the selection. Kuhn, thereby, not only wrongly assumes the idea of providence but also immorally justifies the suffering of his fellow prisoners, including the young Greek Beppo (Druker, 2009, 33). “Kuhn is out of his mind” is Levi’s response—there is no logic that can explain why he escaped death this time and will not be saved when the next selection comes. The random selection cannot be explained, adequately punished, healed, or pardoned, there is nothing that man can do while facing this atrocity. And, if Levi were to be God, he would spit out the prayer of this man who has not understood a bit of what has taken place. Here, Levi rejects Kuhn’s theodicy as being illogical and unjust to the suffering of the other.

There are several interpretations possible of Levi's spitting out of Kuhn's prayer if he were God. First, in line with Druker's argument, it could show Levi's irritation, provoked by the foolish idea that "religion might be able to succeed when reason fails" (33). The evil of Auschwitz, unable to be described and unable to be healed by prayer, shows both the secular and religious end of theodicy. It could also, as Geddes argues, show how Levi is outraged by the suggestion "that it is God who is responsible for the violent and cruel events of the camps. What kind of god, Levi might ask, would be in charge of such a place as Auschwitz? ... A theological view of the world that suggests that all that happens within it is ascribable to God should be, in Levi's view, offensive to God" (Geddes, 2018, 114). Following this line of thought, Levi finds Kuhn's prayer of thanks both offensive to Beppo and God; Kuhn behaves blasphemously. Like Druker, Geddes also concludes that Levi wants to challenge religious theodicy but she adds that he does this without proving that God "does not exist or that God is not all-powerful or all-good" (Idem). According to her, Levi argues "that in the context of the Holocaust, the very engagement in such account-making itself is morally repugnant and deserving to be spat out, even, or perhaps especially, by God" (Idem).

I think we can conclude that Levi strongly rejects a religious system in which this suffering can have its rightful place. Alberto Cavaglione argues that Levi is, indeed, interested in theodicy and the questions of faith (Cavaglione, 2006, 84) and even states that *If This Is a Man* "was written for believers and agnostics" (88). Cavaglione also discusses another chapter from Levi's testimony, which is important when considering "meaningful suffering." In the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses," Levi describes a possible but unabiding answer to the question "why are we here?"

That day in June, Pikolo and Levi walk together half a mile to get the soup for their group of workers. They share stories of their lives at home and Pikolo asks Levi to teach him Italian. The text that comes to Levi's mind is the canto of Ulysses,

who knows how or why it comes into my mind ... He will understand – today I feel capable of so much ... Who Dante is. What the Comedy is. What a curiously novel sensation, to try to explain briefly what the Divine Comedy is. How the Inferno is divided up, what its punishments are. Virgil is Reason, Beatrice is Theology. (CW, 106)

It is not surprising that Levi chooses the Divine Comedy as a medium for learning Italian, as Dante is an important literary inspiration for him. Levi starts with verse 84 of Canto xxvi of the Inferno, “exactly the point in which Ulysses thrashes and writhes at the effort of remembering” (Sodi, 1990, 67). Trying to remember Dante, he goes “back to an almost unthinkable time when he was still a university student in Turin, he tries to inject a breath of humanity into his present condition” (69). I quote a long piece from this chapter:

Here, listen, Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

*Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
You were not made to live your lives as brutes,
But to be followers of worth and knowledge.*

As if I, too, were hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am ... He has received the message, he has understood that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to talk about these things with the soup poles on our shoulders. (CW, 107-108)

...

*Three times it turned her round with all the waters;
And at the fourth, it lifted up the stern
So that our prow plunged deep, as pleased an Other.*

I hold Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this ‘as pleased an Other’ before it’s too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so unexpected anachronism, and something else, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today ... (108-109)

In the middle of the turmoil of the camp, Levi is enjoying Dante’s poetry. It reminds Levi of the seed he was born from and his fate—not to live as a brute but to pursue virtue and knowledge. Levi describes it as a revelation, a moment in which the voice of God speaks to him about what they are made for. In the second part of the quote, a form of theodicy seems to appear—“*come altrui piacquè*,” as pleased another, the suffering is good for someone. As Cavaglion writes, Levi here seems to imagine a “God who, perhaps, is pleased by the destiny of the Jewish people: which is, in all clarity, an explanation in some way theological, if not mystical, of Evil” (Cavaglion, 2006, 86, my translation). Does Levi here offer a theodicy himself—is there indeed a reason why they are there? Is there a God who is pleased by their fate? In contrast to the episode of Kuhn, the “meaning in suffering” is here not presented as an injustice but as a moment of relief, gigantic insight, and wonder. Yet, it is a momentary revelation—they arrive at the line before the soup distribution and the others announce in three languages that it is cabbage and turnips today.

Until the sea again closed – over us. (CW, 109)

The moment is over, Levi’s short throwback to the Italian language, to his memories of home, to humanity, to meaning, gets interrupted by voices that bring him back to the reality of the camp: “*Kraut und Rüben ... Choux et navets. Kaposzta és répak*” (Cabbage and turnips) (109). In chapter three, I discussed how human beings are

created from mud and spirit, which tension is most tangible here. Living in high spirits while reciting Dante, it does not take long before Levi is thrown back to the reality of the camp, where the main question is what is in the soup today. If Levi's "The Canto of Ulysses" chapter shows that there might be meaning in their situation, then, through poetry, it also makes us aware that this was only a short moment that was quickly interrupted by the variety of languages demanding to know what today's soup is made of. In Auschwitz, there is no room for the spiritual reality of human life, which we can also read in the chapter "A Good Day":

The conviction that life has a purpose is rooted in man's every fiber; it is a property of human substance. Free men give many names to this purpose, and think and talk a lot about its nature. But for us the question is simpler.

Today, here, our only goal is to reach the spring. We care about nothing else now. Behind this goal there is now no other goal.
(67)

It is only in the moment in which Levi leaves the time and space of Auschwitz by remembering and reciting the Canto of Ulysses that he is able to hear a trumpet and to be reminded of a purpose in life and a reason for his fate. Until the sea closes above them and he finds himself in line for the soup. Auschwitz is a place in which meaning cannot be constructed at the expense of the other's suffering and in which only the memory of civilization could bring up the thought of a meaningful existence.

In his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi turns the idea of "meaningless suffering" around, by dedicating a chapter to "meaningless violence."² Not only did suffering have no meaning but even the violence had none. He characterizes the Hitlerian era as a time with widespread useless violence as an end in itself: "designed solely to create pain" (CW, SES, 2486). He states that there are, unfortunately, also useful forms of violence, natural death, for example,

and that murder or war also have their purpose despite their awfulness. "They do have a purpose, which may be evil or perverse, but they are not gratuitous and they do not deliberately inflict suffering" (2486). However, the suffering provoked by the Nazis is an entirely different story. In the Third Reich, the best option was whatever provoked the maximum of infliction, either physical or moral: "the 'enemy' was supposed not only to die but to die in agony" (2498). Levi gives several examples, including the long journey in an overcrowded train wagon, without food, water, or a latrine. The train ride was a prologue to the suffering in the camp, where the prisoners often had to be nude and did not have the privacy of a bathroom nor did they receive a spoon to eat the daily soup with. All to increase suffering. "Wouldn't it have been simpler, 'cheaper,' to let them die, or perhaps kill them, in their beds rather than insert their agony into the collective agony of the train?" (2498). Also, most of the work was useless, Levi gives the example of testimonies from Ravensbrück, where women had to shovel sand from one dune to another, in an endless circle, until it had returned to where it came from. It was "the work of a beast of burden – pulling, pushing, carrying heavy loads, back bent to the ground. This was another form of useless violence: useful perhaps only for crushing resistance in the present and punishing resistance from the past" (2498). For Levi, the tattoo that the prisoners of Auschwitz got was another matter:

an indelible sign that you will never get out of here alive; this is the mark branded on slaves and on livestock being sent to the slaughter, which is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. The violence of the tattoo was gratuitous, an end in itself, a pure insult: wasn't it enough to have three cloth numbers sewn on your pants, jacket, and winter coat? No, something more was needed, a nonverbal message, so the innocent would feel their sentence inscribed in their flesh.³ (2497)

Levi tries to analyze the source of this system of useless violence; was it “the rational unfolding of an inhuman plan” or collective madness? Was it evil logic or, instead, the complete absence of logic? Levi wants to acknowledge the rationality in the fundamental design of National Socialism and refuses to see madness as the source of the regime: “Neither Nietzsche nor Hitler nor Rosenberg was mad when he intoxicated himself and his followers by preaching the myth of the superman, to whom all is conceded in recognition of his dogmatic congenital superiority” (2487). But it went wrong when they moved away from reality by detaching their morals “from the morals common to every time and every civilization, morals that belong to our heritage as human beings and must ultimately be recognized” (2487). It is important to see that, for Levi, there is thus a fundamental morality shared by all human beings from which Nazism disconnected itself. Paul Ricoeur also understands evil as the misuse of the fundamental structures: “it is absurd that human beings who have these structures – on the basis of which they may be called good by nature – in fact commit evil and are marked by fault” (Schaafsma, 2006, 31). This turning upside down of morality resulted in ss soldiers for whom violence “ran in their veins, it was normal, a given. It oozed from their faces, their gestures, and their language” (CW, 2499). This is not to say that they were monsters or made from a perverse human substance that is different than ours. Levi stresses that their behavior was a result of year-long indoctrination in a totalitarian regime.

On the last page, Levi turns his argument around and does present a usefulness of the violence, however terrible this “use” might be: “In other words, before dying, the victim had to be degraded to alleviate the killer’s sense of guilt. This explanation is not without logic, but it cries out to the heavens: it is the only use of useless violence” (2502). The fact that victims had first to be degraded to non-humans in order to be able to be killed without feeling guilt is a logic that “cries out to the heavens” (Idem). Maybe that is the only appropriate response when facing the useless suffering of Auschwitz.

4 – Trapped Somewhere In-Between: The Gray Zone between Good and Evil

4.1 – The Gray Zone

The “gray zone” is probably one of Levi’s most well-known and innovative concepts for grasping the dynamics in the Lager, where good and evil appear less easily separable than wished for, a space where a simple division between the perpetrator and victim does not exist. This gray zone shows itself in an epiphanic scene in which the *Sonderkommandos* do the most cruel daily task of killing prisoners in the gas chambers—and one day find a girl lying on the floor who is still alive.

They hide her, warm her, bring her beef broth, ask her questions. She is sixteen years old. She has lost her sense of time and space ... But these slaves, brutalized by alcohol and daily slaughter, are transformed. Before them is not the anonymous mass, the river of frightened, stunned people getting off the trains: before them is a person. (CW, SES, 2445)

Levi’s analysis of this episode might be a bit disturbing. According to him, only saints could have pity for many, in most cases the men of the *Sonderkommandos*, and all of us can only express our pity toward the individual, the *mitmensch*, the co-human: “the flesh-and-blood human being who stands before us” (2446). A doctor revives the girl with an injection, when one of the officers, Mushfeld, arrives and has to decide whether the girl can live while having witnessed what happens inside the gas chamber. “Mushfeld hesitates, then makes his decision. The girl has to die.” Because of her young age she cannot be trusted to keep silent.

That single instant of compassion, immediately erased, is not enough, of course, to absolve Mushfeld, but it is enough to place him, if only at the far end, within the gray area, that zone of am-

biguity that emanates from regimes founded on terror and obsequiousness. (2447)

Keep away from simplification and judgment, that is a key message in Levi's work. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he responds to the climate of the 1980s, especially shocked by the new generation with their stereotypes and indifference to the complexity of the Lager phenomenon. The Lager, according to Levi, was a place in which the space between the victim and perpetrator was not empty, a crucial lesson to learn if we want to understand what it means to be human and if we want to protect ourselves when new tests face us. "Many signs indicate that the time has come to explore the space that separates the victims from the tormentors (and not only in the Nazi Lagers), and to do so with a lighter touch and a less troubled spirit than has been the case, for example, in certain movies" (2433). Levi's exploration of the complexity of the camp has consequences for the way in which we understand the ambiguity of human nature and the way in which political systems can corrupt people into collaboration and complicity. Collaboration is essential in understanding the Lager's complexity—it stands at the basis of what Levi, pioneering, described as the gray zone.

The method chosen by the Nazis was one that destroyed all capacity of resistance immediately by yelling, using violence, shaving hair off, and replacing personal clothes with a prisoner's costume. The "underworld" of National Socialism degraded their victims, made them similar to themselves. They dragged them down with them into a universe, where the enemy was everywhere, outside but also inside the group of the prisoners, where solidarity was hard to find. In the camp, you needed a privilege in order to survive "and privilege, by definition, defends privilege," resulting in a

hybrid category of inmate-functionaries [which] is both its framework and its most disturbing feature. This category is a gray zone, with undefined contours, which both separates and connects the two opposing camps of masters and servants. It has

an incredible complicated internal structure, and harbors just enough to confound our need to judge. (2435)

For Levi, it is of fundamental importance to understand that although the perpetrator and victim are in the same trap, this does not expel the perpetrator's guilt and the need for punishment. To the contrary, it is the oppressor who has prepared and activated this process.

The above mentioned *Sonderkommandos*, especially, present a challenging case while pondering collaboration in the camp. According to Levi, it is the most demonic crime of National Socialism to have thought of and organized these squads, which had to murder and cremate their fellow prisoners day in and day out. It carries a message: "We, the Lord's people, we are your destroyers, but you are no better than us; if we want to, and we do, we are capable of destroying not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed our own" (2443). For Levi, these squads are the troubling case because they accepted their task and did not prefer death. This alarms us with regard to the moral nature of human beings, according to Levi. Here, he awakens some of the key questions in philosophical discussions on evil—are we good or evil by nature? Are we directed to good or bad? What is the power of regimes like those of the camps that they are able to eliminate the free will of their victims? Levi emphasizes that we are not authorized to judge—not those who have experienced the Lager and even less those who have not; every individual is most complex and no one knows what he would have done (2448). The story of the *Sonderkommandos* shows that the meaning of the words "good" and "evil," as understood in moral theories, falls short while facing the camp.

Time and time again Levi stresses the complexity of man and the impossibility to safeguard the optimistic and Enlightenment-based distinction between good faith and bad faith. Most illuminative here is his well-known narration of the fate of Rumkowski, which he presents in the story collection *Lilith and Other Stories* and which returns in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Rumkowski was as-

signed to become the senior elder of the (first) Nazi ghetto of Lodz, the second (after the ghetto of Warsaw) in number, and also the longest-lived one due to its economic importance to the Germans and the personality of Rumkowski himself. He thrived in his role, rapidly saw himself as an absolute but enlightened monarch, and ruled over his tiny kingdom of Jews. Levi describes him as a dictator—he made stamps carrying his image, let himself be driven through the streets filled with beggars and petitioners, and held speeches in the rhetoric style of Mussolini and Hitler. He must have made himself believe he was the savior of his people, a Messiah. This last fact shows the confused being he was, identifying both with the oppressor and the oppressed, “since man, as Thomas Mann says, is a confused creature; and he becomes more confused, we might add, when he is subjected to extreme pressure, and so he eludes our judgment, the way a compass goes wild at the magnetic pole” (CW, L, 1412). This does not implicate his exemption from responsibility, neither lawfully nor morally can he be acquitted. Here Levi again refers to the corrupting system that can only be resisted by a solid moral structure, which Rumkowski lacked. The Lager can be understood as a laboratory—the hybrid class of prisoner-functioner constitutes the disquieting structure of the gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. It is a very complicated structure, which confounds our ability to judge. The gray zone of the privileged has a multilayered source: the more power is restricted, the more it is in need for external aid. The harder the oppression, the more diffuse is the possibility of collaboration among the oppressed.

This brings us to the question of free will. In Western philosophy Kant⁴ has become a dominant voice with regard to this question, arguing that the will can never be completely free or rational but must always strive for situations and acts in which freedom and rationality can prosper. Then, human beings who free themselves from their animality can respect “the human being” and create a moral law that is absolute, universal, and good in itself. The moral law sees the other not as a thing or a means but as a goal in itself.

Kant opposes this moral law to the natural law, which is based on self-love. In Auschwitz, law focused on sheer survival governed: “Eat your own bread, and, if you can, that of your neighbor” (CW, SQU, 152) The kernel of the structure of the camp was that man was treated as a thing by other men and had to struggle for survival.

The history of Auschwitz makes us ask whether man is really free to act in situations of extreme oppression, thereby questioning the idea that Kant has put forth: that man is always free, in times of suppression by either political leaders or nature’s cruelty as well. Every act can be based on a maxim—a rule one sets oneself to govern one’s acts—despite the hard situation one may find oneself in. Levi does ask himself this same question but gives a response different from Kant’s, based on his own experiences. His work shows that the prisoners of Auschwitz were coerced into a condition of sheer survival, unable to act according to a moral law:

Even if we leave aside the infernal environment in which they had been abruptly plunged, it is illogical to expect from them – and rhetorical and false to claim that everyone always practices – the behavior we expect of saints and Stoic philosophers. In reality, in the overwhelming majority of cases, their behavior was coerced with an iron fist. Within a few weeks or months, the deprivations to which they were subjected brought them to a condition of sheer survival, a daily battle against hunger, cold, exhaustion, and beatings, in which *the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to nothing*. (SES, 2440)⁵

The reference to the “iron fist” that coerced the behavior of the prisoners shows Levi’s opinion that the fault lies with the system of the totalitarian state (2436). The fact that the oppressors made their victims similar to themselves, made them into perpetrators themselves, only enhances their evil. “Manzoni⁶ understood this condition all too well: ‘The troublemakers, the oppressors, all those who do harm of any sort to others, are guilty not only of the evil they do but also of the perversion of their victim’s minds’” (2436).

The greatest fault lies with the system but, according to Levi, a state of victimhood does not exclude guilt, “which is often objectively serious, but I do not know a human court that could be delegated to take its measures” (2436). He explicitly states that, if it was up to him to judge, he “would freely absolve anyone whose complicity in the crime was minimal and whose coercion was maximal” (2436). Levi has very subtle considerations about the degrees of judgment. There were low-level functionaries who did not benefit much from their privilege and suffered themselves. Senior functionaries need “a more subtle and varied judgment,” since their motivations to become Kapo varied—from seeing a possible escape from the final solution to a sincere aspiration to power. The absolute power that the Kapos could obtain is understandably very attractive to persons who are greedy for power but Levi also shows examples of the Kapos who had access to secret information and could thereby help their fellow prisoners. Levi is aware that there are people “who are gray, ambiguous, and quick to compromise. The extreme tension of the camp tends to augment their numbers. They bear their own share of guilt (increasing in proportion to their freedom of choice), in addition to which there are the vectors and instruments of the system’s guilt” (2440).

Levi knew that there had already been much discussion about the trading of roles between the oppressor and victim. He responded to the film director, Liliana Cavani, who stated that “We are all victims or murderers and we accept these roles voluntarily” (2439).⁷ Levi’s response is insightful about what he wants his readers to learn about the victims and perpetrators in Auschwitz:

I do not know, nor am I particularly interested in knowing, whether a murderer is lurking deep within me, but I do know that I was an innocent victim and not a murderer. I know that murderers existed, and not just in Germany, and that they still exist, retired or on active duty, and that confusing them with their victim is a moral disease, and aesthetic license, or a sinister sign of complicity. Above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentional or not) to the deniers of truth. (2439-2440)

Levi did not use the concept of the gray zone to mix victims and perpetrators into an indistinguishable gray mass. It seems that Levi creates three roles in the gray zone—the innocent victim, the gray ones who collaborated and had guilt but in varying degrees, and the oppressor who designed the regime and coerced others into it. The gray zone is not meant to label more people as perpetrators but to prevent us from making easy judgments and to open our eyes to the corrupting power of a totalitarian regime.

There were also exceptions, men who were able to resist the corrupting regime and reminded Levi of the good world outside the camp. In the next section, I examine two descriptions of such men from *If This Is a Man*.

4.2 – The Survival of Goodness

Asking what “evil” means in the face of Auschwitz also prompts the question how the “good” can be understood. In the camp, Levi meets certain persons who enable him to survive morally or to keep faith in humanity—people who persevered in seeing themselves and others as human beings. One of those encounters takes place in the washhouse, where Levi sees his 55-year-old Austro-Hungarian friend Steinlauf scrubbing his neck and shoulders. At that moment, Levi himself had already lost the instinct for cleanliness. Washing yourself seemed useless, since the washhouse and the water were dirty, and “I would probably live a shorter time, because washing is work, a waste of energy and warmth” (CW, SQU, 36). Steinlauf disagrees with him and gives him a speech that serves as a testament to the will to resist the dehumanization in the camp:

Precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization. We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to

every insult, condemned to almost certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength, for it is the last – the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves with our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the rules prescribe it but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, to not begin to die. (37)

The perseverance in taking care of your personal hygiene is a sign of human dignity that can keep you alive in the camp. Levi is impressed by Steinlauf's speech, but must admit his is a more flexible and bland doctrine, "which for centuries has drawn breath on the other side of the Alps" (Idem). Levi doubts whether he can accept Steinlauf's moral system:

No, the wisdom and virtue of Steinlauf, certainly good for him, is not enough for me. In the face of the complicated netherworld my ideas are confused; is it really necessary to elaborate a system and put it into practice? Or would it be better to acknowledge that one has no system? (38)

There is one man whom Levi gives credit for his own survival: Lorenzo. Lorenzo was an Italian civilian worker who "brought me a piece of bread and the remains of his ration every day for six months; he gave me an undershirt of his, full of patches; he wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me the reply. For all this he neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple, and did not think that one should do good for a reward" (113). Levi was not the only one who had a relationship with a civilian who helped him to survive physically. Many prisoners were "organized," took care of themselves, were able to find a civilian to support them in some way. Sometimes it happened that a civilian took the initiative to throw a potato or a piece of bread to the "untouchables," to "get rid of some importune hungry look, or through

a momentary impulse of humanity, or through simple curiosity to see us running from all sides to fight each other for the scrap" (115). Levi's relationship with Lorenzo was different than any of these examples:

I believe that I owe it to Lorenzo if am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that a just world still existed outside ours, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, unconnected to hatred and fear: something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving. (115)

Unselfish acting was a rare exception in the camp and, as Levi explains, almost impossible when living in a camp governed by a regime that was directed toward the destruction of both body and spirit. Lorenzo was not a prisoner so he had some advantages Levi did not have. But Lorenzo also served as a reminder of goodness, which gave Levi a reason to survive.

4.3 – Do Monsters Exist?

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi dedicates an entire chapter to unravel the stereotypes about the camps. Some of the questions that are always being asked of survivors are: "Why didn't you escape? Why didn't you rebel? Why didn't you avoid capture 'before'?" (CW, SES, 2522). These questions are incorporated in the book because of their inevitability and growing frequency. In the remainder of this section on the "gray zone," I give attention to one last stereotype that Levi mentions in the conclusion of the book because it can bring us deeper into the discussion about the relevance of Levi's work for thinking about evil. The stereotype is expressed in the following question: what cloth were your "tortures" made of? (2566) I will show that Levi does not understand the perpetrators as monsters, which also Hannah Arendt argues in her book on the tri-

al of Adolf Eichmann. I will finish this section with Levi's reflections on Eichmann.

According to Levi, already the word "tortures"—by which they mean the ss—implies the stereotype, assuming that the perpetrators are "deformed individuals, born bad, sadistic, flawed at birth" (2566). But Levi replies, "they were not monsters" (2566). In the book *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Richard Kearney explains how the three groups of creatures in his title represent the human experience of standing at the edge, confronting us with the unknown. They are also "often set apart in fear and trembling. Exiled to hell or heaven; or simply ostracized from the human community into a land of aliens" (Kearney, 2006, 3). According to Kearney, there are two options to respond to this "alien" experience—either to "try to understand and accommodate our experience of strangeness" or "to repudiate it by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders" and "making sense of our confused emotions by externalizing them into black-and-white scenarios" (4).

Levi's work is a testimony of understanding, of reasoning against black-and-white scenarios. The perpetrators, therefore, must not be understood as "monsters." "Instead, they were made from the same cloth as us, average human beings, of average intelligence and average malice: with some exceptions, they were not monsters, they had the same faces as us, but had been brought up badly" (CW, 2566). Levi's work has such power because it dismantles easy simplifications and stereotypes but also urges and directs us to understanding. It represents a movement toward growing complexity but without absolving the possibility to judge the perpetrator and to see a group of prisoners as "innocent victims." *The Drowned and the Saved* could, hence, be regarded as the middle ground between Enlightenment—"the distinction between good and bad faith is optimistic and enlightened"—and postmodernism, which regards evil as inexplicable and therefore makes understanding impossible. Kearney shows that, in its focus on the monstrous character of evil, postmodern thought on the sublime withholds us from the ability to understand evil and learn from it.

The 'sublime' is a category for dealing with experiences which are beyond categories. It is a sort of self-negating name for the experience of an alterity so 'unnameable' that it may be ascribed to either absolute terror or absolute divinity ... As such the sublime tells us nothing about what happens but only that something happened, that some inexplicable and inconceivable 'event' took place. (Kearney, 2006, 92)

It was Hannah Arendt who, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), dismantled the idea that the perpetrators of the Holocaust should have been monsters. The observation of Adolf Eichmann, during his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, made her rethink "evil," she faced a "dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetrated them ... everybody could see that this man was not a 'monster,' but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown" (Arendt, 1964 version, 54). Eichmann showed no intention to do evil; instead, he testified of "a thoughtlessness that enabled him to do evil in the guise of doing his job" (Geddes, 2003, 108). It is remarkable that Arendt only presents the term "banality" on the last page of the book, while describing Eichmann's behavior just before his execution: "It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lessons that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963, 231, her emphasis). For Arendt, this banality does not imply that Eichmann could be absolved from guilt and judgment, she simply tries to understand how it was possible that someone without evil intent and without consciousness of the effects of his acts – "He merely, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*" (Arendt, 1964, 287, her emphasis) – could cause the death for an "uncountable" amount of people.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi writes about Adolf Eichmann and his defense during his trial in Jerusalem in the chapter "The Memory of the Offense." Levi reflects on the tendency of per-

petrators to repress the memory or alleviate the sense of guilt. He calls Eichmann an “icy fanatic” (CW, 2422), who defended himself in the classic way of the former Nazis: “we were trained to be absolutely obedient ... others decided for us, and it could not have been otherwise, since our ability to decide had been amputated ... Therefore we are not responsible and should not be punished” (2424). Levi finds it unacceptable that they say they could not have resisted the system, since they had joined by choice before Nazism became a totalitarian regime. “Their rewriting of the past was a retrospective operation, slow and (probably) not methodological. It is naïve to ask whether they acted in good or bad faith” (2425).

In the poem “For Adolf Eichmann,” Levi speaks to him directly, not analytically but sharply and condemnatory, as a personification of the evil of the Holocaust:

... And you have come, our precious enemy,
Abandoned creature, man encircled by death.
What can you say now, before our congregation?
Will you swear by a god? What god?
Will you leap joyfully into the grave?
Or will you grieve the way the busy man grieves at last,
Whose life was short for his too long art,
For your sad unfinished art,
For the thirteen million still alive? (CW, CP, 1905)

What god is there for this man to swear to? What does he think of himself and what he did? In the following strophe, Levi curses him, wishing him a long life full of confrontations with the suffering he provoked:

O son of death, we do not wish you death.
May you live longer than anyone ever lived:
May you live sleepless for five million nights,
And every night may you be visited by the suffering of
everyone who saw

The door that closed off the way back click shut,
The dark around him grow, the air with death. (Idem)

Levi only needs two short lines to describe the incredible suffering Eichmann was responsible for—a door closes and death is the only way out. The perpetrator must be confronted with his guilt forevermore.

5 – On Guilt: Each Man Is His Brother's Cain

According to Ricoeur, we cannot speculate about evil or talk about it in abstractions. We have no direct access to it but can only approach it with the help of symbols and myths. In the religious confession of evil, he is able to distinguish three main types of symbols: defilement, sin, and guilt (Schaafsma, 2006, 48). “Defilement depicts evil as something that spreads through contact: it sticks to people when they touch something impure” (50). It is a very physical understanding of the spreading of evil—connected to purifying rituals of washing—and, according to Schaafsma, a view on evil least familiar to us since it “lacks the element of personal imputation of evil” (49). “Sin” is the most religious symbol because it must be understood in the context of a covenant between God and his people and the breaking of that bond by man. “The continuity between defilement and sin [is] in that evil is regarded as a reality: the fact is that sin is there, independently of our human awareness of it” (56). The third symbol deviates from this: “guilt” is the becoming aware of one’s sin (57).

What is of special interest for this section is Ricoeur’s discussion of myths, which narrate the story of man and evil from beginning to ending. The myths he refers to are all about a hero or ancestor who can serve as a prototype of human beings in their relation to evil. Ricoeur leaves out the story of Cain though, which is important in Levi’s narrative on complicity and shared guilt.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, the “anti-hero,” Cain, refers to

three different types of guilt: the *Sonderkommandos* guilt (of those who collaborated in killing their brothers); the survivor's guilt (I survived, so I am my brother's Cain); and the universal guilt of man (we are all our brother's Cain). While we discuss Cain as the prototype of human universal guilt we leave behind, following Levi, the discussion on the particularity of the evil of Auschwitz and start pondering evil today.

5.1 – The *Sonderkommandos*

Cain first comes up in relation to the *Sonderkommandos*, who represent an extreme case of collaboration. Consisting mostly of Jewish prisoners, these squads were responsible for all the work in relation to the crematoriums. The members of the commando worked there for a couple of months, then got killed and cremated themselves by the new squad since no one could live to tell. According to Levi, having imagined and organized these squads is the most demonic crime of National Socialism (CW, SES, 2857).

Through this institution, the attempt was made to shift the burden of guilt to others, that is, to the victims, so that not even the awareness that they were innocent was left to bring them relief. It is neither easy nor pleasant to plumb the depths of this evil, but I think it has to be done, because what was perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, and could involve us or our children. (2858)

Making them murder, plunder, and cremate their fellow prisoners—most of the time their fellow Jews—was a way for the Nazi guards to absolve themselves from guilt. The prisoners themselves had now become the guilty ones. Levi describes that the ss saw the members of the squads almost as their colleagues “by now as inhuman as they were, yoked to the same wagon, bound by the same foul chain of forced complicity” (2860). This “equality” made it possible to organize a football match between the ss guards and *Son-*

derkommandos, an event in which, according to Levi, a satanic laughter sounds through:

It has been consummated, we have succeeded, you are no longer the other race, the anti-race, the primary enemy of the Thousand Year Reich; you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. Now you are like us, you who are so proud: smeared with the blood of your people, like us. Like us and like Cain, you have murdered your brother. Come, now we can play together. (2445)

It is a very physical description of the way in which the Nazis were able to transmit their guilt by designing squads with the sole purpose of killing their own people. Levi uses the words “embracing,” “dragging,” “smearing with blood.” It brings to mind some aspects of the symbol of “defilement,” one of the three symbols through which Ricoeur tries to express the reality of evil. Defilement indicates evil that “spreads through contact: it sticks to people when they touch something impure” (Schaafsma, 2006, 50). Also, the involuntarily undertone in this symbol is important—you touch it, perhaps unwillingly or unconsciously, but through touching it you get affected. In this manner, evil shows itself to be “material and uncontrollable” (53). Ritual purity is an important aspect of Judaism, which you can lose by, for example, touching something or someone impure, including the dead. The above quote by Levi shows how the *Sonderkommandos* were an insult, especially for the Jews—no longer set apart but now smeared by the blood of their own people, forever impure. It was initiated so that the Jews could destroy themselves, as this destruction was the primal goal of Nazism. The squads were an evil in itself by design and showed how complicity in evil can be coerced and guilt transmitted.

The design of these squads shows that the ss deliberately made their victims suffer. According to Claudia Card, in her book *The Atrocity Paradigm, A Theory of Evil*, this aspect of evil is missing in

Kant's theory of radical evil, which she takes as a starting point in her development of a theory of evil. She discusses and critiques Kant's idea of radical evil, which she explains as the expression of a will that subordinates the moral law to self-interest. Self-interest is then the goal that permits the actor to act according to the moral law. What Card misses in this theory is that it does not leave room for doing wrong for its own sake or, as Levi puts it, for performing "useless cruelty, in a deliberate creation of pain" (CW, 2910). According to Kant, "doing wrong for its own sake would be ... diabolical, not human. Human beings, he maintained, are never diabolical" (Card, 2002, 77). The deliberate creation of pain in Auschwitz thus gives reason for Card to rethink evil and complicate Kant's notion of diabolical evil. In her chapter on the gray zone, she presents, with the help of Levi's work, "a more accurate conception of diabolical evil than the one rejected by Kant: the deliberate and successful pursuit of other's moral corruption" (211).

In her book, Card re-conceptualizes and re-introduces the theory of diabolical evil into philosophy. A crucial aspect of this theory is the complexity of human relations, which Levi describes in his gray zone. In order to understand her theory we must first look at her definition of evil. For Card, something can be called evil if it has two basic components: "intolerable harm and (culpable) wrongdoing" (4). This means that natural events, according to her definition, cannot be regarded as evil since they do not involve moral agency. She defines diabolical evil in the following manner:

Diabolical evil, on my view, consists in placing others under the extreme stress, even severe duress, of having to choose between grave risks of horrible physical suffering or death (not necessarily their own) and equally grave risks of severe moral compromise, the loss of moral integrity, even moral death. This is stress geared to break the wills of decent people, to destroy what is best in us on any plausible conception of human excellence. (212)

For Card, Levi's description of how the gray zone in Auschwitz was deliberately created exemplifies diabolical evil. It shows that the greatest danger of severe oppression is that victims can become doers of evil themselves. "Those who knowingly place others in gray zones jeopardize and destroy human goodness" (218) and thereby their innocence. Levi's description of the Satanic laughter of the Nazis who dragged their victims down with them does, indeed, seem to correspond to the manner in which Card describes the classic view of Satan, "a corruptor, as one who tempts others to abandon morality or demote it to a low position on their scale of values" (212). This corruption takes place by putting the victim under an extreme amount of stress in order to "break the wills of decent people" (Idem). In this understanding, the design of the *Sonderkommandos* could be explained as a form of diabolical evil since "the devil wants company and is a willing corrupter, plotting others' downfall" (Idem). It is interesting, for understanding Levi's influence on philosophy and theology, that she presents her understanding of evil as secular while pressing the importance of diabolical evil to understand Levi's work and the complexity of human relations.

5.2 – The Shame of the Survivor

Guilt is the becoming aware of one's sin (Schaafsma, 2006, 57), which, for the prisoners, occurred after the liberation. Where you might expect the liberation to be a liberating event, according to Levi it was "neither joyous nor exhilarating ... At that moment, when you felt human again – responsible, in other words – human despair returned" (2457). For Levi, being human is connected to the feeling of responsibility for the suffering of the other that is inflicted by either oneself or someone else. This "uneasiness" that came with the liberation was perceived by many as shame, the shame of the survivor. It was, by stepping out of the darkness, that they became aware just how they had been impaired and had lived against their will at an animalistic level. They had suffered much less of the

endured hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear than one would under normal conditions because there was no room to reflect, to reason, to feel loved.

What's more, we had all stolen: from the kitchens, the factory, the fields – 'from the others,' that is, from our adversaries. But it was still theft; some (very few) had stooped so low as to steal bread from their fellow prisoners. We had forgotten not only our country and our culture but also our families, our past, and the future we had envisioned, because, like animals, we were confined to the present. We had emerged from this abasement only at rare intervals, on the few Sundays of repose, in the fleeting moments before falling asleep, during the frenzy of the air raids, but these excursions were painful precisely because they gave us the opportunity to measure from the outside how far we had fallen. (CW, 2461)

Thus, the awareness of guilt comes when you are able to reflect on your situation and yourself.⁸ The feeling of shame that comes with this awareness also has to do with the gazes of the outsiders that fell upon the survivors after the liberation. Levi describes how the survivor sees the judgment and condemnation in the eyes of those who listen to his story and that accusation compels the survivor to justify herself. In the biblical story, God condemns Cain for the killing of his brother and sends him out to wander. This fills Cain with fear, this burden is too great; now, he is an outlaw and risks to be killed himself. Then God marks him with a sign that will protect him but that could also be understood as a marking that will always remind him of his guilt.

The guilt Levi speaks of is a response to the knowledge of not having helped someone in need. He also tells one of his own experiences that fills him with shame—the day he did not share precious water with Daniele, who saw him drinking it, but only with his friend Alberto. After the war, on his way home in Belorussia, Daniele confronts him: “he had harsh words for me: why the two of you and not me?” (2465).

Is there any justification for feeling shame in hindsight? I could not figure it out then, nor can I today, but the shame existed and it is still there, concrete, heavy, perpetual. Today Daniele is dead, but in our affectionate, fraternal get-togethers as survivors, the veil of that failure to act, that unshared glass of water, stood between us, transparent, unexpressed, but tangible and ‘costly.’ (2466)

In the episode with Kuhn discussed earlier, Levi formulates his rejection of the idea that there is a reason why one prisoner survived and the other did not. In that episode, he also expresses his suspicion that he survived the October 1944 selection through an error: “René went past the commission immediately ahead of me, and there could have been a mistake with our cards” (122). Druker suggests that this possible “switching of cards” raises the question of survivor guilt and “may explain the unusual rancor Levi directs at old Kuhn” (Druker, 2009, 32). Levi discusses the question of René with Alberto, “and we agree that the hypothesis is probable: I don’t know what I’ll think tomorrow and later; today I feel no distinct emotion” (CW, SQU, 154). Levi makes clear that at that moment no feeling of shame or guilt came to him—Auschwitz was not the place for that.

A religious friend of Levi’s came to visit him after the war and told him that he did not survive out of luck but as a result of Providence: “I was one of the elect, the chosen: I, the nonbeliever, and even less of a believer after my time in Auschwitz, had been saved, touched by Grace” (CW, SES, 2467). His friend believed he survived so he could write and bear testimony. Levi does not see that he earned this privilege, although he did bear witness to the best of his abilities. For Levi, this idea is “monstrous” and makes him perceive himself as a Cain: “maybe I was alive in someone else’s place, at someone else’s expense. I might have supplanted him, in effect killed him” (2467). This also has to do with his conviction that it were not the “good” who survived, those who were destined to do good for others and thereby carried a message to the world. The opposite was true, mostly the survivors were

egotists, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the 'gray zone,' the informers ... I felt innocent, to be sure, but herded among the saved and thus in permanent search of a justification, in my own eyes and in the eyes of the others. Those who survived were the worst, that is to say, the fittest. The best all died. (2467)

Being a survivor for Levi means feeling like a Cain, living in the place of another.

5.3 – Perhaps Each of Us Is the Cain to Some Abel

In his chapter on shame, Levi also reflects on the shame of the world, which is even greater. He agrees with John Donne's statement that "'No man is an island' and that every death bell tolls for us all" (2469). The danger lies, however, in the unwillingness to look at and be touched by the transgressions of oneself and others. This "looking away" and not wanting to know is exactly what Levi blames most Germans for, what relieved them from their complicity in the evil of the Holocaust. But Levi and the other survivors were denied this ignorance, they could not be islands because they felt implicated in the suffering around them, which was irrevocable. In his novel, *If Not Now, When?*, Levi describes an encounter that makes the protagonist realize that we are not only responsible for ourselves but also for the well-being and acts of others.

Mendel replied that he wasn't responsible for what Leonid did or didn't do, but as he spoke he noticed something like an itch around his heart, because he'd realized that the words that had come out of his mouth were the ones that Cain said to the Lord when He asked him about Abel. What foolishness! Was Leonid his brother? He was no brother: he was an unfortunate like him and all of them, a foundling picked up off the street. Of course not, Mendel wasn't his keeper, much less had he spilled his blood. He hadn't killed him out in the field. And yet the itch wouldn't go away: maybe that's the way it really is, perhaps each

of us is the Cain to some Abel, and murders him out in the field without even knowing it, by the things that we do to him, the things that we say to him, and the things that we ought to say to him but don't. (CW, SNOQ, 1826)

The act of looking away and ignoring the suffering of the other is like asking the question of Cain: Am I my brother's keeper? Am I responsible for preventing the suffering of my brother? In this episode, Mendel comes to the awareness that he is responsible, even though Leonid is not biologically his brother and he did not actively spill his blood. All our actions, what we do and do not say, has an influence on the well-being of others, could kill or save them. The guilt of the survivor is hereby universalized, not only suited to describe the relation between the drowned and the saved, but applicable to all human relationships, since no man is an island.

Also in the chapter on shame, Levi suggests that everyone might be a Cain to his brother, although one may find no obvious transgressions. But there is the shadow of a doubt:

That each is a Cain to his brother, that each of us (here I say 'us' in a very broad – indeed, universal – sense) has betrayed his neighbor and is living in his place. It's a supposition, but it gnaws at you; it's nesting deep inside, like a worm. You cannot see it from the outside, but it gnaws, and it shrieks. (CW, SES, 2466)

This suspicion that we are all in some way implicated in the suffering of the other, in evil, brings us to the discussion of the universal character of evil.

6 – The Universal Character of Evil

Many people – many nations – can find themselves believing, more or less consciously, that 'every stranger is an enemy.' For the most part, this conviction lies buried in the mind like some latent infection; it betrays

itself only in random, disconnected acts, and is not the basis of a system of thought. But when this happens, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, stands the Lager. It is the product of a conception of the world carried to its logical consequences with rigorous consistency; as long as the conception exists, the consequences remain to threaten us. The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister signal of danger.
(CW, SQU, 24)

The concentration camp world cannot be completely isolated from the everyday world. While according to Levi, it truly was a unique⁹ event in history, he also describes the story of the camps as a sinister warning signal that concerns all of us and that brings up the alarming question of whether aspects of it can, will, or already have return(ed). Levi concludes his chapter on the gray zone in *The Drowned and the Saved* with the story of Rumkowski, the leader of Jewish charitable organizations who willingly took up the task to become the chief Jewish elder of the ghetto of Lodz and became intoxicated by power. He suggests that, in Rumkowski, we can see ourselves reflected:

Like Rumkowski, we, too, are so blinded by power and prestige that we forget our basic fragility. We make our deals with power, willingly or not, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the wall are the lords of death, and that not far away the train is waiting. (CW, SES, 2456)

Jonathan Druker refers to this passage when he discusses the ways in which the gray zone has influenced conceptual thought. The most innovative appropriations of that concept, according to Druker, work with one of Levi's main concerns: complicity. Debarati Sanyal has looked at gray zones in the works of other literary writers and comes to the conclusion that "'complicity' is not just collaboration with evil, but also an engagement with the complexity of the world we inhabit" (Druker, 2018, 23). In this section, I ask what

Levi's description of the particularity of the evil of Auschwitz can mean for thinking about evil and humanity in general by focusing on the figure of Cain and this possible universal meaning as a symbol of human complicity in evil.

6.1 – Cain's Guilt as a Symbol of Human Entanglement

Genesis 4:1-16 narrates the birth of the first and second sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Abel becomes a shepherd and Cain an agrarian and, one day, both offer the fruit of their work to God. But God only has eyes for the offering of Abel, the youngest, which fills Cain with anger. He invites Abel to go into the field, where he kills him. Then God asks him: "Where is your brother, Abel?" And Cain answers that he does not know, saying "Am I my brother's keeper?" (verses 1-9).¹⁰

By being asked if we know where our brother is, we are being reminded by our responsibility toward others. To become a Cain, "all it takes is a refusal to see, to hear, and to act" (CW, 2470), as Levi states, to deny this responsibility and ask evasively "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain hides himself, which reminds us of his father Adam, who hides himself for God after having eaten of the forbidden fruit. "Where are you?" God asked in response to Adam's hiding, now expanded to the question "Where is your brother?" I would like to discover how these two questions are connected, how showing oneself is also showing one's responsibility to the other, to one's brotherhood. I aim to do this with the help of brief reflections on the work of Judith Butler, Michael Rothberg, and Catherine Keller.

Butler reflects on Levinas' writings about the face, which teach us about the precariousness of life, about human vulnerability. She quotes a thought by Levinas that is interesting while discussing Cain and the human responsibility to not look away when the other is dying:

The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility ... The face is not in front of me (*en face de moi*), but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. Secondly, the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. (Butler, 2006, 131)

This complicity in the death of the other, by leaving him to die alone, to look away, to not act, shows how the life of the self and the other are interconnected. Levinas states that, "In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other" (132). This can be connected to Levi's suspicion that, by surviving, he took the place of some other.

When you are exposed to the vulnerability of the face, of the dying other, your own right of existence is put into question (132). Why should I live and she should die? When we face the other's vulnerability, we become aware of the precariousness of life itself, of our own life. But the awareness of the other's precariousness also has a dangerous component, according to Levinas: "the face of the other in its precariousness and defenseless, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill'" (134). Butler turns to the work of Levinas because he shows the relationship between violence and ethics. When we become aware of our shared vulnerability when we face the suffering other, we are facing both our own precariousness as a call to peace and our power to kill the other out of fear of our own death.

Italian philosopher Simona Forti shows that, from the will to protect our own lives, we are willing to sacrifice the lives of others on a daily basis. In her construction of a new paradigm to understand the evil of our time, she is greatly indebted to the book *The Drowned and the Saved*, where Levi questions the strict duality between the victims and perpetrators. In her last chapter, "Poor Devils Who 'Worship' Life: Us," she shows how Levi bridges the gap between the uniqueness of the situation of Auschwitz or the ghetto in Lodz (Rumkowski) and normal reality. In ordinary life, most of

us cannot resist conformity in order to increase our possibilities and prolong our lives. The categorical imperative of our times seems to be to “make improving your life the absolute, universal law of your conduct” (Forti, 2015, 319). Levi explicitly makes the link to ordinary life in the final part of the story of Rumkowski, who reflects our own ambiguity and the way we are all so dazzled by power and prestige that we forget our existential fragility and are able to kill the other.

It remains a question of what Cain’s real motive was to kill his brother—whether it was anger because of the declined offering, fear of his own fragility, or the will to protect his own powerful position as the older brother. What Cain does univocally show is that we do have the power over the life and well-being of others. This awareness is precisely why Michael Rothberg wants to propose an alternative to Butler’s “precariousness of life.” Butler understands community as founded on loss and vulnerability: “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler, 2006, 20). This reminds us of her reading of Levinas and the vulnerability of the exposure to the face of the other. However, Rothberg asks: “But what if our relation to others is characterized by excess in addition to loss? By a capacity to wound as well as a fundamental vulnerability?” (Rothberg, 2014, online article).¹¹ He proposes that we have to take complicity and privilege into account, to understand ourselves as “implicated subjects,” in order to understand the way we all are responsible for contemporary political issues like “climate change, globalization, and the transgenerational legacies of slavery, genocide, and indigenous dispossession” (Idem).

Levi sensed that we might all be Cains to our brothers, without even knowing it. In order to understand the way we are implicated in the evil we did not personally inflict, Rothberg emphasizes that we need to go beyond the fixed categories of victims and perpetrators and incorporate “implicated subjects” in order to have a general category of “modes of responsibility beyond the criminal guilt of

the perpetrator” (Idem). This echoes Levi’s introduction of the gray zone to explain collaboration in the camp and indirect ways of involvement in evil. As Rothberg describes, the fixed position of victims and perpetrators in the trauma theory “leaves out of the picture a large and heterogeneous collection of subjects who enable and benefit from traumatic violence without taking part in it directly” (Idem). Rothberg shows how capitalism, globalization, and climate change challenge the idea of agency and, as I would like to add, also our awareness of the consequences of our acting or nonacting. In many senses, we are Cains to some Abels without even knowing it. “Implication draws attention to how we are *entwined with* and *folded into* (“im-plied in”) histories and situations that surpass our agency as individual subjects” (Idem). I will link this to the work of Catherine Keller, whose theology is based on the notion that our world consists of a web of relations. What potentiality and danger does this entanglement provoke?

Catherine Keller is aware that, in a postmodern world, relations have become problematic, since people have complicated, entangled identities. “Our world consists of an infinity of undefined, puzzling, enriching, traumatic, unpredictable and hopeful relations” (Benjamins, 2017, 98, translation JR). But this does not mean that we are divided into a many, without solidarity, without something that binds us together:

If faith is not certainty but the courage of our connections, then confidence – *con-fides* – comes only in minding our *complicity* with a vast range of others, even with those we most resist. Across the impossible, shifting distances of class, of culture, of race, of sexuality, of abledness, of species – we remain asymmetrically folded together, *complicans*: my whiteness implicated in the slave traumas of your ancestry and also in the beauty of my multihued [sic] classroom. (Keller, 2015, 26)

She warns against idealizing relationality,¹² since there is an ambiguity in our entangled conditions, “for the knots that bind us may

tighten oppressively” (8). Keller also discusses Judith Butler, who points to our responsibility for a past that we do not completely fathom: “We – we humans at least – emerge complicated by a past that we cannot fully know, implicated in its distortions, its pathologies intimate and collective. And yet for its still unknowable future we are nonetheless responsible” (229). According to Keller it is very important to become aware of our ignorance, which is sometimes deliberate, as a source for ethics (Idem). Here, part 2 of this chapter resonates, which discussed how Levi opposes the denial of the look that dehumanized the prisoners in the camp with ethical looking and how he reminds us of our responsibility for the other through his poetical rewriting of the Shema.

Paul Ricoeur emphasizes that evil is ambiguous in itself; it is both man-made and tragic—we perform it and we suffer from it. We are involved in evil, guilty, but at the same time it also transcends our understanding and responsibility. Ricoeur, therefore, pleads to speak in symbolic language in order to obtain access to this ambiguity. By describing the symbol of Cain, Levi, through symbolic language, expresses this ambiguity and human complicity in evil on different levels.

7 – Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a quote from Levi in which he pointed to the tendency in the 1980s to reenact Christ’ gesture on the Day of Judgment and separate the righteous from the wicked. As we have seen, Levi complicates the possibility to make a clear distinction between good and evil while looking at Auschwitz. Levi pleads for us to stay away from easy judgments. How can we speak about the ratio between good and evil then?

We have seen that, by deciding to look at or to look away, human beings have the power to decide over the well-being of others. Levi defines the evil of his time as a man-made, destructive force. This evil also raises questions of theodicy, both religious and secular,

asking whether any meaning can be assigned to suffering. Levi shows that Auschwitz was the place of both meaningless suffering and meaningless violence, no greater good could be achieved by these extremities. Levi's description of the episode about Kuhn makes this most clear. While Kuhn thanks God for not being chosen, he does not think about the younger man, Beppo, lying a few feet away from him, who will be killed the next day.

Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty – nothing at all in the power of man to do – can ever heal?

If I were God, I would spit Kuhn's prayer out upon the ground.
(CW, SQU, 124)

For Levi, Auschwitz was not the place for thankfulness, for appreciating God's hand in your survival. Levi describes the selection criteria as completely random and a form of such an extreme evil for which there is no pardon, prayer, nor atonement possible. He thereby refuses to speak about meaningful suffering in the face of Auschwitz.

What can be meaningful is to ask ourselves, together with Levi, the following questions: "How much of the concentration camp world is gone and will never return, like slavery and the duel? How much has returned or is returning? In a world teeming with threats, what can each of us do to make sure that at least this threat will be neutralized?" (2418-2419). Levi points us, undeniably, toward a discussion of evil, not to make judgments but to understand its dynamics and to wonder how we ourselves could get involved in it as well.

The biblical story of Cain shows the great power we can have over the well-being of others and confronts us with the human tendency to look away and deny our responsibility. Levi presents Cain as the image of evil today, the evil of our time, marked by a globalized world in which our interconnectivity and anonymity grows.

He thereby gives reason for us to think through the threat and possibility of our relationships to others and contextualizes the story of Cain in which God addresses our interhuman connectivity.

Five – Theology after Suffering

This too is typical of the human condition, to be suspended between the mud and the sky, between nothingness and infinity. (CW, AM, 2028)

I – Introduction

In the story “Lilith,” Levi tells the story of a day in the camp during which the pouring rain turned the worksite into a blanket of mud. The prisoners were allowed to search for shelter and Levi climbs into an iron pipe. Halfway the six meter long pipe he runs into Tischler, the “carpenter.” This Polish Jew speaks a little bit of Italian because he was imprisoned near Turin by the Italians in 1917. They discover that for both of them today is their birthday. In order to celebrate what is probably their last birthday, Tischler takes half an apple from his pocket and gives Levi a piece. They chew in silence, enjoying the taste of fruit. Then, they discover a young woman in the pipe opposite them and they both look at her while she braids her hair and sings softly.

‘She’s Lilith,’ the Tischler said to me suddenly.

‘You know her? That’s her name?’

‘I don’t know her, but I recognize her. She’s Lilith, Adam’s first wife. You don’t know the story of Lilith?’

I didn’t, and he laughed indulgently: everybody knows the Western Jews are all Epicureans, apikorsim, unbelievers. Then he continued, ‘If you had read the Bible carefully, you would recall that the story of the creation of woman is told twice, in two different ways; but of course they teach you a little Hebrew at thirteen and that’s it ...’

A classic situation was emerging, a game I liked, the dispute between the pious man and the unbeliever, who is ignorant by definition, and whose adversary, pointing out his error, “makes him gnash his teeth.” I accepted my role, and answered with the

proper impudence: ‘Yes, it’s told twice, but the second time is just a comment on the first.’ (CW, L, 1362)

I start here with retelling this story because it comprises some of the key themes of this dissertation on which I reflect in this chapter. First, there is the ratio between the pious man and the unbeliever and the distinct roles they are meant to play in the story. Second, I reflect on the role of religious (in the case of Lilith, Jewish) stories and themes in Levi’s work. As the story continues, we also see Tischler reflect on the role of God in human suffering and the longing for the end of evil and Levi himself reflects on being an unbeliever telling this story. The three main themes of the chapters return in the story of Lilith—suffering, creation, and evil. Lastly, this chapter also gives attention to the role of stories in reflecting on what it means to be human and on who God is, in the context of the existence of suffering, during an encounter in a pipe in Auschwitz.

Tischler, in his role of the pious, starts to tell some of the stories that exist about Lilith “because it’s our birthday and it’s raining, and because today my role is to tell and to believe. Today the unbeliever is you” (Idem). He tells the creation story—the first creation of the human from Genesis—of Adam and Lilith as an equal, formless form and Adam’s efforts to dominate her with God’s support. Lilith curses God and becomes a devil living at the bottom of the sea. The strangest story, according to Tischler, comes from the Cabbalists. This story tells how God created Adam but soon realized that it was not good for men to be alone so He created a woman for him. However, for God himself, it was also not good to be alone so he took a companion, “the Shekinah, that is, His very presence in Creation,” who became angry and left God when the Temple was destroyed and joined the people in exile. “I’ll tell you that I’ve thought this myself sometimes: that the Shekinah, too, became a slave, and is here around us, in this exile-within-exile, in this house of mud and suffering” (1364). In the absence of the Shekinah, God took a lover, Lilith, which caused evil on earth: “As long as God continues to sin with Lilith, there will be blood and suffering

on Earth; but one day a power will arrive, the one that all of us are waiting for, and kill Lilith, and put an end to God's lechery and our exile. Yes, and to yours and mine, Italian, Mazel tov, Buona stella, May your stars be lucky" (Idem). In the final lines of the story "Lilith," Levi reflects on his own act of narrating the story once again while writing it: "And I can't explain why destiny has chosen an apikor to repeat this tale, which is both pious and impious, full of poetry, ignorance, bold wisdom, and the incurable sadness that grows over the ruins of lost civilizations" (Idem).

One could ask, together with Levi, why an apikor, an unbeliever would tell this story. That question is central to this research. In the last sentence, Levi reflects on the ambivalence that is encapsulated in the stories on Lilith—it is both pious and impious, wise and naïve. It all takes place at the same time, showing the complexity of stories and their attractiveness. The sadness over the loss of Jewish civilizations we already encountered in his reflections on Tewje in *The Search for Roots*, and can also explain his novel *If Not Now, When?* The conservation of tradition is an important reason to keep retelling stories. The question "why does an unbeliever tell this story?" pulses throughout this dissertation because it was Levi's rewriting of the Shema that initiated my research. In "Shema," Levi gives words to his great concern for humanity in the form of a prayer—transformed and recontextualized but still recognizable as adapted from the Jewish prayer confessing the unity of God. There is an ambivalence in Levi's reference to "religious texts." He often uses the word "God," refers to texts from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and asks religious questions. On the other hand, he identifies himself as a secular and atheist writer and is perceived as such by his readers. In this dissertation, my aim was to trace the ways in which Levi both turns away from traditional religion and refers to religious themes and stories while thinking about human life. It appears that atheism does not stop him from including representations of God—related to suffering, evil, chaos, and creation—while writing about the most fundamental questions of humanity. In the story of Lilith, these two worlds come together—the believer

and the nonbeliever both play their parts but at the end of the story Levi has taken up the role of narrator and, perhaps, thereby the role of the believer as well, for the duration of the story. It is a story about the creation of human life, told in different variations, just as Levi himself does in his many creation stories. “Lilith” is also about God’s role in human suffering—He Himself caused evil on earth. In this, the three main chapters of this dissertation come together: unjust suffering, chaos and creation, and evil.

In “Lilith,” Levi refers to “the incurable sadness that grows over the ruins of lost civilizations” (1364). This dissertation is about Levi’s *afters*, my neologism that indicates the loss that Auschwitz provoked and the challenge it presented to thinking about humanity and God, both in Levi’s writings as well as in the academic disciplines of philosophy and theology. The question that guided this research was: *How does Primo Levi write about humanity and God; how can his representations be read theologically “after God,” and in what way does that challenge and inspire contemporary theology?* In section 5.3, I answer the first part of this research question, in relation to humanity and God, which is inspired by a brief summary of the previous chapters (section 2). The answer to the second part of the research question (theology “after God”) incites a reflection, in section 4, on the theological endeavor undertaken in this dissertation. In section 5, I expand my considerations by linking this study to the wider context of theologizing after atrocities by reflecting on the (dis)connections with the “theology after Gulag” and “theology after apartheid.”

2 – Chapter Summaries

In this section, the chapters of this dissertation are summarized, focusing on how the chapters provide input for answering the research question.

2.1 – Chapter One

The first chapter introduced the research question and the supporting theoretical framework, focusing first on “humanity” and subsequently on “God.” I constantly returned to Levi’s poem “Shema” in which Levi transforms religious language to commit us to his testimony of the dehumanized man and woman of Auschwitz.

The discussion on humanity focused on language, which is essential to being human and was used in the camp to dehumanize the prisoners. Levi’s *If This Is a Man* shows how language falls short of describing what happened in Auschwitz but is also an essential aspect of testimony. This brought me to a discussion of the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who refers to Levi to explain the need and difficulty of bearing witness through language. Agamben’s search for a new ethical territory circles around language, testimony, and the question of what it means to be human. In order to bear witness to Auschwitz, one must bear witness to the impossibility of testimony, according to Agamben. That is why he is inspired by Levi, who presses that only the *Muselmann*, the prisoner who drowned and witnessed everything, can be a complete witness to the destruction that took place in Auschwitz. In his testimony, Levi describes the *Muselmänner* as being, at the same time, not alive and not dead and thereby questions the boundary between human and non-human. This makes him, according to Agamben, the cartographer of a new ethics.

Also, in the framework on humanity, I reflected on the way in which Levi was inspired by the Enlightenment and how his values were challenged by Auschwitz. I focused on the ways in which the Holocaust tested his ideas on universalism, the power of rational thought, and ethics. This showed the intriguing ratio between Levi’s ideas about humanity before and after Auschwitz, thus providing a background to the title of my dissertation, which speaks of Levi’s *afters*.

In the second part of the theoretical framework, I focused on the question of God in Levi’s work and situated my research against

the background of theology on “God after God.” I began my discussion with the observation that, while Levi denies a theistic belief, at the same time he writes about God and is inspired by religious texts. In this dissertation, I looked at how and when Levi refers to religious language while telling the story of humanity in and after Auschwitz and inquired about what meaning this language gets in the context of his work. After denying the existence of God, what does the name God mean? In order to connect this question to theology, I introduced the work of Richard Kearney who formulates all the theological no’s after Auschwitz. For him, these no’s are not the endpoint but the starting point of theological thought. Kearney presents the idea of anatheism, “the return to the sacred after the disappearance of God” (Kearney, 2011, 101). “Ana” represents again, indicating that you have to lose your convictions to meet God anew, as a sacred stranger, and that you can decide time and time again (ana) whether you meet this stranger with hospitality or hostility. The term anatheism also helps Kearney describe the complex paradoxes and ambivalences with respect to God in modern literature. He detects a sense of transcendence in the work of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf, but “inscribed in everyday immanence” (Idem). According to Kearney, these writers do not let themselves be held back by the received divisions between the sacred and profane, the religious and secular, the transcendent and immanent. He then wonders whether this mutual traversal of sacred and secular is “a matter of sacramentalizing the secular or secularizing the sacred” (102). The anatheism-paradigm makes it possible to see both happening at the same time: religion as art and art as religion. I proposed that this approach could help acknowledge and clarify the profane/sacred ambivalence in the poem “Shema” and, possibly, other in passages of Levi’s work. Chapter one concludes with a close reading of Levi’s “Shema,” showing Levi’s creativity in using religious texts and explaining why the religious character of the traditional Shema was crucial for Levi.

The subsequent chapters all presented further reflections on Levi’s representations of humanity and God after Auschwitz while

focusing on three topics—unjust suffering, chaos and creation, and good and evil.

2.2 – Chapter Two

In chapter two, I performed a close reading of Levi's anthology, *The Search for Roots*, zooming in on how Levi—in his introductions to various authors—and his literary inspirers write about humanity and God in the context of suffering. The book narrates the journey of human life in a hostile universe, marked by unjust suffering. In this chapter, I was particularly interested in the presented images of God: What images of God appear in relation to human suffering? Which are rejected and why?

Levi begins with the biblical Job, whose fate is archetypal of the unjust suffering that happens to just men and women—suffering from which you cannot escape. Here, the image of a consoling God who offers a way out of the solitude is dismantled; Job is the victim of a cruel bet between God and Satan and is degraded to an experimental animal. Despite Job's efforts to reason with God and change his fate he has to bow his head—God's absolute power does not leave any room for his efforts and good will. Although Job is searching for an explanation of his suffering, no final answer can be found, neither by Job nor anyone. In theology, the end of theodicy was announced in the twentieth century, accompanied by a return to the complaint of Job—no answers, just the cry of man to God.

Levi has systematized the book with the help of an oval shaped figure, which moves on four roads from Job to Black Holes, symbolizing, first, our scientific potential to imagine the creation of the earth and, second, our communal death to which we are heading. Two of the roads are depicted as “salvation,” either through laughter or understanding. Levi might have used the word “salvation” to symbolize the “after”: since God will not come to our rescue we must search for salvation in other places. I present these roads as the “as if” roads of salvation,¹ representing the temporality of our potential to escape suffering, the absence of meaning, and solitude.

The two middle roads represent the opposites of human existence—unjust suffering and greatness of man.

The first road shows the potential of human beings to laugh in times of suffering. I discussed the potential of language, the playfulness of words, to help human beings look at their situation differently and to imagine another ending to their story. Laughter will not save human beings from suffering but it can make life more meaningful in the meantime and can save them from tears. On the second road of unjust suffering, Levi honors writers with compassion for the suffering, misfortune, and misbehavior of their literary characters. The suffering on this road is unjust and comes independently of the sin or good intentions of human beings—the ultimate connotation of the unjust suffering human being is an unjust God. The stature of humanity, the third road, can be found in its drive for adventure and its courage and ingenuity while facing the challenges of nature. Nevertheless, in the admiration of nature's strength and beauty, there is also the knowledge that nature will always be more powerful than man with the ability to crush human beings eternally. I also pointed to an episode in which four boatmen are being awed at the sight of sleeping dolls, an encounter that transforms ordinary time and place into sacredness and challenges these men to save the ship and become men of greatness. Understanding, on the fourth road, is presented as life support—what can be understood cannot hurt nor frighten or, at the very least, it diminishes pain and fear. The trust in science does not necessarily exclude the idea of a designer behind this universe in the texts by Levi's inspirers. However, this designer—or God—is not the concluding answer to our questions but is incomprehensible and hidden from us.

This anthology is a literary array of small, deviating, fragmented, dialogizing testimonies to what humanity and God can mean when faced with unjust suffering. The authors that Levi had chosen were inspirational to him because they show insight into the greatness of human life, to be sought in humanity's adventurous attitude, moral greatness, and scientific progress. Levi shows, through literature,

how life can be meaningful despite suffering and certain death. It is the dialogizing, narrative character of this work that inspires me to rethink the practice of theologizing in the face of suffering. This book shows that we might never be able to grasp the universe and humanity's position in it, just as we cannot give one conclusive answer to what "God" means. God is not the answer to our enigmas but we can say "God" to give words to our solitude or to formulate questions in our search for answers. "God" can obtain meaning in laughter, in our dignity, or in our scientific potential.

2.3 – Chapter Three

Speaking about chaos, de-creation, and creation helps Levi to tell the story of Auschwitz and life after Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, a de-creation took place—the world was actively brought back to chaos. In the camp, all was focused on the degradation of the prisoners into non-men and non-women, reduced to the mud from before creation. In the last chapter of Levi's testimony, this process comes to an end, when bread is shared and the prisoners slowly turn into men again. Levi himself feels like God on the first day of creation during that episode because he has finally done something useful—the chaos can be overcome. Levi once wrote that the stories of the victims can form a new Bible. Here, he rewrites the age-old story of Genesis, contextualizing it and showing new ways to identify with the creation narrative. The dichotomy of chaos and creation does not only play an important role in religious narratives but in the professions of author and chemist as well. Levi wrote many creation stories in which these three sources of inspiration come together.

According to Levi, irregularity and imperfection are an essential aspect of life on planet Earth. One of Levi's stories narrates a creation from mud in which hybridization of species takes place, resulting in an image of man as a hybrid himself: "suspended between the mud and the sky, between nothingness and infinity" (2028). In postmodern theology on creation, I detected a hybrid, multi-voiced,

theology in the work of Catherine Keller, which connects at some points with Levi's writings. Levi's second creation after Auschwitz and Keller's creation from the deep both reject an *ex nihilo* creation and propose a relational creational process from the mud. Keller also reflects on the "Book of Job," important in chapter two of this dissertation, which she reads as a creative response to Genesis 1—in the "Book of Job," the created universe is returned to primordial chaos and darkness. She regards the book as a parody, an "intentional dialogized hybrid" (Keller, 126), in order to transform the perception of the reader of the initial text. Levi's work has both this parodic and hybrid character. In this parody, the comical serves as a way in which to establish a dialogue between man and God, which Levi does while parodying biblical stories. His work could also be regarded as hybrid, consisting of a dialogue between different stories, disciplines, and literary inspirers. This shows how the meaning of texts is created through dialogue and in a specific context.

Finally, in this chapter, I reflected on "theopoetics," a theological methodology that shows an interesting perspective on the role of poetical language in theology and the creative potential of both God and man, who co-create to make this world a better place. Theopoetics emphasize that meaning-making takes place with the help of stories, metaphors and myths and not through fixed theological concepts, and thereby support the approach of this dissertation in regarding literature as an important source for theological inquiry.

2.4 – Chapter Four

In this chapter, I focused on the way in which Levi questions the clear divide between good and evil inside as well as outside the camp. Here, the "before and after" theme of this dissertation returns, asking how Levi's Auschwitz testimony challenges concepts (before), sheds light on, and can inspire our modern-day world (after). The evil of Auschwitz is captured in one image—the destroyed and spiritless human being, the *Muselmann*. Levi shows how the

Muselmann is created by indifference, by the denial of the look, by the unwillingness to see and act upon the suffering and humanity of the other.

Levi's reflections on the complexity of Auschwitz also challenge the clear divide between the perpetrator and victim, good faith and bad faith. Levi does not use the concept of the gray zone to mix victims and perpetrators into an indistinguishable gray mass. Instead, it seems that Levi creates three roles in the gray zone—the innocent victim, the gray ones who collaborated and had guilt in varied degrees, and the oppressor who designed the regime and coerced others into it. The gray zone is not meant to see more people as the perpetrators but to prevent us from passing easy judgments and simplified systems of thought and to open our eyes and see the corrupting power of a totalitarian regime.

In this chapter, I also reflected on whether suffering can be useful or meaningful, which is intellectually known as the question of theodicy. The close reading of different passages from Levi's works shows that the context of Auschwitz leaves no room for an explanation of meaning in life—the suffering of the prisoner is meaningless in every way. Levi also analyzes the source of the system defined by useless violence. He refuses to see madness as the source of the regime and its perpetrators as monsters but it points out that it all went wrong when they detached their morality from that of the universally shared morals.

According to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, we cannot speak about evil in abstractions or speculate about its meaning but can only approach it with the help of symbols or myths. Levi reflects excessively on the myth of Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. Cain refers to three types of guilt in the work of Levi. First, there are the *Sonderkommandos* who collaborated in killing their brothers. They reflect the satanic aspect of evil, as their perpetrators corrupted their morality, seducing them to become guilty as well. Cain's example also refers to survivor's guilt, "I survived, so I am my brother's Cain." The guilt of the survivor comes in response to the knowledge of not having helped someone in need and the

thought that you might be living in the place of another. This feeling only occurs when you are able to reflect upon yourself and the situation you are in. Third, there is the universal guilt of man, the idea that we are all our brother's Cain. This last aspect of Cain we can link to thinking about evil outside the context of Auschwitz.

The story of Cain shows how we are responsible for and connected to the other. Judith Butler, in the work of Levinas, reads how human life is vulnerable and the way in which people are dependent on whether others regard their lives as valuable and worth to be protected. Michael Rothberg introduces the term "implicated subject" to account for human complicity in evil in a way that transgresses our individual responsibility—for example, in climate change, effects of globalization, and transgenerational legacies of slavery and genocide. This shows how we can all be Cains to some Abels without knowing it.

I concluded by stating that evil is ambiguous in itself; it is both man-made and tragic—we perform it and we suffer from it. We are involved in evil, guilty, but at the same time it transcends our understanding and direct responsibility. Paul Ricoeur, therefore, pleads to speak in symbolic language in order to be able to express this ambiguity. Levi does this by introducing the gray zone and reviving the symbol of Cain, who expresses our complicity in evil on different levels.

3 – Primo Levi's Afters: Humanity and God after Auschwitz

This research was directed by the following research question: How does Primo Levi write about humanity and God; how can his representations be read theologically "after God", and in what way does that challenge and inspire contemporary theology? This concluding chapter I approached it a two-layered question, first trying to answer "what is written on humanity and God?" and second "how do I read his representations of humanity and God theologi-

cally “after God?”, and in what way does that challenge and inspire contemporary theology?”

In this section, I focus on the first question and reflect on the many representations of man and God that were discussed in the course of this dissertation, organizing them loosely into four groups—mud, sky, nothingness, and infinity. This is inspired by the following quote from Levi: “This too is typical of the human condition, to be suspended between the mud and the sky, between nothingness and infinity” (CW, AM, 2028). I want to emphasize that these are not absolute positions. A fundamental aspect of human life is that we are swinging between these extremes and various positions can be true at the same time. It is the hybridity of life, the co-existence of identities, that returns time and time again in Levi’s work.

Mud

Levi’s work begins with a testimony from Auschwitz, which planted the image of the *Muselmann* in our memory—humanity in the mud. He testifies about the unjust suffering of the prisoners of Auschwitz, brought back to the clay from which they were created, to human beings without spirit: “crushed beneath the Spirit of God, but from which the spirit of man—yet still unborn or already dead—is absent” (CW, SES, 2469). He presents Auschwitz as a crucial lesson to learn in order to prevent it from happening again because it was his belief that destructive totalitarian regimes could obtain the same power again in the future. The *Muselmann* is the result of the denial of humanity to the prisoners: they had no name, no belongings; there was no explanation, no meaning. The dehumanization witnessed in the camps is a product of humanity itself—it is a form of man-made evil, the result of indifference, the denial of the look. His testimony about the destruction of humanity is, hence, an intense command to care, to see, and to not forget in order to prevent Auschwitz from returning.

There are also few testimonies to humanity in the camp, symbolized through men who kept their dignity intact, such as privileged

individuals who dared to bring food to the needy, in the memory to the fragments of Italian culture in a place where all civilization was lost. Levi himself felt human again after the liberation, when he was finally able to do something useful and help others, and when bread was shared between the prisoners.

The search for the answer to the research question brought us to the testimonies on the highs and lows of human existence—Primo Levi's work presents humans both in the mud and almost touching the sky. The two middle lines of the graphic found in *The Search for Roots* (chapter two) had already shown us the ambiguity of human life, consisting of unjust suffering and the stature of man. Levi used the figure of the hybrid to describe his own ambiguity, being both a writer and a scientist, writing testimony and fiction, being Jewish and Italian. The hybrid can also describe human beings in general, describing their complexity as “hybrids kneaded of clay and spirit” (CW, L, 1415).

Levi's focus on hybridity is a response to fascism, a sharp rejection of purity—people are not only one thing, a pure, clear self. That is why he rejects thinking about the perpetrators as monsters with a deformed nature. He also introduces the concept of the gray zone in order to describe the complex dynamic between the perpetrators and victims in the camp itself. It shows how totalitarian regimes can coerce people into collaboration to survive but also how we can all be seduced by the idea of power and prestige. In order to explain our human complicity in evil, Levi gives us the image of Cain. Cain shows us how we can be seduced by evil and how our human relationality makes us, consciously and unconsciously, responsible for the suffering of others.

Sky

It would be limiting if we only looked at the human as a being of suffering and capable of performing evil deeds. Levi celebrates and wonders over positive human capabilities in his writings: the adventurous men confronting the challenges of nature on sea and land, the scientists confronting the greatest questions concerning

human life. In this dissertation, the creative potential of human beings recurred often—creating life again after Auschwitz, making life bearable through laughter, creating ingenious machines and babies in laboratories. At the same time, Levi also warns us about the “defect of form” in the way humanity ignores the possible disastrous effects of climate change and economic inequality. He wonders whether the contemporary man and woman are able to confront the pressing questions of our time. The creative potential of human beings shows both their great capability and responsibility: “As makers of containers, we hold the key to the greatest boon and the greatest abuse: two doors side by side, two locks, but only one key” (CW, SE, 2370). Humanity’s fate is, therefore, to swing “between the mud and the sky” (CW, AM, 2028), with Auschwitz and great discoveries representing its ability to reach extremes, while choosing good over evil remains the challenge posed in-between them.

Nothingness

In Levi’s work, God is not the comforting answer to our irresolvable questions; on the contrary, he is presented as the source of the unjust suffering of Job, whose spirit crushes the prisoners of Auschwitz. The relationship between them is highly unequal—the vulnerable and searching man and the all-knowing and non-caring God. Levi frequently stated that he did not believe in God, a conviction that became even stronger after having witnessed the extreme suffering in Auschwitz. The name God pops up frequently in his writings, however, and He seems to play an essential role in the story of human life. God can be the name of the creator, the source of evil and suffering, the unknowable machinist behind the machine that is the universe, the one who has chosen and abandoned his people, the one in whom some believe and others do not, the one who is absent but whose name is still on our lips. It might be suitable to say that God is an important “literary character” in Levi’s works, one who plays different parts in different contexts and in whom you do not have to believe to incorporate “Him” in your story.

Infinity

Thus, there are infinite ways to describe God and humanity, which Levi does through multiple voices—in reference to suffering and creation and with the voices of literary inspirers and in parody. There are infinite stories to be told: “stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, shocking necessity. We tell them to one another in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, Ukraine—simple and incomprehensible, like the stories in the Bible. But are not they, too, stories in a new Bible?” (CW, SQU, 62). Levi describes how the wound that Auschwitz caused is infinite, guilt cannot be absolved, and the war is never over.

His work does present glimpses of the infinite: when there is meaning in the midst of Auschwitz while trying to remember the song of Ulysses; when Levi feels like God on the first day of creation and experiences a moment of peace in the midst of war; when brave sailors encounter a box of dolls on a burning ship. These are temporary moments of meaning that evoke religious language.

Levi also refers to humanity’s infinite questions. Although he believed in the great potential of science and rationality, humans are just a tiny part of a gigantic universe: “I could no longer ignore the fact that chemistry itself, or at least what was dispensed to us, did not answer my questions” (CW, SP, 919).

As said, these oppositions of mud, sky, nothingness, and infinity do not define human life as solely an existence of extremes; instead, we are mostly “suspended between” these extremes in an in-between state. As Cavaglion and Valabrega point out: “There are no extreme positions in people’s lives. Just like a person cannot be either completely happy or completely unhappy (CW, SQU, 13), the sacred and the profane elide together: life offers only ‘intermediate gradations’” (83). (Cavaglion, 2018, 2638)² The figure of the hybrid and the concept of the gray zone represent this intermediary nature of human beings and human life, doing justice to the complexity of our identity, experiences, and feelings. The references to God mostly take place in the everyday, where the mud and the sky for a

moment coincide and the sacred and profane language sound alongside one another, transforming each other.

4 – Primo Levi and Theology: An Answer to the Research Question

Having gathered Levi's stories on humanity and God after Auschwitz, the question how to read this theologically "after God" remains. With Richard Kearney, I described the "after God" era as once and for all established by the Holocaust, moving theology past the indestructible faith in a God who is both good and almighty. However, what comes next? Who is God after God?

I started the challenging endeavor of trying to construct a theological reading of Levi's work after two seemingly opposite observations: the firmly held and widely shared conviction that Levi is an atheist (indicating that Levi is a man beyond or without God) and the constant appearance of the word God and religious stories in his work. I discovered how, in Levi's oeuvre, the denial of the existence of God and the literary appearance of God co-exist and I wanted to interpret this. This work is the result of this interpretative process, now reaching a conclusion—who is Levi's God after God?

The summaries of the three thematic chapters show how theology was a constant point of reference in this dissertation. I want to tie these chapters together now to find an answer to the research question. All chapters have shown that there are no extreme positions in Levi's work. In chapter two, we heard many voices and encountered many descriptions of God, both Levi's and those of other writers. That is why I could never present Levi's "God after God" in one image—the name God can come up in both the highs and lows of human life, can be seen as something positive, or as the source of our suffering. In chapter three, I reflected on Levi's description of the hybrid nature of human beings and their creative potential. Levi himself was a perfect example of this creativity,

bringing science, mythology, and religion into dialogue, while creating stories about human life and their potential to do good or evil. With the help of the work of Catherine Keller, I tried to show that this dialogical character can also be detected in biblical texts in which one writer interprets and responds to another, contextualizing and creating new meaning. Finally, the in-between state is central to Levi's consideration regarding good and evil. Human beings are involved in evil by guilt but it also transcends our understanding and responsibility, turning us all into Cains. The multiple images and sources of inspiration make it impossible to come to one idea of Levi's "God after God." However, this was never my hope in the first place. In this conclusion, I want to focus more on Levi's practice of writing about God than on his ideas, which cannot be fixated.

In their 2018 book, *"Feeble and a Bit Profane", The Voice of the Sacred in Primo Levi*, Alberto Cavaglion and Paola Valabrega explore Levi's gaze on the sacred. They call it a profane look, explaining the profane person as "inexperienced" with the ways of the sacred, a nonspecialist. This is different from an amateur, who "can have fun anywhere, the profane person only in front of the Temple, 'instead of entering'" (Cavaglion, 2018, 151).³ This passage reminded me of a square in Turin, called "piazzetta Primo Levi," situated in front of the temple of the Jewish community. In this synagogue, Levi had his bar mitzvah and, later on in life, he remained involved with this community. This square inspired me to develop an image that could help us understand Levi's practice of writing about God after God—the image of Levi playing with the sacred on the temple square.

Levi Plays With the Sacred on the Temple Square

The image of the temple square shows both what is not anymore and what could be in the time after Auschwitz. The temple in Turin was bombed by allied forces on November 20 1942, which destroyed the entire building, except for its exterior walls. From 1945 until 1949, work on rebuilding of the temple was conducted, which

is preserved⁴ and used for religious festivals by the Jewish community even today. In this dissertation, much attention was given to destruction. I regard the destruction of the temple a synonym for the destruction of the religion of the fathers, of a tradition, and a people. I have compared this with the destruction of certainties in theology, where the name God has lost its self-evident meaning. Nevertheless, there has also been a lot of playfulness with the name of God after the destruction of the temple and I would like to focus on that a bit more in this section.

The square is situated in-between. In-between the streets of the city and the temple, the religious and the secular world. Temple means “house.” It is a house in which the community comes together, a place in which it is believed that God finds a home. Primo Levi situates himself outside the temple—to say it in reference to Cavaglion: he is inexperienced with the ways of the temple but still only wants to play on its square.⁵ Levi is inexperienced with the God confessed in the temple but is nonetheless inspired by its tradition and stories. In this dissertation, I referred frequently to passages in which Levi uses religious language: he writes about *tohu wabohu*, about chaos and creation, about Cain and Abel, the Golem, Job and a ruthless God, and about man being constructed from mud, with a divine sparkle inside. Levi identifies himself with God on the first day of creation after he has done something good for others following the liberation of the camp. In the poem “Shema,” Levi also speaks in the name of God, condemning those who do not adhere to his commands. Levi has taken notice of the tradition of the temple but uses its texts in a playful way.

At Levi’s *piazzetta* in front of the temple, different worlds come together—of man and non-man, of creation in the midst of chaos, of a gray zone between victims and perpetrators, of different vocabularies and images of God. On the temple square, the sacred and the profane come together but cannot be pinned down, boundaries are questioned and new meanings are created. On the square, religious texts return as an important point of reference. Levi’s work shows the power of religious texts to tell the story of humani-

ty, filled with chaos, unjust suffering, and beautiful human creations that can also endanger human life. Levi transforms this religious language, gives it new meaning in a new context. In this manner, he gives religious language one of the main functions it has always had—to give meaning to our difficult to grasp human lives.

Playing on the square in front of the temple is not the prelude to entering the temple. Levi has left it for good, the old temple is gone. Nevertheless, the square is an interesting playground on which to discover what religious language could mean, after God. For a theology that wants to find new meanings for the word God after the loss of traditional ideas, the temple square could be an interesting place to turn to, to discover how the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular worlds intersect, helping us give meaning to our lives.

5 – Afterword: Theology after Suffering—Gulag and Apartheid

With the above formulated answer to the research question, this research can come to a conclusion. I do, however, wish to add an afterword because, even though Auschwitz was unique, there have been many events in history that challenge our understanding of humanity and God. Auschwitz was the one experience that occupied Levi throughout his life—it was his unchosen task to cope with the suffering, destruction, and meaninglessness that Auschwitz forced unto him. Levi pressed the uniqueness of the historical event of Auschwitz but was also highly aware of the atrocities that came afterwards, which also needed the attention of the human community.

Every confrontation with extreme human suffering, evil, and injustice, questions our certainties and challenges theologians to find words that recognize both wounds and hope in a particular context, instead of words that harm in their theological tenacity. In this section, I would like to widen my discussion of theologizing after suf-

fering by giving attention to two forms of state injustices from the twentieth century that had challenged theological anthropology and have had a deep effect on communities and individual lives up until today: the Gulag and the apartheid. I limit myself to these two atrocities⁶ because I got to know and was inspired by deeply involved scholars who are facing these histories and their ongoing effects in their work.

5.1 – Theology after Gulag

Not long after beginning work on my Ph.D. project, I became involved in Katja Tolstaya's and Frank Bestebreurtje's project "Theology after Gulag." They have taken on the task to initiate an academic, theological, and interreligious project to face the "ultimate questions" that the suffering and evil of the Gulag pose. In contrast to the ongoing attention paid by theology to Auschwitz, such a response to the Gulag has, up until now, been absent in post-Communist Eastern Orthodoxy. During my conversations with Tolstaya, we discovered an important overlap in our projects that I would like to discuss in more detail here.⁷

Tolstaya begins her theological reflections with a working definition of *imago dei*, inspired by her literary hero Dostoevsky, who saw the goal of his authorship to find "the man in man." The theological concept of *imago dei* is essential to Orthodox theology—understanding man as being created in God's image and likeness. Tolstaya explains *imago dei* as "the indefinable essence of humans, which makes humans human."⁸ However, when a survivor of a camp testifies about human beings who lost everything human inside them, the theological idea of the human being as *imago dei* is questioned. In this dissertation, I discussed how facing the *Muselmann* challenges our understanding of what it means to be human and, thereby, also challenges theology. In the Gulag, there were *dokhodyagi*, living corpses similar to the *Muselmänner*, about which a Gulag prisoner, survivor, and writer, Varlam Shalamov, has testified. Tolstaya urges for new reflections on the idea of *imago dei*

and theosis, humans seeking Gods likeness, to make theological thought sufficient in the face of testimonies of dehumanization.

Levi also reflects on the possible essence of human beings. At one point, he describes humans as hybrids who are kneaded of clay and spirit (CW, I, 1415), pointing out that both the earthy and the spiritual has to be present in a human being in order to call it a human. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi describes the condition of the *Muselmann* as “crushed beneath the Spirit of God, but from which the spirit of man—as yet unborn or already dead—is absent” (CW, SES, 2469). In Auschwitz, the prisoners were reduced to the clay they were created from but the spirit of life was absent. In “Shema,” Levi gives a response to this dehumanization by reshaping religious words: he rewrites the commandment and curse from the “Book of Deuteronomy” and asks his reader to consider whether the *Muselmann* is a human being. The words “consider if” are essential here. Opening to the man and woman of the “Shema” is an act of imagination—we do not know who the other is but in Levi’s testimony we are challenged to “imagine what it is to be like the stranger [and] actively assume the stranger’s summons and sufferings” (Kearney, 2011, 41). In this way, Levi directs us to look at and to ponder the suffering human beings, as well as to act on their behalf. His lesson to theologians today is to ask whether our theological concepts still suffice and to urge us not to look away from suffering but to always think of the suffering beings and their “strangeness” when trying to look for words.

5.2 – Theology after Apartheid⁹

The second atrocity I give attention to is that of the apartheid racial segregation regime that ruled in South Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s. It was a political culture that encouraged state repression of black, colored, and Asian South Africans in order to benefit the white population, which was and still is a minority in South Africa. The term “apartheid” indicates racial hatred, discrimination, suppression, and subordination of one race by another that is supported and encouraged by the national government.

Primo Levi discovered his otherness—his Jewish identity—by experiencing discrimination through the anti-Semitic laws enforced by the fascist regime in the 1930's and during the year of imprisonment in Auschwitz. After his return to Italy, the notion of the "hybrid" helped Levi describe his own non-fixated identity and was presented by him as a protection against the fear of the stranger, a fear which could result in the return of concentration camps. In this dissertation I have explored Levi's literary writings on hybridity, which I here relate to the work by South African theologian, Nico Koopman, who proposes a pedagogy of hybridity to support pluralistic societies in moving from alienation and oppression to human dignity and freedom. I propose that a dialogue between the post-Holocaust and post-apartheid contexts of hybridity can enrich our self-understanding as hybrid creatures and enable just relationships with others. Levi's imprisonment in Auschwitz showed him how human beings could get destructed by taking all particularity from them—their name, hair, clothes, belongings—which turned them into an indistinguishable mass that is "always the same." Auschwitz returned the world into the mud of before the creation of humanity. After the flood, however, hybrid creatures could create themselves from this mud, producing a fertile mixture of species. Levi presents this second creation as the true creation—identities constructed from multiple roots, a continuous and unpredictable process. For Levi, hybridity is key for understanding humanity without absolving particularity. He himself is an example of how science, literature, mythical and biblical languages, and Italian and Jewish cultures can fruitfully interact, enriching one another. His focus on the hybrid is a statement against fascism and Nazism with their ideal of a pure and static race.

From my stay on the campus of Stellenbosch and my reading of Koopman, I have learned that it is specifically the diversity of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds of students that provokes challenges. As Koopman describes it: "Even though apartheid laws were scrapped two decades ago, and although there is more inter-ethnic contact and exposure than during apartheid, mil-

lions of South Africans, many struggling economically, are still insulated from each other to a great extent” (Koopman, 2012, 151). For Koopman, a pedagogy of hybridity might help in dealing with the questions of students being provoked by the challenge of diversity and would contribute “to a life of dignity, justice and freedom on our campus and in broader society” (151).

There is a large contextual difference between Levi and Koopman’s work. Even though, for Levi personally, the war was never over, he wrote his works in the relatively calm context of Italy for 40 years after the liberation of Auschwitz. Koopman’s students, however, “originate from communities that still experience high levels of ethnic alienation”—apartheid continues to be a daily reality in South Africa (151). This explains the differences in genre and aim between Levi¹⁰ and Koopman. Where Levi wrote a testimony and creative stories that (partly playfully) help to decipher what it means to be human in and after Auschwitz, Koopman is concerned with the daily challenges of campus life in Stellenbosch and presents a pedagogy that might “pave the way for the actualization of so-called thicker manifestations of reconciliation and justice” (161).

Some of Koopman’s students explicitly ask what can be learned from other post-liberation contexts, including “post-Holocaust.” “Would it not be helpful and illuminating and even energizing for current debates about the wrongs of apartheid to broaden our focus and discuss other collective wrongs ... ?” (153). Koopman discusses this under the feature “complexity” and thereby shows that the intercontextual dialogue is part of a pedagogy of hybridity: “this broader focus renders the issues more complex and sheds additional light on our own struggle.” Michael Rothberg, in *Multidirectional Memory, Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, shows that the collective memory of the Holocaust had already taken place in the 1950s and 1960s in dialogue “with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism” (Rothberg, 2009, 22). The Holocaust is often used as an analogy for other events and histories because it was a unique¹¹ form of politi-

cal violence, influencing discussions concerning race, religion, and citizenship around the globe (11, 23). Despite the many contextual differences, “hybridity” appears to be a helpful notion for speaking justly about humanity both after Auschwitz and after apartheid in at least three ways—doing justice to our human complexity, recognizing affinity in the other, and accepting to live in uncertain and liminal spaces. Both post-disaster contexts also ask for a rethinking of the role and task of theology to which hybridity might also be a valuable concept. After the flood, it is time for a rebirth. For Koopman, theology clearly has a public role and is tasked with working toward justice and reconciliation on campus, in church, and in society. He also gives theological grounds for understanding the hybrid nature of human beings through the paradox of being simultaneously sinners and justified ones (Koopman, 2012, 159). In addition, Levi refers to a theologically grounded paradox that defines our ambiguous nature—we are created from mud and divine breath, swinging between the nothing and the infinite. Levi’s work is a testimony to hybridity itself in combining different genres, trades, and vocabularies. Levi and Koopman share the urgency to rethink what it means to be human in order to do justice to the stranger. Becoming aware of the hybridity of life, we learn to live with uncertainties in in-between spaces. This might also be stretched toward the discipline of theology, allowing it to become more and more aware of the fruitful intersections between the secular and the sacred that are shown in the work of Levi. His work is an example of how literary creations can help us envision what it means to be human, which is even more powerful since he has witnessed the destruction of humanity. Levi’s description of the hybrid not only shows us our shared fragility—we are complex, constructed, and wandering beings—but it also holds a source of hope—we see glimpses of humanity recreated from the mud.

Dutch Summary

Primo Levi's *After*s – Primo Levi theologisch lezen na God

Deze dissertatie is het verslag van een theologisch onderzoek naar de wijze waarop Primo Levi de mens en God na Auschwitz representeert. Levi (1919-1987) groeide op in een geassimileerd Joods gezin in Turijn. Hij studeerde scheikunde en sloot zich na zijn afstuderen aan bij een verzetsgroep in de bergen van Noord-Italië. De groep werd opgepakt, waarna Levi via het Italiaanse kamp Fossoli naar Auschwitz werd gedeporteerd. Na zijn terugkeer schreef hij een getuigenis over zijn ervaringen in het kamp, getiteld *Is dit een mens* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947).

Levi opent dit boek met een gedicht, waarin hij de lezer uitdaagt om naar de kampgevangenen te kijken en zich de vraag te stellen: is dit een man, is dit een vrouw? Het gedicht eindigt met een vloek, geïnspireerd op passages uit het Bijbelboek "Deuteronomium," waar God hen vervloekt die zich niet houden aan zijn geboden. Levi vervloekt in dit gedicht hen die zijn woorden niet in hun harten griffen en ze niet door vertellen aan hun kinderen. In 1975 geeft Levi dit gedicht de titel "Sjema," waarmee hij verwijst naar het Joodse gebed dat dagelijks gebeden wordt om de eenheid van God te belijden.

Met behulp van Levi's "Sjema" zijn enkele kernelementen van deze dissertatie te introduceren. In de eerste plaats reflecteert Levi in het gedicht op wat het betekent om mens te zijn. Ten tweede is zijn "Sjema" geïnspireerd op een gebed, wat tot gevolg heeft dat hij dit aloude en centrale gebed van het Jodendom transformeert tot een getuigenis van Auschwitz. Het is belangrijk, ten derde, om te benoemen dat Levi zichzelf als atheïst beschouwde, zowel voor als na zijn ervaringen in het kamp. De combinatie van deze drie elementen – het spreken over de mens, refererend aan een religieuze traditie, gelijktijdig met een afwijzing van theïstisch geloof – leidde tot de hoofdvraag van het onderzoek:

Hoe schrijft Primo Levi over de mens en God; hoe kunnen zijn voorstellingen theologisch gelezen worden "na God," en op welke wijze kan dit hedendaagse theologie uitdagen en inspireren?

In het eerste hoofdstuk wordt het theoretisch kader van deze vraag uiteengezet. In het onderdeel "de mens" concentreer ik me op taal als een unieke

eigenschap van de mens, een eigenschap die in Auschwitz bleek te kunnen worden ingezet om de mens te vernietigen. Ik maak daarbij gebruik van inzichten van de filosoof Giorgio Agamben, die met name naar het werk van Primo Levi verwees om te verklaren dat taal na Auschwitz in een specifiek soort spanning komt te staan: de spanning van de noodzaak en tegelijkertijd de onmogelijkheid om te getuigen. Volgens Agamben kan men alleen getuigen door te getuigen van de onmogelijkheid van getuigenis. Daarom is hij geïnteresseerd in het werk van Levi, omdat deze in zijn literaire werk heeft laten zien dat alleen de *Muselmann*, de gevangene die die ten onder ging en niet terugkeerde, zou kunnen getuigen van de vernietiging die plaatsvond in Auschwitz. Door aan de *Muselmann* te refereren als tegelijkertijd niet levend en niet dood bevraagt Levi op een unieke manier de grens tussen wat nog mens kan heten, en wat niet meer. Levi moet daarom volgens Agamben als de “cartograaf” van een nieuwe ethiek worden beschouwd. In de paragraaf over “de mens” onderzoek ik ook hoe Levi was geïnspireerd door de Verlichting en hoe Auschwitz de centrale waarden van de Verlichting (het universalisme, de rede en de ethiek) op de proef heeft gesteld. De term *afters* in de titel van de dissertatie verwijst daarmee ook naar Levi’s ideeën over humaniteit na Auschwitz in relatie tot de Verlichting.

In het tweede deel van het theoretisch kader richt ik me op de vraag naar God in Levi’s werk, waarbij ik dit situeer in de context van “God na God”-theologie. Ik heb me hierbij geconcentreerd op Levi’s verwijzingen naar religieuze taal in zijn verhaal over de mens in en na Auschwitz, en stel daarbij de vraag welke betekenis deze taal krijgt in zijn werk. Want terwijl Levi een theïstisch geloof in God afwijst, is God een terugkerend “personage” in zijn werk. Dat roept de vraag op welke betekenis “God” kan hebben na het ontkennen van Gods bestaan. Om deze vraag te verbinden met hedendaagse theologie maak ik gebruik van een argument uit Richard Kearney’s “anatheïsme” over het “nee,” dat wil zeggen: datgene wat we in de theologie niet meer kunnen zeggen of geloven na Auschwitz. Ik laat zien dat dit “nee” voor Kearney echter niet het eindpunt is, maar dat het integendeel het startpunt betekent van een nieuwe vorm van theologisch denken die hij als anatheïsme omschrijft. Anatheïsme moeten we hier begrijpen als de terugkeer van het heilige na het verdwijnen van God. Het is een neologisme waarin Kearney gebruik maakt van de betekenis van het Griekse woord “ana,” dat “opnieuw” betekent. Toegepast op het theologische denken en spreken over god houdt anatheïsme in dat vertrouwde zekerheden steeds

opnieuw moeten worden losgelaten om nieuwe betekenissen, die vreemd voor ons zijn, te kunnen ontvangen.

Kearney gebruikt deze nieuwe term ook om de ambivalenties omtrent God in moderne literatuur te begrijpen. Hij beschrijft hoe moderne schrijvers – Proust, Woolf, Joyce – zich niet laten weerhouden door zogenaamde tegenstellingen tussen heilig en profaan; religieus en seculier; en transcendent en immanent. Deze schrijvers weigeren zich in hun taalgebruik en hun verbeelding te laten opsluiten in één van de genoemde velden en streven er integendeel naar deze schijnbaar oppositionele gebieden met elkaar in verbinding te brengen zodat er interactie ontstaat. Kearney interpreteert dit als een sacramentalisatie van het seculiere die zich voltrekt, gelijktijdig aan een secularisatie van het heilige. Religie kan als gevolg daarvan als kunst worden gezien, en kunst als religie. Kearney's perspectief op deze grensgebieden, waarbij kunst en religie elkaar ogenschijnlijk raken, is belangrijk geweest in mijn analyse van Levi's "Sjema," als een tekst die betekenis krijgt op de grens tussen poëzie en gebed.

Close-readings van Levi's teksten dienden in dit onderzoek als uitgangspunt. Ik heb me erop toegelegd zijn teksten nauwkeurig te lezen en ze in hun context te verstaan, om deze vervolgens in gesprek te brengen met hedendaagse theologie. Daarbij heb ik me met name gericht op theologische stemmen die op enige wijze verband houden met het "na God" vraagstuk, waarin dit onderzoek gesitueerd is. Primo Levi wordt in dit onderzoek beschouwd als een mogelijk belangwekkende bron voor hedendaags spreken over God. Het onderzoek richt zich op drie hoofdthema's, gekoppeld aan de verschillende hoofdstukken: onrechtvaardig lijden; chaos en schepping; goed en kwaad.

In hoofdstuk twee staat onrechtvaardig lijden centraal. Ik heb geanalyseerd hoe Levi en zijn literaire inspiratoren, die aan de orde komen in de bloemlezing *De zoektocht naar wortels* (*La ricerca delle radici*, 1981), schrijven over de mens en God in de context van lijden. Levi opent de bloemlezing met de Bijbelse Job, het archetype van de onrechtvaardig lijdende. God wordt in het boek "Job" gezien als de mede-aanstichter van dit lijden, niet als de degene die je helpt eraan te ontsnappen, wat een troostrijke gedachte zou zijn.

Voorin de bloemlezing tekende Levi een ovale figuur met vier lijnen die van Job (bovenin) naar beneden lopen. Daar komen ze uit bij "zwarte gaten," die Levi uitlegt als zowel het wetenschappelijk vermogen om de

schepping van de aarde voor te stellen, als het vanzelfsprekende einde van de mens. Langs deze lijnen plaatste Levi een selectie van de auteurs die hij in het boek behandelt, waarmee de figuur wel wat weg heeft van een routekaart. Twee van de lijnen symboliseren vormen van redding: de lach en het begrip. De twee middelste lijnen representeren de twee extremen in het menselijk leven: het onrechtvaardig lijden en de gestalte van de mens.

Ik versta Levi's bloemlezing als een literaire verzameling van kleine, verschillende, gefragmenteerde en dialogiserende getuigenissen van de mens en God in de context van onrechtvaardig lijden. Alle auteurs die hij behandelt tonen facetten van de grootheid van de mens, die zichtbaar wordt in een avontuurlijke geest, in mededogen en het vermogen om de wetenschap verder te brengen. Met behulp van literatuur laat Levi zien dat het leven zeer betekenisvol kan zijn, ondanks het lijden en een zekere dood. In mijn interpretatie van *De zoektocht naar wortels* toon ik aan dat dit unieke boek waarin Levi laat zien hoe andere schrijvers hem beïnvloed hebben, ook iets over Levi's eigen levensbeschouwing vertelt. In de eerste plaats toont het Levi's overtuiging dat de mens zijn plaats in het universum nooit volledig zal begrijpen, net als dat de mens nooit zal kunnen begrijpen wie God is. In de tweede plaats laat ik zien dat de betekenis van "God" juist in deze bloemlezing van Levi meer nuances krijgt. In *De zoektocht naar wortels* blijkt "God" betekenis te krijgen in de lach, in de menselijke waardigheid en het wetenschappelijke vermogen.

In hoofdstuk drie presenteer ik mijn onderzoek naar Levi's gebruik van noties uit de scheppingsverhalen van "Genesis." Ik signaleer daar dat hij met name woorden als "chaos," "modder," "schepping" en "hoge wind" gebruikt om het verhaal te vertellen van de vernietiging van de mens in Auschwitz, en de zoektocht naar nieuw leven naderhand. "Modder" verwijst in dat verband naar de wijze waarop de gevangenen gereduceerd werden tot het element waaruit ze geschapen zijn: het symboliseert de pure materie, waarin de geest ontbreekt. Primo Levi's *Is dit een mens* lijkt daarmee het verhaal te vertellen van een proces van anti-schepping, dat in het laatste hoofdstuk van het genoemde boek tot een einde komt, wanneer de menselijkheid wordt teruggevonden in het delen van brood. Uit de levensverhalen van de gevangenen destilleert Levi daarmee als het ware een nieuwe Bijbel. Zelf herschrijft hij het verhaal van Genesis, waardoor de Bijbelse noties van chaos en schepping een andere betekenis krijgen. Deze noties zijn ook van groot belang in Levi's werk als scheikundige en auteur. Kenmerkend voor

Levi is dat deze verschillende contexten (getuigenis, chemie en literatuur) samenkomen in zijn literaire werk.

Hybriditeit is een terugkerend thema in Levi's verhalen, bijvoorbeeld om het wezen te beschrijven van de mens, die zich beweegt tussen modder en de hemel, eeuwigheid en het niets. Ik laat zien dat Levi's eigen werk ook vanuit het perspectief van hybriditeit geanalyseerd kan worden omdat het bestaat uit een dialoog tussen verschillende verhaaltradities, disciplines en vocabulaires. Daarmee laat Levi als verhalenverteller zien dat de betekenis van teksten steeds opnieuw ontstaat in specifieke contexten en in dialoog met andere stemmen. In dit hoofdstuk trek ik daarom een parallel met het werk van theologe Catherine Keller waarin wordt aangetoond dat een dergelijke dialoog ook plaatsvindt binnen de canon van de Bijbel. Keller beschouwt het Bijbelboek "Job" bijvoorbeeld als een parodie op de scheppingsverhalen uit "Genesis." Dit perspectief gebruik ik om te laten dat Levi in zijn teksten "Genesis" parodieert. In mijn interpretatie maak ik gebruik van Cavaglion's stelling dat de essentie van een parodie erin bestaat dat er door middel van de inbreng van het komische een dialoog kan ontstaan tussen mens en God.

Tenslotte behandelt dit hoofdstuk de theo-poetica (*theopoetics*) als een theologische methode die de nadruk legt op het belang van poëtische taal in het theologisch denken. Deze methode is gebaseerd op de vooronderstelling dat zowel God als de mens scheppende wezens zijn, en dat het wezen van hun relatie gevonden wordt in de activiteit van het samen scheppen van een betere wereld. *Theopoetics* benadrukt dat theologische betekenisverlening plaatsvindt middels verhalen, metaforen en mythes, waarbij geïxmeerde theologische concepten een minder belangrijke rol spelen. Deze methode is behulpzaam bij het expliciteren van de benadering in deze dissertatie, waar Primo Levi's werk als belangrijke bron voor theologisch onderzoek wordt beschouwd. Ik laat zien dat het scheppende vermogen van de mens bij Primo Levi een terugkerend motief is, en dat hij daarvan zowel de grote potentie signaleert als ook het mogelijke gevaar dat erin schuilt. Levi benadrukt daarom steeds het belang van de onderscheiding: mensen moeten in staat zijn te onderscheiden tussen goede en kwade schepping.

Dit aanwijzen van het onderscheidingsvermogen tussen goed en kwaad vormt een overgang naar het vierde hoofdstuk, waarin de begrippen "goed" en "kwaad" in Levi's werk centraal staan. Ik laat zien dat Levi betwijfelt of

er een duidelijk onderscheid te maken is tussen beide begrippen, en dat hij dezelfde vraag stelt bij het onderscheid tussen dader en slachtoffer. Dit verklaart zijn introductie van het begrip “grijze zone,” dat dient als een perspectief om duiding te geven aan de ambivalente ruimte tussen de schuldige en onschuldige. Het laat ook zien dat Levi’s werk begrepen moet worden als een poging om aandacht te vragen voor de wijze waarop het totalitaire regime in staat was om de slachtoffers te corrumperen en onderdeel te maken van het kwade.

Ondanks zijn nuancering van het begrip “kwaad,” vat Levi het kwaad van zijn tijd samen in het beeld van de *Muselmann*, de vernietigde en geestloze mens. Hij laat zien dat de *Muselmann* uit onverschilligheid voortkomt, en uit onwil om het lijden van de mens te zien en daartegen in het geweer te komen. Langs die weg breng ik in dit hoofdstuk de vraag ter sprake of het lijden betekenis kan hebben – de theodicee vraag. Close-readings van Levi’s werken laten zien dat volgens hem de context van Auschwitz geen ruimte laat aan betekenisverlening – het lijden van de gevangenen is op alle manieren betekenisloos. Ook het geweld van Auschwitz was betekenisloos volgens Levi.

Volgens Paul Ricoeur is het onmogelijk om over kwaad te spreken middels abstracte begrippen, alleen via symbolen en mythes kunnen we er iets over zeggen. Tegen die achtergrond beschouw ik het als significant dat de mythe van Kain en Abel een belangrijke rol speelt in het werk van Levi. In dit verhaal uit het Bijbelboek “Genesis” is te lezen hoe Kain zijn broer doodde, waarna God hem vervolgens vraagt waar Abel is. Kain stelt dan de tegenvraag “ben ik mijn broeders hoeder?” In mijn lezing van Levi’s werk laat ik zien dat het verhaal van Kain Levi verschillende aanknopingspunten biedt om het thema schuld ter sprake te brengen. Levi betreft het in de eerste plaats op de *Sonderkommandos*, de groep gevangenen die hun medegevangenen moesten doden en cremen, en daarmee schuldig werden aan de dood van hun broeders. De uitvinding van deze *Sonderkommandos* is een teken van het satanische karakter van het kwaad in Auschwitz, waarbij de daders hun slachtoffers meetrokken in het kwaad, zodat de slachtoffers medeschuldig werden. Daarnaast maakt Levi via de figuur van Kain de schuld van de overlevende bespreekbaar, de mens die het gevoel heeft te leven in de plaats van een ander. Volgens Levi heeft de schuld van Kain bovendien een universele betekenis, waarmee hij de discussie verbreedt naar het kwaad buiten de context van Auschwitz.

Op grond van al deze overwegingen kom ik in hoofdstuk vier tot de con-

clusie dat het kwaad bij Levi een ambigu begrip is. We zijn erin betrokken als daders en slachtoffers, maar tegelijkertijd overstijgt het ons begripsvermogen en vaak ook onze directe verantwoordelijkheid. Ik heb met behulp van Ricoeurs denken laten zien dat deze ambiguïteit alleen toegankelijk is middels symbolen. Zo kon ik bij Levi de centrale functie aanwijzen van symbolen als de “grijze zone” en de figuur van Kaïn. Ik laat zien dat hij van beide gebruik maakt om uitdrukking te kunnen geven aan onze betrokkenheid in het kwaad op verschillende niveaus.

In hoofdstuk vijf breng ik de resultaten van de verschillende hoofdstukken samen om een antwoord op de hoofdvraag te kunnen formuleren. Om de verschillende representaties van mens en God zoals behandeld in de dissertatie te clusteren maak ik gebruik van vier kernwoorden: modder, hemel, niets en oneindigheid. Deze woorden tonen de extremen van de mens, gereduceerd tot materie in het kamp en in staat tot grote wetenschappelijke ontdekkingen en uitingen van compassie. Levi representeert God op verschillende wijzen, het is de naam van de schepper, de bron van kwaad en lijden, de onkenbare machinist van het universum, degene in wie sommigen geloven en anderen niet. Levi representeert de mens als gecreëerd uit de modder en ingeblazen met geest, waarbij de mens zich voortdurend beweegt tussen de vier extremen die de kernwoorden aangeven. Levi's beschrijvingen van de “grijze zone” en de hybride representeren de wijze waarop de mens zich als het ware in een tussenruimte bevindt, en doen recht aan de complexiteit van identiteiten, ervaringen en gevoelens. Ook de verwijzingen naar God vinden plaats in deze tussenruimte, waarin religieuze en profane taal elkaar ontmoeten en elkaar transformeren.

Om aan te geven hoe deze representaties theologisch gelezen kunnen worden “na God” en welke relevantie dit heeft voor hedendaagse theologie schets ik het volgende beeld: Levi die speelt met het heilige op het tempelplein. De tempel (Italiaanse benaming van de synagoge) van Turijn was gebombardeerd tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Ik acht het van symbolische betekenis dat zich voor deze vernietigde en inmiddels herbouwde tempel een plein bevindt dat vernoemd is naar Primo Levi. Dit plein bevindt zich in een tussenruimte, tussen de stad en de tempel en tussen het religieuze en seculiere domein. Met dit onderzoek toon ik aan dat Levi zich in deze tussenruimte begeeft: hij voelt zich niet verbonden met de God die beleden wordt in de tempel, maar is wel geïnspireerd door de verhalen en de traditie die ermee verbonden zijn. Op het plein voor de tempel komen het heilige

en het seculiere samen, worden grenzen overschreden en komt er ruimte voor nieuwe betekenis. Levi's werk laat het belang zien van religieuze teksten om het verhaal van de mens te vertellen. Hij transformeert deze teksten, en geeft ze nieuwe betekenissen in nieuwe contexten. Hiermee zet hij de religieuze taal in voor een van de functies die zij altijd heeft gehad: betekenisverlening aan het zo complexe menselijk bestaan.

Ik wil benadrukken dat het tempelplein niet de voorhof is van de tempel. Het tempelplein versta ik als een interessante speeltuin om te ontdekken wat religieuze taal kan betekenen, na God, en is daarmee een belangrijke bron voor hedendaagse theologie om te ontdekken hoe religieuze en seculiere werelden elkaar ontmoeten om nieuwe betekenis te kunnen geven aan het menselijk bestaan.

Tot slot leg ik in hoofdstuk vijf een verbinding met theologie na de Gulag en na apartheid, omdat dit onderzoek zich nadrukkelijk positioneert in het theologisch denken na extreme vormen van (staats-) geweld en lijden. Ik beschouw het als de taak van de theologie om vaststaande theologische concepten te laten bevragen door een confrontatie met extreme vormen van lijden, kwaad en onrecht, om vervolgens woorden te vinden die wonden rechtdoen. De dialoog met representanten van beide contexten laat zien dat mens- en Godsbeelden bevraagd worden door menselijke wreedheden en vragen om theologie die getuigenissen en menselijke verhalen als belangrijke kennisbron beschouwt.

Noten

One – Introduction

1. This is a fragment from the poem (CW, SQU, 7). The majority of the quotes from Levi's work are from *The Complete Works of Primo Levi, I, II, III*, edited by Ann Goldstein, New York, London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015. When I refer to these *Complete Works* in this dissertation, I write: (CW, abbreviation book, page). For a list of abbreviations see page 11. If I quote consecutively from the same book, I write: (CW, page). When I refer to or quote from other editions or authors I write: (name, date, page). In all cases, when referring consecutively to the same book I only write (page). Complete references can be found in the bibliography.

2. I also considered using the word "imagination" because it expresses creativity, but it could not capture that Levi sincerely tries to understand humanity and its place in the universe through his writings.

3. This is a reference to his former words about being like work animals without any clearness of mind or memory.

4. Alex Murray discusses the ethical response to the Holocaust by Levinas and Derrida, understanding Agamben as presenting a silent critique on their principles (Murray, 2010, 119). I present Murray's interpretation here alongside my own reading of Agamben's work on Primo Levi, for a broader understanding of Agamben's thought.

5. Agamben traces back the origin of the word and thinks it most likely that the use comes from the meaning of the Arabic word Muslim: "the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God" (Agamben, 1999, 45). Whatever the real source of the word is, Agamben concludes, "the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews" (45).

6. An example of this opinion is Robert Gordon, who states: "There is never the post-Holocaust ontological or moral void in Levi, never quite the radical silence conditioned by radical evil that others have evoked, only the terrible responsibility of now incorporating this too, even this, into the contours of the human. His enlightened, liberal ethics survive Auschwitz, shaken at their very roots, dramatically displaced and reshaped by the trauma of the experience, but nevertheless intact" (Gordon, 2001, 17).

7. Druker presents an interpretation of Levi's ethics, which is inspired by the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. In this interpretation, Druker reflects on Agamben's ethical reading of Levi: "Like Agamben, Levinas re-

flects on the victim's experience and our inability to grasp it, and on the inevitable abyss between and the survivors (or subjects) that 'Levi's paradox' aptly aphorizes. While Agamben's idea of witnessing strikes me as somewhat passive, as a product of being in the right place at the right time, Levinas insists that all of us, however blameless, however distinct from the events, ought to bridge this abyss by taking responsibility for the victim's dehumanization, even though we cannot grasp the experience" (Druker, 2009, 86). The difference between Druker and Agamben on this point could be explained by their different appreciation of the work of Levinas. Levinas is central to Druker's interpretation of Levi's ethics, while Agamben could be understood as somewhat critical of Levinas and the relationship between ethics and "alterity" or "otherness" (Murray, 2010, 119). Agamben focuses on the relationship between ethics and "language." Druker discusses Agamben in his book and concludes that "Agamben, for all his attentiveness to Levi's texts, seems unaware of the contradictory ethical positions that course through them" (86). In my reading of Levi's poem "Shema," I want to emphasize both the impossibility of language and the responsibility bestowed on both the survivor and the reader.

8. Levi's title and most of the testimony, indeed, are about "man." In the section on the Enlightenment, the notion of "Man" appeared, referring to an universal idea of the "human." Both the influence of the Enlightenment and the fact that Levi mostly had contact with male prisoners and guards explains his frequent use of the word "man." The poem "Shema" however, in which we face both a male and female prisoner, shows that, with the "dehumanization of humanity" in Auschwitz, Levi does mean the dehumanization of male and female alike.

9. Appearing, for example, as God, godforsaken, goddess, godlike, god-fearing, god, and goddam. I left out the references to the word "godfather." The book, *The Search for Roots*, which is discussed in chapter two, is not included in the English translation of *The Complete Works*.

10. Druker, for example, writes: "His occasional recourse to Biblical language and references are meant to engage the common inheritance of secular European culture rather than to articulate a specifically Jewish discourse" (Druker, 2009, 18). The opinion that Levi refers to religious texts or themes because of his cultural upbringing is widely shared. I can agree that this explains why he knows these texts and, possibly, why he refers to them. In this dissertation, however, I am more interested in how he uses religious language and what meaning it gets in the context of his work.

11. While Kearney writes “no’s” in his book, the plural of “no” is “noes.” I have not revised this because I use the term in reference to Kearney. In chapter two, I discuss Levi’s “no’s” extensively.

12. Kearney says this with Hannah Arendt, who points this out in *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, 10.

13. Agamben understands “sacred” to refer to “the person or thing one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying hence the double meaning of ‘sacred’ or ‘accursed’” (Moudarres, 2014, 89).

14. Other topics I considered were: silence and language; freedom; and the stranger. I chose to discuss the dichotomy between silence and language already in the introduction. I decided over time that “freedom” and “the stranger” could suffice with a more implicit discussion within the thematic chapters, because “unjust suffering,” “chaos and creation” and “good and evil” met the selection criteria more convincingly. The three themes of this dissertation all recur in more than one of Levi’s works and are related to theology.

Two – God’s Indifference to Human Suffering

1. First published in 1981. The title of the book is abbreviated in this chapter as “R.R.” This work is not incorporated in the English translation of Levi’s *The Complete Works*.

2. Translation: “Me and God. I have never met him, not even in the Lager.”

3. In the introduction to the volume, Marco Belpoliti describes how the publisher regarded the book as too complicated for a young public and, in November, wrote to Levi that it needed an extended apparatus of notes. In December, they decided, however, that it would be published in two different series with an introduction for the students written by Levi himself. It turned out that none of the other authors asked finished an anthology (Levi, 1997, VII-VIII).

4. Translation by Giuliani, 2003, 30.

5. The picture of the graphic comes from Levi, 1997, 3.

6. “A Giobbe ho riservato d’istinto la primogenitura, cercando poi di trovare buone ragioni per questa scelta,” (Levi, 1997, XXIV, my translation).

7. Original transcript: “*religione sia come dice Bonhoeffer, Dio come tap-pabuchi, non accetta.*” <http://www.rai.it/dl/portaleRadio/media/Content>

Item-8b92b11c-0448-4908-9764-4fee91aa81bf.html. This interview took place on September 27, 2015. Date of download: January 15, 2016.

8. Understanding the extent of Levi's Jewish roots and upbringing and the impact of his Jewish identity on his writing has repeatedly been the object of research. For an extensive overview on Levi's youth, see the biography by Ian Thompson, *Primo Levi*, London: Hutchinson, 2002.

9. This image of God that Levi presents here, God as a machinist who does not intervene with humans, reminds us of Deism, the religious-philosophical tradition that regards God (or a first cause) as the transcendent cause of natural laws. In Deistic thought, God is the creator of the universe. Since the act of creation of the natural order, God has pulled back and does not intervene in the ways of nature. It is a tradition of thought that became popular during the Enlightenment, a time period in which man searched for a rational idea of God (Byrne, 1999, 614).

10. At the end of the interview, Levi offers Grieco the poem "La bambina di Pompei." I quote the last lines of Grieco's interview report: "And he ends with an appeal to the 'powerful of the earth' not to push the button to unleash an atomic apocalypse, since 'the torments heaven sends us are enough'" (Belpoliti, 2001, 278). This last sentence shows an image of heaven being involved in the allocation of suffering, just like in Levi's interpretation of Job.

11. Levi's choice to start his search for roots with Job is also in correspondence with the quest for his Jewish identity, which the Holocaust had provoked: "*Facendomi sentire ebreo mi ha sollecitato a recuperare, dopo, un patrimonio culturale che prima non possedevo*" (Baldini, 2003, 44). Translation: "It made me feel Jewish and thereby urged me to recover, later, a cultural heritage that I did not have before."

12. According to the structure represented by Fokkelman, 2009.

13. The structure in which Levi presents the "Book of Job" is created by the hand of Guido Ceronetti. This fact does not diminish the focalizing power of the structure of the text.

14. Quotes can be found on pp. 6-18 in Levi, 1997, the English translations are provided by me in order to follow the Italian syntax closely.

15. Theodor Adorno: "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed, because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience" (Adorno, 1990, 361).

16. I follow the view of R. D. N. van Riessen here.

17. Tollerton, in *The Book of Job in Post-Holocaust Thought*, gives a brief

overview of how different post-Holocaust writers have reflected on the “Book of Job”. He refers, for example, to Lawrence Langer (*Admitting the Holocaust*), Steven Katz (*Post-Holocaust Dialogue*), and Richard L. Rubenstein, who “force us to be cautious about identifying connections between Job’s plight and Holocaust experiences, and compel us to admit that not every reception of Job in this context will be morally palatable” (Tollerton, 2012, 48). Tollerton’s book shows the theological tensions and ambiguities at the heart of the Book of Job, explaining the wide variety of post-Holocaust readings of the text. He states that if we understand the “Book of Job” as an uneven and disruptive text, it can be a nuanced dialogue partner for post-Holocaust thought (90).

18. Affliction indicates suffering experienced as meaningful (Alford, 2009, 7).

19. Druker, on the other hand, sees Levi describe Auschwitz in a way that makes it possible to acquire knowledge, as a particular form of meaning, from this exceptional event. It is the scientific approach in Levi’s testimony that seems to assume that “pre-Holocaust language will be largely adequate to the task of describing the new, terrifying world of the concentration camp” (Druker, 2009, 32). According to Druker, *If This Is a Man* shows that Levi does believe that “increasing applications of reason to our human existence will bring social progress and ultimately reduce suffering” (16). However, here as well there, is a counter-narrative; there are places in Levi’s *If This Is a Man* where he seems to doubt the way the experience of Auschwitz can be reconciled with former ways of understanding and speaking. According to Druker, Levi “courageously face[s] the genuine crisis of faith provoked by the Holocaust ... and does so without offering perfunctory solutions or altogether surrendering to despair” (34).

20. Levinas views the relation to God as a relation to “the Infinite” (Van Riessen, 2007, 1). As the relation between self and other is central to his philosophy, he understands the existence of the subject as “a constant being open to the other / the Other, and should therefore be seen as a permanent letting go. The direction or orientation of this letting go is not nothing, the end, or death, but ‘the Infinite,’ or ‘God’” (7).

21. In the section “Useless Suffering and Useless Violence” of chapter four, I reflect more extensively on the question of theodicy; in this chapter, the discussion is limited to responses to the “Book of Job” after the Holocaust.

22. In 1987, Levi wrote an article in the *La Stampa* newspaper, which

gives another perspective on the concept of Black Holes. In “The Black Hole of Auschwitz,” Levi describes how the memory of Auschwitz was at risk of falling down in the Black Hole of forgetfulness. Levi was afraid of the ignorance of the next generation, anxious “that soon the Holocaust would be equated with equally murderous but nonetheless qualitative different horrors, such as Stalin’s mass murder on the Kulaks” (Alford, 2009, 144).

23. Levi himself writes the following about the selection process of this anthology: “I ought rather to make it clear that my own deeper and more lasting loves are the hardest to explain: Belli, Porta, Conrad. In other cases the deciphering is easier. Professional affinity enters into the game (Gatterman, Clarke, Lucretius, the sinister unknown author of the ASTM specification concerning cockroaches), a shared love of travel and adventure (Homer, Rosny, Marco Polo and others), a remote Jewish kinship (Job, Babel, Sholem Aleichem), a closer relationship in Celan and Eliot, the personal friendship that I have with Rigoni Stern, D’Arrigo and Langbein, which makes me feel (presumptuously) that their writing is almost in some way my own, and it gives me pleasure to bring their work to those who have not read them. The novel of Roger Vercel is a special case: I believe it has its own intrinsic value, but it is important to me for my private reasons, symbolic and charged, because I read it on a day (18 January 1945) when I expected to die” (Levi, 2001, 6).

24. Manuela Consonni, University of Jerusalem, gave a lecture on *La ricerca delle radici*: “For someone who returned from Auschwitz the haunting question is “Where was God?” Unconditional faith suggests the answer of the inscrutable mystery: man does not have the ability to investigate and understand the will of God. Only the horizon of human affairs appears open to man. The legitimate question however, is not where was God in Auschwitz, but rather where was man. The demand for divine justice becomes that for human justice” (Newsletter Centro Primo Levi New York, February 2, 2016). See also: Marco Belpoliti, 2015, 310 and Parussa, 2008, 133.

25. The picture of this road comes from Levi, 1997, 3.

26. Levi describes how there are five fundamental dichotomies “in the destiny of every conscious person: falsehood/truth, laughter/tears, judgment/folly, hope/despair, triumph/disaster” (Levi, 2001, 8).

27. “because even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many people.” “Book of Mark” 10:45, NIV.

28. Levi gives two other possible reasons: “Perhaps it is because Porta has succeeded, like Belli, in the miraculous enterprise of constraining, in a strict metre, a fluid dialect, natural and mimetic, which coincides with the portrait he is delineating. Perhaps it is for his magical capacity to suggest an atmosphere by subliminal means, by a gesture, a rapid brushstroke ...” (Levi, 2001, 48).

29. In chapter four, I reflect more thoroughly on this passage from *If This Is a Man* in the section on meaningful suffering.

30. The picture of this road comes from Levi, 1997, 3.

31. Not all commentators agree on what Adorno meant with this expression. Did he refer to the limits (the loss) of aesthetics or to the limits of representation? In reference to Celan, we could emphasize the inexpressibility of the Holocaust.

32. Fragment from Celan’s poem, “Psalm,” <http://www.lyrikwelt.de/ge-dichte/celang1.htm>, last visited on 04-12-2016.

33. See: CW, SES, 2468.

34. Levi’s poem, “Flight,” also deals with the motive of a past that cannot be erased: “No water for him / who needed only water, / water to erase / water savage dream / impossible water to make him pure again” (CW, CP, 1964).

35. The picture of this road comes from Levi, 1997, 3.

36. *Compact Oxford Italian Dictionary*, Oxford: University Press, 2013. *Van Dale Handwoordenboek Italiaans Nederlands*, Utrecht/Antwerpen: Van Dale Lexicografie, 2001.

37. Parussa understands the centrality of “work” in Levi’s oeuvre as the secular celebration of the Jewish idea that it is the task of man to collaborate with God in continuing the work of creation. Work well done can be a deliverance. By understanding “work” in this manner, Levi makes the Jewish action-based morality into a universal source of liberation (Parussa, 2008, 138).

38. This book reminds Levi, in the first place, of his time in Auschwitz: “I read the whole text in the frightening and decisive night in which the Germans hesitated between murder and flight, and chose flight. I referred to the book, without naming it, in the last pages of *If This is a Man*” (Levi, 2001, 101). The experience of Auschwitz can be regarded the greatest challenge to the greatness of man.

39. In chapter three, section 2.2, I explain Kearney’s concept of epiphany and the idea of sacred time and place more extensively in relation to an episode from *If This Is a Man*.

40. The picture of this road comes from Levi, 1997, 3.

41. In his introduction to the *Horcynus Orca* by Stefano D'Arrigo, Levi writes that he is constructing his "own private Decalogue (work in progress, but you have the illusion of having done it already)" (178). This Decalogue must be understood as a list of literature "that may not be missed" by students for whom Levi wrote this book in the first place. However, it can have a second connotation as well—Levi constructs, through literature, his "10" commandments of our solitary life.

42. Franz Rosenzweig also writes about the "as if" in his *Das Bächlein vom Gesunden und Kranken Menschenverstand*. Rosenzweig speaks about God, man, and world (Rosenzweig, 1946, 10) in a polemical reaction against German idealism, which understands the world and God as dependent on the perceiving subject (15). According to Rosenzweig, it is in fact the non-interrelatedness of God, man, and world that is the problem of existence and that obtained its expression in biblical accounts (20). He reacts against the "*als ob*" answers of the (German) philosophical doctor, who tries to comfort the doubting, *kranker man* with the thought that we must just act as if we believe to be secure of our soul, the world, and God (35).

43. In section 2.1 of this chapter, I referred to the radio broadcast in which Marco Belpoliti mentions Bonhoeffer while stating that Levi did not believe in God as the answer to our unanswered questions.

44. Bonhoeffer envisions here the Christian life in a nonreligious Christianity (Kearney, 2011, 66).

Three – Creation from Chaos

1. This introduction is adapted from: Joyce Rondaij: "Reading Primo Levi on "Hybridity" in the Context of South Africa: Moving Towards Humanizing Descriptions of the Other," in: Stellenbosch Theological Journal, 2018, vol. 4, no. 1, 367-386. <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/stj/v4n1/19.pdf>.

2. Footnote 5 in chapter "*Il lavoro*" of the annotated edition (Levi, 2012, 195).

3. Levi first uses the term "*controcreazione*" in his second book, *The Truce*, in which he writes: "the genius of destruction, of counter-creation, here as at Auschwitz; the mystic of the void" (CW, T, 318). In the scholastic edition, Levi explains his use of the term in the following way: "*Controcre-*

azione: Il processo contrario alla creazione, la distruzione integrale" (translation: Counter-creation: the process in contrast to creation, the complete destruction) (Levi, 1965, 123).

4. According to Cavaglion, this is a reference to "*La divine étincelle*" from the poem "Les Aveugles" by Baudelaire (Levi, 2012, 206).

5. Earlier I referred to "mud" as carrying symbolic value to describe the destructive force of the Nazis.

6. Also Baldini points this out (Baldini, 2003, 54).

7. In this poem, Levi quotes textually the Passover ritual.

8. CW, CP, 1947, my emphasis. Written on April 9, 1982.

9. See the chapter "Traumatic History" in Jonathan Druker's *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections*, 2009.

10. Levi refers to this motive in his story "Lilith," on which I reflect extensively in the introduction of chapter five.

11. Keller's theology of becoming also has a strong ethical motive. Keller states that ethics: "must articulate itself in that borderland, where the flowing potentiality of each actuality, each creature, realizes itself in limitation" (Keller, 2003, 10). In the next chapter on good and evil, I discuss Levi's own conceptualization of an ethical borderland: the gray zone.

12. As Jonathan Druker has shown in his chapter on trauma and *The Truce* (Druker, 2009).

13. "Parodic system," a variation on Levi's title *The Periodic Table*.

14. See: Cavaglion, 2016, 3-4. Cavaglion points out that, in Levi's rewriting of the Bible, Dante must always have been on his mind. It is the way in which Dante describes the sinners (in his *Inferno*) to be condemned to a twisted and blasphemous world that brought Levi to the conviction that, in the Lager, just as in Dante's hell, liturgy must be performed in a parodic, quasi blasphemous, way. Inspired by Dante, the result is his parodic rewriting of the "Shema" in which the unity of God is replaced by the commandment to always remember the *Muselmann* of Auschwitz. "By his 'sacred poem' the message to transmit to the future generations is universalized" (Cavaglion, 2016, 12).

15. An example of the last boundary breakdown in Levi's work is the story "Creative Work" in which the writer Antonio Casella receives a visitor, who appears to be a protagonist of one of the stories he wrote several years ago and who has written a novel about his creator, the writer Antonio. Antonio finds out that all the novel characters live together in a National Park and, since he is now also a protagonist now, he must go there as well (CW, VF, 660-667).

Four – Good and Evil in and after Auschwitz

1. Italics by Robert Gordon.

2. “While I cannot prove it, I think is likely that Levi was aware of Levinas’s ‘Useless suffering’ ... The Levinas essay was first published in an Italian journal in 1982, three or four years before Levi wrote his chapter” (Druker, 2009, 142).

3. The procedure of tattooing was even more harmful to Orthodox Jews because “Book of Leviticus” 19:28 forbids tattoos in order to distinguish the Jews from the barbarians (CW, SES, 2497).

4. This section on Kant is based on my thesis: “The Gray Zone. Een onderzoek naar de ontwikkeling van ‘the gray zone’ in de werken van Primo Levi,” (The Gray Zone, A Research on the Development of ‘the gray zone’ in the Works of Primo Levi) Departement Religiewetenschap en Theologie, Universiteit Utrecht, 2011. The discussion of Kant’s work is inspired by: J.K. Uleman, *An Introduction to Kant’s Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge, 2010.

5. My emphasis.

6. Levi took this quote from chapter two of the book *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, from 1842.

7. From the introduction to the screenplay of *The Night Porter*.

8. As Levi states: “Once everything was over, the awareness dawned on us that we had done nothing, or not enough, against the system into which we had been absorbed” (CW, SES, 2462).

9. Some examples of Levi’s position to the uniqueness of Auschwitz: “The German Lagers constitute something unique in the admittedly bloody history of humanity: ... they added a modern and monstrous goal, that of annihilating from the world entire peoples and cultures” (CW, T, 225). “In the German Lagers the slaughter was almost complete: it didn’t even stop at children, who were killed in the gas chambers by the hundreds of thousands, something unique among the atrocities of human history” (Idem). “Rereading the accounts of Nazism ... I can’t escape the impression of a general atmosphere of unrestrained madness that seems to me unique in history” (236). About the television-series Holocaust: “It also exposed a tragedy that so far – and let us hope, forever – is unique in the bloody history of mankind” (CW, L, 1495). “There was a precise will to demolish humanity in those human beings even before killing them. And this I believe

is truly unique in the history, however bloody, of humankind” (1533). “The Nazi concentration-camp system remains unique in both magnitude and quality” (CW, SES, 2419).

10. NIV, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+4:9&version=NIV>, last visited on 19-09-2019.

11. In 2019, Michael Rothberg published a book in which he develops his ideas on the implicated subject that I could not consult in time. See: Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

12. Keller also uses the word “complicans” to describe the way in which God envelops our world, who is, unknowable, the web of all our relations. She quotes Cusa: “God, therefore, is the enfolding (complicans) of all in the sense that all are in God” (Keller, 2015, 113).

Five – Theology after Suffering

1. In reference to the works of Bonhoeffer and Safranski.

2. I refer here to location 2638 in e-book.

3. I refer to location 151 in e-book.

4. <https://torinoebraica.it/le-sinagoghe/>, last visited on 02-10-2019.

5. My use of the notions “playing” and “playground” is based on Cavaglion’s remark on having fun in front of the Temple: “the amateur can have fun anywhere, the profane person only in front of the Temple, ‘instead of entering’” (Cavaglion, 2018, 151 e-book)

6. In my use of the term “atrocities” I refer to Claudia Card’s definition: “atrocities are both perpetrated and suffered” and yield “two basic dimensions of evils: culpable wrongdoing (by perpetrators) and foreseeable intolerable harm (to victims)” (Card, 2002, 1).

7. The Gulag must be understood as a major instrument of political repression in the Soviet Union. The term refers, in the first place, to the many labor camps that were situated all over the lands of the Soviet Union. The word Gulag is an acronym for “*Glavnoe upravleni lagerei*, or Main Camp Administration. Over time, the word ‘Gulag’ has also come to signify not only the administration of the concentration camps but also the system of Soviet slave labour itself, in all its forms and varieties: labour camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women’s camps, children’s

camps, transit camps. Even more broadly, ‘Gulag’ has come to mean the Soviet repressive system itself, the set of procedures that prisoners once called the ‘meatgrinder’: the arrests, the interrogations, the transport in unheated cattle cars, the forced labour, the destruction of families, the years spent in exile, the early and unnecessary deaths” (Applebaum, 2, 2003). The Gulag already had antecedents in Russia in the regimes of the tsars from the seventeenth century onward and became a strong weapon against “enemies of the people” during the time of Lenin. In the 1930s, the amount of Gulag camps expanded rapidly, which continued during the Holocaust and into the 1950s. The camps disappeared when Stalin died in 1953 but, by then, around eighteen million people had lived in a Gulag camp. It was only in 1987 that the camps disappeared altogether. In the meantime, some of them had still served as prisons for political prisoners and criminals (Idem).

8. Based on: Katja Tolstaya, “Theology and Theosis after the Gulag. Varlam Shalamov’s Challenge to Theological Reflection in Post-Communist Russia,” in: Fernando Enns, A. Mosher (eds.), *Just Peace, Ecumenical Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013, pp. 50-69.

9. This section contains passages from my article “Reading Primo Levi on “Hybridity” in the Context of South Africa: Moving Towards Humanizing Descriptions of the Other,” in: Stellenbosch Theological Journal, 2018, vol. 4, no. 1. <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/stj/v4n1/19.pdf>.

10. In Levi’s work, many differences in time, genre, and aim can be distinguished. He had always been concerned with the post-war community and wrote many articles and stories for daily newspapers in which he reflected on topical issues in Italy and the world. I hope that my introduction of the notion of “hybridity” does justice to this differentiation in his work and can, in all its complexity, be compared to Koopman.

11. Levi’s first imperative was to testify of Auschwitz, which explains his recurrent protest against false comparisons of Auschwitz with other histories. In an article printed in a national newspaper, he reacts to German voices who wanted to negate the uniqueness of the Nazi camps and tried to explain Hitler’s actions as a preventive defense against an “Asian” invasion. By entitling this article “The Black Hole of Auschwitz,” Levi tries, as a witness, to prevent the shocking memory of Auschwitz from disappearing into the black hole of forgetfulness (CW, USE, 2752-2756). When writing liter-

ary works, Levi is able to relate disasters—for example, in the poem “The Girl of Pompeii,” a sad testimony to the suffering of a little girl in Pompeii, Anne Frank, and the Hiroshima Schoolgirl (CW, CP, 1920).

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Curriculum Vitae

Joyce Rondaij was born on July 9, 1990 in Hilversum, The Netherlands. She obtained a BA in Theology at Utrecht University in 2011 and a MA in Theology at Protestant Theological University in 2014. During her MA she completed an extracurricular Research Program with a specialization in practical theology at PThU and studied at Università degli Studi di Firenze in preparation of her master's thesis on Primo Levi. She conducted her PhD research at Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam, starting in 2015. During that time, she was member of the editorial board of the literary journal *Liter* and worked one year as executive manager *ad interim* of the Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies. In 2019 she took a half-year break to work as a policy officer at the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

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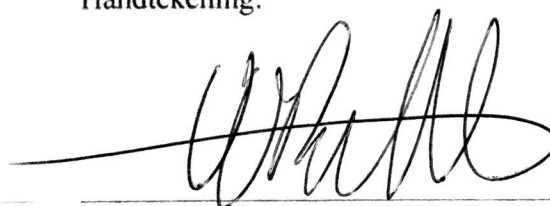
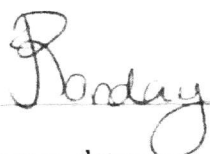
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