“An act against fascism”: Notes on Testimony Based on Primo Levi’s The Drowned and the Saved

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“[…] The best historians of the Lager came from the ranks of the very few that had the ability and the good fortune to attain a privileged vantage point without stooping to compromise […].”¹ The quote is from the preface to The Drowned and the Saved. When I read it, I asked myself several questions: according to Levi, was there any vantage point for camp prisoners that was not “[…] glued to the ground by the needs of every minute”?² Would the principle that “the concentration camps themselves were not always the best vantage point for knowing the camps […]”³ find an exception in the scholars Levi called the “best historians”? Thus, how can we probe the limits of representation, recalling here the title of Saul Friedländer’s classic anthology?⁴

My first reaction was to attempt to identify who the “best historians” might be. Several pages later,⁵ I found reasons to believe that Hermann Langbein, Eugen Kogon, and Hans Marsalek would be among them.⁶ More than in their names, however, I was interested in their characteristics, and Levi presents these a few lines later. The “best historians” have the “humility of the good chronicler” and the capacity to comprehend “[…] the complexity of the Lager phenomenon and the varieties of human destinies that played out in the camps”.⁷ Apart from humility and complexity, which are ethical and epistemic characteristics, there was a third one: the political experience of struggling against fascism: “[…] they realized that bearing witness was an act against fascism”.⁸ And considering Levi’s concern not only with the past, but also with the present, how could we interpret “bearing witness” as “an act against fascism”?

A Book on the Limits

While reading I looked for clues that would help with the answer. I found nothing definite, but noticed with some surprise that one particular word – limit – appeared here and there on the pages of The Drowned and the Saved:⁹ There was also evidence of semantically proximate terms. The following is a sample of my brief search. Note that the words originally used by Levi in Italian are placed in brackets to emphasize that in some cases “limite” was translated into English as “extreme”.

(a) “In this chapter [“The Memory of the Offense”] I wish to examine memories of extreme [estrema] experiences”.¹⁰
(b) “Suppressing is an extreme case [casso limite] of distorting the memory of a wrong committed”.

(c) “What made the entry into the camps such a shock was, instead, the surprise that came with it. The world in which you felt you had fallen was indeed harrowing, but it was indecipherable. It did not resemble any model. The enemy was outside but also inside. There was no clearly defined ‘us’ [il ‘noi’ perdeva i suoi confini’].

(d) “Young people in particular demand clarity and sharp distinctions [il taglio netto].

(e) “The Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz and the other death camps represent an extreme case [casso limite] of collaboration.”

(f) “No one has told the story of the demolition brought to its end, the finished work [...] Even if they had possessed pen and paper, the drowned could not have borne Witness, because their death had already begun before the body perished. [...] We speak in their place, by proxy.”

(g) “I would also like to mention, as an extreme example of violence that is both stupid and symbolic, the evil use that was made (not sporadically but methodically) of the human body as an object, belonging to no one, that could be disposed of arbitrarily.”

I organized the list above as follows: excerpts “a”, “b” and “c” refer to a limit experienced by the survivor (and the executioner) in speaking of themselves; excerpt “d” points to the limit demarcated between the survivor’s testimony and his audience. Excerpts “e” and “f” speak of the discourse on other Lager experiences, those of Sonderkommando members and of the “drowned”. Finally, excerpt “g” speaks of the limit to understanding acts committed by Nazi executioners. There are thus at least four forms of limit (it is always possible to find others): the limit of speaking of oneself, of one’s own past; the witness’s limit in communicating their past experience to the audience, especially to that of a subsequent generation; the limit of speaking for others and their Lager experiences, that is, by delegation, and acts about which it would be better to suspend judgement; finally, the limit of speaking about the executioners, about this other whose acts do not allow for a full explanation based on the instrumental rationality of means and ends.
A Crossroads in Time

Based on these different uses of speaking about the experience of limit, would it not be possible to establish a crossroads in time, where four axes are drawn? This could be organized schematically as follows:

At the limit of speaking of oneself, there is the tension between the survivor’s present and their past.

At the limit of speaking to the audience, one experiences the tension between the survivor’s past and the subsequent generation’s present.

At the limit of speaking for others, there is the tension between the survivor’s present and the past of the “drowned” and of the members of the “gray zone”.

At the limit of speaking about the executioners, the tension lies between the survivor’s past and the perpetrators’ past, which is not subject to a statute of limitations and is still potentially active.

This brief schematic reminds me of Domenico Scarpa’s words: “Levi’s time is very much like an elastic band staked to the hard ground in the year of one’s incarceration. The individual takes off, walks on, stretches the elastic band, but at some moment he can no longer stand the tension, he is snapped back and must start all over again”.18 I would even dare to add the following to Scarpa’s words: when starting all over, the elastic is stretched in various directions and each time it snaps back to the year of one’s incarceration, it takes a different path. And here I return to the purpose of The Drowned and the Saved: “This book”, Levi says, “[...] would like to answer the most urgent question, the question that distresses everyone [la domanda che angoscia tutti] [...] 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”?19

The political reference is highly significant: The Drowned and the Saved was published in 1986, and as we now learn from Martina Mengoni’s rigorous reconstruction, the fear of a far-right return to power, at least since 1969, when the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan occurred, was justifiable.20

Could the anguish Levi speaks of not be the “vantage point” of the testimony, the demarcation of its observatory (“osservatorio”)? The limit of the testimony refers to the undefinedness of its position, or further the circumscription of this same
undefinition. Testimony does not allow events and experiences to distance themselves.

More than restoring the past in its pure objectivity, returning in time, testimony constantly redesigns the limits without providing assurances that the experience of the “concentration-camp world” is located at a safe enough distance from our vantage point. As Mario Barenghi rightly says: “[…] the lesson that reaches us from Auschwitz is that the edifice of humanity is a fragile one. Nothing can be taken for granted, no achievement of civilization can ever again be considered definitive”.22 Testimony should therefore still be an act against fascism.

*Translated from Portuguse by Christopher Petersen.*

This post is a revised version of an online presentation in April 2022 during the 4th Conference of the International Network of Theory of History, organized in Puebla, Mexico. It is also an abridged version (altered in a few points) of an article available only in Portuguese: Pedro Caldas, “O evento limite em Primo Levi: Uma leitura de *Osfogados e ossobreviventes*” in *Literatura & Sociedade* 32 (2020), 51-72.

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**Tags:** Limit / Primo Levi / Testimony

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 2415.
8 Ibid., 2417.
11 Ibid., 2425, my emphasis.
12 Ibid., 2431.
13 Ibid., 2431, my emphasis.
14 Ibid., 2441, my emphasis.
15 Ibid., 2468–2469.
16 Ibid., 2500, my emphasis.
17 I would like to make brief remarks on the scheme: first, in passage “f”, not only is there no term that clearly refers to the experience of limit, but it speaks of shame, of the survivor’s affect for the sommersi of the past; secondly, it speaks of a sentiment inscribed between the present and the past of the survivor, as Lisa Regazzoni notes in her book that devotes a chapter to Primo Levi. See Lisa Regazzoni, Selezione e catalogo: La costruzionenarrativa del passato in Omero, Dante e Primo Levi, Bologna: CLUEB, 2010, 177–178.
20 Mengoni, I sommersi e i salvati, 107–182.
21 In the original Italian, Levi uses the expression “la domanda che angoscia tutti”, translated into English as “the question that distresses everyone [...]: Primo Levi, Opere Complete II, ed. Marco Belpoliti, Torino: Einaudi, 2016, 1153.