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this book succeeds only in correcting some of the terms with which we register the decisive lesson of the century and if this book makes it possible for certain words to be left behind and others to be understood in a different sense. This is also a way — perhaps the only way — to listen to what is unsaid.

CHAPTER ONE

The Witness

1. 1 In the camp, one of the reasons that can drive a prisoner to survive is the idea of becoming a witness. "I firmly decided that, despite everything that might happen to me, I would not take my own life... since I did not want to suppress the witness that I could become" (Langbein 1988: 186). Of course, not all deportees, indeed only a small fraction of them, give this reason. A reason for survival can be a matter of convenience: "He would like to survive for this or that reason, for this or that end, and he finds hundreds of pretexts. The truth is that he wants to live at whatever cost" (Lewental 1972: 148). Or it can simply be a matter of revenge: "Naturally I could have run and thrown myself onto the fence, because you can always do that. But I want to live. And what if the miracle happens we're all waiting for? Maybe we'll be liberated, today or tomorrow. Then I'll have my revenge, then I'll tell the whole world what happened here — inside there" (Sofsky 1997: 340). To justify one's survival is not easy — least of all in the camp. Then there are some survivors who prefer to be silent. "Some of my friends, very dear friends of mine, never speak of Auschwitz" (Levi 1997: 224). Yet, for others, the only reason to live is to ensure that the witness does not perish. "Others, on the other hand, speak of it incessantly, and I am one of them" (*ibid.*).

1.2 Primo Levi is a perfect example of the witness. When he returns home, he tirelessly recounts his experience to everyone. He behaves like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner:

You remember the scene: the Ancient Mariner accosts the wedding guests, who are thinking of the wedding and not paying attention to him, and he forces them to listen to his tale. Well, when I first returned from the concentration camp I did just that. I felt an unrestrainable need to tell my story to anyone and everyone! ... Every situation was an occasion to tell my story to anyone and everyone: to tell it to the factory director as well as to the worker, even if they had other things to do. I was reduced to the state of the Ancient Mariner. Then I began to write on my typewriter at night.... Every night I would write, and this was considered even crazier! (Levi 1997: 224–25)

But Levi does not consider himself a writer; he becomes a writer so that he can bear witness. In a sense, he never became a writer. In 1963, after publishing two novels and many short stories, he responds unhesitatingly to the question of whether he considers himself a writer or a chemist: "A chemist, of course, let there be no mistake" (Levi 1997: 102). Levi was profoundly uneasy with the fact that as time passed, and almost in spite of himself, he ended up a writer, composing books that had nothing to do with his testimony: "Then I wrote.... I acquired the vice of writing" (Levi 1997: 258). "In my latest book, *La Chiave a stella*, I stripped myself completely of my status as a witness.... This is not to deny anything; I have not ceased to be an ex-deportee, a witness...." (*ibid.*: 167)

Levi had this unease about him when I saw him at meetings at the Italian publisher, Einaudi. He could feel guilty for having sur-

vived, but not for having borne witness. "I am at peace with myself because I bore witness" (*ibid.*: p. 219).

1.3 In Latin there are two words for "witness." The first word, *testis*, from which our word "testimony" derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (**terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it. It is obvious that Levi is not a third party; he is a survivor [*superstite*] in every sense. But this also means that his testimony has nothing to do with the acquisition of facts for a trial (he is not neutral enough for this, he is not a *testis*). In the final analysis, it is not judgment that matters to him, let alone pardon. "I never appear as judge"; "I do not have the authority to grant pardon.... I am without authority" (*ibid.*: 77, 236). It seems, in fact, that the only thing that interests him is what makes judgment impossible: the gray zone in which victims become executioners and executioners become victims. It is about this above all that the survivors are in agreement: "No group was more human than any other" (*ibid.*: 232). "Victim and executioner are equally ignoble; the lesson of the camps is brotherhood in abjection" (Rousset, cf. Levi 1997: 216).

Not that a judgment cannot or must not be made. "If I had had Eichmann before me, I would have condemned him to death" (*ibid.*: 144). "If they have committed a crime, then they must pay" (*ibid.*: 236). The decisive point is simply that the two things not be blurred, that law not presume to exhaust the question. A non-judicial element of truth exists such that the *quaestio facti* can never be reduced to the *quaestio iuris*. This is precisely what concerns the survivor: everything that places a human action beyond the law, radically withdrawing it from the Trial. "Each of us can

be tried, condemned and punished without even knowing why” (*ibid.*: 75).

1.4 One of the most common mistakes – which is not only made in discussions of the camp – is the tacit confusion of ethical categories and juridical categories (or, worse, of juridical categories and theological categories, which gives rise to a new theodicy). Almost all the categories that we use in moral and religious judgments are in some way contaminated by law: guilt, responsibility, innocence, judgment, pardon. . . . This makes it difficult to invoke them without particular caution. As jurists well know, law is not directed toward the establishment of justice. Nor is it directed toward the verification of truth. Law is solely directed toward judgment, independent of truth and justice. This is shown beyond doubt by the *force of judgment* that even an unjust sentence carries with it. The ultimate aim of law is the production of a *res judicata*, in which the sentence becomes the substitute for the true and the just, being held as true despite its falsity and injustice. Law finds peace in this hybrid creature, of which it is impossible to say if it is fact or rule; once law has produced its *res judicata*, it cannot go any further.

In 1983, the publisher Einaudi asked Levi to translate Kafka’s *The Trial*. Infinite interpretations of *The Trial* have been offered; some underline the novel’s prophetic political character (modern bureaucracy as absolute evil) or its theological dimension (the court as the unknown God) or its biographical meaning (condemnation as the illness from which Kafka believed himself to suffer). It has been rarely noted that this book, in which law appears solely in the form of a trial, contains a profound insight into the nature of law, which, contrary to common belief, is not so much rule as it is judgment and, therefore, trial. But if the essence of the law – of every law – is the trial, if all right (and morality that

is contaminated by it) is only tribunal right, then execution and transgression, innocence and guilt, obedience and disobedience all become indistinct and lose their importance. “The court wants nothing from you. It welcomes you when you come; it releases you when you go.” The ultimate end of the juridical regulation is to produce judgment; but judgment aims neither to punish nor to extol, neither to establish justice nor to prove the truth. Judgment is in itself the end and this, it has been said, constitutes its mystery, the mystery of the trial.

One of the consequences that can be drawn from this self-referential nature of judgment – and Sebastiano Satta, a great Italian jurist, has done so – is that punishment does not follow from judgment, but rather that judgment is itself punishment (*nullum iudicium sine poena*). “One can even say that the whole punishment is in the judgment, that the action characteristic of the punishment – incarceration, execution – matters only insofar as it is, so to speak, the carrying out of the judgment” (Satta 1994: 26). This also means that “the sentence of acquittal is the confession of a judicial error,” that “everyone is inwardly innocent,” but that the only truly innocent person “is not the one who is acquitted, but rather the one who goes through life without judgment” (*ibid.*: 27).

1.5 If this is true – and the survivor knows that it is true – then it is possible that the trials (the twelve trials at Nuremberg, and the others that took place in and outside German borders, including those in Jerusalem in 1961 that ended with the hanging of Eichmann) are responsible for the conceptual confusion that, for decades, has made it impossible to think through Auschwitz. Despite the necessity of the trials and despite their evident insufficiency (they involved only a few hundred people), they helped to spread the idea that the problem of Auschwitz had been overcome. The judgments had been passed, the proofs of guilt definitively established.

With the exception of occasional moments of lucidity, it has taken almost half a century to understand that law did not exhaust the problem, but rather that the very problem was so enormous as to call into question law itself, dragging it to its own ruin.

The confusion between law and morality and between theology and law has had illustrious victims. Hans Jonas, the philosopher and student of Heidegger who specialized in ethical problems, is one of them. In 1984, when he received the Lucas Award in Tübingen, he reflected on the question of Auschwitz by preparing for a new theodicy, asking, that is, how it was possible for God to tolerate Auschwitz. A theodicy is a trial that seeks to establish the responsibility not of men, but of God. Like all theodicies, Jonas's ends in an acquittal. The justification for the sentence is something like this: "The infinite (God) stripped himself completely, in the finite, of his omnipotence. Creating the world, God gave it His own fate and became powerless. Thus, having emptied himself entirely in the world, he no longer has anything to offer us; it is now man's turn to give. Man can do this by taking care that it never happens, or rarely happens, that God regrets his decision to have let the world be."

The conciliatory vice of every theodicy is particularly clear here. Not only does this theodicy tell us nothing about Auschwitz, either about its victims or executioners; it does not even manage to avoid a happy ending. Behind the powerlessness of God peeps the powerlessness of men, who continue to cry "May that never happen again!" when it is clear that "that" is, by now, everywhere.

1.6 The concept of responsibility is also irremediably contaminated by law. Anyone who has tried to make use of it outside the juridical sphere knows this. And yet ethics, politics, and religion have been able to define themselves only by seizing terrain from

juridical responsibility — not in order to assume another kind of responsibility, but to articulate zones of non-responsibility. This does not, of course, mean impunity. Rather, it signifies — at least for ethics — a confrontation with a responsibility that is infinitely greater than any we could ever assume. At the most, we can be faithful to it, that is, assert its unassumability.

The unprecedented discovery made by Levi at Auschwitz concerns an area that is independent of every establishment of responsibility, an area in which Levi succeeded in isolating something like a new ethical element. Levi calls it the "gray zone." It is the zone in which the "long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner" comes loose, where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim. A gray, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion.

What is at issue here, therefore, is a zone of irresponsibility and "*impotentia iudicandi*" (Levi 1989: 60) that is situated not *beyond* good and evil but rather, so to speak, *before* them. With a gesture that is symmetrically opposed to that of Nietzsche, Levi places ethics before the area in which we are accustomed to consider it. And, without our being able to say why, we sense that this "before" is more important than any "beyond" — that the "underman" must matter to us more than the "overman." This infamous zone of irresponsibility is our First Circle, from which no confession of responsibility will remove us and in which what is spelled out, minute by minute, is the lesson of the "terrifying, unsayable and unimaginable banality of evil" (Arendt 1992: 252).

1.7 The Latin verb *spondeo*, which is the origin of our term "responsibility," means "to become the guarantor of something for someone (or for oneself) with respect to someone." Thus, in the promise of marriage, the father would utter the formula

spondeo to express his commitment to giving his daughter as wife to a suitor (after which she was then called a *sponsa*) or to guarantee compensation if this did not take place. In archaic Roman law, in fact, the custom was that a free man could consign himself as a hostage — that is, in a state of imprisonment, from which the term *obligatio* derives — to guarantee the compensation of a wrong or the fulfillment of an obligation. (The term *sponsor* indicated the person who substituted himself for the *reus*, promising, in the case of a breach of contract, to furnish the required service.)

The gesture of assuming responsibility is therefore genuinely juridical and not ethical. It expresses nothing noble or luminous, but rather simply obligation, the act by which one consigned oneself as a prisoner to guarantee a debt in a context in which the legal bond was considered to inhere in the body of the person responsible. As such, responsibility is closely intertwined with the concept of *culpa* that, in a broad sense, indicates the imputability of damage. (This is why the Romans denied that there could be guilt with respect to oneself: *quod quis ex culpa sua damnum sentit, non intelligitur damnum sentire*: the damage that one causes to oneself by one's own fault is not juridically relevant.)

Responsibility and guilt thus express simply two aspects of legal imputability; only later were they interiorized and moved outside law. Hence the insufficiency and opacity of every ethical doctrine that claims to be founded on these two concepts. (This holds both for Jonas, who claimed to formulate a genuine "principle of responsibility" and for Lévinas, who, in a much more complex fashion, transformed the gesture of the *sponsor* into the ethical gesture par excellence.) This insufficiency and opacity emerges clearly every time the borders that separate ethics from law are traced. Let us consider two examples, which are very far from each other as to the gravity of the facts they concern but which coincide with respect to the *distinguo* they imply.

During the Jerusalem trial, Eichmann's constant line of defense was clearly expressed by his lawyer, Robert Serviatius, with these words: "Eichmann feels himself guilty before God, not the law." Eichmann (whose implication in the extermination of the Jews was well documented, even if his role was probably different from that which was argued by the prosecution) actually went so far as to declare that he wanted "to hang himself in public" in order to "liberate young Germans from the weight of guilt." Yet, until the end, he continued to maintain that his guilt before God (who was for him only a *höherer Sinnesträger*, a higher bearer of meaning) could not be legally prosecuted. The only possible explanation for this insistence is that, whereas the assumption of moral guilt seemed ethically noble to the defendant, he was unwilling to assume any legal guilt (although, from an ethical point of view, legal guilt should have been less serious than moral guilt).

Recently, a group of people who once had belonged to a political organization of the extreme Left published a communiqué in a newspaper, declaring political and moral responsibility for the murder of a police officer committed twenty years ago. "Nevertheless, such responsibility," the document stated, "cannot be transformed... into a responsibility of penal character." It must be recalled that the assumption of moral responsibility has value only if one is ready to assume the relevant legal consequences. The authors of the communiqué seem to suspect this in some way, when, in a significant passage, they assume a responsibility that sounds unmistakably juridical, stating that they contributed to "creating a climate that led to murder." (But the offense in question, the instigation to commit a crime, is of course wiped out.) In every age, the gesture of assuming a juridical responsibility when one is innocent has been considered noble; the assumption of political or moral responsibility without the assumption of the corresponding legal consequences, on the other hand, has

always characterized the arrogance of the mighty (consider Mussolini's behavior, for example, with respect to the case of Giacomo Matteotti, the member of the Italian parliament who was assassinated by unknown killers in 1924). But today in Italy these models have been reversed and the contrite assumption of moral responsibilities is invoked at every occasion as an exemption from the responsibilities demanded by law.

Here the confusion between ethical categories and juridical categories (with the logic of repentance implied) is absolute. This confusion lies at the origin of the many suicides committed to escape trial (not only those of Nazi criminals), in which the tacit assumption of moral guilt attempts to compensate for legal guilt. It is worth remembering that the primary responsibility for this confusion lies not in Catholic doctrine, which includes a sacrament whose function is to free the sinner of guilt, but rather in secular ethics (in its well-meaning and dominant version). After having raised juridical categories to the status of supreme ethical categories and thereby irredeemably confusing the fields of law ethics, secular ethics still wants to play out its *distinguo*. But ethics is the sphere that recognizes neither guilt nor responsibility; it is, as Spinoza knew, the doctrine of the happy life. To assume guilt and responsibility — which can, at times, be necessary — is to leave the territory of ethics and enter that of law. Whoever has made this difficult step cannot presume to return through the door he just closed behind him.

1.8 The extreme figure of the “gray zone” is the *Sonderkommando*. The SS used the euphemism “special team” to refer to this group of deportees responsible for managing the gas chambers and crematoria. Their task was to lead naked prisoners to their death in the gas chambers and maintain order among them; they then had to drag out the corpses, stained pink and green by the

cyanotic acid, and wash them with water; make sure that no valuable objects were hidden in the orifices of the bodies; extract gold teeth from the corpses' jaws; cut the women's hair and wash it with ammonia chloride; bring the corpses into the crematoria and oversee their incineration; and, finally, empty out the ovens of the ash that remained. Levi writes:

Concerning these squads, vague and mangled rumors already circulated among us during our imprisonment and were confirmed afterward. . . . But the intrinsic horror of this human condition has imposed a sort of reserve on all the testimony, so that even today it is difficult to conjure up an image of “what it meant” to be forced to exercise this trade for months. . . . One of them declared: “Doing this work, one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it.” Another, though: “Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness. You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy.” . . . One cannot expect from men who have known such extreme destitution a deposition in the juridical sense, but something that is at once a lament, a curse, an expiation, an attempt to justify and rehabilitate oneself. . . . Conceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism's most demonic crime (Levi 1989: 52–3).

And yet Levi recalls that a witness, Miklos Nyszli, one of the very few who survived the last “special team” of Auschwitz, recounted that during a “work” break he took part in a soccer match between the SS and representatives of the *Sonderkommando*. “Other men of the SS and the rest of the squad are present at the game; they take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green” (Levi 1989: 55).

This match might strike someone as a brief pause of humanity in the middle of an infinite horror. I, like the witnesses, instead view this match, this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp. For we can perhaps think that the massacres are over — even if here and there they are repeated, not so far away from us. But that match is never over; it continues as if uninterrupted. It is the perfect and eternal cipher of the “gray zone,” which knows no time and is in every place. Hence the anguish and shame of the survivors, “the anguish inscribed in everyone of the ‘tohu-bohu,’ of a deserted and empty universe crushed under the spirit of God but from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished” (Levi 1989: 85). But also hence our shame, the shame of those who did not know the camps and yet, without knowing how, are spectators of that match, which repeats itself in every match in our stadiums, in every television broadcast, in the normalcy of everyday life. If we do not succeed in understanding that match, in stopping it, there will never be hope.

1.9 In Greek the word for witness is *martis*, martyr. The first Church Fathers coined the word *martirium* from *martis* to indicate the death of persecuted Christians, who thus bore witness to their faith. What happened in the camps has little to do with martyrdom. The survivors are unanimous about this. “By calling the victims of the Nazis ‘martyrs,’ we falsify their fate” (Bettelheim 1979: 92). Nevertheless, the concepts of “witnessing” and “martyrdom” can be linked in two ways. The first concerns the Greek term itself, derived as it is from the verb meaning “to remember.” The survivor’s vocation is to remember; he cannot *not* remember. “The memories of my imprisonment are much more vivid and detailed than those of anything else that happened to me before or after” (Levi 1997: 225). “I still have a visual and acoustic memory of the experiences there that I cannot explain. . . . sentences in

languages I do not know have remained etched in my memory, like on a magnetic tape; I have repeated them to Poles and Hungarians and have been told that the sentences are meaningful. For some reason that I cannot explain, something anomalous happened to me, I would say almost an unconscious preparation for bearing witness” (*ibid.*: 220).

The second point of connection is even more profound, more instructive. The study of the first Christian texts on martyrdom — for example, Tertullian’s *Scorpiacus* — reveals some unexpected teachings. The Church Fathers were confronted by heretical groups that rejected martyrdom because, in their eyes, it constituted a wholly senseless death (*perire sine causa*). What meaning could be found in professing one’s faith before men — persecutors and executioners — who would understand nothing of this undertaking? God could not desire something without meaning. “Must innocents suffer these things? . . . Once and for all Christ immolated himself for us; once and for all he was killed, precisely so that we would not be killed. If he asks for the same in return, is it perhaps because he too expects salvation in my death? Or should one perhaps think that God demands the blood of men even while he disdains that of bulls and goats? How could God ever desire the death of someone who is not a sinner?” The doctrine of martyrdom therefore justifies the scandal of a meaningless death, of an execution that could only appear as absurd. Confronted with the spectacle of a death that was apparently *sine causa*, the reference to Luke 12: 8–9 and to Matthew 10: 32–33 (“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven”) made it possible to interpret martyrdom as a divine command and, thus, to find a reason for the irrational.

But this has very much to do with the camps. For what appears

in the camps is an extermination for which it may be possible to find precedents, but whose forms make it absolutely senseless. Survivors are also in agreement on this. "Even to us, what we had to tell would start to seem *unimaginable*" (Antelme 1992: 3). "All the attempts at clarification . . . failed ridiculously" (Améry 1980: vii). "I am irritated by the attempts of some religious extremists to interpret the extermination according to the manner of the prophets: as a punishment for our sins. No! I do not accept this. What is terrifying is that it was senseless. . . ." (Levi 1997: 219).

The unfortunate term "holocaust" (usually with a capital "H") arises from this unconscious demand to justify a death that is *sine causa* – to give meaning back to what seemed incomprehensible. "Please excuse me, I use this term 'Holocaust' reluctantly because I do not like it. But I use it to be understood. Philologically, it is a mistake. . . ." (*ibid.*: 243). "It is a term that, when it first arose, gave me a lot of trouble; then I learned that it was Wiesel himself who had coined it, then regretted it and wanted to take it back" (*ibid.*: 219).

1.10 The history of an incorrect term can also prove instructive. "Holocaust" is the scholarly transcription of the Latin *holocaustum* which, in turn, is a translation of the Greek term *holocaustos* (which is, however, an adjective, and which means "completely burned"; the corresponding Greek noun is *holocaustōma*). The semantic history of the term is essentially Christian, since the Church Fathers used it to translate – in fact with neither rigour nor coherence – the complex sacrificial doctrine of the Bible (in particular, of Leviticus and Deuteronomy). Leviticus reduces all sacrifices to four fundamental types: *olah*, *hattat*, *shelamin*, *minha*. As Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert write in "The Nature and Function of Sacrifice,"

The names of two of these are significant. The *hattat* was the sacrifice employed especially to expiate the sin called *hattat* or *hataah*, the definition of which given in Leviticus is unfortunately extremely vague. The *shelamin* is a communion sacrifice, a sacrifice of thanksgiving, of alliance, of vows. As for the terms *'olah* and *minha*, they are purely descriptive. Each recalls one of the special operations of sacrifice: the latter, the presentation of the victim, if it is of vegetable matter, the former, the dispatch of the offering to the divinity (Mauss and Hubert 1964: 16).

The Vulgate usually translates *olah* by *holocaustum* (*holocausti oblatio*); *hattat* by *oblatio*; *shelamin* by *hostia pacificorum*; *minha* by *hostia pro peccato*. The term *holocaustum* is transmitted from the Vulgate to the Latin Fathers, who used it primarily in the many commentaries of the Holy Writ to indicate the sacrifices of the Hebrews. (Thus in Hilarius, *In Psalmata*, 65, 23: *holocausta sunt integra hostiarum corpora, quia tota ad ignem sacrificii deferebantur, holocausta sunt nuncupata*.) Two points are particularly important here. First, early on, the Church Fathers used the term in its literal sense as a polemical weapon against the Jews, to condemn the uselessness of bloody sacrifices (Tertullian's text, which refers to Marcion, is exemplary: *Quid stultius. . . quam sacrificiorum cruentorum et holocaustorum nidorosorum a deo exactio?* "What is more foolish than a god who demands bloody sacrifices and holocausts that smell of burnt remains?" *Adversus Marcionem* 5, 5; cf. also Augustine, *C. Faustism*, 19, 4). Second, the term "holocaustum" is extended as a metaphor to include Christian martyrs, such that their torture is equated with sacrifice (Hilarius, *In Psalmata*, 65, 23: *Martyres in fidei testimonium corpora sua holocausta voverunt*). Christ's sacrifice on the cross is thus ultimately defined as a holocaust (Augustine, *In Evang. Joah.*, 41, 5: *se in holocaustum obtulerit in cruce Iesus*; Rufinus,

Origines in Leviticum, 1, 4: holocaustum. . . . carnis eius per lignum crucis oblatum).

Thus begins the semantic migration by which the term "holocaust" in vernacular languages gradually acquires the meaning of the "supreme sacrifice in the sphere of a complete devotion to sacred and superior motives." In English, the term appears in its literal sense in Tindale (*Mark* xii. 33: "A greater thyng than all holocaustes and sacrificises") and H. More (*Apocal. Apoc.* 101: "In the latter part thereof stands the altar of Holocausts"). The term appears in its metaphorical sense in Bp. Alcock (*Mons Perfect C iija*: "Very true obedyence is an holocauste of martyrdom made to Cryste"), J. Beaumont (*Psyche* xxiv. cxciv: "The perfect holocaust of generous love") and Milton, where it signifies a complete consumption by fire (*Samson* 1702: "Like that self-begotten bird In the Arabian woods embost, That no second knows nor third, And lay erewhile a Holocaust"). It is repeated, over and over again, through to the twentieth century (for example, *Hansard Commons* 6 March, 1940: "the general holocaust of civilized standards") (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989: 315).

But the term's usage in polemics against the Jews also has a history, even if it is a secret one not recorded by dictionaries. In the course of my research on sovereignty, I happened upon a passage by a medieval chronicler that constitutes, to my knowledge, the first use of *holocaust* with reference to a massacre of Jews, in this case in a violently anti-Semitic fashion. Richard of Duizes testifies that on the day of the coronation of Richard I (1189), the inhabitants of London engaged in a particularly bloody pogrom: "The very day of the coronation of the king, at about the hour in which the Son was burnt for the Father, they began in London to burn the Jews for their father the demon (*incoeptum est in civitate Londoniae immolare judaeos patri suo diabolo*); and the celebration of this mystery lasted so long that the holocaust could not be

completed before the next day. And the other cities and towns of the region imitated the faith of the inhabitants of London and, with the same devotion, sent their bloodsuckers to hell (*pari devotione suas sanguisugas cum sanguine transmiserunt ad inferos*)" (Cardini 1994: 131).

Insofar as it implies the substitution of a literal expression with an attenuated or altered expression for something that one does not actually want to hear mentioned, the formation of a euphemism always involves ambiguities. In this case, however, the ambiguity is intolerable. The Jews also use a euphemism to indicate the extermination. They use the term *so'ah*, which means "devastation, catastrophe" and, in the Bible, often implies the idea of a divine punishment (as in Isaiah 10:3: "What will you do in the day of punishment, when the *so'ah* will come from afar?"). Even if Levi probably refers to this term when he speaks of the attempt to interpret the extermination as a punishment for our sins, his use of the euphemism contains no mockery. In the case of the term "holocaust," by contrast, the attempt to establish a connection, however distant, between Auschwitz and the Biblical *olah* and between death in the gas chamber and the "complete devotion to sacred and superior motives" cannot but sound like a jest. Not only does the term imply an unacceptable equation between crematoria and altars; it also continues a semantic heredity that is from its inception anti-Semitic. This is why we will never make use of this term.

1.11 Several years ago, when I published an article on the concentration camps in a French newspaper, someone wrote a letter to the editor in which, among other crimes, I was accused of having sought to "ruin the unique and unsayable character of Auschwitz." I have often asked myself what the author of the letter could have had in mind. The phenomenon of Auschwitz is unique

(certainly in the past, and we can only hope for the future). As Levi points out: “Up to the moment of this writing, and notwithstanding the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shame of the Gulags, the useless and bloody Vietnam war, the Cambodian self-genocide, the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, and the many atrocious and stupid wars we have seen since, the Nazi concentration camp still remains an *unicum*, both in its extent and its quality” (Levi 1989: 21). But why unsayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?

In the year 386 of our era, in Antioch, John Chrysostom composed his treatise *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*. He opposed those who maintained that God’s essence could be understood, on the grounds that “everything that He knows of Himself we can also easily find in ourselves.” Vigorously arguing against his adversaries in affirming the incomprehensibility of God, who is “unsayable” (*arrētos*), “unspeakable” (*anekdiēgētos*), and “unwritable” (*anepigraptos*), John well knew that this was precisely the best way to glorify (*doxan didonai*) and adore (*proskuein*) Him. Even for the angels, after all, God is incomprehensible; but because of this they can glorify and adore Him, offering Him their mystical songs. John contrasts the angelic hosts with those seeking in vain to understand God: “those ones [the angels] glorify, these ones seek to understand; those ones adore in silence, these ones give themselves work to do; those ones divert their gaze, these ones are not ashamed to stare into unsayable glory” (Chrysostom 1970). The verb that we have translated “to adore in silence” is, in the Greek text, *euphemein*. *Euphemein*, which originally means “to observe religious silence,” is the origin of the modern word “euphemism,” which denotes those terms that are substituted for other terms that cannot be uttered for reasons of modesty or civility. To say that Auschwitz is “unsayable” or “incomprehensible” is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one

does with a god. Regardless of one’s intentions, this contributes to its glory. We, however, “are not ashamed of staring into the unsayable” – even at the risk of discovering that what evil knows of itself, we can also easily find in ourselves.

1.12 Testimony, however, contains a lacuna. The survivors agree about this. “There is another lacuna in every testimony: witnesses are by definition survivors and so all, to some degree, enjoyed a privilege. . . . No one has told the destiny of the common prisoner, since it was not materially possible for him to survive. . . . I have also described the common prisoner when I speak of ‘Muslims’; but the Muslims did not speak” (Levi 1997: 215–16). “Those who have not lived through the experience will never know; those who have will never tell; not really, not completely. . . . The past belongs to the dead. . . .” (Wiesel 1975: 314).

It is worth reflecting upon this lacuna, which calls into question the very meaning of testimony and, along with it, the identity and reliability of the witnesses. “I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. . . . We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception. . . . We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse ‘on behalf of third parties,’ the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and

pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy" (Levi 1989: 83-4).

The witness usually testifies in the name of justice and truth and as such his or her speech draws consistency and fullness. Yet here the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. The "true" witnesses, the "complete witnesses," are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who "touched bottom": the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted. They have no "story" (Levi 1986: 90), no "face," and even less do they have "thought" (*ibid.*). Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness. But this alters the value of testimony in a definitive way; it makes it necessary to look for its meaning in an unexpected area.

1.13 It has already been observed that, in testimony, there is something like an impossibility of bearing witness. In 1983, Jean-François Lyotard published *The Differend*, which, ironically repeating the recent claims of revisionists, opens with a logical paradox:

You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak

about it. When they do speak about it, their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation. How can you know that the situation itself existed? That it is not the fruit of your informant's imagination? Either the situation did not exist as such. Or else it did exist, in which case your informant's testimony is false, either because he or she should have disappeared, or else because he or she should remain silent.... To have "really seen with his own eyes" a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber (Lyotard 1988: 3).

A few years later, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub elaborated the notion of the Shoah as an "event without witnesses." In 1990, one of the authors further developed this concept in the form of a commentary on Claude Lanzmann's film. The Shoah is an event without witnesses in the double sense that it is impossible to bear witness to it from the inside — since no one can bear witness from the inside of death, and there is no voice for the disappearance of voice — and from the outside — since the "outsider" is by definition excluded from the event:

It is not really possible to *tell the truth*, to testify, from the outside. Neither is it possible, as we have seen, to testify from the inside. I would suggest that the impossible position and the testimonial effort of the film as a whole is to be, precisely, neither simply inside nor simply outside, but paradoxically, *both inside and outside*: to create a connection that did not exist during the war and does not exist today *between the inside and the outside* — to set them both in motion and in dialogue with one another (Felman and Laub 1992: 232).

This threshold of indistinction between inside and outside (which, as we shall see, is anything but a "connection" or a "dialogue") could have led to a comprehension of the structure of testimony; yet it is precisely this threshold that Felman fails to interrogate. Instead of developing her pertinent analysis, the author derives an aesthetic possibility from a logical impossibility, through recourse to the metaphor of song:

What makes the power of the testimony in the film and what constitutes in general the impact of the film is not the words but the equivocal, puzzling relation between words and voice, the interaction, that is, between words, voice, rhythm, melody, images, writing, and silence. Each testimony speaks to us beyond its words, beyond its melody, like the unique performance of a singing (*ibid.*: 277-78).

To explain the paradox of testimony through the *deus ex machina* of song is to aestheticize testimony — something that Lanzmann is careful to avoid. Neither the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony; on the contrary, it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem.

1.14 The incomprehension of an honest mind is often instructive. Primo Levi, who did not like obscure authors, was attracted to the poetry of Paul Celan, even if he did not truly succeed in understanding it. In a brief essay, entitled "On Obscure Writing," he distinguishes Celan from those who write obscurely out of contempt for the reader or lack of expressivity. The obscurity of Celan's poetics makes Levi think instead of a "pre-suicide, a not-wanting-to-be, a flight from the world for which a willed death appears as completion." The extraordinary operation accomplished by Celan on the German language, which has so fascinated Celan's

readers, is compared by Levi — for reasons worth reflecting on — to an inarticulate babble or the gasps of a dying man. "This darkness that grows from page to page until the last inarticulate babble fills one with consternation like the gasps of a dying man; indeed, it is just that. It enralls us as whirlpools enrall us, but at the same time it robs us of what was supposed to be said but was not said, thus frustrating and distancing us. I think that Celan the poet must be considered and mourned rather than imitated. If his is a message, it is lost in the 'background noise.' It is not communication; it is not a language, or at the most it is a dark and maimed language, precisely that of someone who is about to die and is alone, as we will all be at the moment of death" (Levi 1990: 637).

In Auschwitz, Levi had already attempted to listen to and interpret an inarticulate babble, something like a non-language or a dark and maimed language. It was in the days that followed the liberation of the camp, when the Russians moved the survivors from Buna to the "big camp" of Auschwitz. Here Levi's attention was immediately drawn to a child the deportees called Hurbinek:

Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the baby let out now and again. He was paralyzed from the waist down, with atrophied legs, as thin as sticks; but his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency (Levi 1986: 191).

Now at a certain point Hurbinek begins to repeat a word over and over again, a word that no one in the camp can understand and that Levi doubtfully transcribes as *mass-klo* or *matisklo*. "During the night we listened carefully: it was true, from Hurbinek's corner there occasionally came a sound, a word. It was not, admittedly, always exactly the same word, but it was certainly an articulated word; or better, several slightly different articulated words, experimental variations of a theme, on a root, perhaps even on a name" (Levi 1986: 192). They all listen and try to decipher that sound, that emerging vocabulary; but, despite the presence of all the languages of Europe in the camp, Hurbinek's word remains obstinately secret. "No, it was certainly not a message, it was not a revelation; perhaps it was his name, if it had ever fallen to his lot to be given a name; perhaps (according to one of our hypotheses) it meant 'to eat,' or 'bread'; or perhaps 'meat' in Bohemian, as one of us who knew that language maintained. . . . Hurbinek, the nameless, whose tiny forearm — even his — bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinek died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine" (*ibid.*).

Perhaps this was the secret word that Levi discerned in the "background noise" of Celan's poetry. And yet in Auschwitz, Levi nevertheless attempted to listen to that to which no one has borne witness, to gather the secret word: *mass-klo*, *matisklo*. Perhaps every word, every writing is born, in this sense, as testimony. This is why what is borne witness to cannot already be language or writing. It can only be something to which no one has borne witness. And this is the sound that arises from the lacuna, the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born. It is necessary to reflect on the nature of that to which no one has borne witness, on this non-language.

1.15 Hurbinek cannot bear witness, since he does not have language (the speech that he utters is a sound that is uncertain and meaningless: *mass-klo* or *matisklo*). And yet he "bears witness through these words of mine." But not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own lacuna. This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance — that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. To bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense, to the pure undecidability of letters (*m-a-s-s-k-l-o*, *m-a-t-i-s-k-l-o*). It is necessary that this senseless sound be, in turn, the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness. It is thus necessary that the impossibility of bearing witness, the "lacuna" that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness — that which does not have language.

The trace of that to which no one has borne witness, which language believes itself to transcribe, is not the speech of language. The speech of language is born where language is no longer in the beginning, where language falls away from it simply to bear witness: "It was not light, but was sent to bear witness to the light."