Abstract: This article examines Primo Levi’s engagement with the work of Dante, focusing on Levi’s meditation on language in describing his confinement at Auschwitz and its later representation. Firstly, it establishes the importance of Dante as an ‘infernal’ model for Levi. It then identifies some suggestive parallels between the linguistic and auditory dimensions of Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* and Dante’s *Inferno*, and the degradation of language associated with these two infernal realms. The essay then highlights each writer’s concern with the limitations of human language in describing a place that it is understood as sub-linguistic. The article contends, by highlighting a number of precise textual parallels, that Levi’s reflections on this sub-linguistic essence of the Lager are substantially informed by the closing cantos of the *Inferno*. The essay concludes by considering how Dante represents a productive communicative model for Levi as well as carrying associations with unattainable notions of justice, salvation, and plenitude.

Keywords: Primo Levi; Dante; Auschwitz; Holocaust representation; testimony; communication.

From poetry to cinema, music to visual art, popular fiction to video games, Dante is a pervasive and dynamic presence in modern culture. Not only does the *Commedia*’s medieval account of a journey through the Christian afterlife offer a host of vivid and resonant characters, but its totalizing vision of a theocentric universe, founded upon infallible notions of justice and salvation, has often served as a powerful counterpoint for modern authors and artists in confronting their own more fragmented and less certain realities. One such author was Primo Levi (1919-87). Levi’s Holocaust writings, which document and reflect upon his confinement at Auschwitz, have been increasingly recognized as works not only of profound moral and historical importance, but also

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1 See, for example, the essays collected in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by M. Gragnolati, F. Camilletti, and F. Lampart (Berlin & Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2011).
of great literary value. Levi initially downplayed the literary credentials of his 1947 testimony, *Se questo è un uomo*, excusing its ‘difetti strutturali’ and ‘carattere frammentario’ and emphasizing the urgency and spontaneity of its genesis. Yet he later came to acknowledge its literary qualities, and drew attention to the role of his humanistic formation, as well as his academic and professional experience as a chemist, in shaping its language and intellectual approach. It is now widely acknowledged that *Se questo è un uomo* and Levi’s subsequent writings, while sitting outside of the dominant literary innovations of his time and seldom characterized by formal experimentation, merit consideration not only as some of the most important European documents produced on the subject of the Holocaust, but also as texts of ‘eccezionale qualità letteraria’.

Dante is unquestionably one of Primo Levi’s key cultural touchstones, evoked and cited at numerous points across his corpus, in a manner that reflects an intimate and sophisticated engagement with the medieval writer’s work. As well as playing an important and multifaceted role in *Se questo è un uomo*, allusions to Dante can be identified in its ‘sequel’, *La tregua*, which describes Levi’s return journey from Auschwitz to Italy; in his memoir *Il sistema periodico*, in his racconti (two of which, ‘Angelica farfalla’ and ‘Capaneo’, bear overtly Dantine titles); in the essays of *I sommersi e i salvati* (whose title is again Dantine); and in a number of Levi’s poems. Dante is surprisingly excluded from Levi’s 1981 literary anthology, *La ricerca delle radici*, which brings together some of his preferred authors, from Homer to Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli. But the reasons for this omission are themselves telling: Dante, Levi states in an interview from the same year, is ‘part of any reader’s heritage’.

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anterior to ‘literature’, in Levi’s personal and cultural formation. The terminology such scholars use to designate his relationship to Dante points to something beyond conventional literary influence. Dante has been described, for instance, as representing for Levi a ‘grammar’, an ‘interpretative key’, a ‘conceptual grid’, an ‘instrument of knowledge’, and a ‘resource of meaning through which it might be possible to address questions of fundamental importance in the definition of one’s sense of individual, social, historical and cultural identity’. For these critics, Dante represents for Levi not merely a cherished and ingrained literary precursor, some of whose cantos he had had to learn by rote at liceo in the 1930s, but, in time, a figure of epistemological value, who helps him both to articulate and comprehend the world around him.

My interest in this essay concerns the place of Dante in Levi’s meditation on the linguistic experience of Auschwitz and its aftermath. There are two, interrelated aspects of this question that I shall ultimately consider, with a focus on his works *La tregua*, *I sommersi e i salvati*, and especially *Se questo è un uomo*: firstly, the linguistic chaos associated with the Lager in Levi’s account, and his focus on the degradation of language; and secondly, his emphasis upon the limitations of human language in confronting and describing an experience of incommunicable horror. I aim to demonstrate that Dante represents a compelling model for Levi in reflecting upon these questions. However, rather than simply documenting specific Dantean intertexts, I also wish to show that a comparative approach to this topic – reading Dante through Levi, as well as Levi through Dante – can illuminate both authors’ approaches to language, representation, and the infernal.

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addressing this specific issue, however, we must place it within the context of a rich textual conversation between the two authors – a whole series of allusions, symmetries, and oppositions that place Levi’s testimonial writing firmly in dialogue with Dante’s masterpiece.

1. ‘Questo è l’inferno’: Dante as Infernal Archetype in Levi

While Levi’s textual engagement with Dante spans some forty years, it is in Se questo è un uomo that we find his most sustained engagement with Dante. Firstly, the Commedia features prominently in the diegesis of the testimony, in the celebrated chapter ‘Il canto di Ulisse’. Here, Levi describes his attempts to use Dante to teach a little Italian to a fellow inmate, Jean. Levi experiences a fleeting moment of transcendence as he recalls and translates some fragments from Inferno XXVI, describing the fateful voyage of Ulysses and his crew beyond the straits of Gibraltar and out into the forbidden sea. Levi’s narrative includes a series of direct citations from Dante’s poem. Where modern scholars tend to highlight the transgressive dimension of Ulysses ‘folle volo’ (Inf. XXVI, line 125) in Dante’s poem, Levi’s reading of Ulysses is a Romantic, heroicizing one. The Greek protagonist becomes an example of what Rachel Falconer describes as the ‘unconquerable human spirit that cannot be broken by hell’, in the face of a violent and punitive God. Ulysses’ words to his shipmates (especially the famous terzina: ‘Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza’: Inf. XXVI, 118-20) resonate profoundly.


with Levi. He describes them as sounding ‘come uno squillo di tromba, come la voce di Dio’ (SQ, p. 102). Notwithstanding the Fascist appropriations to which Dante had been subjected in Levi’s Italy, the medieval poet reminds Levi not only of his Italian cultural heritage but also his very humanity in the brutalized world of the camp (‘Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono’: SQ, p. 102). This moment of nostalgic reprieve is, however, short-lived. The chapter ends with Levi and Jean in the queue for soup and with the citation of the final verse of Dante’s canto XXVI: ‘infin che ’l mar fu sopra noi rinchiuso’ (Inf. XXVI, 142). In the context of the Inferno, these words describe how a divinely willed storm caused the sea to consume Ulysses and his crew, leading to their demise and the sudden end of their hubristic voyage. In Levi, the verse encapsulates the abrupt termination of Levi and Jean’s momentary sense of liberation. Thus, Dante’s force of divine power becomes in Levi the ‘oppressive regime against which “virtù and conoscenza” must rise’. This image contributes, moreover, to the wider metaphor of the prisoners as the ‘drowned’ or damned, and reinforces a broader analogy in the text between Auschwitz and Dante’s hell.

The wide range of scholarly readings and interpretations of ‘Il canto di Ulisse’ is testament to the chapter’s breadth of implications and its rich and complex engagement with its medieval source. Nonetheless, its explicit mode of engagement with Dante has at times distracted critics from Levi’s other forms of dialogue with the poet in Se questo è un uomo. Indeed, the use of Dante in ‘Il canto di Ulisse’, where the sublime poetry of Inferno XXVI stands in opposition to the

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12 The Ulyssian imperative ‘Considerate...’ also features prominently in the epigraphic poem Shemà (‘Considerate se questo è un uomo’ [v. 5]) and is thus linked to the very title of SQ.
14 Jagendorf notes how the episode poignantly juxtaposes the ‘raw information’ of the description of the soup (associated with the ‘story-killing reality of the camp’s regime of labour and death’) with Dante’s ‘magisterial line of summation’: Zvi Jagendorf, ‘Primo Levi Goes for Soup and Remembers Dante’, Raritan, 12.4 (1993), 31-51 (p. 50).
15 Traversi, p. 117.
16 On the connections of the Ulysses episode with Homer’s Odyssey, Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and Roger Vercel’s novel Remorques, all important texts for Levi, see Françoise Carasso, Primo Levi: La scelta della chiarezza (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), p. 63.
of Auschwitz, is atypical with respect to Levi’s testimony as a whole, where Dante emerges as a poet of infernal suffering, dehumanization, and – I hope to demonstrate – linguistic degradation. As Lino Pertile notes, where ‘Il canto di Ulisse’ sees the *Inferno* serve as the *antidote* to Auschwitz, elsewhere Levi creates – at least ostensibly – an analogy between the camp and Dante’s hell, through a careful accretion of imagery drawn from the *Commedia.*

The Holocaust presented witnesses with extraordinary representational challenges – a theme to which I shall return in the final part of this essay. Their awareness of the challenge, or perhaps impossibility, of adequately mediating the reality of the camps through language led witnesses to utilize certain tropes and analogies in order to communicate the atrocities. Among the most prevalent of these tropes is that of the concentration camp as hell on earth. As George Steiner wrote, the concentration camp ‘has no true counterpart in the secular mode. Its analogue is Hell’. In the Western imagination, hell, naturally, represents the ultimate locus of suffering: a place of unending physical and psychological torment, hopelessness, and the erosion of dignity and personal identity. If Levi is one of many witnesses to describe the camp as a hell on earth, however, he does so with notable sophistication. Moreover, he is concerned not only with presenting Auschwitz as a generic hell on earth, but a specifically Dantine one, which manifests both superficial parallels but also important tensions with that created by the medieval poet.

Levi’s first explicit reference to the camp as hell comes in the second chapter of his testimony, as he describes how he and his fellow inmates, exhausted and parched, having recently arrived at the camp, stand and wait to learn more of their fate. A tap drips, but the water is forbidden. A terrible sense of foreboding hangs in the air:

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18 Pertile, p. 32.
19 For a concise summary of some key examples, see Arqués, pp. 99-100.
21 The wider use of Dante in Holocaust writing is beyond the scope of this essay. For a rich survey of Dantine resonances in Holocaust literature produced in different languages, see Thomas Taterka, *Dante Deutsch: Studien zur Lagerliteratur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1999).
Questo è l’inferno. Oggi ai nostri giorni, l’inferno deve essere così, una camera grande e vuota, e noi stanchi stare in piedi, e c’è un rubinetto che gocciola e l’acqua non si può bere e noi aspettiamo qualcosa di certamente terribile e non succede niente e continua a non succedere niente. Come pensare? Non si può più pensare, è come essere già morti. (SQ, p. 19)

The room here is designated a hell on account of the prisoners’ anxious and interminable waiting (‘noi aspettiamo qualcosa di certamente terribile’ … ‘continua a non succedere niente’) and their physical pain (‘noi stanchi stare in piedi’). It is imagined existing beyond the threshold of death (‘è come essere già morti’). The passage can immediately be seen to encapsulate some key aspects of suffering in Dante’s *Inferno*, combining physical suffering inflicted on the body, psychological torment, and the cruel irony often associated with Dante’s infernal punishments: Levi’s thirst is acute, and accentuated by the dripping tap, but is never sated. We might recall, by comparison, not only the mythological Tantalus, but also the intense dropsical thirst experienced by Master Adam among the counterfeiters in the *Inferno*: ‘io ebbi, vivo, assai di quel ch’i’ volli, / e ora, lasso!, un gocciol d’acqua bramo’ (*Inf.* XXX, 62-63). The experience of time in this passage, too, seems one more eternal than historical. The past is reported – as so often in Levi’s testimony – in an incursive present tense. As Falconer suggestively notes, historical time in Levi’s testimony seems to be replaced by a ‘mythic’ time, ‘in which everything seems always to have existed in this infernal state’.

We might, indeed, compare it to Dante’s own description of the infernal judge Minos, whose bureaucratic act is similarly described in a present tense that conveys its repetition into eternity (‘Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia: / essamina le colpe ne l’intrata; / giudica e manda secondo ch’avvinghia’: *Inf.* V, 4-6).

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23 Falconer, p. 68. With more specific reference to Dante, Giuseppe Stellardi has written of the ‘perennial present of suffering’ (p. 708) characteristic of the *Inferno* and of *SQ*. 
Levi frequently uses deictic expressions to construct his account of his confinement in Auschwitz as an infernal katabasis. He contrasts the world of the camp and the world outside not by using categories of without and within, but rather above and below: ‘lassù’ and ‘laggiù’. Once the prisoners have gone through the process of initiation, they have arrived ‘sul fondo. Piú giú di cosí non si puó andare’ (S.Q, p. 23). ‘Sul fondo’ is, indeed, the title of the work’s second chapter. This use of deictics can be seen to carry a specifically Dantesque and infernal resonance, as well as contributing to a more general sense of debasement.24 Elisabetta Tarantino notes Levi’s use of the Dantesque expression ‘lassù nel dolce mondo’ in his early poem ‘Buna’.25 This phrase not only reinforces the idea of above and below, and thus the sense of the camp as a netherworld, but specifically evokes the plaintive words of Ciacco to Dante-pilgrim in Hell’s Circle of Gluttony (‘Ma quando tu sarai nel dolce mondo, / priegoti ch’a la mente altrui mi rechi’: Inf. VI, 88-89) and Farinata in the Circle of Heresy (‘E se tu mai nel dolce mondo regge...’: Inf. X, 82). In speaking wistfully of the ‘dolce mondo’ above, Levi thus aligns himself – albeit with clear irony, as I shall discuss in due course – with the painful situation of Dante’s damned.

The term ‘il fondo’ bears weight, too, not only in contributing to a general idea of Auschwitz as an infernal realm, but also in evoking Dante’s own designation of Cocytus, the Circle of Treachery, as ‘fondo a tutto l’universo’ (Inf. XXXII, 8).26 The passage from which this verse is taken in Inferno XXXII, I shall later argue, is an especially important one for Levi and his ruminations on language in dialogue with Dante. By beginning with the words ‘Questo è l’inferno’ and ending with the prominently placed phrase ‘Eccomi dunque sul fondo’ (itself preceded by the Dantesque ‘Tale sarà la nostra vita’ – compare ‘Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita’: Inf. I, 1), the

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24 Ferme argues that Se questo è un uomo ‘follows, somewhat loosely, the structure of Dante’s Divine Comedy in its intimations of a bottomless infernal pit, moments of purgatorial respite, and a final ascent outward toward freedom’; Valerio Ferme, ‘Translating the Babel of Horror: Primo Levi’s Catharsis Through Language in the Holocaust Memoir Se questo è un uomo’, Italica, 78 (2001), 53-73 (pp. 53-54). Falconer (p. 68) notes that while in Dante there is a gradual descent, the prisoners in Levi’s testimony find themselves immediately ‘sul fondo’. On Dante’s own use of deictics, see Paolo de Ventura, ‘Dramma e deissi nella Commedia’, Rivista di studi danteschi, 3 (2002), 33-60.


26 See also Inf. VI, 86; Inf. XXXI, 102; Inf. XXXI, 142 for Cocytus as ‘il fondo’.
chapter ‘Sul fondo’ foregrounds and associates these two Dantean terms. Levi describes the prisoners as taken ‘in viaggio verso il nulla, in viaggio all’ingiù, verso il fondo’ (SQ, p. 14). This fuses the idea of ‘il fondo’ (and indeed the Dantean ‘viaggio’ [cf. Inf. I, 91]) with the idea of nullity (‘il nulla’) that is central to Dante’s conception of hell – a realm that should ultimately be understood in terms of the absence of God (as Peter Hawkins puts it, Dante’s hell is ‘the spiritual version of a black hole’). 27 The term ‘nulla’ here is suggestive of a kind of void, a place that can only be understood negatively – the factory at the centre of Auschwitz, the Buna, for instance, is described as ‘la negazione della bellezza’ (SQ, p. 65). For Adam Epstein, this negative language resonates with apophatic theology, whereby God may only be described in terms of what he is not. 28 But perhaps a more compelling model is that of Dante’s privatio boni – the notion that evil is the absence or negation of good. Negative language and understanding is, after all, the essence of Dante’s Hell, whose overlord Satan should not ultimately be understood as a seductive opponent to God, endowed with his own qualities and properties, but merely as ‘a creature which parodies all creation and the creator himself’. 29

This broader structural parallel between Levi’s account of the Lager and Dante’s description of hell in the Inferno is reinforced by a number of more specific echoes of the poem. 30 In addition to ‘Sul fondo’, the title of chapter 9, ‘I sommersi e i salvati’, suggests the importance of Dante. It not only applies, again with bleak irony, a Dantean eschatology of the saved and the damned, but also recalls Dante’s reference to the Inferno as the ‘canzon […] d’i sommersi’ (Inf. XX,
3). On several occasions, Levi associates the Nazi guards with the guardians and devils found in Dante’s Hell. At the very end of the opening chapter, ‘Il viaggio’, the guard tasked with escorting the newly arrived prisoners is compared to Charon, the ferryman of the river Acheron in *Inferno* III. He is referred to explicitly as ‘[il] nostro caronte’ (*SQ*, p. 18), and Levi states how, instead of shouting ‘Guai a voi, anime prave!’ (the words of Dante’s Charon in *Inferno* III, 84), he menacingly asks the captives if they have money or a watch to give him.31 Judith Kelly compares the nurse who prods Levi’s body to show his morbid condition in the chapter ‘Ka-Be’ to the devils of *Inferno* XXI, who prod the souls guilty of baratry with hooks (cf. *Inf.* XXI, 49-57).32 A number of critics have linked the barked orders of the German guards to those of Dante’s Cerberus (cf. *Inf.* VI, 13-15).33 Alex, a German prisoner who torments the Jews, is described by Levi as ‘leggero sui piedi come i diavoli di Malebolge’ (*SQ*, p. 95), explicitly referring to the sadistic devils who patrol the eighth circle of the *Inferno*, while Paolin also compares the description of Alex, who ‘nel suo angolo sbadigliava e digrignava’ (*SQ*, p. 95), to Dante’s description of the same devils, who themselves ‘digrignan li denti’ (*Inf.* XXI, 131).34

Besides ‘Il Canto di Ulisse’, the most direct citation of the *Inferno*, which again associates the Nazi guards and the ‘diavoli di Malebolge’, comes in ‘Sul fondo’, the chapter containing the greatest density of allusions to Dante. Levi attempts to sate his extreme thirst by reaching out of a window to grab an icicle but is cruelly reprimanded by a Nazi guard. When Levi asks, in German, why this is forbidden, the guard answers ‘Hier ist kein Warum’; here there is no why (*SQ*, p. 25).

Contemplating the implications of this disturbing axiom, Levi explicitly quotes Dante:

> La spiegazione è ripugnante ma semplice: in questo luogo è proibito tutto, non già per riposte ragioni ma perché a tale scopo il campo è stato creato. Se vorremo vivereci, bisognerà capirlo presto e bene:
> ‘... Qui non ha luogo il Santo Volto
> qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio!’

31 As noted by Sharon Portnoff, the contrast between these two Charons is more important than the parallel: where Dante’s Charon quickly yields to Dante’s guide Virgil, who intervenes and informs the guardian of the divinely willed nature of the pilgrim’s journey, Levi’s ‘denies the possibility of grace’, and refuses to cede to any higher power (p. 78).

32 Kelly, p. 66.

33 See Gunzberg, ‘Nuotando altrimenti’, p. 84; Kelly p. 65; Segre, ‘Lettura’, p. 66.

34 See Paolin, p. 238.
Ora dopo ora, questa prima lunghissima giornata di antinferno volge a termine. (SQ, p. 25)
The indented quotation from Dante again comes from *Inferno* XXI (lines 48-49), where the devils of Malebolge (the Malebranche) taunt an unnamed sinner from Lucca. In the context of the *Inferno*, the ‘Santo Volto’ probably refers to Christ’s face in an image of the Crucifixion in the Church of San Martino in Lucca, while the Serchio is the river outside the city where the Lucchesi would swim in the summer months. Dante’s hell, in these verses, can thus only be defined in the negative: in how it departs utterly from the world known and loved above and in terms of the total absence of the divine. Levi’s direct citation here firstly underlines, now more explicitly, what has been implied throughout the chapter: that is, the association of Auschwitz and Dante’s hell.\textsuperscript{35} This is emphasized, furthermore, by the reference to the ‘giornata di antinferno’ in Levi’s prose that immediately follows the quotation. Secondly, in associating the guard’s dictum ‘Hier ist kein Warum’ with the citation from Dante, Levi is using the *Inferno* to underline ‘the negative nature of Auschwitz, its not being like any previously known discourse or system of relations’.\textsuperscript{36}

Levi also evokes topographical features of Dante’s hell.\textsuperscript{37} At the beginning of ‘Sul fondo’, immediately prior to the ‘Questo è l’inferno’ passage and immediately following the reference to ‘il nostro caronte’, the notorious gate of Auschwitz is figured as an infernal threshold. Its cruel words, ‘Arbeit macht frei’ (SQ, p. 19), have often been seen to evoke the foreboding inscription on the gates of Dante’s hell (‘Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate’: *Inf.* III, 9).\textsuperscript{38} Levi evokes other spaces and regions within Dante’s underworld. As noted above, he describes the liminal space the


\textsuperscript{36} Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 34. This citation was only added to the testimony, along with the reference to Charon and some edits to the ‘Canto di Ulisse’ chapter, in its second edition in 1958. On Levi’s edits for this second edition, see Giovanni Tesio, ‘Su alcune giunte e varianti di *Se questo è un uomo*’, *Studi Piemontesi*, VI, 2 (November 1977), 270–278; and, in relation to Dante more specifically, see Traversi, p. 120; Usher, ‘Libertinage’, pp. 92-93.

\textsuperscript{37} Paolin writes that Levi ‘descrive e organizza il Lager come fosse l’Inferno dantesco’ (p. 233).

\textsuperscript{38} See, for example, Gunzberg, ‘Nuotando altrimenti’, p. 84, who also connects the words on the gate to the ironic words of Minos in *Inferno* V, 16-20. The memory of the gate’s words, Levi writes, still afflict him in his dreams (‘ancora mi percuote nei sogni’: SQ, p. 19) – words which, according to Paturno, call to mind Dante’s expression of fear on recalling the horrors of the ‘selva oscura’ at the beginning of the *Inferno* (‘esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte / che nel pensier rino la paura’: *Inf.* I, 5-6): see Paturno, p. 35.
prisoners occupy on arrival as ‘antinferno’, recalling the plain of the Acheron where Dante’s souls
gather before being sent to their assigned circles. As in the initial descriptions of Dante’s hell, first
on the shore of the Acheron and then in the Circle of the Lustful, we are confronted in Levi’s text
by discordant shrieks, driving winds, demeaning nudity, and linguistic chaos.39 In the chapter ‘Ka-
Be’, Levi adapts a famous simile from Dante’s own ‘antinferno’. With reference to inmates
marching to a music described, not coincidentally, as ‘infernale’, Levi writes: ‘la musica li sospinge,
come il vento le foglie secche, e si sostituisce alla loro volontà’ (SQ, p. 44). This passage adapts
and condenses Dante’s famous Virgilian simile, which compares the souls on the bank of the
Acheron to falling autumn leaves:

Come d’autunno si levan le foglie
l’una appresso de l’altra, fine che ‘l ramo
vede a la terra tutte le sue spoglie,
similmente il mal seme d’Adamo
gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
per cenni come augel per suo richiamo. (Inf. III, 112-17)

Levi’s words also evoke Dante’s reference to how divine justice transforms the souls’ fear into
desire for punishment several lines later: ‘ché la divina giustizia li sprona, / si che la tema si volve
in disio’ (Inf. III, 125-26). Ka-Be itself, the camp’s hospital ward, is designated as a Limbo (‘La vita
del Ka-Be è vita di limbo’: SQ, p. 44) and, for Paolin, its atmosphere, with its ‘lunghissime giornate
vuote’ (SQ, p. 48), shares the ‘pensosa malinconia’ of Dante’s first circle.40 Levi, moreover, refers
to Ka-Be as ‘il Lager a meno del disagio fisico’ and as a ‘parentesi di relativa pace’ (SQ, p. 48). This
reflects the absence of physical suffering that is unique to Limbo within the context of Dante’s
hell. The prisoners in Ka-Be, like the souls in Dante’s Limbo, endure only a psychological form of
torment. Levi also uses the Dantean term ‘bolgia’,41 which in the Inferno designates the ten ‘pouches’
of the eighth circle Malebolge, to describe the prisoners’ huts. Elsewhere, Kelly sees echoes of

39 See Gunzberg, ‘Nuotando altrimenti’, p. 87; Kelly, p. 66.
40 Paolin 234. Peron also draws parallels between Limbo and the Italian camp at Fossoli, described in the opening
chapter, from where Levi and his fellow prisoners are deported to Auschwitz.
41 ‘la bolgia buia e urlante del Block’ (SQ, p. 105).
Dante’s marshy river Styx in Levi’s description of the saturated camp after the November rains, while Paolin sees the Buna as a grim correlative of Dante’s fortified City of Dis.  

A further area of congruence between Levi’s testimony and Dante’s Inferno concerns characterization. Paolin argues that Levi follows ‘uno schema narrativo tipicamente dantesco’ – a narrative recounted in the first person, punctuated by concise and distilled portraits of characters who engage with the protagonist and take on an emblematic quality. Cesare Segre describes this as a Dantesque ‘galleria di personaggi’ who acquire ‘una funzione esemplare, positiva o negativa’. In both works we can draw a contrast between the depiction of the ‘sommersi’ at large and the individual characters with whom the protagonists enter into dialogue. One of the dominant themes of Levi’s testimony is that of dehumanization; in the prisoner Steinlauf’s words, the camp is ‘una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie’ (SQ, p. 35), where prisoners are reduced to a primitive, survivalist mode of existence. They are bestialized in the narrative through a rich use of zoological language and are objectified by the guards as ‘stück’ (pieces). Their condition is encapsulated in the wholly desubjectified figure of the ‘musulmano’, the ‘non-human who obstinately appears as human’. By contrast, some of the memorable characters depicted in the foreground of Levi’s account, such as Steinlauf, Alberto, and Jean, provide Levi with glimpses of residual humanity in the camp, and offer him valuable lessons. Similarly, in the Inferno, we might contrast the dehumanized mass of sinners, themselves frequently reduced to an animalistic condition, who appear in the ‘background’ of the narrative, with the eloquence and psychological

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42 See Paolin, p. 234.
43 Paolin, p. 236. See also Gunzberg, ‘Down Among the Dead Men’, pp. 19-24; Patruno, pp. 34-35.
44 On parallels between the ‘I’ in the two works, including the protagonist/narrator divide, see Arqués, pp. 103-7; Paolin, pp. 243-49.
45 Segre, ‘Lettura’, p. 60
47 The term first appears in SQ, p. 80.
complexity of those who emerge to converse with the pilgrim.\textsuperscript{49} In Erich Auerbach’s famous words, we behold in the \textit{Inferno} ‘an intensified image of the essence of [these souls’] being, fixed for all eternity in gigantic dimensions’.\textsuperscript{50}

This constellation of echoes, allusions, and symmetries appears to contribute to a broader parallel between the two texts and the realms they describe. And yet, ultimately, any such parallels – between the medieval hell and the Nazi concentration camp, between the fictional Christian pilgrim and the historical Jewish prisoner – must alert us not to the correspondence but to the ‘utter incommensurability’ of the two protagonists and the ‘hells’ they experience.\textsuperscript{51} As John Murawski observes, any notion of hell ‘rests on the presupposition of a moral system’.\textsuperscript{52} But in this hell of purely racist oppression, there exists no moral system, no free will, and no correspondence between the measure of the prisoners’ human goodness and their fate:

\begin{quote}
Vorremmo ora invitare il lettore a riflettere, che cosa potessero significare in Lager le nostre parole ‘bene’ e ‘male’, ‘giusto’ e ‘ingiusto’; giudichi ognuno, in base al quadro che abbiamo delineato e agli esempi sopra esposti, quanto del nostro comune mondo potesse sussistere al di qua del filo spinato. (\textit{SQ}, p. 78)
\end{quote}

Thus, while Levi frames the suffering described in \textit{Se questo è un uomo} in ‘conventional Judeo-Christian terms’\textsuperscript{53} – good and evil, salvation and damnation, justice and injustice – he does so in order to stress how utterly these categories, mediated through the emblematic example provided by Dante, fail to comprehend the camp’s atrocities. As Pertile writes, the camp described by Levi is less a hell than ‘una macchina inventata esclusivamente per annientare esseri umani, buoni o cattivi che siano’\textsuperscript{54}. The divine justice we find in Dante, the unerring equation of willful crime and

\textsuperscript{49} On the specious forms of eloquence associated with the damned, however, see Steven Botterill, ‘Dante’s Poetics of the Sacred Word’, \textit{Philosophy and Literature}, 20 (1996), 154-62.


\textsuperscript{51} Portnoff, p. 79. As Usher notes, Levi’s ‘critological strategies are not neutral and require careful reading’ (‘Primo Levi, the canon and Italian literature’, p. 174).

\textsuperscript{52} Murawski, p. 91.


\textsuperscript{54} Pertile, p. 21.
just punishment, is antithetical to the indiscriminate murder of Levi’s Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{55} For the fictional construct of Dante-pilgrim, spared hell’s suffering, the realm is a finite stage on his imagined journey to redemption,\textsuperscript{56} yet for Levi and his fellow prisoners, hell is the all-too-real destination. Where Dante’s hell reflects a medieval proclivity for order and (moral) systemization, Levi describes the concentration camp’s ‘follia geometrica’ (\textit{SQ}, p. 45): an oxymoron which encapsulates its poisonous combination of ‘extreme rationality’ and ‘extreme unreason’.\textsuperscript{57}

The capital importance of Dante as an infernal model for Levi is underlined by the fact that Levi proposed the Dantean titles ‘Sul fondo’ and ‘I sommersi e i salvati’ for the work ultimately published as \textit{Se questo è un uomo}.\textsuperscript{58} The \textit{Inferno} is the work’s most important literary archetype, exploited in a variety of ways as both model and anti-model. Scholars have drawn attention to Levi’s different modes of engagement with Dante’s text, from the direct and explicit citations we find in ‘Il Canto di Ulisse’ to more subtle allusions and echoes, symmetries, and contrasts between the two works. But a dimension of the authors’ dialogue that has largely escaped critical attention concerns the question of language and representation: the linguistic experience associated with the infernal environment that each protagonist experiences, and the challenges faced by the writer who seeks to communicate the experience of hell to his reader.

2. ‘Diverse lingue, orribili favelle’: Hell, Auschwitz, and Babel

As a writer so attuned to all questions of language, it is no surprise that Dante’s description of hell in the \textit{Inferno} pays close attention to its linguistic dimension. In his treatise on vernacular language

\textsuperscript{55} On this contrast, see Portnoff, p. 79; Traversi, p. 109. For a broader discussion of the theme of justice in Dante and Levi, see Risa Sodi, \textit{A Dante of our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz} (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 5-29.

\textsuperscript{56} Peron similarly notes that while hell for Dante-pilgrim is a ‘tappa’, for Levi it is the ‘destinazione’ (p. 82).

\textsuperscript{57} Belpoliti and Gordon, ‘Primo Levi’s Holocaust Vocabularies’, p. 58. As Druker has argued, with reference to Holocaust reflections of Theodor W. Adorno, the camp represents the ‘extreme consequence’ of the aggressive assertion of post-Enlightenment rationality, devoid of self-reflection (p. 36).

\textsuperscript{58} See Traversi, p. 114. Parts of the testimony appeared under the title ‘Sul fondo’ in the Communist weekly \textit{L’amico del popolo} in Spring 1947.
and poetry, the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante provides a definition of the linguistic sign as something pertaining at once to the intellect and to bodily, sense-based perception:

It was necessary that the human race, in order for its members to communicate their conceptions among themselves, should have some *signal based on reason and perception*. Since this signal needed to receive its content from reason and convey it back there, it had to be rational; but since nothing can be conveyed from one reasoning mind to another except by means perceptible to the senses, it had also to be based on perception. For, if it were purely rational, it could not make its journey; if purely perceptible, it could neither derive anything from reason nor deliver anything to it. This signal [*signum*], then, is the noble foundation that I am discussing; for it is perceptible, in that it has a sound, and yet also rational, in that this sound, according to convention is taken to mean something. (I, III, 2-3; emphasis mine)\(^{59}\)

Language for Dante is both a sign of human nobility, insofar as it distinguishes us (as creatures endowed with a rational soul) from other forms of earthly life, and limitation, insofar as our transaction of meaning must be mediated by our embodied human form. It stands in contrast with the wordless and instantaneous interpenetration of minds, which Dante associates with the angels and the blessed, and the non-semantic noises produced by animals. Language is thus necessarily hybrid, at once ‘rationale’ and ‘sensuale’, conceptual signified and perceptible signifier.

As Elena Lombardi has written, in setting out a ‘map of language’ for Dante’s afterlife, ‘*Inferno* is the realm of *vox unde sonum*, of sound unrelated to meaning, the place of the distortion of language, in both utterance and internal order’.\(^{60}\) For all the eloquence of the souls in the foreground of the *Inferno*’s diegesis, those in the background often howl and wail in a manner more animal than human. The pilgrim’s very first sensory perception of hell is auditory, and draws immediate attention to the linguistic confusion that defines the realm:

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Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
risonavan per l’aere senza stelle,
per ch’io al cominciare ne lagrimei.
    Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d’ira,
voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle… (Inf. III, 22-27)
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To convey the estranging effects of this Babelic cacophony, Dante incorporates incomprehensible tongues into his narrative. For instance, the ‘voce chioccia’ (Inf. VII, 2) of Plutus, guardian of the circle of avarice, opens canto VII (‘Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe’: VII, 1), while Nimrod, ‘anima confusa’ (XXX, 74) and the architect of the Tower of Babel himself, also speaks a garbled infernal language (‘Raphèl mai anècche zabi almi’: XXX, 67). But returning to the passage cited above from Inferno III, we see that hell is defined not merely by linguistic confusion, but also, as Lombardi has shown, by a degradation of language into inarticulate noise. In Inferno III and elsewhere the integrity of language, that integration of intellectual content and aural ‘matter’ described in the De vulgari, breaks down. As Lombardi observes, in Inf. III, 25-27 we witness fully-formed, if alien, languages (‘Diverse lingue’) give way to isolated ‘parole’, then mere ‘voci’, and finally the purely acoustic ‘suon di man’ – the sound of slapping hands. In a realm where souls are described as having eternally lost the ‘ben de l’intelletto’ (Inf. III, 18), namely God, language no longer serves to point us towards higher truths, as on earth and again in Purgatory, but rather ‘slides away from meaning into confusion’. The passage from Inferno III demonstrates this in nuce. We might think too of the river Styx, where the sullen souls ‘dir nol posson con parola integra’ (Inf. VII, 126). This failure of signification has a theological basis, for – as we have seen – evil in Dante’s time was to be understood not as an absolute that competes with good, but in terms of the negation and absence of God, the single absolute and the source of all meaning: ‘il fonte ond’ogne ver deriva’ (Par. IV, 116). Thus, while the Paradiso sees Dante the poet attempt to encompass in words the ineffable process of trasumanar, in a realm where language is no longer required, the Inferno interrogates the negative threshold of language; the point at which language falls away into non-linguistic – or sub-

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61 On early commentators’ interesting responses to Plutus’s (non-)language, see Simon Gilson, “‘Pape Satan, pape Satan aleppe!’ (Inferno VII, 1) in Dante’s commentators, 1322-1570”, in Nonsense and Other Senses: Regulated Absurdity in Literature, ed. by Elisabetta Tarantino (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 25-54.


63 Lombardi, p. 146.
linguistic – noise. As Lombardi summarizes, ‘both Inferno and Paradiso present, in opposite ways, the problem of language in dissolution’.64

Levi’s account of his internment at Auschwitz, both in Se questo è un uomo and elsewhere, is also unusually sophisticated in its reflection on language and attentive to what Fabio Girelli-Carasi calls the ‘anti-linguistic’ nature of the Lager.65 Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that Malebolge is a region of Dante’s hell repeatedly mined by Levi, given that is where sins of linguistic fraud are especially foregrounded and interrogated. Robert Gordon writes that Levi, ‘perhaps more than any other writer-survivor of the Holocaust, put language at the centre of his account of the camps’,66 while Laura and Giulio Lepschy refer to his ‘linguistician’s mindset’ and ‘enthusiasm for the functioning of different languages and sign systems’.67 In a 1981 interview, Levi described communication and its absence as one of the ‘central experiences’ of life in the camp,68 and he praised a 1963 recorded version of Se questo è un uomo in Canada for the attention it paid to linguistic chaos.69 Levi recalls how, along with Greek prisoners, Italians experienced a particularly acute linguistic isolation – one which he believes contributed to their especially high mortality rate. Linguistic proficiency in Auschwitz, according to Levi, was often a matter of life and death.70

Like Dante’s hell, Levi’s Auschwitz is depicted as a realm of linguistic chaos. As Batnadiv Hakarmi writes, it is ‘rife with miscommunication, broken communication, limited communication,

64 Lombardi, p. 156.
67 Lepschy and Lepschy, p. 121.
69 See Cicioni, p. 38.
70 See ‘Interview for a Dissertation’, p. 142.
hybrid words and mixed, pidgin languages’. The camp’s status as a Babelic realm is rendered explicit at the beginning of Chapter 3 of the testimony:

La confusione delle lingue è una componente fondamentale del modo di vivere di quaggiù; si è circondati da una perpetua Babele, in cui tutti urlano ordini e minacce in lingue mai prima udite, e guai a chi non afferra a volo. (SQ, p. 33)

Levi frequently describes the disturbing isolation that ensues in this Babel. In the train journey to the camp in *Se questo è un uomo*, he recalls how the comforting Italian place-names (‘gli ultimi nomi di città italiane’), glimpsed through the windows of the train, were replaced by the harsher-sounding and unfamiliar place-names of Eastern Europe. He describes a fantasy of a return journey where, by contrast, the sight of ‘i primi nomi italiani’ and the reconstitution of linguistic order would instil an ‘inumana gioia’ (SQ, p. 15). Indeed, the very name of their destination, Auschwitz, was a word ‘privo di significato’, albeit one that at first inspired reassurance as well as foreboding, representing as it apparently did a concrete ‘luogo di questa terra’ (SQ, p. 15). On arrival, the guards who shave the prisoners speak ‘una lingua che non sembra di questo mondo’ (SQ, p. 20). Like Dante, Levi peppers his text with unfamiliar languages to evoke the plurilingual nature of the camp when referring to the daily distribution of bread (‘la distribuzione del pane, del pane-Brot-Broit-chleb-pain-lechem-kenyer’: SQ, p. 34) and to the bricks that make up an industrial tower in the camp (‘i suoi mattoni sono stati chiamati Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, bricks, teglak’: SQ, p. 65), a tower likened explicitly to the Tower of Babel. Strikingly, in ‘Il canto di Ulisse’, the open suggestiveness of Dante’s Italian poetry is curtailed by the blunt, plurilingual announcement that the soup on offer is cabbage and turnip: ‘Si annunzia ufficialmente che oggi la zuppa è di cavoli e rape: – Choux et navets. – Kaposzta és répak’ (SQ, p. 103). We might note how Ulysses’ soaring rhetoric in the *Inferno*, too, is swiftly followed by Guido da Montefeltro’s prosaic

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72 Baker (p. 48) draws a parallel between the Babelic theme in Levi’s testimony and Dante’s *Inferno* but does not explore it in depth. On Levi’s use of the Babel myth, see Girelli-Carassi; Hakarmi; Laura Moudarres, ‘Sacrament of Testimony: Agamben and Biblical Language in Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*’, *The Italianist*, 34 (2014), no. 1, 88-102; Segre, ‘Primo Levi nella Torre di Babele’.
73 See SQ, p. 65.
words in dialect: ‘Istra ten va, più non t’adizzo’ (Inf. XXVII, 21). In both cases we are thrust immediately back into the harsh, disturbing, plurilingual infernal reality. Linguistic exchange with the oppressors becomes impossible (‘Se parleremo, non ci ascolteranno, e se ci ascoltassero, non ci capirebbero’: SQ, p. 23), and that with their compatriots, as their numbers diminish, too painful (‘Avevamo deciso di trovarci, noi italiani, ogni domenica [...] ma abbiamo subito smesso, perché era troppo triste contarcì, e trovarci ogni volta piú pochi’: SQ, p. 32). Physical pain, too, increases linguistic isolation, returning us, in Elaine Scarry’s analysis, to a condition ‘anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned’.74 Physical suffering in the camp thus further exacerbates the breakdown of language and communication, and the erosion and seclusion of the individual.

As we have seen, Levi’s journey to and experience of the camp is defined as an infernal descent (‘in viaggio verso il nulla, in viaggio all’ingiù, verso il fondo’: SQ, p. 14). This dehumanizing journey into the void is subtly accompanied by a deterioration of language, a movement away from linguistic comprehension and towards confusion and a dissociation of sound and meaning that closely reflects that which we saw in Dante. In his rich essay ‘Comunicare’, found in his 1986 collection I sommersi e i salvati, Levi reflects upon the aural experience of the camp:

Nella memoria di tutti noi superstiti, e scarsamente poliglotti, i primi giorni di Lager sono rimasti impressi nella forma di un film sfuocato e frenetico pieno di fracasso e di furia e privo di significato: un tramestio di personaggi senza nome né volto annegati in un continuo assordante rumore di fondo, su cui tuttavia la parola umana non affiorava. Un film in grigio e nero, sonoro ma non parlato.75

Auschwitz here is described not merely as a realm of linguistic chaos, but also as a place where sound (assordante rumore), as in Dante’s Inferno, was evacuated of meaning (privo di significato) and where consequently the fully formed parola umana does not emerge. There is a similar emphasis on

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74 Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 4. Scarry writes that ‘intense pain is also language-destroying; as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject’ (p. 35).
75 Primo Levi, I sommersi e i salvati (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. 72. Henceforth S&S. The phrase ‘pieno di fracasso e di furia e privo di significato’ interestingly echoes Shakespeare’s ‘It is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing’ (Macbeth 5.5.27-28). I am grateful to Robert Gordon for this observation.
the breakdown of language in Levi’s description of the prisoners’ train journey, which ‘marks the transition to otherness’. Their journey ‘verso il nulla’ sees noisy arguments give way first to isolated curses and then to kicks and punches:

Il nostro sonno inquieto era interrotto sovente da liti rumorose e futili, da imprecazioni, da calci e pugni vibrati alla cieca come difesa contro qualche contatto molesto e inevitabile. (SQ, p. 14)

We find here a very similar account of the degradation of language and the breakdown of communal bonds to that which we witnessed in Inferno III, where unfamiliar but intact languages similarly collapsed into isolated curses (accenti d’ira / imprecazioni) and then into the sound of blows (suon di man / calci e pugni) – a first taste of the severance of language from meaning, and the elision of language and violence, characteristic, as we shall see, of both the Inferno and the Lager. The very title Se questo è un uomo, indeed, can be read as suggestive of linguistic breakdown. Margaret Sönser Breen describes the title as ‘a truncated sentence […] encoding violence, loss and dispossession’, while for Valerio Ferme it implies a ‘linguistic void left by the absence/presence of an ineffable consequence clause’.

If Dante’s Inferno is the babelic realm where sound and meaning are dissociated and where linguistic chaos rules, then his Purgatorio is where language and communication are reconstituted and ‘language maintains a flawless effortless balance between sign and meaning’. Voices in Purgatory frequently come together in sacred song. On the Terrace of the Proud, Dante’s narrator makes explicit the contrast between the soundscapes of the first realm and the second:

Noi volgendo ivi le nostre persone,
Beati pauperes spiritu!’ voci
cantarono sì, che nol diria sermone.
Ahi quanto son diverse quelle foci
da l’infernali! che quivi per canti
s’entra, e là giù per lamenti feroci. (Purg. XII, 109-14)

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76 Epstein, p. 34.
77 Sönser Breen, p. 147.
78 Ferme, p. 57.
79 Lombardi, p. 152.
Isolated infernal shrieks are replaced by liturgical chants, voiced by the community of the saved on their journey to God. For Lombardi, while language in hell ‘slides away from meaning into confusion’, language in Purgatory always points to a higher, transcendent reality, to the extent that ‘the whole of the Purgatorio is a single sign, one gigantic act of pointing’.\(^8\)

As Purgatorio stands in relation to Inferno, with respect to language and communication, so – ostensibly – stands Levi’s tale of the plurilingual survivors’ odyssey back to Italy through eastern Europe, La tregua, in relation to Se questo è un uomo. La tregua develops themes introduced in the final chapter of his first testimony, entitled ‘Storia di dieci giorni’, where we witness communal and communicative bonds tentatively re-established and the marking of time and chronology restored.\(^8\) While Se questo è un uomo describes the brutalization of the prisoners, La tregua may be read as a ‘slow process of rehumanization’.\(^8\) At the centre of this process is the rediscovery of communication. La tregua is a text that ‘pulsates with the need to communicate, to create links between languages, cultures and human beings’.\(^8\) Where language in the camp existed in a state of degradation, and linguistic difference served as an index of personal isolation and estrangement, La tregua frequently delights in the overcoming of linguistic barriers, in communication against the odds.\(^8\) For instance, Levi describes a conversation he had with a Polish priest in their single lingua franca of rudimentary Latin, while elsewhere Levi and his friend Cesare manage to procure a chicken from locals in a small Russian village through their resourceful use of words taken from different languages and their absurd gestures. Faced with such examples, we might compare the contrast drawn by Lombardi, between the ‘dissolution of language’ in Dante’s Inferno and the ‘effortless flow of language’ in Purgatorio, with the destruction and reconstitution of communication we witness in Se questo è un uomo and La tregua respectively.

\(^8\) Lombardi, p. 153.
\(^8\) The thematic congruence of these texts perhaps reflects their coeval genesis: ‘Storia di dieci giorni’ was the first chapter of SQ that Levi wrote, while the opening chapters of LT were similarly written very soon after his return.
\(^8\) Ross, p. 41. On language and rehumanization in Se questo è un uomo, see Ferme.
\(^8\) Cicioni, p. 42.
\(^8\) On this contrast, see Cesare Segre, ‘Primo Levi nella Torre di Babele’: ‘il plurilinguismo, che in Se questo è un uomo costituisce un elemento caratterizzante dell’inferno […] ne La tregua diventa elemento pittoresco e talora comico, oltre che fonte primaria di esperienze’ (p. 95).
Yet such an analogy must be qualified, for in Levi’s sequel we continue to find residues of the violence done to language at Auschwitz. Most haunting of all is Levi’s account of the three-year-old Hurbinek, born in the camp, whom nobody taught to speak and who dies soon after liberation. His tragic existence testifies to the ‘language-destroying nature of the camp’; his very name seemed to derive from the inarticulate sounds he produced:

Hurbinek era un nulla, un figlio della morte, un figlio di Auschwitz. Dimostrava tre anni circa, nessuno sapeva niente di lui, non sapeva parlare e non aveva nome: quel curioso nome, Hurbinek, gli era stato assegnato da noi, forse da una delle donne, che aveva interpretato con quelle sillabe una delle voci inarticolate che il piccolo ogni tanto emetteva. (LT, p. 166)

Hurbinek stands as the terrible embodiment of both the violence done to language associated with Se questo è un uomo and the need to overcome communicative barriers that runs through its sequel. Levi describes the urgent need to communicate that is palpable in Hurbinek’s gaze: ‘il bisogno della parola, premeva nel suo sguardo con urgenza esplosiva: era uno sguardo selvaggio e umano ad un tempo, anzi maturo e giudice, che nessuno fra noi sapeva sostenere, tanto era carico di forza e di pena’ (LT, p. 166). His gaze seems here to communicate more eloquently and sagaciously than language the void of life and meaning, ‘il nulla’, that was the true essence of the camp. So, perhaps, do his utterances, even if they are not language as we know it. For David Gramling, Hurbinek speaks ‘an unrecoverable other language that belongs exclusively to the camp. […] The lifeworld of references for this child’s language bore no relation to the national territories from which his various fellow inmates had once come; they reference only the translingual camp space itself’.86

Dante’s and Levi’s ‘infernal’ texts thus stand in relation to sequel works that, by contrast, describe the reconstitution of language following its earlier degradation. Nonetheless, while the analogy is suggestive, Levi in La tregua ultimately departs from as well as gestures to the Dantine archetype with respect to the theme of communication. For all that La tregua offers an account of how the prisoners’ return journey facilitated the rediscovery of their common humanity, their

85 Tager, p. 143
successful efforts to find shared meanings,\textsuperscript{87} it is salutary to compare its ending with that of Dante’s \textit{Purgatorio}. Dante-pilgrim ends his journey renewed and fit to ascend to Paradise:

\begin{quote}
	Io ritornai da la santissima onda  
	rifatto si come piante novelle  
	rinovellate di novella fronda,  
	puro e disposto a salire a le stelle. \textsuperscript{88} (Purg. XXXIII, 142-45)
\end{quote}

Striking here is the semantics of renewal, underlined by the repetition of the \textit{ri}- prefix, which underlines the restorative function of Dante’s Purgatory. By the end of the journey the pilgrim is fully oriented towards Paradise and a retrospective glance is neither desirable nor, indeed, permitted (cf. Purg. IX, 131-32). \textit{La tregua} has a similar focus on renewal and Levi draws on the same semantics of a leafing plant: ‘Cesare rifioriva, visibilmente, di giorno in giorno, come un albero in cui monta la linfa di primavera’ (cf. Dante’s ‘come piante novelle’). This simile places Cesare in clear opposition to the prisoners in the infernal camp, who had been compared to dead autumn leaves (‘la musica li sospinge, come il vento le foglie secche’\textsuperscript{88} in what we saw was a powerfully Dantesian simile. Yet where the healing journey of Dante-pilgrim through Purgatory leads inexorably to Paradise, as reflected in the word ‘stelle’, denoting the heavens, which concludes all three of the poem’s \textit{cantiche}, Levi’s story of his homecoming ends on a much more menacing note, which complicates the analogy between \textit{La tregua} and the \textit{Purgatorio} one might otherwise be tempted to draw:

\begin{quote}
	Ora questo sogno interno, il sogno di pace, è finito, e nel sogno esterno, che prosegue gelido, odo risuonare una voce, ben nota; una sola parola, non imperiosa, anzi breve e sommessa. È il comando dell’alba in Auschwitz, una parola straniera, temuta e attesa: alzarsi, «Wstawać» (\textit{LT}, p. 325)
\end{quote}

The return of the Polish command \textit{Wstawać} (used similarly in the poem that serves as \textit{La tregua}’s epigraph) shows that the traumatic memory of the camp can never be left behind. While Dante’s protagonist is rendered ‘libero, diritto e sano’ (Purg. XXVII, 140) by his journey through Purgatory, Levi’s, like the Ancient Mariner, remains haunted, as he pointedly resists the redemptive linearity

\textsuperscript{87} Cicioni, p. 43.  
\textsuperscript{88} For this contrast in Levi, with a focus on embodiment, see Ross, p. 61.
characteristic of the Dantean archetype.\textsuperscript{89} Indeed, ambiguity is embedded into the title \textit{La tregua}, ‘the truce’, which suggests a break in hostility that is only a temporary suspension. In an interview carried out during a return visit to Auschwitz in 1982, Levi describes how the sound of Polish continued to affect him profoundly, in terms that are suggestive for my argument here. The Polish of the camp was ‘a rough Polish, full of swearing and imprecation that we couldn’t understand; it was truly the \textit{language of hell} […] \textit{the language of the void}’ (my italics). He similarly describes hearing two Poles in his hotel lift speaking what he recalls as the very language of Auschwitz – ‘spitting out what seemed like a stream of consonants, a genuinely \textit{infernal language}'.\textsuperscript{90} It is striking that what often evokes the hell of Auschwitz most powerfully for Levi is its linguistic memory. But as well as strongly foregrounding the disturbing linguistic chaos associated with the realms they describe and the close attention they pay to how language becomes degraded, Levi and Dante display intriguing parallels in discussing the challenge of \textit{mediating} the experience of these anti-linguistic environments through language.

3. ‘\textit{Un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato}’: The mediation of atrocity

Witnesses and scholars have often described the Nazi concentration camps in terms of their radical negativity and otherness in relation to all pre-existing forms of human experience. David Rousset, for instance, described the world he experienced at Buchenwald as ‘a universe apart, totally cut off, the weird kingdom of an unlikely fatality’.\textsuperscript{91} The survivor and philosopher Jean Améry argued that the Holocaust opened up a metaphysical rupture between our world and the world of the camps

\textsuperscript{89} Lorenzo Mondo similarly discusses \textit{La tregua} as a kind of ‘failed’ \textit{Purgatorio}, lacking the ascent to Paradise that lends it its ultimate purpose (‘Dante dunque, ma senza ascesa a un paradiso di carità e giustizia’: p. 228). See also Carasso on \textit{La tregua} as describing a purgatorial state: ‘Bisogna ridiventare un uomo e, nel frattempo, vivere nel “limbo”, una sorta di purgatorio, una regione indefinita e incerta, ancora piena di sofferenze ma ricca di speranza’ (p. 79). And Arquès pp. 104-5. On the model of the Ancient Mariner in Levi, see Kelly, pp. 83-90.
\textsuperscript{90} ‘Return to Auschwitz (1982)’, in Belpoliti and Gordon (eds), \textit{The Voice of Memory}, pp. 208-17 (p. 209). On Levi’s extraordinary aural memory, even for languages he did not know, see the interview ‘Words, Memory, Hope (1984)’, also in \textit{The Voice of Memory}, pp. 250-57 (p. 255).
\textsuperscript{91} David Rousset, \textit{The Other Kingdom}, trans. Ramon Guthrie (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), p. 41.

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– or, as Jonathan Druker puts it, ‘a fundamental discontinuity, which cannot be bridged by the philosophical reflection or by traditional forms of artistic expression’.92

This status of the camp as a ‘universe apart’ poses difficult questions concerning language and representation. Steiner famously wrote that ‘The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason’.93 The atrocities of the camps have often been considered, by witnesses and critics alike, to exist outside all pre-existing frames of reference – including language itself. As Girelli-Carasi summarizes, ‘Language is utter falsity when it attempts to account for a reality that escapes the premises and conventions upon which the language of reality as we know it is based’.94 Considering the Holocaust to exist essentially outside of established human discourse has led to difficult questions for witnesses and literary authors, who have acknowledged the communicative gap that necessarily exists between the reality depicted and the reader.95 Moreover, to impose linguistic and aesthetic order onto the atrocities of the Holocaust is fraught with the danger of misrepresentation. For Elie Wiesel, for instance, the category of ‘Holocaust literature’ represents a ‘contradiction in terms. Auschwitz negates all systems, opposes all doctrines’.96 Perhaps most widely cited and discussed in this regard is Theodor Adorno’s 1949 claim that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric’.97 Adorno’s oblique statement has been variously interpreted and debated, but seems to evoke not only the question of linguistic inadequacy, but also the danger of experiencing aesthetic satisfaction at the expense of the victims. These questions have also stimulated debate among scholars.98 The Holocaust has often been considered an event that ‘tests

92 Druker, p. 35.
93 Steiner, Language and Silence, p. 146.
94 Girelli-Carasi, p. 41.
95 See, for example, Sara Horowitz, Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), on the ‘radical negativity’ of the Holocaust and representational problems it poses.
our traditional conceptual and representational categories', a limit case that raises broader questions concerning historiography and historical truth. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, considers whether the Holocaust should be approached as an example of genocide or as something entirely other; as something unique or something in some way comparable. As LaCapra notes, some comparison is essential in order to gain understanding, yet comparisons may equally serve to relativize and may even serve as ‘mechanisms of denial’.

Levi himself was highly attuned to this problem of representation. He considers the camp not only to be a place of linguistic chaos but a hell whose true reality can be understood to exist ‘beneath’ language. Levi, like Steiner, questions whether ‘rational discourse can cope with these questions, lying as they do outside the normative syntax of human communication, in the explicit domain of the bestial’. Levi argues that the ‘true’ witnesses of the camp experience were the majority who did not survive, the so-called ‘mussulmani’ or ‘non-uomini’. The survivor, by contrast, has not ‘touched the bottom’ and constitutes an exception rather than the rule:

Noi sopravissuti siamo una minoranza anomala oltre che esigua: siamo quelli che, per loro prevaricazione o abilità o fortuna, non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato per raccontare, o è tornato muto; ma sono loro, i ‘mussulmani’, i sommersi, i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto significato generale. Loro sono la regola, noi l’eccezione.

Se questo è un uomo contains two well-known passages that further reflect upon the communicability or otherwise of the experience of Auschwitz. Both serve as disclaimers and, as Gordon notes, ‘markers of solemnity’ that invite a ‘heightened alertness’ in the reader. They stress that Levi’s testimony may only approximate the reality experienced; that the camp is something ultimately

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101 Steiner, Language and Silence p. 189.
103 Gordon, Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues, p. 73 and p. 76.
extraneous to the world experienced by ‘free men’ and thus unable to be encompassed by language deriving from that world. In the chapter ‘Sul fondo’, Levi stresses that what will follow in his text is merely a partial, linguistic approximation of the reality experienced by the prisoners:

Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo. In un attimo, con intuizione quasi profetica, la realtà ci si è rivelata: siamo arrivati sul fondo. Più giù di così non si può andare: condizione umana più misera non c'è. (SQ, p. 23)

Later in his testimony, Levi again reflects upon how the extermination camp, like hell, is something wholly extraneous to the world experienced by ‘free men’ and therefore irreducible to that world’s language. The lexicon he must draw upon in order to communicate with his reader pertains to a different order of reality. Indeed, he suggests that, in time, Auschwitz would have begotten a wholly new linguistic system to communicate its unique horrors:

Noi diciamo ‘fame,’ diciamo ‘stanchezza,’ ‘paura,’ e ‘dolore,’ diciamo ‘inverno,’ e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. Se i lager fossero durati più a lungo un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato; e di questo si sente il bisogno per spiegare cosa è faticare l'intera giornata nel vento, sotto zero. (SQ, p. 110)

As Gordon notes, it is instructive that – while once again underlining the inadequacy of our language – Levi here posits the hypothetical development of a new one.104 His belief that a ‘new language’ would be born, rather than silence being imposed, is typical of Levi’s essential faith in the power of communication to overcome the challenges that befall it.

Both Levi’s ‘disclaimers’ here are often cited in wider critical discussions of Holocaust representation, as examples of how the reality of the camps can only be approximated through negative definitions. Moreover, a number of critics have read them in light of Dante’s famous declarations of ineffability in the Paradiso, and particularly that of the opening canto – perhaps the most famous statement of linguistic inadequacy in the Italian literary tradition:105

Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,  
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba  
che 'l fé consorte in mar de li altri dèi.

104 Gordon, Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues, p. 78.  
105 See, for instance, Arqués, pp. 91-94; Carasso, p. 70; Falaschi, p. 23; Gordon, Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues, pp. 74-75; Paolin, pp. 227-30; Patruno, p. 36; Peron, p. 81-82.
Trasumanar significar *per verba*
non si poria; però l’esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba.

(Par. I, 67-72)

This passage stresses that the entire text of the *Paradiso* must condescend to the intellect of a reader who has not yet soared to that realm where the human word, partial and fragmented, is replaced by the divine Word of unqualified meaning.\(^\text{106}\) Thus, the Ovidian myth of Glaucus who, upon eating of a magical herb, was transformed into an immortal sea God, must serve as an ‘essemplo’ for the reader who might one day experience this divine metamorphosis. Critics have therefore tended to read Levi’s topoi of ineffability in *opposition* to Dante’s in the *Paradiso*.\(^\text{107}\) My suggestion here, however, is that there exists a much more pertinent episode from Dante’s poem through which to read Levi’s declarations of ineffability, and this is Canto XXXII of the *Inferno*.

The final three cantos of the *Inferno* describe Cocytus, hell’s ninth and final circle, which takes the form of a frozen lake divided into four concentric circles containing four categories of traitors. The opening of *Inferno* XXXII, which is one of the richest cantos of the poem with regard to questions of language,\(^\text{108}\) presents this canto as a watershed and declares the linguistic inadequacy of what will follow:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{S'io avessi le rime aspre e chiocce} \\
\text{come si converrebbe al tristo buco} \\
\text{sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,} \\
\text{io premerei di mio concetto il suco} \\
\text{più pienamente; ma perch' io non l'abbo,} \\
\text{non sanza tema a dicer mi conduco;} \\
\text{ché non è impresa da pigliar a gabbo} \\
\text{discrever fondo a tutto l'universo,} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{106}\) On the topos of ineffability in the *Commedia*, see Giuseppe Ledda, *La guerra della lingua: ineffabilità, retorica e narrativa nella *Commedia* di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2002). Botterill notes that, while language must fall short in describing Paradise, this is not to say language is devalued by Dante: ‘Words cannot do everything; but they can do much, and, in the mouth of a skilled and morally pristine speaker […they] can come infinitesimally close to the plenitude of meaning, beauty, and referential power that, in the last analysis, is reserved for the Word that is God’ (p. 161).

\(^{107}\) See, for example, Peron: ‘Dunque mentre Dante perde la parola quanto più si eleva; Levi la perde quanto più sprofonda’ (p. 82); Falaschi: ‘La lingua dunque trova il suo limite espressivo nei contenuti sublmi e sovrumani. In *Se questo è un uomo* Levi verifica questo principio dell’ineffabilità, ma lo applica ai contenuti piu’ bassi’ (p. 23); and Patruno, who argues that while Dante describes a process of ‘trasumanar’, Levi seeks to describe the process of ‘subumanar’ (p. 36). My suggestion henceforth is that Levi finds a model for this very process in the final cantos of the *Inferno*. Baker (p. 51) connects the first of the ‘disclaimers’ above to *Inferno* XXXII, 7-9, but does not analyse the relationship between the passages in depth or consider their wider implications.

\(^{108}\) Baker argues that the closing cantos of *Inferno*, beginning with Nimrod in canto XXXI, are ‘linked by their function of representing the deterioration of language, which is the essential bond of human concourse’ (p. 49).
né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo.
Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso
ch’aiutaro Anfïone a chiuder Tebe,
si che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso. (Inf. XXXII, 1-12)

Dante emphasizes here the monumental difficulty of composing these final cantos. He does so in
the hope that ‘dal fatto il dir non sia diverso’ – that language might correspond to the dreadful
reality – and he invokes the muses in lines 10-11 so they might help him to complete this
formidable poetic task of describing ‘fondo a tutto l’universo’. The reference to harsh rhymes,
‘rime aspre’, strongly calls to mind his earlier lyric sequence, the ‘rime petrose’, which had deployed
boldly abrasive poetic language and challenging forms to convey the poet-lover’s erotic
frustration.109 Here, though, the term aspro is supplemented by chioccio, which points to a language
that is less than human. It evokes not only the clucking of the hen but also the infernal idiom of
the bestial guardian Plutus in canto 7 (‘maladetto lupo’: Inf. VII, 8), uttered ‘con la voce chioccia’
(Inf. VII, 2). It is also an example of onomatopoeic language; language of the most material kind,
signifying as much through its aural texture as through its semiotic referentiality.110 Yet on closer
inspection we see that Dante also declares the inability of any existing language, however ‘aspro e
chioccio’, to describe Cocytus (‘If/I had such verses … but since I do not have them…’). No verses
are ultimately ‘aspre’ or ‘chioce’ enough. The Circle of Cocytus is thus situated beneath the realm
of ordinary human language. As a reserve of intellectual meaning, language may only serve to
dignify this spiritual void and confer onto its nothingness some degree of meaning. Only silence
could avoid this, or perhaps some kind of discordant scream, like those that Dante hears
throughout his journey through Hell.111 Yet, while pointing towards something subhuman and
sublinguistic in its phonic harshness and the adjective ‘chioccio’, Dante’s poetry must retain its

109 See Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante’s ‘Rime Petrose’* (Berkeley and Los
110 See Durling and Martinez’s commentary in Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed., trans., and with a commentary by Robert
Durling and Ronald Martinez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); ‘That the significance of onomatopoeic words
is their sound, their acoustic “matter”, suits them to the dense material center of the cosmos’ (p. 506).
111 ‘Il linguaggio che funzionava per le Malebolge qui resta inadeguato; per aderire al nuovo ed estremo universo del
male, occorreva qualcosa in più, che Dante sembrava non possedere ancora: una sorta di balbuzie translinguistica o di
linguistic integrity: its ‘signs’, per the *De vulgari eloquentia*, must remain at once rational and sensory to communicate with the *Commedia*’s earthbound reader.

Like Levi, then, Dante can only offer a definition in the negative. Indeed, if we return to Levi’s declarations of incommunicability above, we find echoes of this very passage from *Inferno* XXXII. Levi’s first passage coincides with his arrival ‘sul fondo’ (cf. Dante’s arrival at ‘fondo a tutto l’universo’), which is reiterated with the expression ‘Più giù di così non si può andare’. The second, meanwhile, describes how, had the *Lager* lasted longer, ‘un nuovo aspro linguaggio’ would have been born. Deploying the word ‘aspro’ in the context of a long conditional ‘Se…’ clause, both Dante and Levi posit a kind of language, or rather anti-language, that their own texts cannot deploy: in Dante’s case, the ‘rime aspre e chiocce’ that he requires but does not possess; in Levi’s, the ‘nuovo aspro linguaggio’ which would have uniquely responded to the linguistic exigencies of the camp, but would not be understood by his readers. Nevertheless, as I shall highlight in the final section, both writers, while intensely cognizant of language’s limitations, will also continue to demonstrate great faith in the communicative power of human words.

The remainder of *Inferno* XXXII develops Dante’s theme of the sub-linguistic. For example, in line 36, the traitors are compared to storks in the chattering of their teeth: ‘mettendo i denti in nota di cicogna’. The stork was described in the Middle Ages as a bird lacking a tongue and, thus, the capacity for song, making instead a rattling sound with its beak. The tongueless stork and its clacking beak (one thinks back to the adjective ‘chioccio’) brings us back to the descent of language and song towards unadorned noise. The Florentine traitor Bocca degli Abati, who inspires great fury in Dante‐pilgrim, meanwhile, is reduced to a canine howling (‘latrare’). Having failed to persuade Bocca to disclose his identity through language, Dante’s words give way

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112 For a fuller reading of the canto in terms of this theme, with additional bibliography, see Tristan Kay, ‘Dante’s Poetics of the Subhuman: A Reading of *Inferno* XXXII’, *L’Alighieri*, 54 (2019), 99-115.
to violence, as he pulls at Bocca’s hair, to elicit a verbal response. But the culmination of the deterioration of language that can be traced through the canto comes in perhaps the most haunting image of the *Inferno*: Ugolino’s gnawing upon the skull of his nemesis Ruggieri: a savage act famously described as a ‘bestial segno’ (133). On the one hand, this expression simply conveys the idea of a gruesome, bestial deed. But in the use of ‘segno’ it pointedly raises the theme of language and signification with which the canto began. ‘Bestial segno’ is an oxymoron, for Dante explained in the *De vulgari* that beasts, lacking intellect, lack the gift of language, but it is an oxymoron that conveys the lack of a clear demarcation between the human and the animal in this part of hell and points – as Lombardi has written – ‘to the possibility of a subhuman form of communication in hell’. Something is paradoxically signified in this animalistic, cannibalistic gesture. Thinking back to the terms of the *De vulgari*, we behold a *segno* devoid of the rational and intellectual. Yet few images lodge themselves in the memory of the *Commedia*‘s reader like Ugolino’s ‘bestial segno’, testament to its savage, visceral eloquence, its capacity to communicate the essence of Cocytus more veraciously than any verbal *segni*.

There is good reason to pay particular attention to *Inferno* XXXII with respect to Levi, as this canto manifestly impacted upon his descriptions of Auschwitz. The following passage, suggestively located before another declaration of linguistic inadequacy (‘la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa cosa’), shows the striking lexical influence of the canto upon the prose of *Se questo è un uomo*.

Quando abbiamo finito, ciascuno è rimasto nel suo angolo, e non abbiamo osato levare gli occhi l’uno sull’altro. Non c’è ove specchiarsi, ma il nostro aspetto ci sta dinanzi, riflesso in cento visi lividi, in cento pupazzi miserabili e sordidi […] [p. 23]

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114 Lombardi, p. 149.
115 Donna Yowell writes: ‘Bestiality marks Ugolino from the moment we encounter him; it distinguishes his countenance, his actions, and his mode of communication or ‘bestial segno’ which in hell succeeds in conveying meaning not via the *rationale signum et sensuale*, but through the *sensuale* – bestial – sign alone: *segno*, then, because in hell communication has occurred, *bestiale*, because words have not been exchanged’. Donna Yowell, ‘Ugolino’s “bestial segno”: The *De vulgari eloquentia* in *Inferno* 32-33’, *Dante Studies*, 104 (1986), 121-43 (p. 123).
This passage brings to mind several features of *Inferno* XXXII. In his use of ‘pupazzi’, Levi echoes the striking rhyme-sound cagnazzi/guazzi found in Dante’s initial description of the heads of the traitors protruding from the icy lake of Cocytus: ‘Poscia vid’io mille visi cagnazzi / fatti per freddo; onde mi vien riprezzo, / e verrà sempre, de’ gelati guazzi’ (*Inf.* XXXII, 70-72). ‘Specchiarsi’ recalls the traitor Camicione’s question to Dante, ‘Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?’ (54). While ‘cento visi lividi’ combines Dante’s ‘mille visi cagnazzi’ with his description ‘livide […] eran le ombre ne la ghiaccia’ (34-35). In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi evokes the canto’s expression ‘se quella con ch’io parlo non si secca’ (*Inf.* XXXII, 139), which perhaps refers to poet’s future inability to find an adequate form of expression to convey the horrors of Cocytus, to describe the rapid breakdown in communication upon arrival in the camp: ‘la lingua ti si secca in pochi giorni’ (*S&S*, p. 72).

Elsewhere, the figure of Ugolino is mentioned both in Levi’s essay ‘La memoria dell’offesa’ and in his short story ‘Breve sogno’, while the characters Branca d’Oria and Frate Alberigo from canto XXXIII are evoked in the poem ‘Il superstite’ and in a 1987 interview respectively, further underlining the impact the Cocytus cantos had upon Levi.

Levi himself is intrigued by the thresholds between humanity and inhumanity, language and violence, that Dante explores in Canto XXXII. For Giorgio Agamben, the figure of the ‘mussulmano’ in Levi’s testimony inhabits ‘the extreme threshold between […] the human and the inhuman’, and Levi is similarly interested in ‘the porous borders and exchanges between the animal and the human, thereby defining what is human […] and posing profound metaphysical questions as a result’. In the essay ‘Comunicare’, Levi describes how for those in the camp who did not speak German, language would be used less as an intellectual medium and more as a rudimentary instrument: words not understood would be repeated ‘con voce alta e rabbiosa, poi

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116 These might be examples of what Jonathan Usher, citing Contini, refers to as ‘poetic memory’, indicating a form of intertextuality where the source text becomes ‘incorporated into the verbal fabric of the writer and no longer implies a precise volition’: Jonathan Usher, ‘Libertinage’, p. 94. Usher’s essay notes several examples of what he deems ‘subconscious’ Dantean borrowings.
117 For different critical interpretations of this line, see Kay, ‘Dante’s Poetics of the Subhuman’, pp. 112-13.
118 On the allusion to Branca d’Oria and its implications, see Montemaggi pp. 67-79.
119 Agamben, p. 47.
urlato a squarciagola, come si farebbe con un sordo, o meglio con un animale domestico, più sensibile al tono che al contenuto del messaggio' (*S&S*, p. 70; my emphasis). Words function here at a purely sensory level and are emptied of their referential content. Once it becomes such a blunt tool, it is unsurprising that language then gives way to violence:

Se qualcuno esitava […] arrivavano i colpi, ed era evidente che si trattava di una variante dello stesso linguaggio: l’uso della parola per comunicare il pensiero, questo meccanismo necessario e sufficiente affinché l’uomo sia uomo, era caduto in disuso. Era un segnale: per quegli altri, uomini non eravamo più: con noi, come le vacche o i muli, non c’era una differenza sostanziale tra l’urlo e il pugno. (*S&S*, p. 70-71)

The violence Levi describes here, while manifestly sublinguistic, nevertheless signifies: with reference to this passage, Anna and Giulio Lepschy refer to a ‘brutalized semiotics of violence’.121 Levi proceeds to point out that interaction with an animal, as was the case in the linguistic interaction between the Nazi officers and the prisoners, requires only ‘un dizionario costituito da una dozzina di segni variamente assortiti ma univoci, non importa se acustici o tattili o visivi’ (*S&S*, p. 71). He notes that another Holocaust witness, Hans Marsalek, recalls that in the camp of Mauthausen, the guards’ rubber whip became known as ‘der Dolmetscher’ (the interpreter): a powerful example of the elision of language and violence associated with the camps.

Levi’s ‘brutalized semiotics’ here resonate powerfully with several passages we have examined from the *Inferno*. We saw how in Canto III language gave way to isolated words and then to blows. We might recall the pilgrim’s words to Bocca giving way to violence where, as Françoise Carasso summarizes with respect to the passage from ‘Comunicare’, ‘il segno è sostituito dal segnale, come si usa per impartire ordini agli animali’122. This description could apply to both instances, particularly since Dante grabs Bocca by the scruff of the neck (‘Allor lo presi per la cuticagna’: line 97), as one might an unruly dog. We could also connect Levi’s ideas to Ugolino’s ‘bestial segno’ – the sub-verbal sign (we might compare the ‘segno…visivo’ posited by Levi above) that culminated the degradation of language that could be traced through *Inferno* XXXII. Notable

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121 Lepschy and Lepschy, p. 135.
122 Carasso, p. 45.
are the cognates segno/segnaile used by the two authors to describe the ‘brutalized semiotics’ in each case. Salient, too, is Hurbinek in *La tregua*, whose ‘sguardo selvaggio e umano ad un tempo’ (cf. the oxymoron ‘bestial segno’) conveyed a disturbing truth concerning Auschwitz that our language cannot fully encompass. While Dante presents Ugolino’s ‘bestial sign’ as the most eloquent symbol of the hatred of Cocytus, Levi writes: ‘se potessi racchiudere in una immagine tutto il male del nostro tempo, sceglierei questa immagine, che mi è familiare: un uomo scarno, dalla fronte china e dalle spalle curve, sul cui volto e nei cui occhi non si possa leggere traccia di pensiero’ (*SQ*, p. 82). As in Dante, it is an image, a visible ‘sign’, that expresses most eloquently a horror beyond words. The novelist Leslie Epstein wrote that, ‘If to some degree civilization began when a man settled for screaming at his enemy instead of stoning him to death, then the task of the Third Reich was to turn words back into rocks, that is to say, to drain them of their imagistic and metaphoric properties’. Levi and Dante show themselves to be extraordinarily attentive to the ways in which language can be pushed to its negative limits and beyond in the infernal environments they describe, and how other, ‘brutalized’ modes of signification may be seen to take the place of verbal discourse.

4. ‘Comunicare si può e si deve’: Atrocity, Testimony, and Communication

Levi writes in *I sommersi e i salvati* that those returning from the camps could be divided into ‘quelli che tacciono e quelli che parlano’ (p. 121), the former governed by feelings of shame or else the fear of not being believed, and the latter (while still afflicted by the same fears and emotions as the first group) by the burning need to bear witness. Levi, naturally, belonged to the second of these categories, and considered the act of witnessing to be a painful but essential bulwark against future atrocities. Like other witnesses, however, he faced the problem of communicating a reality that he believed sat outside of existing frames of reference. He felt acutely the need to testify and yet

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123 Quoted in Portnoff, p. 81.
recognized that any testimony would necessarily fail to do justice to the atrocities he encountered. However, while deeply cognisant of these representational challenges, Levi, faced by the choice of speech and silence, would emphatically choose speech, and would powerfully defend the possibility of communication in even the most extreme circumstances. As I hope to illustrate in these concluding pages, while Dante and Levi’s texts resonate strikingly in their accounts of the corruption and degradation of language, and in their meditation upon the representational challenges associated with the hells – imagined and real – that they describe, each author also powerfully affirms the possibility and indeed the necessity of communication in his attempts to bear witness to these inherently incommunicable horrors.

As we have seen, Levi was well aware of the representational paradox associated with his testimony. He understood, as Adam Epstein puts it, that ‘the impossibility of representation is intrinsic to the very notion of atrocity’.\(^{124}\) Silence might be considered the only adequate response, but such defeatism would only further enable the Nazis’ language-destroying ambitions. Gordon considers Levi’s rejection of silence ‘as constituting a position from which to understand or respond to the Holocaust [to be] a cardinal feature of his ethical universe’.\(^{125}\) Thus, while remaining mindful of its inadequacies, Levi considers his ongoing faith in language, his refusal to accept communicative defeat, to be an anti-fascist stance.\(^{126}\) As explored by Cesare Cases, Levi pointedly places the order and lucidity of his writing in opposition to the disorder and confusion of Auschwitz.\(^{127}\) His writing across a range of genres is known for its cogent and crystalline style. In the document accompanying modern editions of Se questo è un uomo, in which Levi responds in written form to some of the questions he has most frequently been asked about the work, he associates this style with ‘il linguaggio pacato e sobrio’ of the witness,\(^{128}\) who calmly states the facts

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\(^{124}\) Epstein, p. 35.

\(^{125}\) Gordon, Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues, p. 80.

\(^{126}\) See Epstein, p. 38.


\(^{128}\) Appendix to SQ, p. 330.
as might a witness before a judge. It has often been discussed in relation to Levi’s profession as a chemist and the analytical rigour associated with it, his ‘mental habit of concreteness and concision’.\textsuperscript{129} This signature tone is enriched by language drawn from literary and humanistic sources (Dante included), imagery taken from zoology and the natural world, and his meditation on ethics – strategies which help him to compensate for the representational challenges he faced to overcome the void of silence and communicate the horror of the camp (while nonetheless demonstrating an ongoing awareness of its essential “untranslatability” into linguistic form).\textsuperscript{130}

Levi’s ‘old fashioned trust […] in language’\textsuperscript{131} places him outside of the intellectual avant-garde. While acknowledging the profound representational challenges posed by the Holocaust, he has ‘little time or patience for the more grandiose and all-encompassing declarations of ineffability’.\textsuperscript{132} In his essay ‘Comunicare’, he articulates his frustration with modern theories of language that understand it to be something wholly subjective, fragmented, and incapable of transmitting meaning; theories that present human beings as ‘monadi, incapaci di messaggi reciproci, o capaci solo di messaggi monchi, falsi in partenza, fraintesi all’arrivo’ (\textit{S&S}, p. 68). Levi clearly refers here to postmodernism and its ‘rejection of the possibility of identifying some stable reality or truth beyond the constant polysemy and self-referentiality of linguistic constructs’.\textsuperscript{133} He remains more sanguine than this concerning the power of language, which he sees as the basis of all progress and civility:

Salvo casi di incapacità patologica, comunicare si può e se deve: è un modo utile e facile di contribuire alla pace altrui e propria, perché il silenzio, l’assenza di segnali, è a sua volta un segnale, ma ambiguo, e l’ambiguità genera inquietudine e sospetto. Negare che comunicare si può è falso: si può sempre. (\textit{S&S}, p. 68)


\textsuperscript{130} Lepschy and Lepschy, p. 135. See Belpoliti and Gordon on Levi’s ‘holocaust vocabularies’.

\textsuperscript{131} Anthony Rudolf, \textit{At an Uncertain Hour: Primo Levi’s War Against Oblivion} (London: Menard, 1994), p. 4.

\textsuperscript{132} Gordon, \textit{Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues}, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{133} Friedländer, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.
It goes without saying that in the ‘urgently informative’ genre of the Holocaust memoir, this emphasis on the enduring possibility of communication takes on a particular importance.134

Levi addresses similar themes in his essay ‘Dello scrivere oscuro’. Here, he describes how his writing always intends to move from ‘darkness to light’. In this he places himself in opposition to Kafka (whose novel *The Trial* he had translated), who – Levi contends – sought to move in the opposite direction.135 In the essay he writes:

L’effabile è preferibile all’ineffabile, la parola umana al mugolio animale. Non è un caso che i due poeti tedeschi meno decifrabili, Trakl e Celan, siano entrambi morti suicidi, a distanza di due generationi. Il loro comune destino fa pensare all’oscurità della loro poetica come ad un pre-uccidersi, a un non-volere-essere, ad una fuga dal mondo, a cui la morte voluta è stata coronamento.136

He considers the fractured Holocaust verse of the great Romanian poet Celan to resemble a ‘disarticolato balbettio’ and even a death rattle. For Levi, the horror and disorder of the Holocaust did not mandate its stylistic equivalent.137 While he may have witnessed in the camp the threshold between ‘parola umana’ and the ‘mugolio animale’ eroded, he nonetheless believed that language must retain its communicative function; that – as Rachel Falconer puts it – ‘meaning can be derived from nihilistic experience, that reason can help us to compass insanity, that while language might fail to communicate the fullness of horror, it should nevertheless be used’.138 Like Dante in the final cantos of the *Inferno*, he recognizes that a gap necessarily exists between the verbal signifier and the experience signified. He recognizes that he does not possess that ‘nuovo aspro linguaggio’

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134 Gramling, p. 168. As discussed by Gramling, the translingual environment of the camp was ‘translated’ into the formula of monolingual testimony, with a stress on the conative function of language, which became the ‘hallmark of authentic representations of camp life’ (p. 169).

135 Levi ‘contrasts his own ablative poetics of arrival with Kafka’s apophatic poetics of nonarrival; where Levi delivers meaning from obscurity to clarity, Kafka’s signs dwell always and only in an unfiltered turbidity’: Gramling p. 165. See also Levi’s amendment of Adorno’s dictum concerning poetry after Auschwitz: ‘Avrei riformulato le parole di Adorno: dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia se non su Auschwitz’: Gramling p. 165.


137 He contends that ‘non è vero che il caos della pagina scritta sia il miglior simbolo del caos ultimo a cui siamo votati’: *L’altrui mestiere*, p. 842. It should be noted that Levi’s relationship to both Celan (who appears in *La ricerca delle radici*) and Kafka (whom he translated) is nonetheless ambivalent rather than antagonistic. On Levi and Celan, see Anthony Rudolf, *At an Uncertain Hour: Primo Levi’s War Against Oblivion* (London: Menard Press, 1990), passim.

138 Falconer, p. 63. See also Tager ‘To translate experiences of such pervasive, intense violence back into language becomes the challenge of the witness’ (p. 143).
(like Dante’s ‘rime aspre e chioce’) that might more fully reflect the reality he encountered. But seeking such a language (or anti-language) would lead only to communicative failure.

Levi’s criticism in ‘Dello scrivere oscuro’ of ‘closed’ modes of writing in the wake of the atrocities of the Holocaust, his insistence on literature’s ‘prevailingly communicative and referential function’, would prove controversial. His perceived stylistic dogmatism would see him attacked by Giorgio Manganelli in La repubblica, while Cases describes Levi’s statement ‘meglio essere sani che insani’ as ‘una banalità che non tiene conto delle difficoltà di essere sani in un mondo insano’. Yet, notwithstanding the legitimacy of these objections, Levi’s concern for clarity and enduring faith in human powers of communication exist – as I hope this essay has shown – alongside a sensitive awareness both of the semiotic gap associated with Holocaust representation and the different forms of linguistic degradation to which he bore witness.

Dante’s Commedia is, on its own radically different terms, a testimonial work: the author claims divine inspiration for a poem whose message, communicated to the protagonist, must be delivered for the benefit of a world that has gone astray. Beatrice commands the pilgrim in Purgatorio XXXII: ‘in pro del mondo che mal vive […] quel che vedi, / ritornato di là, fa che tu scrive’ (103-5). When the character Dante encounters his ancestor Cacciaguida in the Heaven of Mars, he is told to articulate his vision in unflinching terms:

‘Ma nondimen, rimossa ogni menzogna,
tutta tua vision fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov’è la rogna.’

(Par. XVII, 127-29)

These words are especially important as they also underline the importance of clarity and uncompromising veracity in the poem. In the middle of this cantica so concerned with the limitations of the human word, we find this powerful declaration of communicative intent. Indeed,

139 Cicioni, p. 169.
141 Cases, p. 32.
the *Paradiso* can be seen as simultaneously testament to language’s limitations and its expressive power. Dante’s paradisiacal neologisms, for instance, give ‘tangible proof that ineffability can be counteracted or even diminished’.142

Given his duty to represent through the *dir* of his poetry, however inadequately, the *fatto* of the afterlife, Dante radically departs from the stylistic conventions of his time. He adopts a flexible, ‘plurilingual’ vernacular that draws upon style and register not according to rhetorical norms but rather the exigencies of the reality he claims to have experienced on his journey. Indeed, the character Cacciaguida’s language in cantos XV-XVII, which encompasses a wide range of registers, from lofty Latin to the corporeal idiom of ‘lascia pur grattar dov’è la rognà’, has been seen to represent a prototype for the inclusive approach to language and style that Dante must himself adopt in his poem – encompassing both the transcendent poetry of *trasumanar* and the ‘rime aspre e chioce’ of Cocytus.143 As critics have shown, Dante subtly establishes a contrast between Virgil’s lofty ‘tragic’ register, restricted in its communicative and lexical range, and his own flexible, ‘comic’ style, which is able to encompass more faithfully the spectrum of reality.144 Dante, moreover, pointedly criticizes his contemporaries associated with a ‘closed’ vernacular style, such as Guittone d’Arezzo and Arnaut Daniel, for producing ‘self-indulgent hermetic poetry’.145 Dante’s sustained promotion of the Italian vernacular was informed in part by a movement away from the narrow literary elitism associated with Latin. The Italian vernacular, he argues in his

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142 Botterill, p. 160. As Botterill rightly notes, ‘it is both anachronistic and profoundly contrary to the spirit of both Dante’s theological beliefs and his linguistic theory (in so far, at least, as those can be deduced from his writings) to suggest that, for him, human language’s failure to attain perfection instantly consigns it to the category of perfection’s polar opposite’ (p. 161).

143 As Claire Honess puts it, ‘one of the functions of Dante’s encounter with Cacciaguida is to make explicit the justification for the poetics of the *Commedia*: ‘Expressing the Inexpressible: The Theme of Communication in the Heaven of Mars’, *Lectura dantis*, 14 (1994), 42-60.

144 ‘As Dante’s treatment of Vergil’s [*Aeneid*] repeatedly demonstrates, the classical *tragedìa* participates in fiction, also known as falsehood—menzogna—while the *comedìa*, based on the conviction that the real is more valuable than the beautiful, deals exclusively in truth’: Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and truth in the ‘Comedy’* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 279-80.

philosophical work *Convivio*, will rise where the ‘old sun’ of Latin shall set and will bring light to those who currently live in darkness (see *Conv.* I, xiii, 12), resonating with Levi’s aim of moving in his writing from ‘darkness to light’. Where Latin may bring benefits only to the few, the vernacular ‘servirà veramente a molti’ (*Conv.* I, ix, 4). While operating in radically different modes and contexts, both authors seek to address the broadest possible publics, and – while tackling challenging issues of enormous complexity – both take aim at those who opt for obscurity over clarity and accessibility. Where Dante thus represents an especially pertinent model for Levi is as an author who was pushed to his communicative limits, but who nevertheless – as Steven Botterill puts it – ‘believes in words’;146 as one who insisted on preserving the integrity of his writing in the face of the dissolution of language, most famously in the *Paradiso* but also, crucially, in the *Inferno*.

Critical work on Primo Levi and Dante has drawn attention to Levi’s extensive use of Dante in representing his own all-to-real experience of the hell of Auschwitz, most notably in the rich and suggestive chapter ‘Il canto di Ulisse’. As well as highlighting some of the ways in which Dante inspired Levi, critics have also highlighted the tragic contrast that emerges in Levi’s Holocaust writings between a medieval, imagined hell and a modern, historical hell. As in other forms of twentieth-century engagement with Dante, the *Commedia* might thus be seen as a site of redemption, plenitude, and justice unattainable to the (post-)modern subject, a mirror in which that subject may only perceive his or her negative image. While this is certainly true, I hope to have shown in this essay how Dante also represents for Levi a more positive and productive model with respect to his meditation on language. Dante provides a lens through which Levi could reflect upon the linguistic chaos of Auschwitz and the violence he saw done to language. Moreover, Dante offered a powerful model for Levi in confronting the paradox of communicating incommunicable horrors. In exploring Levi’s rich linguistic dialogue with Dante, I have also endeavoured to reanimate these aspects of Dante’s own work, highlighting the remarkable sophistication and

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146 Botterill, p. 154.
modern resonance of his medieval account both of the linguistic experience associated with hell and the representational problems that it posed.