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# Jean Améry, the dislocated witness

**Not without reason, Primo Levi has been said to represent a sort of “perfect witness” of the individual and collective, multi-faceted and complex, traumatic and infernal experience commonly summed up with the name of “Auschwitz”<sup>1</sup>.**

Indeed, Levi began to write his testimony while he was still in the Lager and soon after returning home “those memories were burning up inside (him) to such a point”<sup>2</sup> that he hurried to complete his book, *Se questo è un uomo* (1958), almost a statement of legal evidence. From then on, practically until his suicide in 1987, Primo Levi never ceased to claim his status as a witness, in opposition to other survivors who had opted, through pain, shame or other more unmentionable reasons, to remain silent<sup>3</sup>. The Italian chemist always defended the therapeutic function of his testimony; it was, he claimed, an “interior liberation”<sup>4</sup>. Above all, however, it was a way “to explain to the *others*, to share with the *others*” an extreme reality, an experience that had been no less real through being so unimaginable. One facet of this desire to speak constitutes a warning: “This happened, and that means it can happen again, that is the essence of what we have to say”<sup>5</sup>. It also involves an affirmation of dignity and meaning: “Remembering is a matter of duty for these survivors: they do not want to forget, and above all they do not want the world to forget, because they have understood that their experience was not devoid of significance and that the death camps were not an accident, just some unforeseen chance of History”<sup>6</sup>.

Before these a posteriori justifications, however, already during the period of internment in the camp, the testimony, the will or the hope of bearing witness was for Levi a reason for living, a sort of vaccination against death: “even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, in order to explain it all, to bear witness to it all”<sup>7</sup>. But this hope is not free of anxiety, as is shown by the dream that Levi narrates in a passage of *Se questo è un uomo*: “It is an intense, physical, inexpressible pleasure, to be at home, among friendly people, and to have so many things to recount. But I cannot

fail to realise that my listeners are not following me, or rather, that they seem absolutely indifferent: they talk confusedly of other things amongst themselves, *as if I weren't there*. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes without saying a word. *A desolate grief* now emerges in me, like certain barely remembered pains from one's earliest childhood: this is *pain in the pure state*"<sup>8</sup>.

It is difficult to know if this dream was actually shared by the other prisoners, as Levi later asserts. But even if it were not, it should still be given fundamental importance, since it enables us to grasp the experience of the testimony from within. Hence, when Levi wonders: "Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the always repeated scene of the story which is told but not listened to?"<sup>9</sup>, we should delete this "our", introduced rather surreptitiously, and understand that this is in any event the dream of the man who feels the intimate *need*, and thus the *possibility* of bearing witness. It is thus the dream of a "perfect witness". This dream, however, does not only potentially contain the future testimony, but also the anxiety which cancels the testimony itself, the abyss gaping open as the utterance itself comes forth, the void inhabited by the voices of all those with no chance to sublimate their impossibility in the dream, those whom we could provisionally and clumsily call "imperfect witnesses".

This is where the case of Jean Améry, the assumed name of Hans Mayer, proves so very illustrative. Unlike Levi, Améry took twenty years to write about his experience as a prisoner at Auschwitz and other Nazi camps. What is more, his book *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (1966) is utterly removed from the model of the "perfect witness" exemplified by his Italian fellow-prisoner. In fact, it can hardly be considered a "testimony" at all, but more of an "indictment" whilst at the same time being a "confession".

In Améry's *attempt to surmount the insurmountable*, therefore, we find hardly any of the motivations that Levi adduced to justify his testimonial vocation. It is true that Améry himself sets his effort in the context of that "systematic process of winning back dignity" which had guided his life from the first experience of degradation in 1935<sup>10</sup>. Following Imre Kertész, one could doubtlessly interpret his book's subtitle —*Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*— as "a defeated man's attempt to get back on his feet"<sup>11</sup>. Nobody would deny the *therapeutic* function of Améry's work, if only the will to recover balance, the interior liberation that Levi talked about, the catharsis often upheld by Kertész. Neither can one deny that the need to warn others is always present in Améry's mind. One can even acknowledge his having a particularly forceful sense of the urgency of this task, which manages to take on, as in Levi's case, a genuine moral dimension. "Ultimately", he writes, "I still maintain the hope that this work should be in a good cause: for it to concern all those

■ <sup>1</sup> AGAMBen, G., *Lo que queda de Auschwitz. El archivo y el testigo. Homo Sacer III*, Pre-Textos, Valencia, 2000, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> LEVI, P., *Si això és un home*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1996, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> See P. LEVI, *Els enfonsats i els salvats*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 2000, p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> LEVI, P., *Si això... op. cit.*, p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72 [my own italics].

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá de la culpa y la expiación. Tentativas de superación de una víctima de la violencia*, Pre-Textos, Valencia, 2001, p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> KERTÉSZ, I. *Un instante de silencio en el paredón. El holocausto como cultura*, Herder, Barcelona, 1999, p. 78.

who do not relinquish their status of fellow-humans”<sup>12</sup>. Beyond Améry’s declarations and intentions, however, the truth is that these are not the motivations throbbing through the text, in each one of his essays, in the bitterness and rage of his indictment.

“I never come forward as a judge”<sup>13</sup>, Levi said, “you should be the judges”<sup>14</sup>. But Améry neither wants nor is able to set himself at that distance in respect of his suffering. He is not simply attesting to his personal experience so that others could be able to judge. *How could the others judge?* How could those who have not lived through what he has lived understand anything about his experience? Hence, Améry does not write to “bear witness”; so much so that it is very hard to find any details of his stay in Auschwitz in

the pages of his book. If he so graphically describes how he was tortured by the Gestapo, it is only because all the meaning —the *meaninglessness*— of the violence that has driven him to speak lies precisely in the *experience* of torture. Améry, therefore, comes forward to the reader as a *victim of violence*, and from this absolutely subjective and radically untransferable status, he also sets himself up as a witness, as an accuser and, ultimately, as a judge.

The distance separating Jean Améry from Primo Levi, at least from the Levi of *Se questo è un uomo*, appears thus quite

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clearly. It is not only a difference in standpoint or a simple divergence of characters, as Levi himself seems to hint at in his discussion of one of Améry’s essays in *I sommersi e i salvati*<sup>15</sup> (1986). There is actually a profound incomprehension, an almost insurmountable distance between them. Améry cannot understand the “perfect witness” represented by Levi, the human dignity of someone who relinquishes resentment and legitimate indignation to seek betterment on a higher sphere, in an ethics of justice that can be acceptable for society as a whole. This is why he rather disparagingly referred to him as a “forgiver”. But neither can Levi manage to understand the rebellion that Améry, as a victim, puts up against the unjust sentence that has been passed on him by society. Hence, Levi can only see in the Austrian’s resentment “positions of such a severity and intransigency that make him unable to find joy in life”<sup>16</sup>. It would nevertheless be wrong to think that this is a form of intellectual incomprehension. It is obvious that both of them were lucid enough to “understand”, even to penetrate, the other’s vital rationality. What they could not do, for all their good will and lucidity, was to *share* the other’s life. And the fact is that their experiences were radically different, even while intersecting at the same fatal place and time. Again, we have to avoid the risk of trivialising this

■ <sup>12</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 49 (prologue from 1966).

<sup>13</sup> LEVI, P., *Entrevistas y conversaciones*, Península, Barcelona, 1998, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> LEVI, P., *Si això...* op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> The chapter entitled “L’intellectual a Auschwitz” in P. LEVI, *Els enfonsats...* op. cit., pp. 127-147.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem* p. 136.

difference, either reducing it to the “content” of the experience —after all they did share a very similar fate, and even, as it seems, the same hut in Auschwitz— or to the “quantity” —it would be absurd to establish a gradation in suffering. The difference lies in the very foundation of the experience, in the gaping void between living and speaking, in the subjectivity of the testimony.

The fact that Levi’s personal evolution, from the almost naïve hope of the survivor who wrote *Se questo è un uomo* to the disillusionment exuded by each page of *I sommersi e i salvati*, brought him closer to Jean Améry, to the extent of joining with him in his life’s ultimate and definitive declaration, in the decision to kill himself, should not prevent us from grasping the full meaning of this *difference* that we have just pointed out. The last act of Primo Levi’s life confirms what we already suspected, that he was not so “perfect” after all, and this can only serve to reveal even more clearly his dignity, not only as a witness, but as a human being. There is still the need, however, to explore this gap, the displacement of the “imperfect witnesses”, one of whom decided to go under the assumed name of Jean Améry, but also the non-place of the “impossible witnesses”, the anonymous *Muselmänner*.

■ In his interesting considerations on what he himself calls the “Levi paradox”, Giorgio Agamben forgets, even while stressing this in another sphere, the existence of a “grey zone” of the testimony<sup>17</sup>. This could be the reason why the Italian philosopher seems to get entangled in his own conceptual network and ends up encountering another much more dangerous paradox.

The “Levi paradox”, according to Agamben, would consist in the fact that the “complete witness” is also an “impossible witness” —meaning that the *Muselmann*, as the “subject of an (*absolute*) desubjectification”, would be prevented from bearing witness to his own experience, and would thus constitute a “lacuna”, a non-place, a sort of black hole from which the voice that should pass on to us such an extreme experience cannot emerge<sup>18</sup>. So far, Agamben follows Levi’s formulation, which, whilst being paradoxical, does not cease to be *consistently* paradoxical. Levi’s conclusion is very clear: “Those of us who were lucky have attempted, with more or less discretion, to explain not only our fate, but that of the others, the ‘submerged’; but it has been a narration ‘on behalf of another’, the story of things seen from close by, not experienced personally. There is no-one to explain the finished demolition, the accomplished work, just as there is no-one who has come back to explain his own death”<sup>19</sup>.

The problem comes up when Agamben attempts to develop this paradox applying certain post-structuralist postulates. According to the Italian philosopher, there is not only an equality between complete witness and impossible witness, but any testimony is an “impossibility of bearing witness”<sup>20</sup>, or to put it more precisely, testimony is always a “speaking on behalf of the silent”<sup>21</sup>. Reducing Agamben’s paradox to its logical skeleton,

■ <sup>17</sup> AGAMBEN, G., *Lo que queda...* op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> LEVI, P., *Entrevistas...* op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> LEVI, P., *Els enfonsats...* op. cit., pp. 72-73.

<sup>20</sup> AGAMBEN, G., *Lo que queda...* op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

it would look something like this: 1) bearing witness is the speech of a subject; 2) every statement of a subject is an act of desubjectification. As an act of language, therefore, bearing witness is a “paradoxical act which entails at the same time a subjectification and a desubjectification, and in which the living individual appropriates language only in a complete expropriation, he becomes a speaker only as far as he falls into silence”<sup>22</sup>. Hence, “the testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation”<sup>23</sup>.

This kind of reasoning, however, stretches Levi’s paradox to such an extent as to make it unsustainable. If the survivor was asserting the impossibility of the complete testimony, what the postmodern philosopher is really defending is the impossibility of *any* testimony, if we take testimony to mean an utterance with claims to validity, that is, one which aspires to “conformity between what is said and the facts”<sup>24</sup>. The testimony is thus limited to the exteriority of the enunciation; it “does not guarantee the factual truthfulness of a given utterance kept in the archive, but the very impossibility of its continuing to be archived, its exteriority in respect of the archive”<sup>25</sup>. Ultimately, the only thing that the witness can bear witness to is the “impossibility of bearing witness”. Hence, Auschwitz, “that which cannot be the object of testimony”, far from “being irrefutably and absolutely proved”, tumbles down with the rain of cinders that follows the fireworks of a so-called philosophy of language<sup>26</sup>.

At the root of all this non-sense lies the dichotomy between “perfect witness” and “complete witness” established by Agamben —using Levi, certainly, but taking him where he would never have gone of his own free will. Thus, when the Italian thinker puts forward the thesis that “the *Shoa* is an event with no testimonies, in the dual sense that it is impossible to bear witness to it, either from the interior —because one cannot bear witness from the interior of death, there is no voice for the extinction of the voice— and from the exterior, because the outsider is by definition excluded from the event”, he is setting us before a false dilemma, in order to be able to conclude that the very structure of the testimony enables us to overcome this aporia<sup>27</sup>. Actually, as mentioned above, not only does he not manage to overcome it, but he creates another much more serious contradiction. The problem, if it can be put this way, is that “the *Shoa*” is not a *single* event. Hypostasising the *Shoa*, as Agamben does so often in his text —not unlike a powerful strand of Jewish thought—, only manages to pervert it, to steal it from the hands of the victims and the survivors, to turn it into a monument built to fit society or religion (or philosophy), but in which the victims cannot nor ever will be able to recognise themselves. The *Shoa* is not a *single* event, because the *Shoa* is the sum of the individual events undergone by each of the persons who suffered inside that *univers concentrationnaire* created by the Nazis<sup>28</sup>. No-one therefore can talk *from the inside* of the *Shoa*, not even the *Muselmänner*, not even the dead. The “complete witness” does not exist. There are indeed, however, individuals who can talk from the interior of their experience. They are the *survivors*. Perhaps they are not “perfect witnesses” —neither was Primo Levi after all. They may even be “outsiders” in an existential sense, like Améry.

■ <sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p.135.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> According to the formula of D. ROUSSET, *L’univers concentrationnaire*, Minuit, Paris, 1965.







But their word will never be exterior, it will never be excluded, because their testimony, the sum of their testimonies, is what constitutes for us the actual *event*.

III Between the high ground of the “perfect witness” —the voice speaking of its own experience from an unharmed subjectivity— and the non-place of the “impossible witness” that philosophy tries to present as the paradoxical abyss of integrity, an unstable ground opens up, a damp, muddy land, and for this reason more fertile. It is in this “grey zone” of the testimony that Jean Améry becomes specially relevant.

Améry’s particularity, if we can talk about it in these terms, is that he constitutes a case of radical “desubjectification”, but which does not reach the dehumanised state of the *Muselmann* and thus retains the capacity to stand up as a witness. Améry’s stance cannot be that of the observer who, from the high ground afforded him by his secure identity —which may be the result of a religious, national or political faith, or simply the firmness of the human ground itself— observes the events and takes note of them. Instead, Améry’s testimony stems from an experience of self-estrangement taken to the limit of silence itself. As he himself explains in the prologue of his book: “I cannot say that in the age of silence, I forgot or ‘repressed’ the twelve years of German fatality and personal fate. For two decades, I probed constantly into this unforgettable past, but it was too painful for me to talk about it. It was only when I wrote the essay on Auschwitz that I seemed to break a dark taboo; suddenly I was taken up by the desire to explain it all, and that was how this book was born”<sup>29</sup>.

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Thus, Améry comes forward as a witness exiled from himself, existentially dislodged, literally dislocated. His entire work consists in an attempt to overcome this dislocation, to close this open wound. But it is not just a question of seeking a therapy in writing. In fact, Améry’s writing is quite the opposite from what is normally understood as therapeutic writing. It is not a cure, but the illness itself. His book is certainly a testimony, but it is not a testimony that confines itself to explaining a personal

experience to others. It is, as mentioned above, an indictment, but also the confession of resentment, of a failure, of an anxiety. There is no doubt that Améry writes to overcome “that crisis of trust in the world and in language” caused by torture and degradation<sup>30</sup>.

But the question which runs through the five intense essays of his book is not *how* to overcome this crisis of confidence. His question is much more simple, but at the same time so fundamental as to rule out any possibility of reply. To overcome: *bewältigen*. It is clear *what* needs to be overcome: aggression, resentment, fear, homesickness, anxiety. But *who*

has to overcome all this? *Ein Überwältigten*, that is, literally, “one who is overcome”. The question is not thus *how* one who is overcome overcomes, but *from where*?

Before facing this question, however, we should ask ourselves about the nature of this fundamental dislocation: specifically, what is this so-called “Améry wound”?<sup>31</sup> His famous essay on torture, significantly the first that Améry wrote of the five that form his book, contains the most accurate, even definitive description: “wer der Folter erlag, kann nicht mehr heimisch werden in der Welt” (“Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world”)<sup>32</sup>.

The first blow from the authority’s fist, in this case from the Gestapo, produces right away the devastating feeling of “helplessness” (*Hilflosigkeit, desemparement*)<sup>33</sup>. The victim realises that nobody will come to help him, that he has not the least possibility of defending himself. And thus he loses *trust in the world*. But it is only with torture —“the most horrible event that a human being can retain within himself”— that the estrangement process is completed<sup>34</sup>. The transformation of the subject into pure corporality, “into a body and nothing else”, together with the experience of one’s own death in pain and of the absolute sovereignty of the other, the torturer, yields the victim to a “feeling of amazement and a estrangement from the world that cannot be compensated by any subsequent human communication”<sup>35</sup>. This essential dislocation, the definitive break between the self and the world, which subjects the individual to the determination of anxiety for evermore, has its physical parallel in torture itself. “There was a cracking and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten to this hour. The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head. Torture, from Latin *torquere*, to dislocate (*verrenken*)”<sup>36</sup>.

Dislocate: to put out of place. In Améry’s case this verb is almost a declaration of identity. After a childhood and youth closely linked with the Alpine landscape of the Tyrol and with the *Landschaftsliteratur*<sup>37</sup>, the economic crisis put him out of his home and obliged him to lead a miserable life with his mother in Vienna, where he wrote the novel *Die Schiffbrüchigen* (The Shipwrecked), the only published part of which is significantly titled “The Rootless”. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws again put him out of his place and forced him to face up to his “Jewishness”, a condition which had no positive determination, only the certain threat of degradation and death. This threat became imminent with the 1938 *Anschluss*, which put him out of his country and condemned him to an exile that would be perpetual. With this last dislocation, Hans Maier did not only lose his “homeland” (*Heimat*), but also his mother tongue, which now became the language of the enemy, as well as his own past, the possibility of recovering a collective identity. The process of self-estrangement was almost complete: “I had become a human being who could no longer say *we* and who therefore said *I* merely out of habit, but without any feeling of full possession

■ <sup>29</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Prologue by E. OCAÑA, *La herida Améry. Más allá de la mentalidad expiatoria*. In *ibidem*, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9-36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> See W. G. SEBALD, “Verlorenes Land. Jean Améry und Österreich”, in *Unheimliche Heimat. Essays zur österreichischen Literatur*, Fischer, Frankfurt, 1995, pp. 131-144.





of myself”<sup>38</sup>. It is the flesh of this “homeless man” (*Heimatlos*) that is defiled by the torturer’s hand, accomplishing the alienation, the physical and moral dislocation. The subject who entered the Auschwitz death camp on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1944 only aspired to recover balance by “returning the blow”, cancelling out any cultural and intellectual conscience that might still remain in his memory, cultivating resentment as a form of survival.

Is it plausible that such a man should dream, like Primo Levi, of “the always repeated scene of the story which is told and not listened to”? Surely not, since only someone who still feels “at home [*heimisch*] in the world”, someone who retains trust in others, someone who still wishes “to be heard” by the world, can allow oneself to be swayed by this dream. The *dislocated man*, however, could never dream this

scene full of hope and horror, with all its anxiety, its “pain in the pure state”. And he could not do so because this is a scene that has already been *lived* by him, a scene that he has overcome in the very overcoming process that has dislocated him, that has overcome him. It is thus a scene that has no meaning anymore. For how could one dream of being as if he *had not been there* when in fact *he is no longer there*? How could one dream of being *at home* when the whole world has ceased to be a possible home, when *being* means inhabiting an open fault, the ground of the wound, of the dislocated identity, the non-place of wandering and permanently missing oneself?

Certainly, Primo Levi went also through the experience of “helplessness”, the loss of trust in the world, the anxiety of the victim confronted with degradation and violence, subject to the absolute sovereignty of the torturers. But he did so from the firm ground of an unharmed identity. He did not have the believer’s faith in God or the Idea, but could rely on his scientific spirit and humanistic values, which were founded on an intact culture and past, on an identity *of his own* which enabled him to overcome the aggression of Auschwitz and become a witness.

Thus, Levi was able to find a haven in Dante, a place in which to take shelter in the middle of the strange and hostile *inferno* of the camp: “I would give today’s soup to know how to join up *non ne avevo alcuna* with the end”<sup>39</sup>. Améry will in vain seek shelter in *his* culture, which is no longer his but only that of his tormentors. Hölderlin, once so familiar (*heimlich*), cannot offer him any consolation. His old verses are all mixed up with the

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■ <sup>38</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>39</sup> LEVI, P., *Si això...* op. cit., p. 136.



voice of the *Kapo* crying “Links!” German, and with it the whole culture that had formed his identity, have literally become *unheimlich* —threatening, disquieting, sinister<sup>40</sup>. Améry could never have wished to swap his soup for completing Hölderlin’s verses; in any event, he might have agreed to give it up in exchange for forgetting about them. “In most cases [aesthetic reminiscences] did not offer any consolation, they sometimes came across as suffering or mocking; more often they diluted into a feeling of absolute indifference”<sup>41</sup>. But how can one forget one’s own identity without forgetting oneself at the same time, without automatically becoming a non-person, a *Muselman*?

But Améry, in spite of existentially coming very close to it, at least much closer than Primo Levi, never actually plunged into the state of a *Muselman*. His testimony reaches us not from an unfathomable *lacuna*, but from the unstable ground of dislocation; not from death, but from the living experience of death. It is therefore not surprising that Levi and Améry should also irreconcilably disagree as regards this fundamental experience of the camp. As Levi himself said: “At this point my experience and that of my memories depart from Améry’s. It may be because I was younger, perhaps because I was more ignorant than he, or less secure, or less aware, but I never had almost any time to devote to death; I had other things to think about: finding a bit of bread, getting out of the more extenuating work, putting heels on my boots, stealing a broom, interpreting the signs and the faces around me. Objectives in life are the best defence against death: not only in the *Lager*”<sup>42</sup>.

If we might be so bold as to use the vocabulary of that “disquieting magus from Alemannic regions”<sup>43</sup>, we would say that Levi saw the *Lager* in the form of the “Fall”, that is, as an “absorption in (*Aufgehen bei*) the world of its concern”<sup>44</sup>. Levi’s world was thus the significant everydayness of the entities at hand insofar as they were useful, a bit of bread, work, boots, a broom, the signs and faces around him —as well as the coexistence with the others— Alberto, Jean, Elias, Henri, Mendi, but also doctor Pannwitz or Kapo Alex. In this “fallen” mode of being-in-the-world, the experience of death necessarily has to be “inauthentic”. But not because Levi was “younger”, “more ignorant”, “less secure” or “less aware” than his Austrian companion, and for this reason lacking “time to devote to death”. Rather, the question is that Levi *could not devote himself to death*. And not because he was not able to think about it, but because genuinely devoting oneself to death implies “being towards death”, that is, existing in “the possibility of the absolute impossibility”, to some extent dying (*sterben*)<sup>45</sup>. “But the emotional disposition (*Befindlichkeit*) which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein’s ownmost individualized being, is anxiety”<sup>46</sup>. Levi, being *absorbed in* the world of the camp, could feel death as an external threat and could experience it in the “inauthentic”<sup>47</sup> emotional disposition of *fear*. To be able to *devote himself* to his own death, however, would have meant being existentially determined by anxiety<sup>48</sup>. But what does Heidegger

■ <sup>40</sup> See. S. FREUD, “Das Unheimliche” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Imago, London, 1947, vol. 12, pp. 227-268.

<sup>41</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 63-64.

<sup>42</sup> LEVI, P., *Els enfonats...* op. cit., p. 147.

<sup>43</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> HEIDEGGER, M., *Ser y tiempo*, Trotta, Madrid, 2003, p. 198.

The translations (into Catalan) are mine from the Spanish

translation by Jorge Eduardo Rivera and the original edition.

<sup>45</sup> One must distinguish this from *ableben*:

to expire: see M. HEIDEGGER, *Ser...* op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285.

<sup>47</sup> Obviously, these terms must be taken in the same a-moral sense that they have in Heidegger.

<sup>48</sup> See J. AMÉRY, *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 107.

specifically mean by this concept of *anxiety*? “In anxiety”, he writes, “one feels ‘uncanny’ (*unheimlich*). This term describes, in the first place, the peculiar indefiniteness of the ‘nothing and nowhere’ in which Dasein finds itself under anxiety. But here ‘uncanniness’ (*Unheimlichkeit*) also means homelessness, ‘not being at-home’ (*Nichtzuhause-sein*)”<sup>49</sup>.

What Levi describes in his dream as a “desolate pain”, “pain in the pure state”, is thus “anxiety”: the experience of *not-being-at-home*, of the “I am at home” but “as if I weren’t”.

But if this *Unheimlichkeit* emerges

in his dreams, it is precisely because it is not yet an existential determination. In spite of all, Levi was able to find alternative dwelling places. Even if these “substitutes”<sup>50</sup> for home were fragile and unstable, even if they could not save him from the latent threat of radical helplessness looming up every night in his dream, they did enable him to stand more or less upright in the

field of his own subjectivity. These alternative homes may be termed Dante, Alberto, the Italian language, chemistry or humanism; the point is that they are experienced as havens against helplessness and uncanniness, places dwelt in as shelters from anxiety and death. But though they afford him protection, they also prevent him from facing directly the meaninglessness and the ultimate impossibility into which the drowned ones fall. In this sense, even if they are less protective than faith in God or Father Stalin, these havens are just as blinding, to the extent that they prevent him from experiencing the same reality as the individuals dying around him day by day, in the same bunk, at the place of work or in an absurd formation in the snow-covered yard. From here stems Levi’s dilemma, which is not a paradox, but rather the tragic and lucid discovery of a man that time and disenchantment have finally “put out of place”.

Thus, when he thought he had finally returned home, Levi discovers that in fact he had never been so far away. What had given him most shelter while he endured the hell of Auschwitz, but also afterwards, during his long years as a survivor, was doubtlessly the “testimony”. But it is this last haven which falls apart in *I sommersi e i salvati*, when he realises that it is precisely the possibility of taking refuge in the testimony, of saving himself in order to bear witness, which makes him dumb and unable to bear witness. Primo Levi’s terrible fate was to discover around 1987 that the dream which had tormented him during the long nights at Auschwitz had ended up becoming true, not because he *could not* speak or make himself understood, but because he had not been able to live through his *own* experience and thus could not be its witness; When he understood that the anxiety of the dream, the anxiety of helplessness *was* helplessness itself, the “meaninglessness” of the world, the radical impossibility of “finding a home”,

It is precisely the possibility of taking refuge in the testimony, of saving himself in order to bear witness, which makes him dumb and unable to bear witness

■ <sup>49</sup> HEIDEGGER, M., *Ser... op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>50</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá... op. cit.*, p. 116.



and therefore that he could only bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness; the only thing left for him to do was to assume his own anxiety and face the unavoidable possibility of death.

**IV** It might seem that we have just slipped back into the “Agamben paradox”. But here is precisely where Jean Améry’s testimony takes on all its importance. As mentioned above, he seems to fall somewhere between the “perfect witness” and the “impossible witness”. It is now time to specify as far as we can the significance of this “grey zone” of the testimony, the message of the “dislocated witness”.

“Dislocation”, as we have seen, is equivalent to Heidegger’s *unhomeliness* or *uncanniness* (*Unheimlichkeit*); this is at the same time the indeterminacy of the “nothing and nowhere” and the “not-being-at-home” and is therefore expressed in the fundamental emotional disposition of *anxiety*.

At this point, we should ask ourselves whether we might not be committing a manipulation like the one denounced above in the case of Primo Levi? Are we not taking Améry where we ourselves want, in this case into the Heideggerian woodland, a place which could never be particularly pleasant for him, a victim of Nazism? Améry’s statements at the end of his book would seem at least to put us on our guard against this sort of interpretations: “In short, nothing sets me apart from the people around whom I spend my days other than a fluctuating unrest which I feel more or less intensely at different times. But this is a *social*, not a metaphysical, unrest. I am not distressed either by the being or the nothingness, either by god or the absence of god, only by society: since

Indeed, Améry does express his fear at a possible repetition of history. But what he feels above all is *anxiety*

it was society, and only society, which inflicted on me the existential imbalance from which I am still trying to recover. This and only this has stolen trust in the world from me. Metaphysical anxiety is an elegant, high-flying concern. It affects someone who has never had doubts about his identity and nature, someone who has never wondered why he is as he is, and who knows that he may go on being as he is in the future. This anxiety

has nothing to do with mine, and it is not this that causes my unhappiness”<sup>51</sup>.

And yet, as much as Améry may try to distance himself from the “disquieting magus from Alemannic regions”, for reasons that are in any event quite understandable, he does not cease to confirm Heidegger’s insights with his life and his words. It is society, no doubt, that is responsible for Améry’s existential “dislocation”. But *who* or *what* is this society? The economic agents that caused the crisis and turned him into a young, rootless intellectual wandering through the streets of Vienna? The national socialist party which promulgated the Nuremberg laws and threw him out of his own country?

■ <sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 193.

The anti-Semites and that part of the Austrian people who received the Führer with open arms? Lieutenant Praust, who physically dislocated him in the basement of Fort Breendonk? The SS who transported him to the different concentration camps and under whose authority he had to live in inhuman conditions for several years? The *kapos* and other fellow-prisoners with whom he had to struggle day after day in the *Lager*? The German people who not only did not protest at their rulers' ignominy, but rose up with pride after their nation's defeat, without having suffered scorn and punishment for their crimes? The government and citizens of the victorious countries, who were not able to do justice when demanded, and preferred to seek a shameful reconciliation? *The whole world*?

It is clear that Améry's anxiety does not have a *single* specific cause. If it did, it would not be anxiety, but rather *fear*. Indeed, Améry does express his fear at a possible repetition of history. But what he feels above all is *anxiety*. And the object of anxiety is "nothin and nowhere" because "that in the face of which one has anxiety [*das Wovor der Angst*] is being-in-the-world as such"<sup>52</sup>. As Heidegger explains: "In anxiety what is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away, and so, in general, do entities within-the-world. The 'world' can offer nothing more and neither can the Dasein-with of Others. Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the 'world' and the way things have been publicly interpreted. Anxiety throws Dasein back upon that which it is anxious about —its authentic potentiality-for-being-in-the-world. Anxiety individualises Dasein for its ownmost being-in-the-world [...]. Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its *being towards* its ownmost potentiality-for-being— that is, its *being-free for* the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself"<sup>53</sup>. Beyond the complications of Heidegger's jargon, what we should understand here is that the existential determination of anxiety constitutes the way of being-in-the-world of the individual who *has lost trust in the world*, that is, of someone for whom the world that he himself opens up with his existence has ceased to be a possible dwelling place. This man is thus condemned to isolation and helplessness, to permanently missing himself, to a freedom which is at the same time a lack of shelter. "Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualized, but individualized as *being-in-the-world*. Being-in enters into the existential 'mode' of the 'not-at-home' (*Un-zuhause*). Nothing else is meant by our talk of 'uncanniness' (*Unheimlichkeit*)"<sup>54</sup>. Or, to say the same thing in Améry's searing words: "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world"<sup>55</sup>.

Someone who has been "dislocated" can no longer feel the everyday familiarity that Levi was able to find even in the *Lager*. But for this same reason, because he can no longer be-in-the-world in an immediate and everyday sense, Améry remains open to "the utter and constant threat to [himself] arising from [his] ownmost individualized being, and therefore finds himself 'face to face with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of his existence"<sup>56</sup>, that is, with his *own* death.

■ <sup>52</sup> HEIDEGGER, M., *Ser... op. cit.*, p. 209 [my italics].

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 211.

<sup>55</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá... op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> HEIDEGGER, M., *Ser... op. cit.*, p. 285.

But, is it possible to talk of one's *own* death, *authentic* death, in the context of Auschwitz? Everything would seem to indicate that it is not. As Améry himself acknowledges: "With the shattering of the aesthetic representation of death, the prisoner came up defenceless against his vital hour. If, however, he attempted to re-establish a spiritual and metaphysical attitude, he again ran into the reality of the camp, which frustrated any attempt to do this. What happened in practice? To put it concisely and trivially: just like his comrade with no spiritual training, the intellectual prisoner came up against, not death, but *dying*"<sup>57</sup>.

**Death becomes part of everyday life in Auschwitz, it is present in a density previously unknown, it becomes *concentrated***

The distinction established here by Améry between death and dying is a direct attempt to question the Heideggerian concept of the *being-for-death*. And yet it only confirms its validity, at least as an unattainable possibility of the human being. Heidegger himself, in a lecture some years after the liberation of Auschwitz, would seem to head this way: "Do they

die? (*sterben*). They expire (*ableben*). They are eliminated. Do they die? They become pieces in a body-making factory. Do they die? They are imperceptibly liquidated in the extermination camps... But dying (*sterben*) means enduring death in one's own being. Being able to die means being capable of enduring this. And we are only capable if our being accepts the being of death... All around us the great misery of countless, terrible, undied deaths (*ungestorbene Tode*) and at the same time *the essence of death is concealed from man*"<sup>58</sup>.

It is not, as Agamben thinks, that Auschwitz becomes an inversion of the paradigm of reality, a sort of alternative world where "any distinction between authentic and inauthentic, possible and impossible, radically disappears"<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, death becomes part of everyday life in Auschwitz, it is present in a density previously unknown, it becomes *concentrated*. In this sense, the *Lager* is fundamentally distinct from the outside world, from *our* everyday life, where death itself, dying, happens on a massive and anonymous scale in hospitals and on the roads, in hospices and in apartments, all around *people* expire, they experience an undied death, an inauthentic death. But this death is diluted, concealed, ignored. A man outside the *Lager* can go on maintaining the illusion, the false expectancy of dying his own death. But the truth is that man's death, as a non-ideological interpretation of *Sein und Zeit* enables us to understand, can only be inauthentic, because authenticity is not an attainable foundation, it is not a home where one can take shelter, it is rather the total absence of home, the abyss of the subject which fails to encounter itself and collapses into nothing. When Adorno claims that "men simply burst and that

■ <sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>58</sup> HEIDEGGER, M., *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1994, GA, vol. 79;

quoted in G. AGAM BEN; *Lo que queda...* *op. cit.*, p. 76 [my own italics].

<sup>59</sup> GAMBEN, G., *Lo que queda...* *op. cit.*, p. 78.

is that”<sup>60</sup>, he is not referring only to death in Auschwitz, but also to death before, during and after Auschwitz, to any man’s death, which is *always* an inauthentic death, a “bursting”.

It is thus not true, therefore, that “in the-being-for-death man authentically appropriates the inauthentic” nor that “in the camp the deported exists *in an everyday and anonymous way* for death” (in the sense of dying authentically in an everyday and anonymous way)<sup>61</sup>. Neither is the being-for-death an *appropriation*, which would imply that there is someone, a subject, able to exercise property rights over it; neither is death in Auschwitz *essentially* different from death in the intensive care unit of a modern hospital, for example, where the everyday and anonymous aspect of dying (*ableben*) does not in the least affect the theoretical possibility of living through one’s own death (*sterben*). In this respect, one cannot dismiss Améry’s words without trying to understand them: “Undoubtedly, fear of death is anywhere the anxiety of dying, and what Franz Borkenau once said is also valid for the camp, that is, that anxiety about death expresses the fear of dying stifled. However, freedom allows us to think about death *without at the same time thinking of anxiety, without feeling anxious about the possibility of dying*. In freedom, death, spiritually-speaking, can at least in theory be disassociated from agony:

from a social point of view, by surrounding it with considerations about the surviving family, about the profession left behind; or from a philosophical stance, by recognising a breath of the nothingness of existence. It need hardly be said that an attempt of this sort is futile, the contradiction of death being insoluble. But in any event, the attempt is still something worthwhile in its own right: faced with death, the free man can assume a certain spiritual attitude, because for him it is not absolutely exhausted in the sufferings of agony. The free man can move on as

far as the bounds of the intelligible, *because deep inside he still keeps a very small redoubt free of fear*. For the prisoner, on the other hand, death no longer had any goad stinging him into thought. This may explain why the prisoner in the camp —and this goes for all of them, intellectuals or not— did indeed undergo a tormenting fear of particular forms of dying, but almost never felt genuine anxiety about death”<sup>62</sup>.

If the free man can actually conceal his own death from himself, by social or intellectual mechanisms, it is because he is able to find a haven in some “home substitute” that prevents him from having to directly face up to the anxiety of his death

■ <sup>60</sup> ADORNO, T.W., *Mínima moralia. Reflexiones desde la vida dañada*, Taurus, Madrid, p. 284.

<sup>61</sup> GAMBEN, G., *Lo que queda...* op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>62</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 76 [my own italics].



This paragraph, directed by Améry against the thought of death, particularly in the Heidegger school of thought, is in fact the clearest confirmation of some of the German thinker's speculations. Because, what does it mean that in freedom it is possible to think of death "without at the same time thinking of anxiety, without feeling anxious about the possibility of dying", if it is not that in freedom it is possible to experience death *inauthentically*? If the free man *can* actually conceal his own death from himself, by social or intellectual mechanisms, it is "because deep inside he still keeps a very small redoubt free of fear", i.e. because he still lives in the world as if it were his own home, or at least because he is able to find a haven in some "home substitute" that prevents him from having to directly face up to the anxiety of his death. Should we thus conclude that the camp prisoner was *obliged* to live through his own death, as Agamben suggests? If this were the case, how should we explain Améry's final assertion, that the prisoners "almost never" felt any real anxiety faced with death? In fact, there is no paradox here. If "death no longer had any goad stinging (the prisoner) into thought", it is because the thought of death had less room in the camp to prevent the experience of one's own dying. But that does not mean that there was no possibility of avoiding anxiety, just as happens outside the *Lager*. We have already seen that the havens, the "false homes", may be of many kinds, from the faith of the believers to the firm ground of an unscathed identity, from the unconsciousness of the *kapo* blinded by his blows to the wish and the hope of bearing witness to the world. All this may be of use for not having to face up to the anxiety of one's own dying. In the *Lager*, therefore, being-for-death is not necessary. But is it *possible*?

It is here that the figure of the *Muselmann* emerges, as a ghost or a "spectre"<sup>63</sup>, as the man who does indeed live through his own death and in living it becomes the non-man, the

drowned, the "walking corpse, a bundle of physical functions in agony"<sup>64</sup>. Agamben rightly points out the central role that the *Muselmann* has to take in any approach to the experience of the *Lager*, but he fumbles when he tries to bring the problem to the field of testimony. The

**Overcoming, yes. But from where? Who is actually wounded when the subject is the wound itself?**

*Muselmann* is *beyond* testimony. We have already seen that he constitutes an "impossible witness", comprehensible only in his exteriority and never to be claimed as a voice, whatever the intellectual twists and bends we give to the matter. And yet, as Levi knew, it is vital for us to attempt to approach these men and women, beings who, without constituting "complete witnesses", have indeed lived through an experience that has taken them beyond the limits of humanity itself.

The *Muselmann* comes thus forward as a being of a sort that Heidegger could not envisage, but one that his phenomenological analyses could help us to understand better.

■ <sup>63</sup> AGAMBEN, G., *Lo que queda...* op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>64</sup> AMÉRY, J., *Más allá...* op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> See M HEIDEGGER, *Ser...* op. cit., § 53, pp. 279-286.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314 and p. 302.

We have to move with great care, however, and always remember that everything that we say about the *Muselmann*'s experience is pure speculation. We can never know what the experience of the non-man consists of, in the same way that we shall never know how an

animal feels or lives, nor manage to see the light of a black hole. Still, without wishing to go into an in-depth discussion about Heidegger's existential analytic, we could suggest that the authentic being-towards-death has one of its possible projects, if not the only one, in the *Muselmann*<sup>65</sup>. When he described the ontological structure of this moving towards "the possibility of the absolute impossibility" which is the opening of the being-towards-death, Heidegger was clearly thinking of another model, probably the Christian mystic in the Lutheran tradition. Ultimately emptied of their content, the structures of the potentiality-for-being —the call, conscience, guilt— which culminate in resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), as a form of existence proper to the Dasein, vouch for a clear theological origin and point towards particular existentiell (ontic) possibilities. If we take the Heideggerian reflection one step further, however, we can consider that the authentic *resoluteness*, the *final* resoluteness —we might venture to say the final "resolution"— insofar as it is a "projecting of oneself upon one's own being-guilty [...] that is to say, as being-the-basis of a nullity (*Nichtigkeit*)"<sup>66</sup>, constitutes in fact the ontological description of a perfectly real ontic possibility: *dehumanisation*. The resolute being would thus be the Dasein effectively advancing towards its own death and assuming the nullity of its own existential foundation, plunging therefore into an abyss from which no voice can be uttered, a place from which nothing can emerge, a there (*Da*) where nothing *ex-sists*, that no-one can *a-sist*.

Dislocation forces him  
to endlessly seek without  
finding himself, condemned  
to eternal wandering

**V** The *Muselmann*, then, by being his own death, and so losing his humanity and becoming pure *sistere*, is necessarily a *mute* projection, an "impossible witness". A further step this way, however, there is the "dislocated witness", the being who is not yet his own death, but is indeed *his own wound*; the man who has not lost himself in a final not-being-at-home, but who dwells in an unstable fault, a dislocation that forces him to endlessly seek without finding himself, condemned to eternal wandering in an attempt to flee from exposure; the voice that can still speak and bear witness to his exile, his helplessness, but which can only do so hesitantly, somewhere between the wounded animal's whimper and the sullen tramp's mumbling; not the drowned in the lagoon, but the survivor in the mud.

Overcoming, yes. But *from where*? *Who* is actually wounded when the subject is the wound itself? Until we are able to answer this question, we shall never understand the meaning of the testimony that Jean Améry brought to us, with his words, but also with his life, right up to the last leap, the only act that could overcome the swinging of the dislocated body on the hook at Fort Breendonk **||**