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NARRATING SURVIVAL IN PRIMO LEVI'S *IF THIS IS A MAN* AND *THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED*.

Leigh-Ann Mary Collopen

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersand, Johannesburg, in part fulfilment of the requirements for a degree of Master of Arts.

Johannesburg, 2006

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Abstract

This research report explores the process of narrating survival in Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved*. The central objective is to understand the process of psychological survival is narrated in Levi's autobiographical narrative. To this end, I have used a psychoanalytical framework to understand the traumatic impact of Auschwitz on subjectivity as well as to position subjectivity in relation to autobiographical narrative. I shall argue that the trauma of Auschwitz resulted in an eroded and shattered subjectivity and that narrative offers a space in which the reconstruction of that subjectivity can be negotiated.

Keywords: narrating survival, Primo Levi, Lacanian theory, subjectivity, historical trauma, autobiographical narrative

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Leigh-Ann Mary Collopen

____ day of _____ 2006

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Dedication

I would like to sincerely thank the following people for helping me narrate my *own* process of survival:

Kendall, for simply being

Joanne, for believing

Claudia and Janice, for listening

Rakesh, for patiently teaching me about precious things

Ashleigh, for your help and guidance and advice and everything in between… I thank you

To my parents and family, for their support

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Chapter One:

Self and Self-Narration: An Introduction to Autobiographical Narrative and Lacanian Theory

The central objective of this research report is to explore the process whereby narrative space and historical trauma intertwine. Functionally, what I have termed "narrating survival" in Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved* refers to a process of psychological survival within autobiographical narrative. This chapter begins by considering Primo Levi's work within an autobiographical framework and then moves on to consider Levi's articulation of his traumatic experiences within a Lacanian framework.

To begin this endeavour, I think that it is useful to consider the concept of autobiography and, hence, the genre's influence on my engagement with Levi's texts. By accounting for why this particular genre is attractive to an inquiry into narrating survival, I intend to elucidate firstly the complexity inherent in representing trauma and secondly the relationship between the act of writing and the process of survival that informs my research.

As a literary genre, autobiography can be broadly defined as a self-reflective form of narrative.[1] However Eakin[2] points out that autobiography encompasses four main discourses: a literary discourse, a discourse of fact, a discourse of fiction and a discourse of identity. Eakin's comment indicates that it is hard to keep the

[1] Tiechart, M. 1984.
[2] Eakin, P.J. http://cla.calploy.edu./~charlon/HIST304/Eakin.BreakingRule.hlm

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definition of autobiography purely in the realm of the literary because the genre offers a retrospective account of one's own life where the emphasis is also on individual development. Lollini[3] refers to the philosophical understanding of autobiography where there is a premise of logic in the progression of one's life. Hence, in the act of autobiography the writer seeks to create coherence and general meaning within his/her own life. From this standpoint autobiography is more than a space for self-reflection as it not only describes a life but the very act of writing affects that life. This effect can be linked to the act of transformation in the act of autobiography.[4] The act of writing one's autobiography gives way to a process that recreates the writer's experiences in "meaningful form".[5] This comment gives weight to Eakin's argument about the complexity of autobiography. Autobiography is considered a systemised form of contemplation where the author systematically articulates his/her experiences and in that process creates an understanding that directly affects the narrator's life. Hence, the genre becomes an important (w)rite of self-validation as autobiography becomes a significant convergence between narrative and personal space.

In defining Primo Levi's work as autobiographical, it is important to distinguish between memoir and autobiography. Firstly, autobiographies are written with an audience in mind and with the intent to publish whereas memoirs are written more for personal use.[6] Secondly a memoir is a record of people and events that the

[3] Lollini, M. 2004. p, 67-89
[4] Tiechart, M. 1984.
[5] Tiechart, M. 1984. p, 32
[6] Abrams, M.H. 1993

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author has known or witnessed and is similar in style to a dairy or a daily journal.[7] Although autobiography is a record of events in an author's life it differs from memoir writing in the attempt to impose a sense of the character, temperament and milieu to the writer's own experiences and in that process create meaning and coherence around experiences. It is in this characteristic of autobiography that contains the discourse of identity and fiction referred to by Eakin.[8] In *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved*, Primo Levi re-orders the temporality of his experiences in order to explore the meaning within them. In *If This Is A Man*, for example, he admits that he wrote the text in order of urgency.[9] Hence in autobiographical writing Levi is able to create a new narrative structure to impose upon his experiences of Auschwitz. In so doing he systematically engages with his experiences utilising elements of self-reflection and validation whilst creating a narrative that contemplates what these experiences mean.

In explaining what autobiography is, note the oscillation between the reference to Levi as the "author" – as the man who survived Auschwitz – and Levi as the "narrator" – the voice or the "I" that speaks from within the literary work. In critiquing a text, it is conventional to refer to the psyche, thoughts and experiences of the written "I" or the narrator as opposed to the author. Hence it is a fallacy to draw conclusions about the author though his/her narrative or to speculate about the author's psyche, thoughts and experiences through the texts he/she produces. However this distinction is blurred when the literary work at hand belongs to the genre of autobiography. In the case of Levi's two texts – *If This Is A Man* and *The*

[7] Abrams, M.H. 1993
[8] Eakin, P. J. http://cla.calploy.edu./~charlon/HIST304/Eakin.BreakingRule.hlm

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Drowned and The Saved – the thoughts and experiences that emerge are his own and there is a valid argument for assuming that what Levi writes about in his texts are a true reflection of his life. Paolo Puppa[10] considers a metaphor for this differentiation that aptly explains this tricky positioning in the analysis of Levi's work. Puppa explains the identification of author and narrator as follows:

> He [Levi] makes a double identification with the character, both as God the Father and as God the Son, the former is a metaphor outside the story, incarnated in the body of the latter, who is inside the story as the narrator.[11]

In autobiography the author is objectified, in Puppa's words "incarnated", in the text as the narrator. Puppa's metaphor explains Levi's lucid presence, as author, in the voice of the narrator in his texts. However note that the author's identity exists "outside the story". Therefore one must be weary of drawing inferences about the author through his/her autobiographical work. Therefore, in this research report I refer to the narrator as the "Written-I" in an attempt to negotiate the blur between author and narrator in Levi's work.

In *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved*, Levi articulates his experiences of Auschwitz. In both texts he engages with his incarceration at Auschwitz and contemplates its meaning to him as well as its significance to humanity. The need to create coherence and meaning from his experiences forms a central motif and motive for his writing. Levi wanted to understand his incarceration at Auschwitz and the broader injustice to humanity that defined the

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[9] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* P, 16
[10] Puppa, P. 2004.

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Holocaust. Levi explains this need to understand in an interview that was conducted by Calcogno in 1986:

> I feel the passage of the years, of my years too. And as they pass, I feel a slippage in the way these memories are understood in the world.
> … I have spent forty years going around trying to understand the Germans. To understand how this could of happened is the aim of my life… I want to understand the world around me.[12]

Levi's need to identify meaning and comprehend his incarceration and the atrocities of the Holocaust is a point he repeats in both these texts as well as in many of his interviews.[13] Farrell makes the observation that Levi belongs to a generation of humanists who attempted to understand and impose meaning on the world.[14] For example, in the preface to *If This Is A Man* he states that the book is meant to "furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind… The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm-signal."[15] In this text, Levi uses his experiences to "furnish" a "quiet study" of the psyche and through this understanding flag the death camps as a "sinister alarm-signal". In this objective Levi sets out to systematically impose meaning and coherence on the world around him through his autobiographical works. In both *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved* Levi acknowledges his attempt to deduce and formulate meaning and comprehension as well as bear witness to his experiences of Auschwitz. Levi's consistent reach toward formulating meaning and understanding from his

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[11] Puppa, P. 2004, p. 184
[12] Calcogno G. 2001
[13] Belpoliti, M & Gordon, R (eds). 2001.
[14] Ferrel, J. 2004.

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experiences align his work to the philosophical aspect of autobiography where the search for meaning and a sense of coherence are identified as the motive for autobiographical writing.

Levi's desire to speak of his own experiences and to bear witness to the death camps is a common desire amongst the accounts of survivors of the Holocaust. Langer[16] points out that survivor accounts give "a view of experience invested with meaning and purpose". This clearly links survivor testimony to the philosophical motive of autobiographical writing and indicates a link between testimony and autobiography in the context of Holocaust writing. I think that Levi gives a vivid account of this desire to testify in the preface to *If This Is A Man*:

> The need to tell our story to 'the rest', to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs. The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation.[17]

Levi's investment in the process of testifying and its centrality are evident in his choice of words. Describing his experiences at Auschwitz was a very strong compulsion that took on an "immediate and violent impulse", this suggests the degree to which he needed to bear witness to his experiences. This excerpt belies a

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[15] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* p.15
[16] Langer, L. 1988
[17] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* P.15

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common desire in all survivor testimony that Appelfeld[18] refers to as a search for relief through the process of testimony. Thus in Levi's autobiographical works, his desire to understand his experiences of Auschwitz merge with his desire to testify about the Holocaust. These processes intertwine with Levi's engagement with his readers, referred to here as "the rest". These desires propel Levi's work and must be taken cognisance of in a critique of his work.

I have shown that *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved* can be viewed as autobiographical because these texts are self-reflective and aimed toward creating meaning and understanding, not just for the narrator but for the reader as well. Marilyn Teichart[19] identifies five main processes that summarise the narrator's engagement and investment in the autobiographical act: remembering; an attempt to reintegrate or summarize; recovery; dialogue with self; transformation. I intend to expand on Teichart's conclusions later in this research report in order to extend a link between the act of survival and autobiographical narrative. Teichart's work is informative as it reveals a conclusive link between the act of writing autobiography and its transformational quality. But it is important to note that Teichart uses these aspects of the agency of writing to conclude that autobiography is a healing art and constitutes what she defines as the act of "reaching toward wholeness".[20] However, survival refers to the act of continuing to exist despite of, or through, previous experiences. My study focuses on this capacity to endure, to exist after a trauma and not within the specific process of healing which connotes a movement towards a positive, better

[18] Appelfeld, A. 1988.
[19] Tiechart, M. 1984.

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existence. As will be discussed – such a movement is idealistic when considering existence after a traumatic experience.

Considering the above discussion on autobiography I think that the link between the act of autobiography and the process of survival is plausible as it suggests a linkage between psychic process and narrative space. Teichart's work on the act of transformation in autobiographical narrative does suggest that survival is perpetuated by virtue of the fact that a process of testifying is opened in the agency of narrative. Hence I intend to argue that the genre of autobiography bespeaks a link between narrative and survival. Further, I argue that autobiography becomes functional for Levi as a narrator, after his experiences at Auschwitz and that the meaning and understanding it initiates becomes a part of a process of survival.

The experiences that Levi narrates in his autobiographical work attest to an era of European history that is etched in political, social and personal memory as a space of horror, atrocities, silences and gaps. It has been argued that the Jewish Holocaust or *Shoah* was an event that elicited mammoth change in the trajectory of civilisation. In fact the Holocaust has come to be considered as a break in European civilisation.[21] From the testimony of those who emerged from the death camps – Primo Levi is one of several examples – it is clear that these men and women endured a kaleidoscope of subverted reality, horror, extraordinary actions and reactions. These testimonies attest to the traumatising reality of that era. I am

[20] Tiechart, M. 1984, p.5
[21] A point by Dan Diner made in Schlant, E. 1999

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interested in the psychoanalytical impact of this historical trauma as it is reflected in Primo Levi's work. I am concerned with the ways in which subjectivity is allowed the space to traverse its traumatic experiences within narrative, in a process of survival.

Trauma is broadly defined as a distressing experience or event that causes some kind of emotional shock.[22] The traumatic experience can include what the person has personally experienced, witnessed or even confronted in relation to events that involve actual and/or threatened death and/or serious injury.[23] Although this broad definition of trauma does highlight the link between psychological stress and traumatic events, it does not reveal much about the true impact such events have on individual subjectivity. Cathy Caruth gives a definition of traumatic experiences that I think elucidates Levi's traumatic experience of Auschwitz and the literary work he later produced:

> …an event that… is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor…
> The story of trauma [is], then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life[24]

Caruth's definition of a traumatic incident highlights the key aspects of what trauma involves from a psychoanalytical viewpoint. Firstly, trauma is an event

[22] Barlow, V and Durand, M. 2001
[23] Barlow, V and Durand. 2001

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that is largely unexpected; it is an experience that occurs completely outside what gets considered as a conventional range of experiences and events from the environment. At the level of the individual, the Holocaust was experienced as an unexpected historical event that could not be fully understood by any one individual in that era. For example, Auschwitz – the concentration camp where Levi was incarcerated – has come to symbolise the atrocities of the Third Reich and the calculated, cold, government-endorsed cruelty they inflicted on millions of people. At Auschwitz, Levi was subjected to an arduous daily regime of hard physical labour as well as both physical and mental torture and – like all prisoners of the concentration camp – Levi did not expect the atrocities they were subjected to at Auschwitz. Further because Levi's trauma was evoked by social, political and historical circumstances, his traumatic experiences can be read as an index of the broader historical trauma that defined this era.

The second point that Caruth makes relates to the fact that the individual represses the traumatic incident or aspects of it. The individual cannot cope with the traumatic event because of its unexpected nature and, in response; the psyche represses the memory of this incident. Hence in the case of severe trauma one is either not aware of the event's gravity or becomes disconnected from the experience.[25] After the liberation of Auschwitz, Europe plunged into a silence about the Nazi's crimes against humanity. One survivor describes this silence as "so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness [the Holocaust survivor] even seemed like a fabricator to himself… the inability to express your experience and

[24] Caruth, Cathy. 1996, p. 4-7
[25] Barlow, V and Durand, M.2001

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the feeling of guilt combined together and created silence."[26] Jean Francois Lyotard theorised this issue of silence in his renowned paper, *The Differend.*[27] In this paper he debates the validity of writings about the Holocaust. He argues that the truth of the Holocaust cannot be fully acknowledged as it cannot be contained within one person's testimonial. Lyotard's work emphasises the lacuna that has come to define the Holocaust and re-asserts Caruth's point about the repression of memory of the Holocaust. Lyotard's argument gives an indication of the degree to which traumatic memories can be repressed and made unavailable to the consciousness of both individuals and entire nations. Hence the individual's tendency toward repression is supported and facilitated by society's willingness to repress the horrors of the Holocaust.

Caruth's third observation concerns what she refers to as the imposition of the traumatic experience in the form of "nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor". This paradoxical shift in the psyche's response to trauma – the drive to repress and the return to the space of trauma – has been studied extensively in the field in psychology under the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[28] This disorder is used to describe a variety of different symptoms presented by people who have experienced traumatic incidents. These range from hallucinations to anxiety attacks. In these symptoms there is recognition that traumatic events, although initially repressed, does attempt to resurface and – in Caruth's words – the trauma becomes the "narrative of a belated experience". Although Caruth's definition of trauma is revealing, it does not fully explore the

[26] Appelfeld, A. 1988, p 86
[27] Lyotard, J. F. 1988

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linkage between narrative and the psyche made in studies on autobiography. The process of narrating survival and my exploration of the relationship between survival and narrative is not fully facilitated by Caruth's definition of trauma.

Caruth's definition aptly explains the repression of the traumatic event and the subsequent repetition of the trauma that manifest in an array of displaced symptoms. However, I think that Caruth does not fully exploit her own description of trauma as a "*narrative* of a belated experience". This reference to narrative in relation to psychic repression and repetition is elaborated on in the work of Jacques Lacan.[29] Within a psychoanalytical frame, Lacan links linguistic aspects of language to psychic development in a manner that allows for a clearer linkage between narrative and the psyche. In order to understand how such a link is plausible, one needs to explore Lacan's theorisation of mental development from what he referred to as the real through to the symbolic.

For Lacan the psyche is constituted of the real, the Imaginary (or the Lacanian Mirror phase) and the symbolic.[30] Lacan proposed that the real defines a newborn infant's reality. The real is considered to be an experience of nebulous space: undifferentiated and, importantly, pre-linguistic. In this phase of mental development there is no recognition of an external and internal reality since the real is a space where no boundaries exist through which such differentiations can be made. According to Lacan, in later development the real is that which presents itself as unassimilable. In other words, the real is an un-narrateable space that

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[28] Barlow, V and Durand, M. 2001
[29] Lacan, J. 1966; 1973 and 1981

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cannot be directly enunciated. When the infant discovers his/her own image in a mirror it precipitates an emergence from the real as there is an awareness that he/she is significantly disconnected to that which is Other. This is a crucial moment that marks the discovery of a Self that is separate and distinct from an Other and it heralds the Lacanian Mirror phase. This phase acts to position the infant in relation to his/her internal and external reality. This positioning becomes crucial to the rudimental structure of the Lacanian psyche.

After the plenitude of the real, the recognition that one exists in necessary and fundamental separation from an Other creates a duality in the experience of the Self as different to an Other. Feelings of anxiety and alienation manifest in the experience of lack in this newly discovered reality defined by separateness.[31] The anxiety that the infant feels is linked to the reality that although one is alienated from another, the Other is necessary in the maintenance of the Self. In order to preserve a sense of Self despite the experience of lack, the psyche must undergo a structural change in order to cope with the anxiety and alienation and protect its newfound subjectivity. The psyche splits into the conscious and unconscious, these are separated by "the cut", a bar of repression.[32] I consider these structures to be the mechanical components of the Lacanian psyche that only become fully functional when framed within the linguistic structures acquired through language development.

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[30] Lacan, J. 1973
[31] Lacan, J. 1973
[32] Lacan, J. 1973

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The acquisition of language marks the infant's entry into the symbolic where these "mechanical components" take on their full function.[33] The symbolic order both structures the internal functions of the psyche and also facilitates its intra-psychic functions. The unconscious consists of free-floating signifiers which are the impression or conception of one's inner or outer reality.[34] When these free-floating signifiers form a chain that gets attached to signifieds – the sounds or marks of the sign – a movement is created that is referred to as a process of signification. Lacan goes on to define consciousness as the result of a continuous process of signification.[35] Hence the inter-psychic function of the symbolic order is the maintenance of these mechanical components. Where the unconscious and its desire to merge into the real is kept suppressed by a bar of repression or "cut", hence maintaining the *méconnaissance* of I and the structures that allow for subjectivity. Theoretically, there are infinite possibilities within this process of signification as there is no intrinsic order to these signifiers. However, the symbolic orders intra-psychic function and the process of signification in terms of its external reality.

This is an important process of signification; the Lacanian subject must take into account the cultural and familial rules pre-determined by the society. The Law-of-the-Father contains these necessary laws and regulations. Master signifiers order the process of signification in accordance with these laws. The process of signification that determines subjectivity must take into account these intra-psyche rules and regulations that mediate the Lacanian psyche's relationship to its

[33] Lacan, J. 1973
[34] Lacan, J. 1973

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broader social context (contained in the Other). This process is mediated by the *point de caption,* which enables the Law-of-the-Father through master signifiers that order the process of signification. In this way, subjectivity – essentially the process of signification – gets ordered and informed by an external reality. It gives a viable external frame to the symbolic order where the Self exists only in relation to an Other. The Other must be perceived to be non-shifting or stable in order for the Self to keep its sense of coherence within the symbolic. This process of enculturation forms a frame of "normality" that creates a sense of external stability for the Lacanian Subject. Thus the "I" that speaks enunciates his/her *méconnaissance* of unified subjectivity, as it is ordered by the Law-of-the-Father.

In the case of the Holocaust, there is an external reality that comes to be defined by consistent and unexpected trauma. This external reality defined by traumatic experience disrupts the symbolic order as the Law-of-the-Father, the social and cultural codes that once defined external reality ceases to make sense as these codes get systematically subverted. In the face of such massive trauma, these Laws get subverted and become incompatible in the immediacy of these events that are unexpected. As a result the symbolic order gets destabilised and a merge into the real begins and there is entropy in the mechanical components of the psyche. In the text *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan defines traumatic encounters as *tuché,* an encounter (a radical encounter) with the real within the realm of the symbolic order. In reference to the reality of trauma, Lacan uses the word "*souffrance"*.[36] I find this word apt in explaining the nature

[35] Lacan, J. 1973
[36] Lacan, J. 1981

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of the traumatic experience as it denotes “in suspense”, “pending”, or “awaiting attention” but also denotes “pain”. In the face of trauma the Lacanian subject is faced with an experience that is unexpected because it does not make sense within the law-constructed symbolic order. As a result there is a slide into the real that keeps the Subject “in suspense” but also “in pain” due to the fundamental anxiety felt because of the threat to subjectivity. The real is what presents itself as inassimilable in the symbolic because it cannot be brought into the process of signification via language.

The existence of trauma as *souffrance* precipitates the shifting of the trauma to a space “unavailable to consciousness” – in other words – the repression of the traumatic event. The *méconnaisance* of “I” rests on the illusion that subjectivity is unified and stable. Because trauma destabilises the symbolic order it also poses a threat to the *méconnaissance* of an “I”. To cope with this threat the psyche defends itself by repressing the traumatic event in memory. This act of repression is a natural defence mechanism that aids in the attempt to cope with biological survival. In the field of psychology, the study of PTSD reveals the extent to which the individual can (and does) attempt to deny the traumatic experience.[37] The study of PTSD is focused on the repression of the traumatic events presented in the avoidance of thoughts and behaviours that evoke past traumatic experiences. There is the observation that there is a “persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness”[38]; this is a manifestation of the act of repression. This drive toward repression allows for

[37] Barlow, V and Durand, M. 2001
[38] Barlow, V and Durand, M. 2001.

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the subject's survival despite the threat to the *méconnaissance* of the coherent self presented by the destabilisation of the symbolic order.

As a missed experience the traumatic event continues to be problematic within the symbolic order because it exists as a lack within the psyche as an event that has yet to be assimilated. Recall that Caruth notes that traumatic events "impose itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive acts of the survivor". Within the repressed enclosure of the unconscious – the traumatic experience creates rapturous moments in the process of signification, demanding to be integrated within subjectivity. These repetitious acts or behaviours are the attempts to negotiate the Law-of-the-Father after a traumatic experience where these Laws and the master signifiers that support them have failed. Lacan considered the act of repetition a function of Return.[39] The function of return is central to the unconscious and "the law of his [the Lacanian Subject's] own desire"[40], this is the desire to return to the real or a space where the sense of lack can be completed. Hence it needs to be understood that repression does not imply the erasure of the trauma. Repression is a defence mechanism that can only serve to push the memory of the traumatic experience outside the bounds of awareness by denying its memory. This leads to the understanding that repetition is not the same as reproduction. In a process of reproduction there is a replication or reduplication of an event as it was. Repetition reintroduces the traumatic incident into conscious awareness so that the event can be integrated into the sense of Self. The function of repetition brings the trauma to the fore in order to grasp, destroy or

[39] Lacan, J. 1981
[40] Lacan, J. 1973, p. 48

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burn the event "in a symbolic way, as one says, *in effigie*, in abstentia.".[41] In other words the act of repetition brings the traumatic event into the symbolic order, framed within the linguistic process of signification, where meaning and coherence can be imposed onto the incident. Lacan's emphasis on the centrality of language in the structure and function of psyche offers entry into the significance of narrative in the process of survival.

I consider Primo Levi's need to bear witness through his writing as an act that belies the repetition that Lacan speaks of and an example of what Caruth refers to as a "narrative of belated experiences" signifying a trauma's "endless impact on a life". Evident in Levi's work and the interviews conducted with him is his compulsive act towards understanding the Holocaust. This desire to create a sense of meaning and coherence from his experiences became a compulsive and consistent desire that, for Levi, occurred through the act of writing. Hence, I consider his act of writing and the texts he produced after his liberation from Auschwitz as a repetitive act. Levi's work can be read as an attempt to reintroduce the trauma into the realm of the symbolic in order to create meaning that would reconstitute a sense of self.

Because trauma affects the psyche in the realm of the real, its effects on the psyche exist in an un-narrate-able space that cannot be fully enunciated and, by extension, integrated into subjectivity within the symbolic order and its system of language. After a traumatic experience, "I" – the holder of the *méconnaissance* of subjectivity within the symbolic order – needs to "reclaim" the memory of the

[41] Lacan, J. 1973, p. 49

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traumatic experience. This process occurs though language. It is here that narrative becomes crucial in the survival of the psyche. Narrative allows for the enunciation of the trauma in a contained space that is perceived of as safe. Within narrative the traumatic memory is contained within the symbolic by renegotiating the Self after the subversion of the *point du caption.*

Hence narrative allows for the resurfacing of the repressed memory, such that the memory can be re-knitted into present reality in order to create a sense of coherence and meaning. This nexus is where narrative process is aligned with the individual's process of survival. Lacan considered the function of Return to be the desire of the unconscious. In the process of signification, signifiers that are most frequently attached to a chain of signifiers give a clear indication of unconscious desires expressed in the realm of the symbolic.[42] In the instant of a traumatic event, the rupture of the Lacanian Bar occurs more often and the unconscious desire to Return to the realm of the real becomes more evident. By giving vent to this repetitive desire the Subject is able to perpetuate his/her own survival by bringing the trauma into the structured frame of language and the realm of the real. The function of Return is fulfilled through the repetitive act of narrative in a way that supports the perpetuation of survival after a traumatic event.

The fictional autobiographical narrative that Levi produces can be read as a unique space where the traumatised subject gets to enunciate his/her sense of Self. Narrative space allows for the reconstruction of "I" in a process akin to the

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"talking cure". The psychoanalytical "talking cure" is based on work done on the "pathogenetic event called the 'traumatic experience' ".[43] Traumatic events cause certain specific symptoms (examples of which are recognised in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) however "the putting into words of the event (in the patient's stories) determined the lifting of the symptom".[44] Thus in narrative the traumatised subject is able to confront his/her symptoms and initiate a process whereby these symptoms may be alleviated. The above discussion on autobiographical narrative indicates that the telling of one's story not only alleviates symptomatic responses but allows for a space where a discourse of identity can be created. Within autobiographical space the subject can attempt to integrate the traumatic experience into his/her present reality hence creating a sense of continuity in the sense of Self that is threatened after the disruptive experience of trauma.

This is the process of survival that I intend to explore through Levi's autobiographical texts. As a repetitive act, Levi's texts indicate the psyche's attempt to regain "equilibrium". I shall argue that it is this drive towards survival that the leads Levi onto the "difficult and improbable paths [to] salvation"[45] that Levi refers to in his discussion of the Saved – those who survived the Holocaust – in *This Is A Man*. The rupture of subjectivity means that the psyche must radically renegotiate its positioning in relation to the symbolic and the *Nom du Pére.* Thus

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[42] Lacan, J. 1966
[43] Lacan, J. 1981
[44] Lacan, J. 1981
[45] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* p. 96

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signifying that trauma exists in the repetitive act and the drive to "tell the story" to "the rest" is an attempt to reaffirm Self in relation to Other.

Within the texts themselves, I shall explore the process of narrating survival by considering the deconstruction and reconstruction of the traumatised subject within narrative. Because I have framed narrative as a repetitive act, those aspects of the trauma most revisited in the text will be explored as an indication of those aspects of the trauma that had the most telling impact on subjectivity. Given the dynamics of fictional autobiographical narrative, my analysis of the texts will include an exploration of contextual information in order to draw comprehensive conclusions about the process of narrating survival.

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Chapter Two:

The Subversion of subjectivity in *If This Is A Man*

This chapter aims to further examine the impact of historical trauma on the psyche as it is represented in Levi's autobiographical narrative, *If This Is A Man*. To this end, this chapter focuses on the subversion of norms, rules and regulations at Auschwitz as it is narrated in *If This Is A Man* as this subversion indicates a disruption in the symbolic order. I intend to examine both the genesis of *If This Is A Man* as well as the text itself in order to comment on the disruption of the symbolic order and the consequent deconstruction of subjectivity after a historical trauma. This will allow for a more inclusive conclusion on the process of narrating survival.

Primo Levi was incarcerated at Auschwitz-Monowitz from February 1944 to January 1945. After his liberation from Auschwitz, Levi returned to his hometown of Turin, Italy in October 1945 after enduring an arduous journey that lasted about nine months. From Levi's transport there were in total 489 people on the train bound to Auschwitz. About 296 entered the various camps alive but 193 were sent to the gas chambers immediately.[46] Levi was one of only sixteen men and eight women who returned to Italy from Levi's transport. These statistics, the aftermath of the war that devastated Europe as well as his incarceration at Auschwitz explains Levi's sense of numbed shock on his arrival back home. He found it very hard to readjust to life after his incarceration and his behavioural patterns bespoke the fact that he was still traumatised. Because he was one of very few survivors, he was also plagued by a sense of loneliness and isolation as

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well as a sense of purposeless.[47] His behaviour indicated the extent to which his psyche must have been marred by his traumatic experience of the Holocaust and, hence, the difficulty he would have felt in constructing a process of survival after his twenty month ordeal.

If This Is A Man is the first text that Levi produced after his liberation from Auschwitz. The book begins by explaining how he came to be incarcerated at Auschwitz and tells of his experiences of the Nazi Death Camp. Although *If This Is A Man* was published in 1947, its development began much earlier. In the preface to *If This Is A Man*, Levi reveals that this desire speak about his experiences began while he was incarcerated at Auschwitz. In an attempt to cope with his experiences of the Holocaust, Primo Levi felt the need to testify, to bear witness to all that he had witnessed and experienced. This desire culminated in a compulsion to communicate[48], he was consumed by a decision speak about his ordeal. For example, in Turin he would corner train passengers and unapologetically tell them about his experiences of Auschwitz. Such acts illustrate a compulsion to bear witness that bespeaks the importance of narrative, and by extension the act of autobiography, after historical trauma. Levi began the actual writing process in the spring of 1946 at the beginning of the Nuremberg Trails.

It is interesting to note that this compulsion to bear witness was present during his incarceration at Auschwitz because it implies that narrative is intertwined with

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[46] Belpoliti, M & Gordon, R (eds). 2001
[47] Thompson, I. 2004

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traumatic space. The desire to speak about his experiences and his need to attest to the atrocities of the Holocaust are contained within Levi's compulsion towards narrative. He had written the text in a process that he considered "a private ritual of cleansing".[49] In fact, Levi attributes his survival to this cathartic process, stating that, "[p]roperly if I'd *not* written this book, I'd have remained one of the damned of the earth".[50] Thus, the compulsive act of autobiography bespeaks a drive towards survival. The above contextual information on *If This Is A Man* affirms Lacan's theory on the centrality of language in maintaining subjectivity and asserting a sense of self within the symbolic order after a traumatic experience. The genesis of the text and Levi's sense of disorientation and shock indicate that the mammoth changes that occurred during the Holocaust destabilised Levi's sense of the symbolic order. A consequence of such a change in the symbolic order is that language begins to fail as master signifiers lose their meaning and subjectivity falters. Levi's compulsive desire to tell his story indicates the importance of language in re-framing subjectivity after historical trauma as the act of writing allows the narrator to renegotiate the symbolic order.

Levi considers this need to write in the preface to *If This Is A* Man in a way that reasserts the privilege of language in the space of trauma. He states that telling others about his experiences of Auschwitz took on "the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs".[51] Based on this impulse, the text was written "in order of urgency" as an "interior

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[48] Thompson, I. 2004
[49] Thompson, I. 2004, p. 146
[50] Thompson, I. 2004, p. 142
[51] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* p.15

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liberation".[52] Levi's comments indicate that by writing this text he began to feel a sense of internal liberation from the burden of his experiences. The necessity of bearing witness is linked to "elementary needs", suggesting the extent to which narrative is fundamental to the process of both physical and psychological survival. Levi's investment in the reader is revealed in the poem that opens *If This Is A Man*. In the poem he states in an authoritative tone: "I commend these words to you,/ Carve them in your hearts….".[53] He demands that the text be taken very seriously and the reader is asked to "carve them [the words of the text] into your hearts"; to remember this story and to contemplate the question "Is this a man?" This poem indicates the level of engagement Levi demands from the reader as well as his own investment in his readers.

I think that Levi's investment in the reader is indicative of the Lacanian Subject's investment in an Other within the symbolic order. The Subject's reality is positioned in relation to the reflection of an Other, the Other is also the space of language. According to Lacan, our capacity to understand our reality exists within this intra-subjective space, hence our dependence on an Other. Further, for Lacan language references the discourse of Other.[54] This means that our experience of ourselves in reality is referenced by an Other through the medium of language. Lacan insists that through the function of the Word, the subject is transformed through the introduction of signifiers. This explains Levi's investment in his readers. He has experienced a reality so detached from what he knew that he requires an attentive audience in order to make the experience of Auschwitz more

[52] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p.15
[53] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 17

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tangible, more lucid and more real to himself. The relationship between self and Other explains Levi's compulsive need to tell his story to Others; to the reader. Through narrative, Levi's subjectivity is framed through language and referenced by an Other and this aids his process of survival as he renegotiates his sense of self.

After this poem of contemplation and warning, Levi draws the reader into the text's first chapter The Journey with the words "I was captured by the Fascist Militia on 13 December 1943".[55] This sentence sets up an atmosphere of entrapment that characterises the rest of this text. The factual tone of this opening sentence is carried out throughout the text. It is indicative of Levi's style as a writer, which is more critical than it is creative. Farrell comments that Levi's convictions as a humanist lead him to critically scrutinise his writing style, measuring it against criteria of intelligibility, of communicability, of reason and reality.[56] Levi considered his first obligation as a writer to be clarity of thought and purity of style.[57] However, there are instances in the narrative where the impact of this historical trauma reveals itself despite the text's overall critical stance. I think that because of Levi's emphasis on a style that is more critical than it is creative, instances in *If This Is A Man* that deviate from his general style reveal the impact of Auschwitz on his psyche.

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[54] Lacan, J. 1981
[55] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man*. 1958, p.19
[56] Ferrel, J. 2004
[57] Ferrel, J. 2004

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The narrator of *If This Is A Man* reflects on his life before his deportation to Auschwitz with a sense of mournful disillusionment in his naïve belief of "a world inhibited by civilised Cartesian phantoms."[58] Although the narrator had lived under laws of racial segregation prior to his deportation, these laws would soon be usurped by a far more subversive structure. In hindsight, the narrator considers life before Auschwitz as an illusion, a phantom world of rational civilisation. The radical destabilisation of these "Cartesian" social rules, the symbolic laws which defined the narrator's world before his incarceration, stresses the eradication of the "cultivated" rebellion that the narrator identified with before his journey. The narrator is thrust into a space that systematically threatens the *méconnaissance* of "I" and subverts the narrator's subjectivity. At the roll calls the narrator explains that the first blows from the German SS were confusing, "how can one hit a man without anger?"[59] This example of the narrator's experience of the senselessness in the Nazi Death camps reflects the destabilisation of the symbolic order. This subversion is exemplified in the narrator's description of his first days at Auschwitz.

In the chapter entitled "The Bottom" the narrator describes his traumatic metamorphosis into a prisoner. The narrator explains the end result of this metamorphosis as follows:

> When we finish, every one remains in his own corner and we do not dare to look at one another. There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a

[58] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man*. 1958, p.19
[59] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 22

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> hundred miserable and sordid puppets. We are transformed into the phantoms glimpsed yesterday evening.[60]

The narrator sees himself "reflected" in the faces of the other prisoners. I think that the word "reflected" denotes the Lacanian conception of the mirror that reflects back one's *imago*, the image of one's selfhood. What is reflected back to the narrator is sordid, livid and miserable. This systematic desecration of the physical self is a metaphorical stripping away of the narrator's subjectivity as he is reduced to a "phantom", a shadow of his former self.

After this metamorphosis the narrator is faced with a reflection of himself that, in relation to what he was, is ineffable; there is no external reality to completely support or maintain his previous sense of self. This transformation into a phantom implies a threat to the *méconnaissance* of "I". It also marks the destabilisation of the symbolic order as the narrator contemplates the external reality that he defines as "the bottom".

> Then for the first time we become aware that *our language lacks the words to express this offence, this demolition of a man*. In a moment, with prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink any lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have

[60] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 32

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> to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that something behind the name something of us, of *us as we were*, still remains.[61]

The inadequacy of language at "the bottom" re-affirms the regression into the real evoked by this traumatic desecration of the self and identity. This makes the narrator aware of the reality of Auschwitz as an order that subverts the symbolic order in its attempt to destroy, deconstruct, demolish man and reconstruct a new order that seeks to dehumanise people. In this subverted order, the narrator is also stripped of communication. This in itself constitutes a traumatic experience because Auschwitz denies even the ownership of a self that is distinct from an Other by denying the narrator his name. Further, in the Lacanian frame, language constructs a person's sense of self, so denying the medium of language implies a denial of aspects of the self. The narrator is painfully aware of the juxtaposition in his subjectivity before and after Auschwitz; he laments that his name evokes "us as we were". The investment of the self in one's name is ripped away in this system. Perhaps the narrator's use of "we" instead of "I" is symptomatic of the continual damage inflicted by the metamorphosis he endured at "the bottom". The lack of a name or a word to contain the Self results in a rupturing of subjectivity; this is indicated in the fact that the text becomes more about the experience of Auschwitz and less about the narrator as a distinct self. The narrator seems intent on using his experiences as a lens through which he can speak the story of Others in the camp. These elements are arguably symptomatic of the rupturing of the self.

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[61] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 32-33

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The narrator's status as an obscure phantom is literally inscribed on his body in the form of a tattooed number.

> *Häftling*: I have learnt that I am Häftling. My number is 174517; we have been baptised, we carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die.[62]

The stripping away of one's name can be considered another layer of trauma. The Lacanian subject's identity is signified by his/her name. The fact that the narrator states "I *am* Häftling" indicates that he has taken his status as prisoner on as a part of his identity. In this subverted space he has been reduced to a number, denoting his status as something that is not only inhuman but also *a*human. Further, notice the suggestion of finality in the above passage, suggesting that the narrator's psyche has been completely immersed within this subverted space. This statement illustrates the gravity of what the narrator means when he says "we are transformed into the phantoms glimpsed yesterday evening."

However, despite the ritualised attempts to dehumanise them, the prisoners attempt to use their previous rules to create purpose and identity within this traumatising space in what I consider an attempt to survive. For example the narrator tells of a conversation he had with a fellow prisoner, Steinlauf, the gist of which the narrator explains as follows:

> But this was the sense, not forgotten either then or later: that precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore *one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness*; and that to survive one must force ourselves to save at

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> least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilisation.[63]

In terms of this research paper, this passage points to two key issues. The first is the reassertion of the fact that humans do indeed have a natural drive towards survival and it is only with extreme willpower that one becomes self-destructive. As the narrator states, even in the traumatic and subverted space of Auschwitz "one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive". There is an attempt to save the "scaffolding" of civilisation in order to maintain a sense of "moral survival". This drive towards survival brings me to my second point of interest. Notice that the point of survival for Steinleif is so that he can testify about his experiences of Auschwitz. Hence, the link between survival and the process of testifying is made very early on in *If This Is A Man.*

The importance of the process of bearing witness is highlighted later in the text, in the chapter entitled Out Nights where the narrator focuses specifically on the fear of not being heard. In this chapter, the narrator tells of a recurring dream that he experienced every night during his incarceration at Auschwitz.

> This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friend and many other people. They are all listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling: the whistle of three notes, the hard bed, my neighbour whom I would like to move, but whom I am afraid to wake as he is stronger than me. I also speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. *It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home*

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[62] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 33 (my emphasis)

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> *amongst friendly people and to have so many things to recount*: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I were not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.
>
> A desolating grief is now borne into me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. *It is pain in its pure state*, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, *a pain like that which makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim once again up to the surface, but this time I deliberately open my eyes to have a guarantee in front of me of being effectively awake*.[64]

The above passage illustrates the necessity of bearing witness and being recognised and validated by an Other. The ability to speak of his experiences to an Other, his sister, is of such importance that the playing out of this possibility in his dreams gives the narrator a sense of "intense pleasure" that is "inexpressible". The absence of this intense pleasure of being heard is so extreme that the narrator would rather wake up to the traumatic immediacy of Auschwitz than be stuck in a dream that plays out this horror. The narrator compares this grief to that felt in infancy. Within the Lacanian framework, this would be the angst and alienation that an infant feels with the emergence from the plenitude of the real. The traumatic possibility of not being heard proves Lacan's hypothesis that subjectivity only exists in relation to an Other. And, by extension, one's subjectivity is dependent upon being acknowledged and understood by Other.

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[63] Levi, Primo. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 47 (my emphasis)

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The narrator's entrance into Auschwitz means that he is completely immersed into its subversive system. On a day to day basis, the narrator is subjected to its ritualistic attempts to destroy entire peoples. The narrator tries to articulate this through his explanation of the music in the Lager, which becomes another level of trauma in the camps. The narrator explains that the music has a "geometrical madness" that creates "the hypnosis of the interminable rhythm, which kills thought and deadens pain" and signifies the infernal quality of life at Auschwitz:

> We all look at each other from our beds, because we all feel that this music is infernal…
> When the music plays we know that our comrades, out in the fog, are marching like automatons; their souls are dead and the music drives them, like the wind drives dead leaves, and takes the place of their wills. There is no longer any will: every beat of the drum becomes a step, a reflected contraction of exhausted muscles. The Germans have succeeded in this. They are ten thousand and they are a single grey machine; they are exactly determined; they do not think and they do not desire, they walk.[65]

In this space of relative reprieve, the narrator is able to contemplate the reality of Auschwitz. Once again, metaphor is used in an attempt to signify the narrator's realisation of the horror of Auschwitz. The narrator attempts to articulate the infernal quality of Auschwitz by attempting to capture the equally infernal music that signifies the concentration camps. The narrator's entry into the Ka-Be challenges his resolve to not think very much. He describes this as an opportunity

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[64] Levi, Primo. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 66 (my emphasis)
[65] Levi, Primo. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 56-57

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to slip back into himself but the space for contemplation this affords him is traumatic.

In tracing the deconstruction and reconstruction of the traumatised subject, "The Canto of Ulysses" stands out as a poignant illustration of the nexus between narrative and survival. In this chapter, the narrator tells of his walk with Jean. Jean speaks German and French and is interested in learning Italian. The narrator tries to teach him by translating The Canto of Ulysses from Dante's *Inferno*. By choosing Dante's *Inferno*, the narrator creates a link to a literary history and, by extension, to his life before the Holocaust. I would argue that because Dante's *Inferno* is an important and significant classical Italian literary work, The Canto of Ulysses speaks back to the symbolic order that previously defined the narrator's subjectivity. Thus, in choosing The Canto of Ulysses to teach Jean Italian the narrator unconsciously attempts to reconnect to the symbolic order that used to define his sense of self. The narrator creates a dialogue between this historical text grounded in a symbolic order that makes sense to the narrator and the reality of Auschwitz that challenges this very order. At an unconscious level, the narrator is reminded of this connection as the psyche attempts to renegotiate this threat to the *méconnaissance* of I.

This is evident in the passages of Dante's text that the narrator is able to remember. Consider the following example:

> Here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:
>
> "Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance

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> Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
> To follow after knowledge and excellence."
> As if I were also hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forgot who I am and where I am.
> Pikolo begs me to repeat it. How good Pikolo is, he is aware that it is doing me good.[66]

Here the narrative is structured in such a way that the narrator could be speaking directly to the reader. He draws "Pikolo" in, attempting to make him listen, he implores him to try and "understand" as it is important to him. Lacan's postulation on the significance of an Other explains the narrator's investment in Jean's (or the reader's) attention and understanding. Pikolo (or the reader) becomes a mirror that reflects back to the narrator his own narrative, and hence helps the narrator to recreate an image of his former self. This counters the initial response of repression that the psyche has to a trauma. The narrator states that this "is doing me good"; in contemplating Dante's words the narrator gives himself access to words that allow him to contemplate the traumatic reality of his life in the death camps.

The words "you were made men" resonate for the narrator as if this message came from the "voice of God". It seems to me that these words enable the narrator to do two things. The first is to break through the mechanical existence he had been living in his attempt to simply exist on a day to day basis. The second is that he reaffirms himself as a "man"; as more than what the camp has tried to reduce him to. By speaking through a literary discourse, the narrator re-claims his identity.

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This kind of narrative exchange affirms Lacan's adamant belief in the power of literary discourse.[67] The remembrance of these words shifts the grey and numb inner world that has, thus far, defined the narrator's voice. The narrator describes the significance of these words "like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God". The use of semantic condensation in the form of a metaphor increases the importance of this conversation to the narrator's psyche by highlighting the effect these words have on the narrator's process of signification. This metaphor is even more poignant because of the association with "God" who signifies the symbolic order resonates within the subverted space of Auschwitz and reminds the narrator of his own, seemingly lost, humanity.

Dante's words transport the narrator away from his immediate reality, allowing him to move towards a space where he can distance himself from his traumatic reality: "For a moment I forgot who I am and where I am". In remembering these words the narrator is allowed access to parts of his own subjectivity that had been repressed in order to maintain the *méconnaissance* of "I", as Dante's words come to signify all that the narrator has lost at Auschwitz. The remembrance of Dante's words triggers the recognition of an entire symbolic order that had been threatened and challenged in the subverted reality of Auschwitz. Towards the end of this chapter, the narrator tells of his desperate attempt to recapture the memory of Dante's words.

> I would give today's soup to know how to connect 'the
> like on any day' to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it

[66] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 119-120
[67] Lacan, J. 1966

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> through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers –
>
> but it is no use, the rest is silence.[68]

This need to remember the words of Dante's The Canto of Ulysses brings to the fore the importance of memory in the creation of subjectivity. The narrator tries hard to grasp the words that evade him and it is of such importance that it competes with the basic need of hunger. This indicates that in the memory of Dante's words, the narrator is briefly aware of the aspects of himself threatened by the trauma of Auschwitz and the subversive structures in represents.

At the end of the chapter, the narrator is drawn back into this subversive system where men are pressed up against, each other clamouring for a meagre bowl of soup.

> We are now in the soup queue, among the sordid, ragged crowed of soup-carriers from other Kommandos. Those just arrived press against our backs. '*Kraut und Rűben? Kraut und Rűben.*' The official announcement is made that the soup today is of cabbages and turnips: '*Choux et navets. Kaposzata és répak.*'
> "And over our heads the hallow seas closed up"[69]

Metaphorically, the "hallow sea" is Auschwitz and it drowns out the narrator's preoccupation with Dante's text and the revelation that it signifies. Hence, remembering Dante's *Inferno* is akin to a gasp of air for a drowning man. In the hour that the narrator spends attempting to translate The Canto of Ulysses he is able to step back and recognise the horrendous crime committed by Auschwitz.

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[68] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 120
[69] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 120

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The metaphoric nuances of Dante's work allow the narrator's ruptured psyche the space to assimilate his own experiences.

The importance of this walk with Jean and their conversation about The Canto of Ulysses is revisited by Levi in *The Drowned and The Saved*. He admits that he was not exaggerating when he says that he would have given up his soup, his lifeline, to remember Dante's words in that moment. He goes on to explain the significance of Dante's words to him:

> Culture was useful to me; not always, at times perhaps by subterranean and unforeseen paths, but it served me well and perhaps it saved me…
> Then and there they [Dante's words] had great value. They made it possible to re-establish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity. They convinced me that my mind, though besieged by everyday necessities, had not ceased to function. They elevated me in my own eyes and those of my interlocutor. They granted me respite ephemeral but not hebetudinous, in fact liberating and differentiating: in short, a way to find myself.[70]

Here Levi confirms my Lacanian analysis of "The Canto of Ulysses": remembering Dante's *Inferno* was literally about survival because it reminded him of his identity before Auschwitz. Levi's reference to "culture" can be reframed as a reference to the symbolic order theorised by Lacan. This reframing adds to the significance that Levi attributes to his experiences told in "The Canto of Ulysses" in *If This Is A Man.* Levi is able to process the immediate reality of Auschwitz through the "liberating and differentiating" "respite" offered by Dante's words

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because these words gave him access to the social codes that defined the narrator's life before Auschwitz. This further emphasises the importance of language in the functioning of the psyche because it highlights the traumatic loss of self through the loss of language. This is reinforced by the fact that the narrator is distraught at not being able to remember the words of this literary link to his identity before the camps. Significantly, after "The Canto of Ulysses" the narrative trajectory of *If This Is A Man* shifts as the remainder of the text is about the events that led up to the narrator's eventual liberation from Auschwitz. Hence this chapter marks a turning point in the narrator's story.

In the chapter entitled Die Drei Leute vom Labor, the narrator reflects on the extent to which he has changed as a result of his incarceration at Auschwitz.

> …This year has gone by so quickly. This time last year I was a free man: an outlaw but free, *I had a name* and a family, I had an eager and restless mind, an agile and healthy body. *I used to think of many, far-away things*: of my work, of the end of the war, of good and evil, of the nature of things and the laws which govern human actions; and also of mountains, of singing and loving, of music, of poetry. I had an enormous, deep-rooted, foolish faith in the benevolence of fate; *to kill and to die seemed extraneous literary things to me*. My days were both cheerful and sad, but I regretted them equally, they were all full and positive; the future stood before me as a great treasure. *Today the only thing left of the life of*

[70] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p.112

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> *those days is what one needs to suffer hunger and cold; I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself.*[71]

This passage aptly sums up the shattering of the narrator's subjectivity through the dismantling of everything he once knew. I think that this passage is haunting because it laments the extent to which people were destroyed at a psychological level as a result of this historical trauma. In a matter of a year, the author has lost his identity as well as his sense of belonging. In this passage it is clear that the narrator's entire life has been obliterated, "Today the only thing left of the life of those days is what one needs to suffer hunger and cold; I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself". He does not even possess the strength or the passion to consider an end to his existence. The narrator only feels enough to suffer what is basic: hunger and cold. This passage aptly sums up the deconstruction of subjectivity I explored in this chapter.

In this chapter, I have explored the subversion of the Written-I in Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man*. The aim of this endeavour has been to understand the impact of trauma on the psyche as it is represented and reflected in *If This Is A Man*. In achieving this aim I have explored the subversion of the rules, norms and regulations that make up the symbolic order. Levi's description of his incarceration at Auschwitz illustrates the systematic destabilisation of the symbolic order that occurred within that subverted space. The consequence of this subversion on the subjectivity of the narrator is indicated in the physical stripping of his body and the tattoo that brands him a prisoner and a number. I think that the narrator's articulation of this process denotes that destabilisation of the process

[71] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 149-150 (my emphasis)

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of signification that defines the Lacanian psyche. In this text the subversion and threat to the written "I" signifies this process. In my analysis of *The Drowned and The Saved,* I will show that revisiting and signifying this traumatic space is indicative of an attempt to maintain control over this continually threatened Written-I.

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Chapter Three:

Reconstructing the Written-I in *The Drowned and The Saved*

In this chapter I intend to explore Primo Levi's text, *The Drowned and The Saved*, as a narrative that bespeaks the reconstruction of the Written-I after the historical trauma of the Holocaust. It is interesting to note that although this text was written some forty years after *If This Is A Man*[72], Levi still feels invested in understanding the atrocities of the Holocaust through narrative. In this chapter I will argue that this attests to the fact that trauma has a continual effect on the Written-I and, further, that the process of narrating survival is a continuous one. In relation to my earlier exploration of the nature of historical trauma, *The Drowned and The Saved* exemplifies the fact that trauma is indeed a "narrative of belated experiences" that signifies an "endless impact on a life". By focusing on this I intend to illustrate the process of narrating survival that defines Levi's work.

In the preface to *The Drowned and The Saved* Levi explains that he wrote this text in order to contemplate those aspects of the Lagers that have become obscure and misunderstood in the world. He explains that:

> … the truth about the Lagers has come to light through a long road and a narrow door, and many aspects of the *univers concentrationnaire* still have not been explored in depth. By now, more than forty years have passed since the liberation of the Nazi Lagers; this considerable interval has, for the purposes of clarification, led to conflicting results, which I will try to enumerate.[73]

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[72] Gordon, R. 2001.
[73] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p. 7-8

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Thus, whereas in *If This Is A Man* Levi focused on bearing witness to his incarceration at Auschwitz, in this text he broadens his focus to consider what the Holocaust has come to signify. Levi sets out to systematically engage with, to "enumerate" the memory of the *"univers concentrationnarie"* and hence rectify the "way that these memories are understood in the world". As will be discussed in this chapter, superimposed onto this need to unpack the memory of the Lager is the narrator's continual need to engage with the traumatic memory of his own incarceration at Auschwitz. This shift in focus also means that he engages with the reader differently. Recall that *If This Is A Man* begins with a poem that compels the reader to pay careful attention to the text and contemplate the question "is this a man"? In this text the narrator demands that the reader not only listen and contemplate but that he/she critically engage with these experiences, as the narrator critically engages with the memory of the Lagers. Given the emphasis placed on the relation between Self and Other in a Lacanian framework, I think that this indicates that the narrator is much more invested in his relation to an Other. The narrator's increased investment in making the reader *understand* the traumatic memory of the Lagers implies that he is still attempting to merge the trauma of Auschwitz with his reality after his liberation. Levi's reasons for writing *The Drowned and The Saved* indicate that even after forty years of liberation there is still a cogent desire to revisit the memory of the Lagers and the traumatic space encompassed in that memory.

Interestingly, Levi aims to enumerate the memories of the Lager in a book he entitled *The Drowned and The Saved*. This intriguing title first appears in *If This*

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Is A Man as a chapter heading.[74] In this chapter the narrator explains that in the exceptional circumstances of the Lagers there existed a particularly clear categorisation of men: "the drowned" and "the saved". The drowned are the men and women who lost their lives in the Nazi Death camps. The narrator says of "the drowned", "they suffer and drag themselves along in an opaque intimate solitude, and in solitude they die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone's memory".[75] Hence "the drowned" never got to tell their story; they disappeared in solitude because they did not leave behind a narrative that could leave a mark in "anyone's memory". The narrator describes the striking, horrendous image of who "the drowned" in the Lager were: "an emancipated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, in whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen."[76] For the narrator, this image becomes iconic of the atrocities that define the Holocaust.

Juxtaposed to the category of "the drowned" is that of "the saved". The narrator states that "If the drowned have no story, and single and broad is the path to perdition, the paths to salvation are many, difficult and improbable".[77] Thus those who were liberated from the Nazi Death camps and become "the saved", did so in various ways, unlike "the drowned" whose path and story can be reduced to the singular image of the emancipated man. In this chapter, the narrator makes the following observation which I think is an important indication of the narrator's own status as one of "the saved":

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[74] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 93-106
[75] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 95
[76] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p.96
[77] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p.96

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> One has *to fight against the current*: to battle everyday and every hour against exhaustion, hunger, cold and the resulting inertia; to resist enemies and have no pity for rivals; to sharpen one's wits, build up one's patience, strengthen one's will-power. Or else, *to throttle all dignity and kill all conscience, to climb down into the arena as a beast against other beasts*, to let oneself be guided by those unexpected subterranean forces which sustain families and individuals in cruel times. Many were the ways devised and put into effect by us *in order not to die… Survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world…was conceded only to a few superior individuals made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.*[78]

This excerpt lists the kinds of acts and behaviours that "the saved", including the narrator, had to enact and display in order to ensure their own physical survival. It gives one a lucid sense of the otherwise ineffable space of the Nazi Death Camps as it gives one an idea of what "the saved" had to endure. Note that physical survival often demanded that one "throttle all dignity and kill all conscience", this suggests the violence involved in relinquishing one's moral and ethical codes in order to survive. This passage gives one a clearer idea of the traumatic ways in which the narrator's subjectivity was shattered within the subversive space of the Lagers and what it actually meant to be one of "the saved".

I think that these categories also apply to *The Drowned and The Saved* in different ways. In this text Levi attempts to answer what he considers "the most urgent question": "How much of the concentration camp world is dead and will not

[78] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, p. 98

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return".[79] In light of this aim the categories "the drowned" and "the saved" can be viewed as the choices that mankind is faced with in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Will we return to the horrifying and traumatic world lived out in Nazi Germany and become "the drowned" or will we chose the difficult path of "the saved"? Also, Levi's need to understand: to contemplate, construct and articulate meaning from a space that would produce such ghastly atrocities as "the drowned" is a continuous desire. In this chapter I intend to look more closely at the narrator's journey as one of "the saved" as indicative of the reconstruction of the Written-I in narrative. Hence *The Drowned and The Saved* can be read as the narrator's "many, difficult and improbable" path to salvation.

On one level, one can argue that the narrator is caught between the paths of "the drowned" and "the saved" after his liberation from Auschwitz. This is evident in the chapter entitled Letters from Germans, where the narrator gives an excerpt from a letter he wrote to the German translator of *If This Is A Man*. Within this letter he states the following:

> But I cannot say I understand the Germans: now, something one cannot understand constitutes a painful void, a puncture, a permanent stimulus that insists on being satisfied. I hope that this book will have some echo in Germany, not only out of ambition, but also the nature of this echo will perhaps make it possible for me to better understand the Germans, placate this stimulus.[80]

This passage is interesting because it represents the essence of the language of psychological trauma. The narrator's strong desire to "better understand"; to gain

[79] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p. 9

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a logical and coherent meaning from the atrocities in Germany is of such importance that its lack creates a "painful void". The descriptor, "painful void", signifies the realm of the real within the symbolic order through the connotation of an agonising gap created by the narrator's inability to understand the Germans and, by extension, his own traumatic experiences. Hence, there is a sense of "puncture", a rupture within the process of signification as the narrator grapples with his attempt to understand this subverted symbolic order. Given that the Lacanian Subject's identity is signified through the process of signification, the need to create understanding around this traumatic event becomes an attempt to reconstitute and reconstruct the Written-I by creating linguistic bridges across the traumatic space.[81] The reference to "permanent stimulus" alludes to the narrator's repetitive need to create a narrative around his traumatic experience. It is the act of writing that allows the narrator the space to reconcile his experiences of the Holocaust within the symbolic order that exists outside that traumatic space. In the above passage, the narrator states "I hope that this book will have some echo in Germany". This hope signifies an ironic relationship with the Other – Germany – because being heard in Germany would placate the "painful void" he feels, creating a platform from which the narrator is able to reconstruct a sense of subjectivity. This relationship is ironic because the narrator is only able to reconstruct his subjectivity by gaining an understanding of and, perhaps more importantly, being understood by the very people who contributed to the atrocities he experienced. Given the dynamics of trauma, one could argue that the narrator is caught between becoming "the drowned" (loosing his sense of Self and

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[80] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p. 143
[81] Lacan, J. 1966 and Feldstein, R. 1995

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becoming one of the "emancipated men") and maintaining his "difficult and improbable" path by continuing to revisit the traumatic space through narrative and, hence, perpetuate the process of psychological survival.

Therefore *The Drowned and The Saved* is not just an enumeration of the memory of the Lagers, it indicates the narrator's attempt to re-negotiate his own encounter within that traumatic space and reconstruct a sense of self. Within this frame, *The Drowned and The Saved* can be read as indicative of the dark fissures in the reconstruction of the Written-I in its need to satisfy the "permanent stimulus" created by the "painful void" of trauma. Given that the narrator aims to unpack what has become unclear and conflicting about the Lagers, the issues discussed in this text point directly to the rupture within the process of signification that cannot be ignored by the psyche and becomes a site of consistent engagement within narrative space. Linking this to a process of survival and specifically the reconstruction of self within narrative, this text indicates that the signification of trauma becomes a part of the process of narrative survival.

Levi wrote *The Drowned and The Saved* because he was aware of the "conflicting results" that emanated from the reality of the Lagers. This trope of ambiguity is revisited throughout the text but specifically in the chapter entitled The Grey Zone. Here the narrator considers aspects of the Lager that belong to "… the grey band, that zone of ambiguity which irradiates around regimes based on terror and obsequiousness".[82] The narrator focuses on the existence of Special Squads, prisoners at Auschwitz who ran the crematoria and Chaim Rumkowski, the Jewish

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President of the Nazi ghetto in Lodz. The narrator tries to explore and unpack what it would have meant to exist in "the intrinsic horror of this human condition"[83], that is the "theme of human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression".[84] At the end of this chapter, it is interesting to note that the narrator feels that he can identify with this "grey band" as he concludes the chapter with the following statement:

> Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential human fragility: willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death and that close by the train is waiting.[85]

The end of this chapter is ominous as the narrator vividly evokes the iconic image of the waiting train into the present tense, suggesting that the horror of Auschwitz is still a reality. The narrator states "the train *is* waiting" this use of the present tense indicates that the threat of the train that lead millions to their death is still a reality for the narrator. The above passage also alludes to the sense of danger, ambivalence and threat that the narrator still feels even forty years after his liberation. This passage lends credence to Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma has an "endless impact on a life"[86] as the narrator still feels imprisoned by the Ghetto walls and the horror of the Holocaust that they signify. Here, one gets a sense of the consistent threat to the narrator's sense of self. In the same instance, there is a sense that it is perhaps better to stay within the Ghetto walls as opposed

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[82] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved*. 1986, p. 40-41
[83] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved*. 1986, p. 36
[84] Feldstein, R. 1995, p 43
[85] Feldstein, R. 1995, p. 50-51
[86] Caruth, C. 1996, p. 4-7

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to facing "the lords of death". I think that this indicates that the narrator feels that power and prestige are the walls of the ghetto and to cross these walls is to cross into the realm of death and danger. Hence, the Written-I is still consistently engaging with the trauma of the Holocaust.

The ominous tone evoked in The Grey Zone is echoed in the chapter entitled Useless Violence where the narrator describes the "autochthonous Auschwitzian invention"[87] of the tattoo:

> The operation was not very painful and lasted no more that one minute, but it was very traumatic. Its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is the indelible mark, you will never leave here; this is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to the slaughter, and this is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. The violence of the tattoo was gratuitous, an end in itself, pure offence... so that the innocent would feel his sentence written on his flesh.[88]

This inscription of violence onto the body becomes a physical signifier of the trauma of the Lager. The tattoo is then a clear visual mark of the "missed experience" of trauma and the need to compulsively return to the traumatic incident and reconstruct subjectivity. In the above passage the narrator describes the tattoo as an "indelible mark, you will never leave here". This message is sadly ironic because this does prove to be true at the level of the psyche. The narrator does compulsively return to the events that surround his traumatic incarceration at Auschwitz, hence "this is what you [the narrator] have become". This suggests

[87] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p. 94
[88] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p.95

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that the narrator's identity has been determined by and centralised to this act of useless violence and to his incarceration at Auschwitz. The narrator still bears this "indelible mark". He explains that this is because "there are not many of us in the world to bear this witness"[89]. In relation to the aims of this research report, this is an important assertion as it links the narrator's consistent act of narrative to his traumatic experiences. The physical act of violence and the act of narrative are intimately connected and suggest the extent to which the narrator is invested in the agency of writing.

The narrator also feels an "indelible mark" at the level of the psyche in the form of guilt and shame. In the chapter Shame the narrator explains the opposing and difficult responses to being one of "the saved", the most difficult being the phenomenon of survivor's guilt. The shame of having survived whilst so many others did not is accompanied by another stratum of guilt due to the subversion of one's moral code after living "for months and years at an animal level".[90] This reduction to "an animal level" denotes the extent to which the symbolic order was subverted within the Lagers and hence, the extent of the trauma suffered by the narrator. In describing this shame, this "unceasing discomfort" (65), the narrator states the following:

> Perhaps it would be more correct to see in it as an atavistic anguish, whose echo one hears in the second verse of *Genesis*: the anguish inscribed in everyone of the 'toho-bohu' of a deserted and empty universe crushed under the spirit of God, but from which the

[89] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p.95
[90] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p.56

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> spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished.[91]

The atavistic, primal, anguish that the narrator feels is akin to the primal anguish and anxiety that accompanies the emergence from the plenitude of the real. However, this anguish is produced from a "deserted and empty universe *crushed* under the *spirit of God*". In the symbolic order, the *Nom du Pére* is symbolised by the concept of God.[92] In the introduction of this report, I noted that upon emerging from the real one feels an anxious need to re-immerse one's self with its plenitude. But the "atavistic anguish" the narrator feels is produced by a crushed symbolic order "*from which the spirit of man is absent"*. This suggests a space where there cannot be a merge between Self and Other because in this "empty universe crushed under the spirit of God" neither Self nor Other exists. Hence, one gets a sense that the shame the narrator feels results in an inversion of the real that is experienced as pure *absence* as opposed to plenitude within the psyche. The experience of a traumatic event that causes entropy at such a fundamental level creates further rupture in the process of signification and the Written-I.

In my analysis of the ambiguity of the Lagers and the narrator's physical and mental wounds from his incarceration at Auschwitz, it is interesting to note the narrator's removed and academic position to the Lagers. This narrative tone is interesting considering that the narrator is a Holocaust Survivor and the memory he engages with belongs to him. Throughout *The Drowned and The Saved* there is an attempt to avoid reference to the narrator's own experiences of the Holocaust. This tendency also creates a sharp juxtaposition between this text and

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[91] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p.65

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If This Is A Man where the Written-I was more lucid and present within that text. I think that because trauma exists within the psyche in the realm of the real, its remembrance creates anxiety because it forces the psyche to re-visit an experience that does not make sense in the symbolic order. The narrator is aware of this anxiety; he states in the text, "The memory of a trauma suffered or inflected is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing: a person who was wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain."[93] I think that the detached and objective voice of the narrator contains the trauma created by remembering the traumatic event. Hence the narrator's academic tone can be read as a defence mechanism that minimises the impact of these "painful or at least disturbing" memories on the *méconnaissance* of "I".

The following quote, which is used at the beginning of *The Drowned and The Saved*, aptly captures a sense of what the narrator is drawn to do in order to ensure his psychological survival and is an appropriate summation to my engagement with this text:

> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns,
> And till my ghastly tale is told
> This heart of mine burns.
>
> Samuel Taylor Coleridge
> *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, II 582-85*

This quote highlights the nexus between the agency of writing and the drive towards survival that is exemplified in *The Drowned and The Saved*. The narrator's "ghastly tale" encompasses his traumatic experiences of the Holocaust

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[92] Julien, P. 1994

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as well as his consistent desire to impose meaning on these experiences in order to create an understanding of this historical trauma. As discussed in this chapter, the narrator's attempt to tell his "ghastly tale" is not easy. This is most clearly seen in the narrator's tone and the frequent references to the historical trauma in the present tense, which suggests that there is always a level of re-traumatisation in remembering and engaging with these events in narrative. Yet, "at an uncertain hour", the narrator is compulsively drawn to the memory of his "ghastly tale" and he is consumed by the need to tell it to others. I have argued that this denotes the nature of the trauma which gets etched to the psyche and must be revisited through a process of signification. For the narrator this signification is contained within autobiographical narrative. Linking this to a process of survival, specifically the reconstruction of the Written-I within narrative, this text indicates that the signification of trauma is in itself a process of survival.

Hence *The Drowned and The Saved* is indicative of the rupture within the process of signification that cannot be ignored by the psyche and that becomes a site of consistent engagement within narrative space. The fact that the narrator has an impulsive, repetitive need to revisit his traumatic experiences lends itself to Lacan's argument that the function of return defines the Lacanian Subject. The function of return defines the subject's desire to return to the realm of the real. But, as discussed in chapter one, this function can never be fulfilled because it will mean the dissolution of the self. Hence the process of reconstructing subjectivity after trauma is a process that is never completely resolved. Therefore this "ghastly tale" will never be completed and the heart will always burn in its

[93] Levi, P. *The Drowned and The Saved.* 1986, p. 12

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yearning for completion, healing, and reprieve from the anguish of historical trauma.

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Conclusion

In this research report I have explored the process of narrating survival within Primo Levi's autobiographical narratives *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved*. This exploration is the product of my interest in the impact of historical trauma on the psyche and the ways in which narrative affords the psyche space to negotiate its survival after historical trauma. My analysis of *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The* Saved gives credence to the Lancanian understanding of the impact of historical trauma on the psyche. I found that Lacan's theory best elucidates the nexus between the psyche and the narrative process. Indeed, this theory supports the idea that the structure of the psyche is informed by language.

My analysis of Levi's two primary texts *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and The Saved* indicates that historical trauma effects the psyche at a fundamental level. The narrator of *If This Is A Man* describes his descent into what he calls "The Bottom". In my analysis of this narrative I showed that the systematic dismantling of social and moral codes during the Holocaust indicates the destabilisation of the symbolic order and that this extreme subversion reflects in the trauma experience by the Written-I. The narrator calls this radical deconstruction of the written-I within this disruptive space "the demolition of man".[94] I have argued that this "demolition" is indicative of the fact that the atrocities committed within the Lagers, the Nazi Death camps, were of such an ineffable nature that it destabilised the symbolic order. The Lagers were a disruptive space that – in a cruel, systemised way – destabilised the narrator's

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sense of self. Yet, in this subversive space, there are instances where the narrator regains a sense of self separate from the horrors of the Death Camps. This is clear specifically in the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses". In my analysis of this chapter I argued that there is indeed a clear relation between the literary discourses available to the narrator's psyche and, hence, his process of narrating survival.

In my analyses of both these texts, it became clear that the creation of meaning and coherence from the atrocities of the Holocaust forms a central motif and motive for Levi's work. In fact, in both texts the narrator makes mention of the need to understand his traumatic incarceration at Auschwitz. In the course of this research report I have shown that this consistent need to re-visit the memory of this traumatic space and create an understanding of that space is indicative of the psychologically repetitive nature of trauma. The need to consistently signify these traumatic events becomes an attempt to create a linguistic bridge around this space. I have argued that Lacanian subjectivity is constructed within this process of signification and that the narrator is allowed the space to reconcile his experiences of the Holocaust with the symbolic order, which exists outside this space, through narrative. Hence, the act of narrative is a repetitive one that placates the psyche's compulsive need to re-visit the memory of the trauma.

However, In *The Drowned and The Saved* the narrator revisits aspects of the Lagers that, for him, are still points of critical engagement. In his discussion of these aspects of the Lager, it is clear that there are still aspects of the Lager that the Written-I still continuously grapples with. This indicates that although there is

[94] Levi, P. *If This Is A Man.* 1958, 32

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a reconstruction of the written-I it does not occur as a function of, or as a result of, the healing aspects of autobiography as proposed by Teichart[95], but rather as a testament to the enduring act of psychological survival played out through the agency of narrative. In this research report I have shown that in Levi's literary work there is a process of *narrating* survival: a continual process of negotiating the violence and trauma inflicted on the narrator during his incarceration at Auschwitz within narrative space.

[95] Tiechart, M. 1984

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