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Victim-victimiser relationship, loss and survival in war: a comparative study of Elsa Morante's History, a Novel and Primo Levi's If this is a Man, and The Drowned and the Saved

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Victim-victimizer relationship, loss and survival in war: A Close Reading of Primo Levi's *If This is a Man,* and *The Drowned and the Saved* and Elsa Morante's *History, A Novel*

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Chapter 1

1. Introduction

In recent years much has been written both in the popular press and academic journals about victims of abuse who in turn abuse others. Generally psychologists study this phenomenon in the context of the physically or sexually molested child who grows up to become the perpetrator of the same crimes. Fewer studies focus specifically on victims of trauma, abuse or torture in war-time who are so altered by their experience that they find themselves committing the same or similar heinous deeds. War has always been an element of human society, resulting from social, political, economic and ideological differences, but since the 'war to end all wars'[1], wars and genocides have only escalated. This way of interacting with those whose possessions are coveted or are deemed to hinder our own progress in some way existed centuries prior to what is today understood as the 'civilised world'. It brings into question whether humans have truly evolved with all the supposed change and development in the domain of human knowledge and consciousness. Has 'civilisation' brought us closer to dealing with our more animal instincts and with our emotions? Has it made accepting, understanding and living with our differences any easier? To what extent is the misuse of power the cause of great loss and exploitation? How far does one's humanity and moral righteousness extend when faced with one's own survival? These are all questions raised in the works of two Italian authors I recently read. Though one is very well known throughout the world and the other has only fairly recently begun to be appreciated in the English-speaking world, and even if their works are thoroughly different in terms of narrative style and scope, they present very similar themes and views. The two authors in question are Primo Levi and Elsa Morante. In their writings both tackle the question of whether the victimiser is not more often than not a victim as well.

1.1. Aims

In the light of recent revelations concerning what might well have been Levi's own 'ugly secret'[2], I aim to explore, how each deals with "the necessity of killing" (Angier, 2002:242)

[1] With the creation of the League of Nations after World War I, it was thought that this international organization dedicated to resolving disputes without war, would put an end to armed conflict.

[2] Exposed by historian Sergio Luzzatto in *Partigia* (2013), but previously mentioned, without direct allusions to what may have been Levi's direct involvement in some dark deed, in two reputable biographies of Levi: Ian Thomson's *Primo Levi. A Life* (2002& 2003) and Carole Angier's *The Double Bond* (2002).

and the 'grey zone'[3] into which war drags everyone, including Levi. No one can doubt Levi's integrity nor that he was – as Farrell labels him – an "austere humanist"(2004), yet if he too faced moral ambiguity, he was living proof as well as witness to how man's potential for either compassion or inhumanity can be triggered or extinguished by extreme conditions and circumstances. Morante, like Levi, advocates compassion for the individual, while condemning in the strongest terms the regimes, ideologies and social systems that are ultimately responsible.

Thus, through a close reading of selected passages of Levi's *If This is a Man* (1947) and *The Drowned and The Saved*, (1986) and Morante's *History, A Novel*(1974)[4], the aim of this study is to illustrate how the two Italian writers deal with the questions of who are the victims of war and how the victimised can become victimisers. It hypothesises that, in the cases presented in the texts, everyone – to an extent –is a victim of Power and of the hegemonic forces, socio-political, economic and religious, which govern ordinary peoples' lives and determine whether they live in peace or at war. This essay will analyse the ways in which both Levi and Morante take into account moral and ethical questions when considering what it means to be human and what it takes for even a kind, humane person to be transformed into a perpetrator, capable of murder and of inflicting all kinds of suffering on others.

Supported by both philosophical and psychological studies, and starting from the assumptions that two opposing and equally powerful tendencies exist within all human beings, and that everyone is potentially capable both of ruthless brutality and compassion, this study will question what makes one totally un-empathetic and oblivious to other people's pain, and what instead elicits empathy to the point of forsaking all regard for one's own safety. If humanity is 'by nature' *moral*, as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, what goes wrong? What does it take to make a person lose his/her sense of identity and humanity? How do these authors account, not only for the actions of individual, but for the misuse of power by governments or other parties that make countless errors and are responsible for the loss of millions of innocent lives? Attempting to answer these questions will shed light on why:

[3] Title Levi gives to Chapter 2 of *The Drowned and the Saved*.
[4] The dates given here are those of first publication of these texts. Hereafter the dates and page references will refer to the English translation being used.

1) both authors caution their readers not to judge without at least trying to understand other people's histories, and bid them to oppose any falsification and denial of reality as much as the ethical degradation of our societies. By helping to develop a vigilant critical consciousness, their works endeavoured to suggest ways of putting an end to senseless crusades, wars and genocides;
2) both authors felt a sense of guilt and of failure, which they carried to their graves.

The surfacing of Holocaust denial in France[5], which soon had a following in Europe and America and was largely supported by academics, along with the continuous wars that follow the two World Wars may have contributed to the disappointment that soured their last years. Despite their earnest attempts to enlighten people about the dangers of perceiving only one version of reality, the same processes of exclusion of the 'other' that were at work in the Holocaust continued to be at the root of brutal fighting, mutilation and loss, and are still the cause of most conflicts today.

1.2. Rationale and Parameters

The choice of authors, through whose works to pursue the line of investigation that is the focus of this study, was determined firstly by the fact that Morante lived through German occupied Rome, devastated by Allied bombs, and Levi experienced and survived the Nazi concentration and death camps, and secondly because, although both experienced the hardships caused by the build-up to WWII and the horrors of the war itself, the two authors engage in a discourse which attempts to comprehend rather than judge the perpetrators of violence. Neither take a judgemental moral stand that views victims and victimisers as binary opposites; they attempt to comprehend the dynamics of power between victim and perpetrator and they recognize that what both groups have in common is that they are victims of Power.

The works of the two authors I have chosen seem to suggest that 'civilisation' has brought us no closer to knowing how to resolve our differences. Nor has social and cultural evolution made it any easier to accept, understand and live with racial, cultural, religious and other differences. Are we then to expect new waves of 'pre-modern barbarism' and the slaughter of

[5] Historical revisionism with regards to the Holocaust gained momentum in the seventies and the eighties as a result especially of the writings of Robert Faurisson, a Franco-British university professor who wrote a letter to Jewish dignitaries, published articles both in academic journals and the popular press (*Le Monde*).

those we choose to call 'other'? On the surface both authors seem to agree that sadly that is the case. Our humanity and understanding does not stretch very far when we are faced with having to struggle for our own survival. Issues regarding humane and moral behaviour vis-à-vis war and survival are as pertinent today as they were seventy years ago when the historical events highlighted in these texts occurred or even three or four decades ago when the texts were written.

This study will thus closely analyse only selected episodes of three primary texts by these two Italians writers who experienced and witnessed atrocities, yet were able, for the benefit of posterity, to revisit the horrors of war and the depths of degradation to which humans can stoop, without categorically apportioning blame. They first try to understand the forces at play in individual cases. I will argue that they took their roles as witnesses and committed intellectuals very seriously, but that ultimately literature does not change the world. Consequently one can appreciate the chagrin with which these two sophisticated thinkers viewed the sad spectacle of the world.

In *History, A Novel*, the main protagonist is a half-Jewish school teacher in her late thirties whose husband and father, at the outbreak of the war are both dead, leaving her thus to fend on her own for herself and her adolescent son, Nino and later baby Useppe. "Both men [who had] acted as her guardians against all violence from outside..." (45) were no longer there to protect her when, one evening in 1941, on her way home from work, she is confronted by Gunther, a young German soldier, posted in Italy on his way to the African front. He feels displaced, lonely and homesick; he is in desperate need of some female companionship. He knows no other way of getting what he wants except by exerting the 'power' he discovers he has because of the uniform he wears. The reader sees the world through her eyes, through those of the child-Useppe born from rape and through the host of other lower middle class or proletarian characters that make up the universe of her novel.

Lily Tuck in *Woman of Rome*, Morante's biography, contends that "Gunther may be a monster but he is a simple monster, not a political one, and thus he can be redeemed" (2009: 183). This statement shows that Tuck recognised that the rape in the opening chapter of the

narrative is largely symbolic: Gunther is one of only two[6] 'aggressors' given a face and a name in the novel; all other aggression is faceless; a manifestation of the Power wielded by men sitting round a table and who will never have to see the faces of the victims or the results of their resolutions. They bear the responsibility for Gunther's deed and should be held accountable. Morante's work denounces the faceless aggression of those in power who assign themselves the right to determine the course of history and the fate of others. At the end of any war "the […] Powers and their victorious allies, […] seated at the peace table, to establish among themselves the new division of the world and to draw the new map of Europe" (14) count their gains, while the people on both sides count the losses.

The book's other emblematic episode, in which the reader witnesses the cold blooded murder of a German soldier by Davide Segre, a Jewish university student come 'Partigiano' (freedom fighter), in the design of the novel, is opposite but equal to the first. There are parallels between the perpetrators and the violent crimes they commit that Morante carefully draws to explore in a subtle manner the complex question of victimization and culpability or, in the words of criminologist Stacy Banwell, the "blurring of boundaries […] between agency and victimization" (2011:1), which will be explored in the course of this study.

Likewise, in *If This is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi refrains from facile judgement both against Nazi Germans and Jewish collaborators. For Levi and Morante, not all Germans are Nazi war criminals, not all soldiers are responsible for the atrocities of war, just as not all Jews were *solely* victims of Hitler's genocide policies. In *If This Is A Man*, the case of the victimised becoming victimisers is portrayed through the 'Prominents', the Jewish 'Kapos' and Jews assigned to the 'Special Squads', who service the gas chambers and crematoria. All these in some way were privileged Jewish prisoners. The Prominents gain power and certain privileges through the exploitation and betrayal of other inmates and by working with the officers; the Kapos and members of the *Sonderkommandos* were compelled to aid the Nazi war machine under pain of death. Levi says of the former – who are motivated by greed and personal gain – that they are "monsters of associability and insensitivity" (97), but speaking of Rumkowski, one such individual, he adds: "And yet this character was far more complex than appears thus far. Rumkowski was not merely a renegade and an accomplice […] he was confused and [we might add] the more tension he was exposed to, the

[6] The other one is Davide Segre alias Carlo Vivaldi alias Piotre, the Jewish university student – come fugitive then partisan - who kills in cold blood, largely for personal rather than for military reasons.

more confused he became; thus he escapes our judgement like the compass point that goes haywire at the poles" (1986:48). Levi feels even less authorised to judge those who showed little compassion or humanity towards weaker, less resilient prisoners who just allowed themselves to die, for he considers himself one of them. In the camp they were called *Musselmänner* to denote their almost unnatural lack of survival skills or will to live, which made them easy prey. Levi says in the "Grey Zone": "faced with such human cases, it is imprudent to hastily emit a moral judgement. It must be clear that, for the most part, the blame lies with the system and the structures of the State" (1986: 30).

In the midst of much questionable behaviour, in all three books, there are examples of individuals who managed to preserve their goodness and moral integrity and even performed selfless deeds. In Levi's *If This Is A Man*, for example, Lorenzo, a civilian employed to work in the Buna-Monowitz chemical plant, shared his ration of food with Levi and smuggled letters out for him at the cost of his own life, "Lorenzo Perrone kept Primo Levi fed for no reason but pure altruism", states Anissimov, (1998: 171). Levi acknowledges that he owes his life and survival to Lorenzo's humanity, and blames himself all the more for not displaying the same degree of humanity or compassion to his fellow prisoners by sharing his extra rations with any of them. Thus, *If This is a Man* is Levi's philosophical reflection on what it means to be human under conditions of unyielding misery.

In Morante's book Ida steals food (from people in similar conditions to her own) in order to provide for her family. This act operates against the strict moral principles she, as an educator, taught and lived by before the war. Moretti states that "Ida's moral community is not the Fascist Italian one, but rather that of all those unknown people who suffered the effects of dictatorship, war and poverty, all those people who never had the power nor the right to protest and oppose history – the innocent victims" (2011:4). Yet among these Ida too meets a few selfless souls who help her at their own peril.

Morante is concerned with history and war as experienced by ordinary individuals. The failure of History, for Morante, is in its concentrated focus on the actions of those who wield Power. Those in power tend to have control over the production and distribution of information, therefore certain truths can be omitted to fit the needs and objectives of the

institution of power at the time[7]. This has led to the histories of common people, those more affected by History, never being voiced. "Morante [...] identifies and validates the smaller and indistinguishable lives that make up the nation. It allows them their space within the chronology of time to tell their stories" (Commisso, 1999: 29). She sets out to retell the history of WWII, through the experiences of women like Ida, afraid for the fate of her children in a country where Racial laws were enforced, men like Davide who were compelled to take up arms, and the thousands who had to flee their homes, become refugees and somehow survive in whatever shelters they could find, after their homes were bombed and their livelihood destroyed. It allows her to challenge the study of history as it is conventionally understood. Cristina Della Coletta argues that "Morante challenges the validity of historical truth and denounces the omissions and silences that plague canonic historical texts" (1993: 194). History as retold by ordinary people, whose struggle for survival eventually lead some to commit acts which would normally go against their own values, takes on a whole different hue. Levi's writings, though on a different scale, do much the same. The horrors of Auschwitz are narrated through his own personal experiences and those of his fellow inmates, who had to struggle daily to keep a hold on their humanity.

Morante writes that "the immobile principal of historical dynamics [is]: power to some, servitude to others" (13). Issues of Power have always and will always be at the heart of History. In her essay "*Teatro di guerra:* Of History and Fathers", Stefania Lucamante argues that "there is [...] a strong defence for those who are forced, sometimes through indoctrination, to enter a conflict. The 'oppressed' are those unable to construct their own destiny" (2006: 231).

1.3. Literature Review

Though much has been written in English, Italian and other languages on Primo Levi's extraordinary attempt to understand the 'other'[8] and his need to make the world understand

[7] In a more recent film titled "Centurion", Roman government officials strategize to assassinate a general who has survived a lost war simply because what he knows and has experienced would threaten the already established Historical truths of the glories and power of the Roman Empire.

[8]See for example what he writes in 1960 to Heinz Riedt, the German translator of *If this is a Man*, and that then becomes part of the Preface of the German edition of his book: "I am sure you have not misunderstood me. I never harboured hatred for the German people; and if I had I would be cured of it now, after knowing you […]. But I cannot say I understand the Germans. Something one cannot understand constitutes a painful void, a sting, a permanent stimulus that insists on being satisfied. I hope this book will find some echo in Germany: not only out of ambition, but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps make it possible for me to understand the

what millions of people had been made to live through, his holocaust literary works have not been meticulously examined in relation to Elsa Morante's bestselling fiction, *History*, in spite of them presenting similar world views. This may be because of Levi's importance in both Holocaust and Jewish scholarship, while Morante was largely ignored by the Italian literary establishment until after her death, when American and English scholars started taking an interest in her work, which defies any specific definition. Much of the scholarship focusing on Levi's writings finds his stoic effort to present the human side of a perpetrator rather disturbing. English author and critic, Adam Phillips, has gone as far as saying that Levi's "sober lucidity" gives the impression that "Levi treats Auschwitz as a quasi-scientific experiment, as an enquiry into human nature in which what people are like in concentration camps can tell us something about what people are like in general and about the roots of morality" (2001). He goes on to say that Primo Levi writes that, "*survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world, […] was conceded to very few superior individuals*. [… But] whether or not 'superior individuals' are those who under no circumstances sacrifice their personal morality – or, indeed, whether morality at its best is something that should be indifferent to circumstance – is the kind of moot point that Levi is not keen to consider" (ibid.). I will argue that with great intellectual difficulty he has accepted the notion of moral relativism. Humanity is not made up of many 'superior individuals' and man, including himself, are driven to adapt their behaviour to the circumstances. This study will concentrate on the psychology of the ordinary men and women that populate Levi's and Morante's works.

For the specific purposes of this essay, I shall adopt an interpretative and somewhat philosophical and psychological approach when examining the texts. Useful to the focus I have chosen, is to consider Michel Foucault's notion that the dominant discourse of an era, instead of reflecting pre-existing realities, brings into being the concepts, oppositions and hierarchies of which it speaks and thus that these elements are both products and propagators of the Power of socio-political forces (1983:209). Foucault's theory of power also takes into consideration the "the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualisation" and studies "the objectivizing of the subject" (Foucault in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982:208-9). Even more pertinent for this essay is the way Foucault looks at "forms of resistance against different forms of power" from biological power to the '*régime du savoir'* i.e. the privileges of

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Germans better, to placate this urge. (Quoted in Carole Angier's *The Double Bond: Primo Levi, a Biography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002:510)

knowledge and the "excessive powers of political rationality" (1982:210) and how they lead to the "anarchistic struggles" against power, which one sees in Morante's novel.

The theories on hegemony of the Italian Marxist political thinker, Antonio Gramsci, albeit in contrast with Foucault's thinking, will also allow me to explore the two author's critique of how power, concentrated in the hands of an elite ruling class, can lead to the concealment of how it exploits and controls the masses. Building on the Marxist idea of the pervasive power of ideology, values and beliefs in reproducing class relations and concealing any inherent contradictions, Gramsci extends his theory of hegemony or economic dominance and the 'manufacture of consent' (1971) to include cultural dominance by the upper ruling classes. Gramsci recognises what Andrew Heywood (1994:100) and Steven Lukes (2005) call a 'third face of power' or all pervasive 'invisible power' that dictates the prevailing cultural norms of a society is imposed by the ruling class. It must not be perceived as natural and inevitable, but must be recognized as an artificial social construct that can be used as an instrument of class domination. Challenging the 'hegemony' (leadership role) of this 'knowledge' is thus indispensable for the intellectual and political liberation of the proletariat, so that workers and peasants, the people of town and country, can create their own working-class culture, which specifically addresses their social and economic needs. Adapting this concept to pre-war Germany and Italy, one can shed light on Morante's anarchic views and why – through the mouth of Davide Segre – she engages in a lengthy tirade in support of anarchy in its purest sense, and why Levi can endeavour to make sense of the 'gratuitous cruelty' and the senseless violence inflicted on Jews and other "inferior" human beings who were sent to Nazi concentration and death camps. Levi reflects in *The Drowned and the Saved* that:

> Neither Nietzsche nor Hitler nor Rosenberg were crazy when they made themselves and their followers drunk – with their preaching – on the myth of the superman (*Übermensch*), to whom all is allowed in recognition of his dogmatic and congenital superiority (1988:84).

Hitler undoubtedly knew how intoxicating and appealing this notion would be to his fellow Germans but failed to realise how easily this type of thinking could make both 'masters and pupils' lose sight of reality and abandon all morality that is essential in any 'civil society'.

A (new) historicist approach, which analyses context, will also help to explore the ambiguous fallacy of the humanistic concept of an essential human nature that is common to the authors

of the literary works, the characters in their books and the reading public. I say ambiguous because I will want to show that all humans, though they may share fundamental human nature – with its propensity for both good and evil – do not have the same nurturing, i.e. the same ingrained cultural beliefs, which can determine the degree of conscience they have and how they will react under difficult and traumatic circumstances. I would argue further, using Stephen Greenblatt's conclusions that "the role of human autonomy" is limited as "the human subject [is] remarkably unfree, [and is rather] the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society" (1980: 256). Giorgio Agamaben's theories on biopolitics in *Homo Sacer* will allow for a consideration of perpetrators acting as puppets of the state, who are made to have no will of their own.

To interpret the variance in human attitudes to other people's pain, Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* will also offer useful considerations. In setting out to answer a question once posed by Virginia Woolf : "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" (which is foremost in both the consciousness of Primo Levi and Elsa Morante), Sontag argues that the visual (and we can add narrative) depictions of violence, mutilation, death and destruction do not in fact help people to change their attitudes to others nor commit themselves to insuring that such atrocities never be repeated. Depictions "can communicate very much" and can momentarily touch the viewer (or the reader), but they cannot enter the psyche of those who have not lived through such things. Outsiders "can't understand, can't imagine" (Sontag, 2003:126) the experiences such images represent, as Levi so often repeats. Furthermore, Sontag postulates that "[c]ompassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do […] and nothing 'they' can do either […] then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic" (ibid:79). Some may even become attracted to such images of violence. In Sontag's view, to be "surprised that depravity exists" or even incredulous "when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans […] one has not reached moral or psychological adulthood"(ibid:89) as this aspect of human nature has been recorded since the time of Plato's *Republic*[9].

[9] See Book IV.

One's reason can be overwhelmed by unorthodox desires or compulsions, which drive the self to become angry with that part of its nature which at times it cannot control. This fits the psychological profiles of some of both Levi's and Morante's characters, which will be discussed by looking at the relationships between Perpetrator-Rescuer-Victim, as described in the 'Drama Triangle', also known as the 'Karpman Triangle'. According to Steven Karpman, the triangle represents the relationship between any two people [or sides of oneself]: Perpetrator, Rescuer and Victim represent different 'roles' people [...]'play', not the people themselves. The roles interlock and there is always 'someone' on top who seems to have more power and 'someone' on the bottom, as the relationship moves about in a circle. This model describes the development of certain characters in Morante's novel and can also be applied to Levi – the narrated 'I' – of *If this is a Man*.

The inhumanness of war and its effects on soldiers are illustrated both by what they suffer and the cruelty of combatants towards the enemy; both leave equally indelible scars. The psychological scars left on the soldiers are not very different from the scars that mark victims. Think of the wars in the Middle East in the 21st century, decades following both Morante's and Levi's concerns, and how they still present the very same issues that both authors caution in their respective works. Sontag has also pointed out how a "...wounded Taliban soldier begging for his life [...] also had a wife, children, parents, sisters and brothers..." (2003:72-73). It is the capacity of war to destroy one's humanity that one should question. Since both sides have the potential to switch roles as pointed out in the 'Karpman Triangle', "it is easier to think of the enemy as just a savage who kills, then holds up the head of his prey for all to see" (Sontag, 2003:70) than to face that he is a man like us. The 'monster' we can hate and condemn, the 'man' we feel compelled to justify or at least understand. Seeing the perpetrator as the savage 'other', an unfeeling and inhumane animal whose acts are governed by a need to destroy and cause harm, denies the possibility that in a reversal of roles, it could be us in his place.

Stacy Banwell[10] studies the psychological dynamics of Levi's "Gray Zone"[11] by applying this notion to a recent case of a young female victim, Karla Homolka[12], who became a perpetrator.

[10] Senior Lecturer of Criminology at the University of Greenwich, London.
[11] Chapter 2 of Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* is referred to as the Gray Zone in Rosenthal's translation; Banwell uses the same spelling when discussing the concept in her article.

One of the arguments that Banwell presents is that "Karla's fear of her husband[...and] her participation was simply a means of survival" (2011: 4). She refers to her as a "compliant victim", one whose actions are not completely "autonomous". In other words, Karla is a victim-turned-perpetrator by her awareness that if she fails to do what her victimiser commands, she will suffer the same horrors as those she is ordered to victimise. This dynamic, although different, had a similar function in the Lager where the Jewish Kapos were compelled to assist the SS officers. Banwell points out that what make these situations different is that, unlike the prisoners who were caged and constantly guarded and thus had no chance to escape, Karla could have escaped. The question to ask then is why did she not escape or even help some of her victims to escape, when she knew what her moral obligation to them was? Banwell argues that there are psychological fears, like Karla's, which go beyond the rational. Levi himself explains that "…the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness to collaborate with power" (1988:28). Fear and a measure of 'privileges' drove the Jewish Kapos to be brutal and heartless towards other prisoners, the Prominents to collude with the 'enemy' and betray their comrades, and to a degree, Levi too became hardened to other people's needs and not share his 'extra' bread or water with any fellow inmate. These acts Banwell contends are committed out of a need to survive. For the Kapos, survival meant being compliant to their victimiser's demands. Levi's "Grey Zone" examines the 'power' that controls victims, victimisers and victim-perpetrators alike and the psychological defeat that both ends suffer.

Stefania Lucamante also argues that "everybody is defeated by war, particularly the oppressed, whether these be women, children, or ['enemy' soldiers like] the young Gunther" (2006: 231). War destroys (or has the potential to destroy) the ordinary lives and moral fibre of people without regard for the consequences; it is a display of power by those who wield that power. Sontag, like Levi before her, claims that "...the scale of war's murderousness destroys what identifies people as individuals, even as human beings" (2003: 61). The people who are left to live with the consequences of war are not primarily those who are the cause of the war. The psychological devastation of war ultimately leads to the destruction of the individual. Levi who kept hold on his humanity and managed to survive Auschwitz and tried to atone for this privilege by living out his life to bear witness, to tell the stories of the

[12] At the age of 17 Karla married Paul Bernardo, 5 years her senior, who raped and tortured young women. After he abused and raped her too, Karla became his accomplice and victimised other women, while still married to him and a victim to his abuse.

atrocities of Auschwitz and the Holocaust so that similar genocides might never be repeated, nevertheless he seems to have succumbed to despair 40 years after he first bore witness. Morante's Davide Segre, who is unable to reconcile with his inhumanity, is similarly torn apart by a guilt which ultimately leads to his suicide.

In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci argues that "many political acts are due to internal necessities of an organizational character [...] they are tied to the need to give coherence to a party, a group, a society"[13] (1991: 753). Nancy Armstrong clarifies this in her essay "On the Politics of Domesticity" by pointing out that for Gramsci "[...] the dominant group must offer to one and all a view that makes their form of domination seem true and necessary if not desirable and right" (2004: 569). It is against the backdrop of Fascism that Gramsci develops his theory of Hegemony, recognising the dangerous ways in which ideology can be used to psychologically imprison not only the individual but the nation, and can be turned into a means with which the ruling class can control the masses. Both Levi and Morante take this into account; they create characters who are victims of a pervasive ideology, exploited by the powers that control their destinies.

However, we cannot dismiss the fact that some Germans, soldiers and civilians alike, supported Hitler because they truly shared his views and not because they were controlled by Nazi ideology. Not everyone was necessarily a victim of cultural hegemony and dictatorship. Certain German soldier, camp officers and ordinary citizens, one could argue, had a genuine belief and faith in what Hitler and the Nazi party were preaching. Many – and not all necessarily German – believed in the racial superiority of Aryans. Racial tensions and anti-Semitism are as present in contemporary society as they were then. One needs only to think of the rise of Neo-Nazi movements; the discrimination against the Palestinians by the Israelis; the rise of radical Muslim fundamentalist groups, and so on. It seems harmony cannot exist in human society. Power can corrupt the humanity of a person, but human frailty and fallibility do not provide a satisfactory answer to these questions for the two authors. As long as the status quo continues intellectuals, artists and academics will be burdened with the responsibility of educating people to seek answers. As Dustin Ells Howes points out: "Six decades after the Holocaust, the problems of its political significance remains formidable [...] The carefully orchestrated killing of millions of individuals marks the extreme end of political

[13] For this research I have used two different translations of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* since they differ in style.

and (im)moral possibilities" (2008: 266). As Albert Einstein and Edmund Burke have respectively said:

> The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do bad things, but because of those who look on and do nothing.
>
> All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.[14]

It is time to face our own complicity and accept our share of culpability, as Mark Sanders (2002) points out in *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, and to acknowledge the lack of a true moral conscience in the modern world. Zygmunt Bauman in his *Postmodern Ethics* argues that a form of "moral conscience commands obedience without proof that the command should be obeyed; conscience can neither convince nor coerce. Conscience wields none of the weapons recognised by the modern world as insignia of authority. By the standards which support the modern world, conscience is weak" (1998: 249). Man's superficial conscience is perhaps a cause of the loss of feeling and humanity. Applying this thought to Morante's work one sees that the anarchist, counter hegemonic views expressed are a utopian ideal not a solution.

Levi's work has naturally gained more attention than Morante's, especially in Jewish and Holocaust scholarship, but there are sufficient articles in English on Morante against which to test the hypothesis that both authors are committed to the same conscious raising cause, even if they go about it in distinctly different ways: Morante, in the way of magic-realism, by weaving a Utopia around stark reality and Levi, in the manner of an essayist, by analysing it with almost clinical, intellectual detachment. The research will approach the writings using a qualitative, interpretative and speculative method; my reading of the three primary texts will be from a historical, philosophical and psychological perspective. While the research will engage with selected writings by theorists and literary critics, as well as with both Levi's and Morante's biographers, it does not attempt to deal with other significant aspects of the texts that are not related to the focus of this study.

[14] Both quotes taken from Anti War.Com: http://antiwar.com/quotes.php

Chapter 2

2. Primo Levi: survival and the duty of bearing witness

2.1. *If This is a Man*: entering Auschwitz

After the experience of Auschwitz and the recognition of the degree to which human cruelty could stoop, Levi felt isolated and worn out when he had to re-enter normal society. Ian Thomson points out in "The Genesis of *If This is a Man"* that Levi "was in a trauma, and disturbed... After the nightmare of Auschwitz, everything seemed colourless, futile and false to him" (2005: 43). His experiences in the camps had not only drawn Levi to question his own existence and survival, but it also drew him into a state of passivity, as Dustin Ells Howes reflects: "the camp destroys the capacity for action" (2008: 269). However, with the approach of the predicted harsh winter of 1945 Levi, being the sole surviving male in his family since his father had passed away of cancer in 1942, was left with the responsibility of having to provide for his mother and sister, thus hoping to rebuild his career as a chemist, he began to travel to and from Milan. "Levi said he began to buttonhole passengers on the Milan-Turin express to tell them of what he had seen and suffered." (Farrell, 2004: 144). People's interest in the stories he told was what rescued him from falling into a state of depression; after the apathy of the first months he again began to believe that the reason for his survival was "to bear witness", so he started writing *If This is a Man.*

Primo Levi's first book, opens with a very salient poem which requests that the reader consider what it means to be human. Drawing from his experience of the death and concentration camps, Levi urges the reader to reflect whether being human means living a safe and fulfilling life in the comfort of one's home and country or whether being a man means "work[ing] in the mud, [to] not know peace, [to] fight for a scrap of bread or [to] die because of a yes or a no" (Levi, 1988:17). Levi's voice in the opening poem of the narrative is confrontational and displays a level of urgency. Pressing the reader to think about their safety and comfort and how these, without warning, can be stripped away from them; about their freedom to live without fear of being beaten or killed without reason, he questions the validity of our assumptions. Howes argues that "Levi chooses words that are vibrant and insistent so that the sensitive reader will be jarred, and at a minimum, understand that the author holds this question to be of the highest import" (2008: 275). Of course, the comfortable "we", can give an immediate answer: 'yes this is a man' or 'no this isn't a man',

"and in both cases believe that we are empathizing with Levi and understand his point" (2008: 276). But, Levi does not expect that the safe and comfortable reader in familiar surroundings, to give an answer to the paradox rooted within the question; he wants the reader to reflect and consider what it truly means to be a man, i.e. to be human and be considered human.

This section of the essay will examine several issues Levi engages with in his first literary work and the moral and ethical dilemmas that he was faced with in the camps. As discussed in the introduction, for both Levi and Morante the question of the victim-victimiser relationship, especially within the framework of a social and political context, is not always clear-cut. Both these authors' works are very significant for the purpose of this discussion since they approach the problem with a degree of moral detachment which results from the awareness of the complexities of life based on their personal experiences. Important for the reading of the text will be the examples of inhumanness, the moral standards that needed to be sacrificed to ensure survival and, on the other hand, the altruism and self-sacrifice which exists even amidst extreme harshness. I have chosen to engage with the web of virtue and evil which results from unbalanced power relations and the seemingly obvious question of who are victims and who are perpetrators, which instead is not always simple to answer.

2.1.1. The abuse of humanity

One of the principal dilemmas in dealing not only with Holocaust and WWII Literature, but studies of the history of war and its effects on individuals, is the moral and ethical corruption; the degree of depravity and disregard for the sanctity of human life and dignity of every man that one is faced with. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag points out that "War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins" (2004: 8). These stark statements bring into context a problem she poses earlier in her text: why do men make war? She argues that men like war, since for men there is "some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting" (2004: 3). This begs the question: at what cost is that glory, pursued and gained? If the aftermath of war is always marked by loss and the pain, how do we change this historical crisis which has affected human societies for many generations? The iniquities of war go back countless generations and the 20th century has seen the most devastating ones; from World War I and the Russian revolution, to the Spanish Civil War, World War II and the Holocaust, soon followed by the Korean War, the Vietnam War,

the numerous wars of independence in Africa, the Arab-Israeli wars and now the wars against fundamentalist Muslim states. Decades later we are no closer to finding a definitive solution to putting an end to war. Is it greed, lust for power or are humans just innately evil and sadistic that they enjoy seeing others suffer?

I would argue that war is a corruption of humanity, it has no glory as fighting to protect one's country (or so patriotic propaganda would have us believe), it destroys, causes affliction and alters people's values. Thomson mentions how "Anna Maria Levi could not bear to hear her brother talk [of Auschwitz and his experiences], as her boyfriend had perished in the camps" (2004: 145). Unable to bear her brother's testimony, since it did not only remind her of a lost lover, but of how he may have died or been brutally murdered; she could not empathize with the burden of pain and guilt carried by a survivor. Reacting to this Levi writes,

> ...for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this [...] if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our humanity (1988: 33-32).

The Nazi war machine had failed to achieve its desired goal of purging the world of Jewish and other people it considered "undesirables", such as the disabled and mentally handicapped, political dissidents, gypsies, homosexuals and anyone who opposed the regime despite its immoral disregard for the dignity and lives of millions of people. Zygmunt Bauman argues that moral responsibilities and ethical rules should "guide our conduct toward each other – ours towards others and, *simultaneously*, others' towards us – so that we may feel secure in each other's presence, help one another, co-operate peacefully and derive from each other's presence a pleasure untainted by fear and suspicion" (1998: 16). Levi's description of life in the camps proves the complete opposite: the Nazis had no consideration for their victims, whom they stripped of their humanity and everything that made up their identity, depriving them even of their names, their voices and the very values by which they had lived.

In *Homo Sacer,* Giorgio Agamben substantiates an argument once made by Karl Binding[15] that the "concept of 'life devoid of value' […] applies first of all to individuals who must be

[15] German jurist who was known to be in support of retributive justice; this is a theory of justice which requires that the offender be punished for a wrongdoing. Unlike vengeance, retributive justice is supposedly only

considered as 'incurably lost' following an illness and an accident and who, fully conscious of their decision, desire 'redemption'[…] and have somehow communicated this desire" (1998: 138). But, Agamben explains, this notion of a life undeserving of existing is "clearly not an ethical one – it is rather, a political concept in which what is at issue is the extreme metamorphosis of sacred life […] on which sovereign power is founded" (1998: 142). Agamben's theories on biopolitics, drawn partly from Foucault, about the expanding inclusion of the individual's natural life, in the modern age, into the exercise of power, allows for a much closer look at what he refers to as 'the sovereign'[16], which gives itself the right to have power over and can control the daily life of individuals, seen as mere bodies (or objects). The sovereign, given this power, can decide who lives and whom it wishes to destroy once they cease to have political significance or be of value to the State.

"The Euthanasia Program for the incurably ill" launched by Hitler in 1940, which commanded that hospitals eliminate the mentally and physically ill since they had no contribution to make to the development of the German state, is an example of 'sovereign power'. Agamben proposes a way in which to understand the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, and the ambiguity which underlies the dynamics of this relationship. If the 'sovereign' has the power to decide which life is unworthy of being lived and to eliminate that life, then the 'sovereign' can also exercise the power to send non-consenting young men off to war and impose what its subjects must and must not do. The Hitler Youth, young boys some as young as 16 and 17, were sent to fight and told it was their duty as Germans to protect their heritage. When people's lives are dictated and decided upon by the regime, or political rulers of the time, the line between the victim and perpetrator is blurred; the power of the sovereign is what blurs these lines.

Agamben's theories fit well with Levi's discourse regarding the abuse of power and the question: who are the victims of war? As Levi states in the above quoted passage, the lives of those sent to concentration camps had become politically irrelevant and could therefore be exterminated; their existence had no significance for Nazi Germany, and they had ceased to exist as individuals who had any moral rights, or the freedom to choose. Stripping them of

directed at the offence not the offender, and is thus not personal. It "involves no pleasure at the suffering of others, and employs procedural standards" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retributive_justice).

[16] What Agamben refers to as 'the sovereign' is established upon the basis of who holds political power. It can refer to the state, or even the individual(s), who can exercise this power for ideological ends or for personal gain, even at the cost of disrupting or corrupting their subjects' lives.

their identity and names robbed and denied them their humanity; their lives were turned into something over which only the SS men and Kapos had jurisdiction. However, even the roles German-victimizers and Jewish-and others-victims performed are ambiguous; Levi does not offer the reader a conclusive response as to who the perpetrators and the victims are. According to Levi's way of thinking, judging the obvious perpetrator outright does not place one in a position to understand the circumstances which drove the perpetrator to inflict atrocities, thus it serves no purpose. McClellan points out that Giorgio Agamben "comes to grips with a fundamental political and ethical problem laid bare in the Nazi death camps: the destructive effects of power on the human subject […] Agamben argues that Auschwitz...is the site where power absolutely degraded and destroyed human beings before exterminating them" (2005: 147) while at the same time it morally destroyed those it lured into accepting its policies. Levi, in *If This is a Man*, reveals the unnecessary beatings and the purposeful infliction of hunger that the prisoners of the camps had to endure. Levi speaks of how on their arrival at the Lager the authorities had already "taken away [their] clothes, [their] shoes and [their] hair" (1988: 33), depriving them of their individuality. They became a moving mass, a group of the same species, termed *Häftlinge*, subhuman creatures that could be abused and destroyed for the "noble" cause of preserving German purity.

The history of hate and prejudice against Jewish people is one which long predates Levi's reflections. Literary artists have, in some way, over the centuries addressed this intolerance in their works. One needs only mention the opening act of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* where Antonio, a Christian merchant, spits in Shylock's[17] face because he is disgusted by his very existence. Antonio, speaking to Shylock, says:

> I am as like to call thee so [dog, cur] again,
> To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
> If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
> As to thy friends; for when did friendship take
> A breed for barren metal of his friend?
> But lend it rather to thine enemy,
> Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face
> Exact the penalty. (Act I, Sc.3)

[17] Jewish moneylender who loans money to Antonio on condition that if he does not repay the money in time he can have a pound of Antonio's flesh as repayment.

This verse clearly reveals that at the height of the Renaissance Christians and Jews tolerated each other for the sake of doing business, but neither would consider having the other for a friend. Amos Elon, in *The Pity of it All*, reflects on how "In [the] early August of 1819…frenzied mobs ran through the streets looting and demolishing Jewish homes and shops, screaming "*Hep! Hep! Jude verreck!"(Death to all Jews)*" (2004: 101). The contempt that Jewish people were subjected to was not only driven by religion or ideology but, especially in Germany, by the economic woes experienced by many Germans before and after WWI and by historical events and anti-Semitic sentiments that preceded the rise of the Third Reich[18]. Levi reflects upon this when he writes that newcomers to the camps "experienced within [themselves] a grief that was new for [them], the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every century" (1988: 22). The experience of persecution was new to many Jewish prisoners, but it had a history rooted in 'ancient' times, only now it had become a cultural imperative to free German society of the evil influence of Jews. The fact that in the Lagers not only people of Jewish ancestry were incarcerated but other prisoners, including criminals, suggests that it was a crime to be Jewish in the eyes of many ordinary Aryans. This attempt to understand the German situation is a reflection of Levi's fairness and ability to detach himself – even in this first autobiographical work – from the anger and resentment his personal experience inevitably generated. He was aware of the abuse of sovereign power exercised also over German citizens. But was this excuse enough to blindly follow the dictates of the regime or to turn a blind eye on what was going on? In his later work it becomes evident that Levi thinks it is not.

Just as Alexandre Dumas[19] did in his major work of the 19th century, Levi addresses similar moral ambiguities which manifested in the Lagers, making it difficult for him to adopt an inflexible moral view when addressing the problem of Auschwitz. Approaching the problem

[18] Influential and well respected European thinkers from the time of Martin Luther in the mid-16th century to the 18th and 19th centuries had spread anti-Semitic sentiments and propagated the notion of the inequality of human race and the superiority of the 'Aryan blood' (Arthur de Gobineau). See "Anti-Semitism in Germany: Historical background", http://web.mnstate.edu/shoptaug/AntiFrames.htm.

[19] In Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Edmond Dantes, the protagonist, is unjustly sent to prison by a corrupt official not only to further his own career, but to further the ambitions of Count Mondego, a jealous acquaintance of Dantes who betrays him. "Moral wounds have this peculiarity – they may be hidden, but they never close; always painful, always ready to bleed when touched" (2008: 662). The narrator reflects upon Dantes' wounds and how the course of revenge he embarks exposes a degree of the same cruelty his victimisers had inflicted upon him. Whether Dantes understood the circumstances which drove Count Mondego to betray him or the corrupt official to abuse his power, Dumas does not make clear. However, the reversal of roles from victimised to the victimiser clearly reveals the fluidity of the roles, and how unforeseeable it is for the individual to know his own capacity to do much the same things as those they normally held morally reprehensible.

of the camps with an attitude of ethical judgment would have resulted in a moral dilemma; Levi might have fallen into the same trap as the Nazis did. By judging everyone equally harshly he would have reduced perpetrators to 'monsters'[20] according to his own set of moral values. Levi's intellectual and existential approach allows him to see his perpetrators as humans and not just as monsters. James and Stuart Rachels argue that "morality requires the impartial consideration of each individual's interests" (2010: 10). Levi perhaps achieves a degree of moral transcendence in being able to still see his abusers as human and requiring his readers to consider their role. The victimizers were not all callous and unsympathetic men and woman who enjoyed killing and inflicting pain on the prisoners. Many – due to their schooling, and early indoctrination – were acting merely out of an overdeveloped sense of obedience and some of the responsibility to protect their families from the possible repercussions of a dictatorial regime. These are some of the considerations that Levi requires the reader to keep in mind when reading *If This is a Man.*

However, it is important to understand also that Levi does not excuse the actions of certain Nazi officers and other people vested with power in the camps. While he does attempt to understand the circumstances which led to the German officers and the guards to committing such acts, he cannot forgive the moral injustices and the atrocities to which many of the camp prisoners were subjected. The opening poem of *If This is a Man* offers a glimpse of Levi's less guarded self and his disapproval and anger when at the end of it, he hurls in a quasi-biblical curse: "…may your house fall apart/ may illness impede you/ May your children turn their faces from you" (1988: 17). Levi's tone in this poem reflects all the outrage which still resided in his heart. Forgiving would clearly have meant forgetting the atrocities committed by the Nazis and Hitler; his duty to bear witness forbade him to act against what he regarded as his moral obligation to ensure that this injustice was not forgotten and that its memory would impede its recurrence. Morality does not make allowances for individuals, who act out of fear, for self-preservation or aggrandizement or for their pleasure, to be excused for their despicable or depraved actions, even if they were, to a degree, themselves victims of circumstance. Levi does not shy away from revealing the level of inhumanity which was the norm for the Kapos, SS men, and other people who held authority in the camps or even some certain *Reichsdeutsche* in the cities, who betrayed their neighbour, looted their shops and

[20]As Professor J. Evans argues in the *Private Voice of Hitler*, "It's very easy to think of Hitler as a monster [or] simply as a raving madman..." but it would be denying that "we, maybe in some, even if in some very small way, have the sort of potential to do evil as Hitler did" (2006, Disc 2).

destroyed Jewish property. The group of people Levi is particularly interested in are the 'prominents'[21]. Levi writes that the "Jewish prominents form a sad and notable human phenomenon. In them converge present, past and atavistic sufferings, and the tradition of hostility towards the stranger makes of them monsters of asociality and insensitivity" (1988: 97). This statement supports what Levi had said in the first paragraph of chapter 9: "[w]hat we have so far said and will say concerns the ambiguous life of the Lager" (1988: 93). The ambiguity of this life is reflected in the different characters' propensity for both cruelty and compassion. Levi does not separate or differentiate the brutal acts of the Jewish prominents from those of the other officers and non-Jewish officials or post-holders. Levi remarks how "some of [the Kapos] beat [them] from pure bestiality and violence" (1988: 73). Although Levi attempts to understand, the correspondence he later has with some of the German officers – introduced in the final chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved*– confirms that he cannot forgive the brutality and the moral corruption that was rife in the camps.

Howes presents a striking argument when he reasons that "The fate of the 'drowned' demonstrates the mutability of the presumption that we, the comfortable, comprise the human community" (2008: 279).The many ordinary Germans, who were 'comfortable in their homes' and did nothing to stop or counter the propaganda activities of their government – cannot plead ignorance of at least some of the atrocities that were being perpetrated in their country; thus there was a degree of complicity for which they needed to admit culpability. Where was their humanity?

Levi does not answer this question; he only poses it for the consideration of the readers, so that they may ponder it and fathom how this came about. Does this point to our indifference and failure to meet our own moral obligations to protect our neighbours? The questions are as significant today as they were at the time of the book's publication, giving the many examples of senseless xenophobic attacks against innocent civilians or acts of terrorism such as the September 11 attacks on the twin Towers and the Pentagon, the shooting of cartoonists and editorial staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris in the second week of January this year and the still fairly recent kidnappings of almost 200 schoolgirls by the Islamist fundamentalist

[21] [*Prominenz* or *'Prominenten*] these were camp officials, "from the *Häftling*-director […] to the Kapos, the cooks, the nurses, the night-guards, even to the hut-sweepers" (1988: 96). Levi is more interested in the Jewish prominents because, unlike those who were given these posts on the basis of their being Aryan, the Jews who were assigned these tasks were initially coerced into doing them, then ended up acting against their own kind to better insure their own survival.

Boko Haram. There are always people who allow themselves to be used or who know what is being planned.

Levi keeps referring to the Lager as "a gigantic biological and social experiment" (1988: 93). There were indeed medical and scientific experiments carried out in the camps by Nazi scientists to further the ambitions of the regime. "During World War II, a number of German physicians conducted painful and often deadly experiments on thousands of concentration camp prisoners without their consent" (Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2014)[22]. Inmates were used as guinea pigs to advance research and test theories. Farrell argues that the "objective of the Nazis [was] not only the destruction of a race, but also the demolition of a human by the elimination of all the innate qualities, the dignity and craving for respect and self-respect..." (2011: 95). An example of the success of this objective are the *Musselmänner*, the 'damned', prisoners who had given up all forms of resistance to the Nazi war machine and surrendered themselves to inevitable death. One such character to whom Levi refers is Null Achtzehn – 018, the last three digits of his identification number; he has no other name, perhaps he too has forgotten his name. Levi writes: "Null Achtzehn is no longer a man [… he is] nothing more than an empty shell, like that of certain insects" (1988:38), who works like a tame, senseless, obedient animal, following all the rules, never rebelling, until he dropped dead. Farrell further points out that the "Musselman...is a creature drained of all power of resistance [...] so in essence a man passively resigned to fate" (2011: 94) in whom even the most basic survival instincts have been dulled. Often they are very young men like Null Achtzehn or 'Beppo the Greek':

> who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and he knows it, and lies [in his bunk] looking fixedly at the light without saying anything, and without even thinking any more … (1988:135-6).

In the chapter titled, "The Drowned and the Saved" Levi describes how the Lager is a place where:

> thousands of individuals, differing in age, condition, origin, language, culture and customs, are enclosed within barbed wire: there they live a regular, controlled life which is identical for all and inadequate to all needs, and which is more rigorous than any experimenter could have set up to establish what is essential [for man's survival] (1998:93).

[22]"Nazi Medical Experiments" http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?Moduled=10005168

The ‘social experiment’, which Levi refers to, mentioned above, thus also refers to the inadequacy of the necessities to sustain life that characterized the camps; a person could die of hunger, thirst, exposure to the cold, sleep deprivation or the lack of hygiene as easily as of being subjected to overwork or regular beatings. It was a ‘social experiment’, however, that also revealed either the elemental goodness in people or the degree of insensitivity to other people’s suffering and the cruelty of which we are all capable. It proved that anyone is capable of inflicting harm on others. Levi warns the reader that he/she has no authority to pass any moral or ethical judgment against these individuals because the reader is an outsider and cannot, therefore, even begin to fathom the harsh realities of the camps. Our moral sympathies are not adequate enough to offer a sufficient or just ruling. It is easy for a person who has never experienced the severity of that reality to adopt an ethical position, according to one’s social and religious upbringing, and to condemn perpetrators outright of being immoral. Levi, however, requires the reader to question what they would do under similar circumstances. Levi necessitates the reader to face, to a degree, related to Pirandello’s body of work in which he explores what circumstances reveal about us and show how little we know of ourselves and what we are capable of.

The conclusion one arrives at is that all humanity is driven by self-interest and that reacting with sympathy is not enough to resolve the endless thread of violence and victimization. In Woody Allen’s *Whatever Works,* Larry David plays an old, retired professor who has given up on humanity and life, and jokingly complains that “we”, whom Levi calls ‘the comfortable’, “read about some massacre in Darfur, some school bus [that] gets blown up and [we] go ‘Oh my God, the horror’, and then [we] turn the page and finish [our] eggs from the free range chickens...” (2007). Sympathy without the urge of taking the initiative for action amounts to nothing ever changing. Sontag writes that we “can’t truly imagine what it was like [to be in the front line of a war zone]. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is, [...] what every soldier, and every journalist who has put time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels” (2004: 125-26). The moral indignation and sympathy the reader may experience when faced with the horrors of war, or the Lager, is not enough to make one fully understand and envisage the experiences of those who have lived through its tragedies and inhumanity.

If This is a Man is one of the most morally significant texts to be written about Auschwitz. In this work Levi explores the moral ambiguities he observed during his imprisonment in the

Lager and from this he infers much about the nature of man. Psychoanalyst and writer Adam Phillips defines the text "as a quasi-scientific […] enquiry into human nature in which what people are like in concentration camps can tell us something about what people are like in general and about the roots of morality" (2001). In fact Levi writes in the Preface of this first book that he wrote it "not to formulate new accusations, rather to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind" (1988:1). In it he explores the dynamics of power and the chain of victimization that the Nazi dictatorial regime caused. He suggests that is where the abuse of humanity lies, in the chain of victimization that National Socialism was responsible for on a much broader scale, both politically and socially, both within and outside the concentration camps. The victims were not only the prisoners, but a number of the officers in the camps, the civilians at home and the young men who were sent off to fight at the fronts who did not necessarily endorse Hitler's racial and political ideology. However, as previously said, we then must ask whether the fact that one too is a victim presents a valid excuse for us being complicit to the victimization of others. Some soldiers and officers truly believed in Nazi ideology, others were coerced by their circumstances to join the Nazis. Although Levi does not speak of any specific officer who was truly humane, he does reveal that "some of the [Kapos] beat [them] from pure bestiality and violence, but others beat [them] when [they were] under a load almost lovingly, accompanying the blows with encouraging exhortations, as cart-drivers do with willing horses" (1988: 73). This reluctance to follow orders on the part of some of the Kapos affirms that one could retain some degree of conscience and exert some freedom of choice even in the midst of prevailing barbarity. The complexities of the cruelty of the political regime and the disregard for the sanctity of human life during Hitler's dictatorship reveal not only the brutality that every human being is capable of but – within limits – the possibility of holding onto one's humanity because, as Levi demonstrates, there is an equal amount of moral strength and goodness in each one of us.

2.1.2. Self-preservation as accepted morality

One of the tenets that govern the lives of the prisoners in the camps is the length to which each one is prepared to go to insure self-preservation; the means one adopted for survival vary according to one's psychological, physical and moral strength. The camps function according to the Darwinian principle of the 'survival of the fittest'. Weak prisoners, like the *Musselmänner*, always fall prey to those who are stronger; there are those who are prepared to steal their bread, shoes and anything which is necessary for surviving in the camps. The

Musselmänner are avoided by other inmates; no one even wants to work alongside them for fear of being punished for poor work. Levi writes, describing survival in the camps, that

> ...one must take into account a definite cushioning effect exercised by both the law and the moral sense which constitutes a self-imposed law; for a country is considered the more civilised the more wisdom and efficiency of its laws that hinder a weak man from becoming too weak and a powerful one too powerful.
> But in the Lager things are different: here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone. (1988: 94)

In a previous chapter Levi had stated that "survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world" (1988:75) was practically impossible in the concentration camps. This implies that one should accept that there can be different sets of ethics that apply to different situations, but moral relativism is also problematic[23]. Moral relativism also allows one to reflect on the cultural norms which are inconsistent with one's own moral obligations and responsibilities towards others. Rachels and Rachels (2010) contend that a 'cultural relativist' would not criticize National Socialists for being intolerant of Jews, if all they were doing was following their own cultural code. But, given that cultural relativists take pride in their tolerance, it is ironic that their theory actually supports, or at least tolerates, the intolerance of aggressive societies. Every country has the right to protect its interests, its borders and itself against disruptive foreign elements, however, when a country deems it of national importance to interfere with things outside its boundaries and – with little hesitation – is prepared to invade, subjugate, plunder and steal from its neighbours to further its own interests, it loses that right and must be stopped.

Yet, the majority of Germans failed to consider the moral implications of the 'Final Solution' their government was planning; non-German people tried to ignore the abuse of German and other Jews perhaps because their own cultures were tacitly anti-Semitic. Thus what was

[23] Moral relativism is a branch of ethics which deals with attempting to make sense of and understand the various and contrasting moral principles which are relative to different cultures and human societies. Although all cultures do not share the same moral codes, there are values which most societies have in common like the immorality of murder or purposefully harming another human being. Stuart and Stuart write that "To many people, this observation – 'Different cultures have different moral codes' – seems like the key to understanding morality" (2010: 16). This argument, of course, presents a very difficult moral dilemma especially when one has to consider the acts of malice and cruelty sanctioned by the state and orchestrated murder on such a grand scale. If one accepts the implications of moral relativism, it could be said that one would be compelled to abide by the prevailing norms of that country, but the problem with this argument is that one would then be failing one's own moral obligations and the responsibility to take action against a wrong done other human beings. This line of thinking is further complicated by notions of patriotism, self-interest and self-preservation. Many countries that advocate patriotism, national pride and the importance of protecting one's own country, fail to consider the consequences of such social and political ideologies.

happening within the national boundaries of Germany and its occupied territories was not their concern. This behavior reflects the indifference, which Woody Allen satirizes when he depicts us opening the newspaper and decrying "the horror", but immediately afterwards turn the page and go back to our accustomed lives. If things do not touch us directly, it is all too easy to slip into the role of bystanders and not take into consideration the real tragedies of individuals whom we perceive to be different from ourselves.

Levi's text forces us, the readers, to consider the corruption of both ethical and moral standards that an infernal place like the Lager would breed, and therefore not to judge. In *The Drowned and the Saved* he categorically states his belief that "no one is authorized to judge them [referring to the Jews forced to collaborate and be part of the *Sonderkommandos* (Special Squads) that herded Jews to gas chambers and disposed of the bodies afterwards], not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not live through it" (1989:42). Our instinct is to live, so if you are threatened with instant death or prolonged torture if you do not do what you are told, you will end up obliging. The morality of self-preservation in the camps is to a certain extent a form of resistance against the Nazi war machine; not all the prisoners resigned themselves to extermination; the refusal to submit to sure death shows that the natural instinct to survive in most prisoners was not crushed. Instinct, an involuntary compulsion, is far stronger than ethics, a rational imposition man foists on himself. Levi is aware of the immorality of their actions, but he also knows that something stronger than morality takes over. Levi writes that

> "[i]f some Null Achtzehn vacillates, he will find no one to extend a helping hand; on the contrary someone will knock him aside […]. In history and in life one sometimes seems to glimpse a ferocious law which states: 'to he that has, will be given; from he that has not, will be taken away.' In the camp where the man is alone, and the struggle for life is reduced to it primordial mechanism, this unjust law is openly in force" (1988: 94).

Most prisoners in their daily struggle for survival failed to extend a helping hand to their neighbour; they were acting out of the pure instinct to survive without regard for the needs of fellow prisoners. Reflecting back on his own behaviour, Levi does not excuse himself for never sharing the tiny source of water he found or the rations of food Lorenzo, a civilian worker from outside, surreptitiously gave him, with any of his fellow prisoners. He, like many others, was to a degree complicit to the Nazi war machine that had transformed them. Until they fought to stay alive, it was evident that all will power had not been snuffed out of

them; their refusal to submit to an assigned fate confirmed the power of Eros[24], drive or instinct which makes man want to live and procreate; the physical energy that drives man to want to live and protect his life; but it also turned them into exploitative, predatory creatures.

In his book *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid,* Mark Sanders criticizes the failures which he observed in some of the 'Truth and Reconciliation' reports; he points out that,

> [u]nder the heading, "Responsibility and Reconciliation," the report advocates a "moral responsibility [that] goes deeper than legal and political responsibility". In a series of self-critical paragraphs, it puts forward two reasons why the commission failed to focus sufficiently on the dimension of moral responsibility [...] drawing the attention of the public to the deeds of the exceptional perpetrator led to a "fail[ure] to recognise the 'little perpetrator' in each of us"; whereas "it is only by recognising the potential for evil in each one of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated" (2002: 3).

It is the elusive dynamics of moral responsibility that Levi tries to understand. Sanders' argument offers another perspective with which one can appreciate Levi's work. In judging the perpetrator outright, the observer fails to perceive the perpetrator as a fellow human being, but it is necessary to recognize the 'little perpetrator' to realize that perhaps it is inherent in us. The failures of human society to genuinely address the cause of all such moral and ethical corruption has only resulted in us being blind to our own – even involuntary – propensity to ignore our conscience or justify our own actions. The very issues Levi addresses in *If This is a Man* are still significant because more fundamental issues have not been addressed. Organizations such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in South Africa and the Nuremberg Trials in Germany exist to only serve public interests, but they do not address the roots, or any solutions, to such evils.

In his book *On Evil* Terry Eagleton argues that "Evil appears on the scene only when those in what one might call ontological pain deflect into others as a way of taking flight from themselves. It is as though they seek to break open the bodies of others in order to expose the nullity which lurks inside them" (2010: 119). By defacing the perpetrator from their humanity and punishing them for their 'evil' acts, we (society) assume a moral high ground in order to avoid our own potential to be as those we judge as evil. We are prepared not to judge soldiers

[24] In Freudian psychology, 'Eros' is the sexual drive or instinct which makes man want to live and procreate; it is a physical energy that drives man to want to live.

who are sent off to fight in wars for their crimes, but rather glorify and honour them for defending their countries. The above quoted passage about life in the Lager allows for the reader to understand how vulnerable we are to a reversal of roles.

"We are more particularly interested in the Jewish prominents, because while the others *[non-Jewish prominents]* are automatically invested with offices as they enter the camp in virtue of their natural supremacy, the Jews have to struggle hard to gain [their privileges]" (1988: 96-97). It is through the vicious acts of the Jewish prominents that Levi reveals that even solidarity among men who have lived to experience the same sufferings can be broken. Levi further adds that "[t]hey [Jewish prominents] are the typical product of the structure of the German Lager: if one offers a position of privilege to a few individuals in a state of slavery, exacting in exchange the betrayal of a natural solidarity with their comrades, there will certainly be someone who will accept" (1988: 970. The Jewish prominents represent a class of people who would do anything for their own survival, even at the cost of betraying and risking the lives of their comrades. Although Levi does not judge their humanity, he does, however, question the morality of self-preservation. The 'severe humanist' in Levi makes him view even his own acts as immoral; he does not fail to accuse himself of surviving perhaps at the cost of another life, and for this he carries a burden of guilt for the rest of his days.

In a recent article titled "The truth about evil" philosopher John Gray upholds a cynical view in demonstrating evil as an inherent human trait, "Our leaders talk a great deal about vanquishing the forces of evil. But their rhetoric reveals a failure to accept that cruelty and conflict are basic human traits" (2014). To back his argument he addresses how "those who govern us at the present time reject a central insight of western religion, which is found also in Greek tragedy and the work of the Roman historians: destructive human conflict is rooted in flaws within human beings themselves" (2014) complementing this argument with contemporary cases of war, "Isis has made clear its commitment to beheading apostates and unbelievers, enslaving women and wiping out communities that will not submit to its ultra-fundamentalist interpretation of Islam" (2014). For Gray, war will never end because of the evil inherent in human nature. Since human society has always been affected by conflict and cruelty, it is futile attempting to destroy this attribute or aspect of human life which is why he argues that "their [world leaders] rhetoric reveals a failure to accept that cruelty and human conflict are basic human traits" (2014). For Gray the dictates of morality are just "restraints

[which] exist to curb this innate human frailty" (2014). Gray perceives human beings as fairly irrational animals whose capacity for logic is limited and mainly act out of impulse.

Gray, however, introduces a profoundly alarming scenario. He seems to accept as true that human beings are innately and fundamentally prone to what evolved societies deem to be evil and have no inherent virtue or goodness in them, or even if they do, their capacity for evil hinders it. Gray's passivity and submission to 'evil' contradicts itself in that, although it reveals that every human is capable of committing inhumane atrocities, there is also in man a capacity for goodness which suppresses the evil for the sake of harmony.

Gray's article offers some significant insight into understanding the moral ambiguities which trouble both Levi and Morante in their respective works. However, it does not offer a way out or really further an age-old debate. As Dr. Jonathan Snicker writes in one of the reviews, "[h]is essay reveals the inadequacies of the "western" political and military responses thus far, yet does not offer a way out of the morass" (2014). In arguing his point, he refuses to acknowledge all the good and virtuous deeds which history has also revealed; the Abolitionist Movements[25], which began in the United States confirm, as Levi aims to demonstrate, that integrity, like evil, can be found even in the most severe conditions where one expects self-preservation and wickedness to thrive.

It would be impossible to study Levi's work without an understanding of the moral and ethical ambiguities which persisted within the camps. Levi's meaning lies within his paradoxes and the degree of moral detachment with which he observes life in the Lager. Although Levi aims to understand the perpetrators' role to his and other prisoners' victimization, he does not excuse them or the Nazis, for their crimes. Levi in fact seems to have though much in the same way as John Gray when he argues that "[l]arge parts of the population in Germany went along with Nazi policies of racial persecution and genocide from motives that included social conformity and obedience to authority [...] Until it became clear that Hitler's war might be lost, Nazism was extremely popular" (2014). The soldiers' obedience to the dictatorial rule and many of the Germans passivity and support for Hitler's

[25] The Abolitionist Movements (also known as anti-slavery movements) were reformation movements during the 18th and 19th century sought to put an end to the slavery of Brown, or African people, in Europe, the Americas and also Africa. The abolitionists also aimed at ending the Atlantic slave trade. According to Stanley Harold, a Professor of History at South Carolina State University, "The historical roots of abolitionism lay in black resistance to slavery. Such resistance began during the 15th century as Africans enslaved by Europeans often sought to kill their captors or themselves" (2009).

rule, and the ideology of the Nazis, holds them accountable for the atrocities committed against Jews and victimized people regarded by the regime unworthy of living.

Levi does not excuse his and many of the other prisoners' roles in the death of weak prisoners like the so-called *Musselmänner*. In the introduction to *The Drowned and the Saved* Paul Bailey quotes the phrase, which Levi perpetuated throughout his life after surviving Auschwitz: "'[w]e, the survivors, are not the true witnesses'" (1994: IX). This phrase does not only reveal his 'duty to bear witness', but it also reveals a sense of guilt at having survived at the cost of his comrades' death. Although self-preservation reveals a level of morality construed by a resistance to yield against the moral decadence of the camps, Levi also notices that this act of resistance reveals a level of submission to baser instincts. The failure of some to offer their comrades a helping hand, which would have been the 'right' thing to do according to one's moral obligations, indicates that self-interest is stronger. The Darwinian code of the 'survival of the fittest', existed in the camps; the Nazis had reduced the prisoners to reconciling themselves with their conditions, so for the strong survival meant stepping on the weak, even when aware that this would be detrimental to them. As in the chapter titled "The Grey Zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi writes "It is absurd, naïve and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism was, sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them similar to itself" (1994: 25).

2.1.3. Altruism at the expense of one's own life

In the chapter "The unbearable silence of responsibility" Zygmunt Bauman writes "[m]oving away from the comforting security of being to the fearsome insecurity of responsibility" (1998: 78) is an essential element of the social pact. As I had aimed to demonstrate in the previous section, one of the principal forms of conduct which is accepted in the Lager is the survival and self-preservation of oneself, attained through the exploitation of even the smallest opportunity, often at the expense of the weaker prisoners. However, unlike Gray who only sees humanity as fundamentally 'evil', Levi refuses to acknowledge such an ominous and pessimistic outlook, but rather views most of human actions as being governed by circumstances. It is those conditions which draw the individual to commit acts of cruelty or evil. Although Levi requests that the reader consider the moral ambiguities presented by life in the Lager, he also requests that the reader not judge these actions as fundamental characteristics which define the individuals responsible for performing those acts of malice.

To further this debate Levi reveals the virtue and selfless humanity which existed even under the harsh conditions of the Lager. An example that he presents to the reader is that of Lorenzo, a civilian employed to work at the Buna-Monowitz chemical plant. Lorenzo, who even at the cost of endangering his own life and safety, shared a portion of his food and clothing with Levi and smuggled letters out of the camp for him. He records how

> ...an Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months; he gave me a vest of his, full of patches; he wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me the reply. For all this he neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward. All this should not sound little. My case was not the only one; there were others of us who had contacts of various kinds with civilians, and derived from them the means to survive (1989: 125).

Anissimov, who wrote the first complete biography of Levi, reveals how "Lorenzo Perrone kept Primo Levi fed for no reason but pure altruism" (1998: 171). The most crucial laws of survival in the camps were that a prisoner should not lose any clothing, shoes or bread. These three items are essential for survival; without sufficient clothing, the prisoner could freeze to death, without shoes, his feet would freeze rendering him unfit for work and a sure candidate for the selection, and without food, a prisoner could die of hunger or become so weak that he would be eliminated. Levi acknowledges that he owes his life to Lorenzo's humanity in the face of danger to his own safety, but also blames himself for not displaying the same degree of compassion to his fellow prisoners by sharing his extra rations with any of them. He too had put his own needs and survival first. Levi's desire for survival is not driven necessarily by a fear of death, but rather by his sense of responsibility which fuels his need to be a witness. *If This is a Man* is Levi's philosophical revisiting of what it means to be human under conditions of relentless suffering. What does it take to maintain one's humanity in conditions where survival thrives over morality and compassion? Mirna Cicioni in *Primo Levi, Bridges of Knowledge* maintains that "Levi's indirect question highlights the [plight of the] victims: it asks what human features are left after they have been deprived of their identities and of their collective social and moral codes..." (1995: 27).

Antoine Phillipe argues that since "Levi aims at a new Kantian moral imperative, the Hobbesian conception of human is what [he] absolutely reject[s]" (2005: 126). Levi refuses to acknowledge that only evil or the urge to create suffering for others if it benefits oneself or

one's society is the primary conception which governs humans. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, especially in his epistolary dialogues with German correspondents, as in *If This is a Man*, Levi speaks of the sense of guilt which they feel for their role, whether actively or passively, in the cruelty against the victims of Auschwitz, but he does not fully accept the passive cooperation or obedience to the authority of the Nazis which most use as their justification. Although he aims at understanding, Levi cannot forgive the level of dehumanization to which the Nazis had subjected the prisoners. He claims that responsible human beings always have a choice, no matter how difficult, as the cases of solidarity and humanity, even in the midst of all the immorality and brutality that existed in the camps, testify. Lorenzo is not the only person who extends a hand of kindness to those who the Nazi war machine is determined to eliminate. However, it was Lorenzo's charity which reminded Levi that he was still a man, and that he could resist the Nazi war machine by surviving to bear witness: "Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man" (1988: 128). Lorenzo's selfless humanity kept alive in Levi the memory of a world outside the camps, where – although the realities of life in the Lagers tended to make one believe that that life was an illusion, a dream which taunted the prisoners – he would still be a man even if impoverished because being a man meant holding onto one's dignity. "Human beings were reduced to the state of nature, where primal instincts ruled, where the social contract was ignored, where culture was a trivial irrelevance" (2011: 97). In *If this is a Man* there is a tone of longing to redeem oneself in the face of such degrading conditions. For Levi and others it meant finding small ways of being defiant, of disregarding one's own safety for the sake of preserving one's moral integrity and social obligation. A failure to revolt against an already set fate, as in the case of the *Musselmänner* who, although they never trampled on any of the other prisoners, lost their sense of morality through their lack of resistance against the powers which aimed at destroying them. The Musselman completed every task he was assigned without any form of resistance and seemed oblivious to the taunts of others. The figure of the Musselman is a very difficult one to deal with because, although Levi is, to a degree, unsympathetic in his description of their failures as human beings, he also holds into account that they are the true witnesses to the horrors of Auschwitz. For Levi, the best of them – the inmates – died, and all the *Musselmänner* fit into the category 'the best of them'. As Farrell points out, ultimately for Levi "...the Saved are failures. It is in this sense; it seems to me, that Levi came to see them, the supposedly subhuman relict who dragged out their existence without hope, without resistance, as the only genuine witnesses." (2011: 98). The

saved failed because they could not do anything to help the *Musselmänner*; their own survival was of prime importance for them to inconvenience themselves by extending moral support to the irrevocably downtrodden. The *Musselmänner* are victims who have accepted their fate and have forsaken any form of resistance to give a purpose to their lives and fight the oppressors, who although Levi cannot approve their passive acceptance to be dragged down, their presence fuelled Levi's guilt, which he feels he can only recompense by telling their story. Levi's sense of guilt comes from remorse: although throughout his experience of the camp he witnessed moments of kindness, from Lorenzo and other characters like Resnyk, Levi feels he did not extend enough of a helping hand to those who needed it. Although he records how he helped Jean Samuel, called Pikolo, to survive by befriending him, talking to him, and on their daily walk to fetch the soup cauldron teaching him Italian through memorized extracts from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*. Intuitively Levi chose Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, the canto of Ulysses, where he exhorts his men to follow him on one more journey; Levi felt it held an important lesson:

> Consider from what noble seed you spring:
> You were created not to live like beats,
> But for the pursuit of virtue and of knowledge!
> (118-120)[26];

nothing ought to stand in the way of the desire "to gain experience of the world and of the vices and worth of men"... (98-99)[27]. Ulysses ' message to his crew was *their* (the prisoners') answer to the Kapos, the SS, the whole infernal system around them.; it was a clarion call, a summon to them, and he and Pikolo were obeying it at that moment by finding a reason, a meaning to their existence in the labour camp. Levi perceived what Viktor E. Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist in Vienna, arrested, transported to and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, observed: "man can get used to anything" (2007:38) but those who found meaning even in the most horrendous circumstances were far more resilient to suffering than those who did not. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing,"

[26] Considerate la vostra semenza
fatti non foste a vivere come bruti
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.
[27] L'ardore / ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
e de li vizi umani e del valore.

Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way"[28] (2007:89).

Levi, 24 years of age, and Pikolo 22, liked working together; they were not excessively strong, but they were healthy and from the time they were allowed to work together they motivated each other; Levi helped Pikolo adapt and find some meaning; Pikolo helped Levi understand himself and others and the significance of what was happening around him. One of the governing laws in the camps was that strong prisoners avoided work with the weak ones, and Levi usually found himself dragged down by prisoners physically weaker than he was. This, of course, increased the chance of being selected for the "death chambers". On the other hand, he was lucky at times to be paired with stronger ones who would help him. In fact, aside from Lorenzo, whom at the risk of his own life offers Levi his ration food and perform other altruistic acts, Resnyk is another inmate who displayed a charitable attitude towards Levi, who often sought him out:

> I will try and place myself with Resnyk; he seems a good worker and being taller will support the greater part of the weight. I know that it is in the natural order of events that Resnyk refuse me with disdain and form a pair with another more robust individual...Instead Resnyk accepts, and even more, lifts up the sleeper by himself and rests it on my shoulder with care (1988: 73).

Maurice Resnyk (Reznik) – a Polish Jew who had lived in France for twenty years and by the time Primo met him, in Lager terms, was strong, healthy and relatively secure because he had become *Block Schneider*, a tailor for his block proves to Levi that life in the camps was not completely a Hobbesian reality[29], where the struggle for survival only meant destroying other weaker prisoners for the sake of advancement or a vestige of power. The 2009 Microsoft Student Encarta defines altruism as a "devotion to the welfare of others". Resnyk, unlike many of the other stronger prisoners in the camps accepts working with Levi, not because of his moral obligation, but because he had no interest in advancing his status in the Lager; the camps may have reduced most of its inmates to subhuman beings, but he managed to remain a 'man' and see his fellow inmates as human beings. In the pages describing Resnyk, there is a

[28]On returning from the concentration camp Frankl went on to develop and use "logotherapy" to help his patients. He explains that "Logos is a greek word which denotes "meaning". "Logotherapy", focuses "on meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning" because it holds that "striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. Frankl speaks of "a will to (find) meaning" in contrast to Frued's "pleasure principle" (eros) and Adler's "will to power" which is describes man's "striving for superiority" (cfr. Frankl, 1984:121).

[29] That is "a moral-and-value-free environment", cfr.Hobbes, Thomas; *Leviathan*, Gutenberg, ebooks,05-01-2015.

degree of indirect criticism of those stronger prisoners who – unlike Resnyk – had lost any feeling of solidarity with their comrades and only thought of their own survival. Although stronger prisoners "by a miracle of savage patience and cunning", always found "a new method of avoiding the hardest work [...] he [was] esteemed [...] and he [became] stronger and so [was] feared" (1988: 94). Levi does not respect these individuals who gained power and survived through their cunning because what little power they achieved was generally at the cost of other weaker prisoners. But Resnyk was different; because he was relatively secure he was in a position to help others (unlike those "on the way down", as Henri, another inmate, puts it) and he did. Resnyk noticed Levi's physical unsuitability for that kind of labor carrying heavy railway sleepers to make a path through the deep clinging mud, and realized that without help he could not survive. So he did not refuse to work with him; on the contrary he lifted the sleepers and when carrying them, he took almost all the weight himself. Furthermore he did this daily always with the same gentleness that was extraordinary in Auschwitz.

If This is a Man is Levi's account of the experiences of the inhumanity and cruelty which he observed in the death and concentration camps of Auschwitz. In this work Levi does not fail to reveal the moral ambiguities which reigned, exposing the frailty of the roles played by victims and perpetrators. Levi does not offer the reader any answers to the question of Auschwitz and its atrocities. The Germans, and better still the Nazis, had succeeded not only in debasing the prisoners, but in destroying all forms of resistance. Although, they knew that there was another life outside the atrocities of the camps, dreaming of their days before being sent to the camps, was like torture for it now seemed so very unreal, thus many could not do anything to regain that world; the environment of the camps was planned to reduce all forms of hope. However, even in the midst of all the suffering, humanity still prevailed in many instances, and Levi made a point of documenting such instances. People like Lorenzo Perrone and Maurice Resnyk reminded Levi that victims were still "men" and that the Nazis had failed to debase all the prisoners so completely that they no longer considered themselves human. Levi's survival, in large part due to human kindness, reveals a degree of triumph of the human spirit over the microcosm of the Lager.

2.2. *The Drowned and the Saved*: Revisiting Auschwitz

Contrary to *If This is a Man*, where Levi offers a testimonial of the cruelties he witnessed and the extraordinary goodness that managed to survive in their midst conditions, in *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi he reveals his exasperation with the crimes of the Nazis and the attitude of many Germans in subsequent years, and with the world's initial failure to accept the truth about the death and concentration camps at Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buchenwald, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and other places in Germany and Poland. In the introduction to the work Paul Bailey reveals that "*The Drowned and the Saved* dispels the myth that Primo Levi forgave what the Germans did to his people. He didn't, and couldn't, forgive. He refused, however, to indulge in what he called 'the bestial vice of hatred'. The voice that speaks in this work is that of a reasonable man, dismayed by the lack of reasonableness in his fellow human beings" (1994: x). Levi's annoyance was fuelled especially by the emerging scholarship of 'Holocaust denial' in France. Holocaust deniers aim at negating rejecting some of the facts about the Jewish genocides; it argues that the 'Final Solution' meant the deportation of all Jews from the Reich Germany and Europe; that the death and concentration camps, the mass murders and gas chambers are all gross exaggerations , or even a Jewish conspiracy. These views, perpetuated by learned men which who found favor with a section of the public, fuelled not only his exasperation, but a sense of disappointment and disillusionment which crushed his belief in humanity. Bailey further argues that Levi's voice is that "...of a sceptic, a natural doubter" (1994: x). His faith and hopes for humanity were disturbed, worsened by the fact that the individuals who discarded the events of the Holocaust were not just regular, ignorant and unlearned laymen, but were educated University professors. This, of course sparked a great sense of failure in him, he had to face that he had not succeeded in somehow revealing the truth about Nazi crimes against humanity and being believed: so why then was he spared? Why did he survive? What caused him to question his own survival, and his duty to bear witness: had the drowned died for nothing?

Analysis of the link between the need to survive and the need to tell the story of the experience has revealed the two to be deeply intertwined, to the point where "survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts" (Des Pres, 1976:31); this was the case when writing *If This is a Man*, but *The Drowned and the Saved* is a far more rational work. The sense of urgency and need that undoubtedly informed his first work are not present in the latter text; if Levi made a distinction between that which motivated him to write and the act of writing

itself in the earlier work, he made an even more conscious decision to avoid a discussion of personal emotions and to filter out anger and bitterness in the second: "I have deliberately assumed the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting tones of the victim, nor the irate voice of someone who demands revenge. I thought that my account would be all the more credible and useful the more it appeared objective and the less it sounded overly emotional", writes Primo Levi in the "Afterword" of his first testimony (1988:382). However, the austere narrative style of *If This is a Man* is replaced by a colder and less detached style in the *The Drowned and the Saved,* which seems to indicate that, given the way acknowledgement of the Holocaust turned out, he had not altogether succeeded in his attempt to understand and overcome the events he had lived through. Yet, although Levi's tone reveals his exasperation, disillusionment and disappointment, he still does not judge or harbour hatred.

The section of Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, that remains most impressive is the one in which he discusses the "grey zone", that is what lies between the two binary opposites of the perpetrators and the victims of a crime.

2.2.1. The 'Grey Zone' of victimization

The issue of victim-become-perpetrator and perpetrator-become-victim has been a very significant point of discussion in both Holocaust and War studies. In criticizing Hilberg's[30] categorization on these roles, Joram Warmund argues that "Hilberg's categorizations are too sharply drawn, that some of the protagonists may in fact be more accurately placed into another group; or that distinctions between perpetrators and bystanders, between perpetrators and victims, or between victims and bystanders, are not always as clear as Hilberg has presented them" (2005: 164). In this study, Hilberg provides a "sociological organized framework" where in a variety of historical characters can be placed offering a practical introduction with which the ordinary reader and serious scholars can engage to classify the range of Jewish figures who lived through or succumbed under the "infernal order" of National Socialism and its expansionist and superiority ideals. Although Warmund criticizes Hilberg, he does not completely disregard the importance of having such a framework and finds it useful to discuss the thin line which at times separates the victim from his perpetrator,

[30]Raul Hilberg, author of *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945*(New York: Collins Harper, 1992) is discussed at length in Warmund's article "The Gray Zone Expanded" cit.

or the perpetrator from the victim. Levi is right in saying that it is not always clearly definable and he dedicates a considerable number of pages to illustrate how life in the camps made this distinction at times very ambiguous, because the same person who could find the good in himself to do heroic humanitarian deeds, had, at times, also given in to the evil that exist within every human being:

> "the network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors.
> [...]
> Instead, the arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limit... One entered hoping at least for the solidarity one's companions in misfortune, but the hope-for allies, except in the special cases, were not there (1994: 23).

Every *Zugang*, newcomer, was treated with hostility and envied rather than pitied (one suffers most in the first few weeks of deprivation of every creature comfort and familial support); the newcomers still had "the smell of home" about them and this was intolerable to those who had to learn to forget it. New arrivals were often subjected to a sort of "initiation ceremony" like new recruits or fraternity freshmen or young men and women coming of age in primitive societies. "Without a doubt," adds Levi, "life in the Lager entailed regression, it led back to adopting behaviours that were, precisely, primitive" (1989:25). Right from the start, on entering a concentration camp, one became aware that one had no natural allies. Constant dehumanizing treatment, constant hunger and thirst could drive anyone to regress and become a potential persecutor or at least a person capable of preying on others or be a detached bystander incapable of feeling anything for others. In the short story "Cerium", Levi returns to this point:

> We were not normal because we were hungry. […] To eat, to get something to eat, was our prime stimulus [… and I], a respectable little university graduate, became a thief. […].I stole like [the great Buck of *The Call of the Wild*] and like the foxes: at every favourable opportunity but with sly cunning and without exposing myself. I stole everything except the bread of my companions (1986:140).
> […] learning how to steal is not easy; it had taken me several months before I could repress the moral commandments and learn the techniques (ibid.).

Each story of *The Periodic Table*, has as its title a chemical element which metaphorically resonates with some feature of the human condition. According to the Lenntech site, "Cerium

is a malleable, soft, ductile, iron-grey metal, slightly harder than lead. It is very reactive: it tarnishes readily in the air; it oxidizes slowly in cold water and rapidly in hot water. It dissolves in acids. It can burn when heated or scratched with a knife"[31]and is thus a perfect metaphor for the human race: adaptable, tarnished, reactive in the sense of volatile and vulnerable. If such is the nature of man, no one can righteously judge another. Carol Angier records how this thought "never disappeared from [Levi's] conversation"(2002:597): after tackling the subject in his first book, in 1957 "he [came] across a book published in Holland […] by a Dutch-Jewish historian, Jacques Presser; it was called *De Nacht der Girondijen* (*The Night of the Girondists*); it was the story of a young Dutch Jew who managed to stay alive in Westerbrook [a holding camp from which detainees were transported to Auschwitz and other end-stations of the Reich] by helping to load his fellow Jews on to the trains." (ibid.) Angier adds that he read it and reread it; he could not get it out of his mind until in 1975, Levi sat dawn to translate it and had it published by Foà. She comments that this book was Levi's "first re-encounter with the dreadful subject of the 'grey zone' – the twilight world of Schepschel, Alfred L. and Henri, of the Block elders, Kapos and spies; all those who saved themselves by collaborating, more or less willingly, with their persecutors" (2002:596). "Translating Presser he relived Auschwitz [and] was afflicted by 'violent emotion'. He was forcing himself […] to face 'the monstrous in man'" (ibid.). And at great cost to his mental and physical health he does so again in the years leading to the publication of *The Drowned and the Saved* in 1986. Levi recognizes that "the harsher the oppression the more likely is the willingness to collaborate with those wielding the power" (1994:28).

A more recent study which approaches the question of victim-perpetrator with consideration to Levi's conversation on the subject was done by Dr. Stacy Banwell of the University of Greenwich in London. Examining a case about Karla Homolka, a young Canadian female offender convicted for serial murders. Karla and her husband abducted, tortured and murdered young women. Banwell refers to Karla as a 'compliant victim', that her actions were not entirely autonomous. Although Karla committed these atrocious acts with her husband, while she was also a victim of his abuse; her deeds were committed out of the instinct to protect herself (as we witness with many of the prisoners in Levi's *If This is a Man*). Karla was aware of her actions and afraid of rebelling under the pretext that she may suffer the same atrocities

[31]http://www.lenntech.com/periodic/elements/ce.htm#ixzz3OSJFdP7O

from her perpetrator husband. Banwell argues that "Karla's fear of her husband - based on her knowledge that he was actively raping other women and the abuse she herself suffered - is emphasized in order to demonstrate that her involvement in the crimes was far from voluntary: her participation was simply a *means of survival*" (2011: 4, italics mine).

Banwell's examination of the 'grey zone' of victimization is in support of Levi's discussion and the difficulty of dealing with camp life and the ambiguity that underlay the relationships and life in the camps. As in the above quote, Levi demonstrates his concerns in *If This is a Man* when he introduces the Jewish prominents, "Schepschel has been in the Lager for four years. He has seen the deaths of tens of thousands of those like him...[he] is not very robust, nor very courageous... Schepschel was no exception, and when the opportunity showed itself, he did not hesitate to have Moischl, his accomplice in a theft from the kitchen, condemned to a flogging" (1988: 98-99). The circumstances faced by many of the prisoners who entered Auschwitz do not differ much from Karla's experiences. Prisoners like Schepschel were as Banwell describes "compliant victims" which implies the victims' cooperation in others and their own 'persecution'. One could argue that unlike the prisoners, Karla could escape her husband's cruelty since she was not always under his inspection, or that Karla's situation does not measure to the kinds of atrocities and cruelty that the Auschwitz prisoners were subject.

The above arguments presents the reader with two very upsetting issues; first, approaching Karla's circumstance in such a straightforward manner one would fail to recognize the psychological scars that she was subject. Banwell argues that "the focus of Levi's (1988) analysis [is that] the structure of state oppression experienced by the prisoners offered them no opportunity or avenue for escape" she continues to argue that "the harsher the subjugation the more likely the victim is to collaborate with the authority" (2011: 10-11). It is not that Karla and the prisoners could not escape their abusers, but the harsh punishments and realities which they were faced, killed all forms of resistance because of the trauma they experienced through their punishment. In "The Black Hole of Trauma" McFarlane and van der Kolk argue that "repetition causes further suffering for victims and for the people around them. In this re-enactment of the trauma, an individual may play the role of either victimizer or victim" (2004: 493). To look at these perpetrators simply as inhumane creatures would reveal the reader's failure to consider not only the circumstantial, but also the mental scars which cause "compliant victims" to commit the same acts as their abusers. It is important to note that not all perpetrators were, as Karla's husband, cold and unfeeling. Some of the officers suffered

trauma from having witnessed and been agents of the crimes committed against many Jews and other prisoners whom the regime considered unworthy of life and living. Although Levi realises the variety of roles the Jewish prominents and the officers or any other German/Aryan 'compliant victims' who held a position in the camps played, the dynamics of their victimisation differed because of their circumstances. He is conscious of the various circumstantial heights at which these 'compliant victims' were subject, he does not forgive, nor does he excuse the fact that they were accountable and therefore had to be held responsible for their actions.

Secondly, to hold that the suffering of one individual does not compare to the suffering of thousands presents a very disturbing ethical dilemma; is the life of one person less significant than the lives of a thousand people? To agree that the life of one person is less significant and that it is easier for one person to die than thousands devalues individual life. After his survival of Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, developed a psychology theory he termed Logotherapy. "Logotherapy is based on Frankl's theory that the underlying need of human existence is to find meaning in life" (Frankl, 2009). In Frankl's most famous book *Man's Search for Meaning* he argues that "the meaning of life differs from man to man... What matters, therefore is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment [...] Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life" (2007: 113). To deny the value of the individual is to destroy their role in the world, since as Frankl argues, every person has a specific purpose to fulfil. No man has any right to decide how the life of another has to end, to do so is immoral, and also eliminates the compliant victim's humanity. Levi's work addresses very significant moral and ethical problems which affected prisoners, perpetrators and compliant victims in the camps and the question to ask is; to what extent did these events threaten the humanity of all the individuals who played these roles? The many war films[32] which address the mental scars suffered by returning soldiers who have experienced the death of countless human beings offer a brief insight of the extent of cruelty to which war effects on both victims and perpetrators. It eliminates the individual's will to create meaning for themselves, and fulfil their purpose in life, however it is not in all instances that it dehumanises since there are

[32] Many of the war films about the Vietnam War which became a central project of Hollywood film studios from the early 1970's to the early 1990's, that is to say from *Apocalypse Now* to *Born on the Fourth of July*, were concerned with the psychological scars that the war left on the minds of soldiers.

soldiers who find meaning and purpose in "defending one's homeland". What Levi exposes about the camps is what Agamben reveals in his biopolitics theory; some of the officers and soldiers who were sent off by the state to commit the worst kinds of atrocities against humanity were merely puppets of the larger social and political powers. Karla, like some of the compliant victims and perpetrators in Auschwitz, did not commit these atrocities because they were innately 'evil'[33]. To deny Karla's victimisation and to reject the significance of her case purely based on the scale of her situation is to deny her of her humanity; it is to deny that her suffering ever happened. It is Anthony Hopkins in *The Human Stain* who says that "one cannot measure suffering".

Any event of cruelty and dehumanisation is as significant as the next, it reveals a certain pattern of human societies and human beings and their inclination towards creating suffering for others as an inherent trait. At one point in history it was an accepted moral truth and responsibility in several European countries to treat people of African descent as animals, to capture and handle them as one would do any other animal. Morality in itself, the accepted virtues and ways of living in many societies, can be flawed since history has shown us how human beings can use their reasoning to create chaos and pain for others. Zygmunt Bauman argues that "In moral space, the stranger is someone of whom one cares little for and is prompted to care even less", earlier on he argues, "this [is] tantamount to exempting certain categories of humans, earmarked for banishment from social space (be it criminals, 'enemies of the people', enemies of the nation, party or any other cause, or 'alien' – and hostile – 'races') from the class of potential objects of moral responsibility; in other words, to the *dehumanizing* of such categories of people" (1998: 167). When the Nazis marked the Jewish and other people they regarded as 'undesirable' and unworthy of life, they had to find reasons to dehumanize them, to make them less human. It was considered the moral duty of every German man, woman and child to see Jewish people as less than human. Morally accepted decisions and actions can be used as a justification to dehumanise the other. Many German citizens may have sympathised and supported Hitler's regime, but they failed to recognise the defacement of their own humanity; they failed their own Christian moral obligations[34]. What

[33] I use the concept of 'evil' not with any religious connotations, but rather to express the acts of cruelty which human beings subject each other. So, it is the acts that are cruel and the human being who commits these evil acts is evil, but that does not make the person committing the act innately evil. Evil, like goodness or virtue, is defined by the acts of an "evil" person, not by some supernatural power.

[34] In *The Pity of it All*, Amos Elon points out that in many Nations, and this is decades before the Holocaust, especially in Germany, for Jews to be integrated into the society and accepted they had to convert to Christianity. Elon writes, "in 1812 [Frederick William III]...approved an edict of emancipation that annulled

the Nazis were preaching was not entirely new, which is why many Germans readily accepted their ideologies. As Elon points it out, "Jewish people have always been an easy scapegoat to place blame and hatred against; what Hitler had done was to create a common enemy. Although 26 years have passed since Levi wrote *The Drowned and the Saved* and warned against sensationalism and the dangers such socio-political ideologies can cause the world still faces the same kind of issues Levi was concerned about. Karla's victimisation presents very profound and troubling social issues which addresses the human condition. For Levi every prisoner in the camp had specific role, however that role was established by the Nazis, so neither the prisoners, nor the officers were serving their own specific purposes; they were all robbed of their humanity, their right to choose and create their own meaning. Karla's case, like many of the lives which were robbed of their meaning in the Lager, is significant because it offers some insight to understanding Levi's 'Grey Zone' and the difficulty of establishing an apparent conception of victims and perpetrators.

2.2.2. Surviving Auschwitz: defeat or victory?

Unlike *If This is a Man*, *The Drowned and the Saved* is Levi's response to the field of 'holocaust denial' studies, which emerged out of France, various scholars denied the events which took place in the camps as a Jewish conspiracy. This does not only reveal the unsympathetic approach of these academics, but also the problem of anti-Semitism which is rooted in the early years of Christianity[35]. As Heine reveals in *The Rabbi of Bacherach*, "The Great Persecution of the Jews began with the Crusades and raged most furiously around the middle of the fourteenth century, at the end of the Great Plague. The latter, like all public disasters was attributed to the Jews, for it was held that they had brought down the wrath of God... The enraged populace...murdered many thousands of Jews, tortured them, or violently converted them" (1948: 508). Also, in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Eastern Europe there were organized massacres of Jews known as Pogrom. Levi was aware of the persecution of Jews which preceded the Holocaust in many Christian societies, as I have earlier quoted from his first book *If This is a Man*, " [they] experienced [...] the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every

most of the existing restrictive laws and recognized Jews, at least in theory, as full citizens" (2003: 95). This emancipation, however, could only be granted if a Jew were not to convert to Christianity.

[35] According to an article on Wikipedia, Christian anti-Semitism can be attached to various considerations which include "theological differences, competition between Church and Synagogue, the Christian drive for converts decreed by the Great Commission, misunderstanding of Jewish beliefs and practices, and a perceived Jewish hostility towards Christians" (http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_antisemitism).

century" (1988: 22), he desired that his work would bring about some level of change, this study (holocaust denial) revealed humanity's failure to attempt to understand and live with each other's differences. Levi's aggravated tone in *The Drowned and the Saved* is born from a sense of disappointment, he did not expect for there to be a precipitous change, but he had hoped that the event of the Holocaust would help change or at least shape people's views into the right direction. Levi was not only concerned about the Holocaust or anti-Semitism, but his discussions encompass a revolt against the misuse of power and the senseless violence born from mindless hatred. The Holocaust was an event which had to be preserved in History to teach coming generations, and to deny the future of such an important event, meant that it could be repeated.

The title of the first chapter in *The Drowned and the Saved*, "The Memory of the Offense", is a response against such a line of thought. In the first paragraph Levi argues about the fallacy of human memory, "Some mechanisms are known which falsify memory under particular conditions: traumas...repressions; blockages" (1994: 11). His awareness of the fallibility of memory is a defence against the danger presented by Holocaust denial. Levi refers to the victims of trauma who have repressed their experiences in order to cope with their everyday realities.

In a more recent article "'Ugly Secrets'? Primo Levi and the Resistance" Mirna Cicioni reveals how Primo Levi and the band of partisans[36] which he was a part of "[o]n [the] 9 of December...sentenced two very young members 18-year old Fulvio Oppezzo and 17-year-old Luciano Zabaldano, to death and executed them with a volley of machine-gun fire in the back" (2012). Primo Levi carried the weight of this event to his deathbed and even mentions it in *The Periodic Table*,

> ...among us, in each of our minds, weighed an ugly secret: the same secret that had exposed us to capture, extinguishing in us, a few days before, all will to resist, indeed to live. We had been forced by our consciences to carry out a sentence and had carried it out, but we had come out of it destroyed, destitute, waiting for everything to finish and to be finished ourselves; but also wanting to see each other, to talk, to help each other exorcize that so recent memory (1986: 132).

Levi is unforgiving of his own role in the death of these two young boys. They too had a right to life, but the band of partisans which Levi was a member did not consider this, they acted

[36] Civilian resistance fighters who were against Mussolini's Fascist regime.

out of a sense of duty as any combatant would. The aspirations which drive him to attempt to understand the perpetrator are driven by his own experience that we are all capable of committing the acts; that every human being has the capacity to take life. However, Levi does request that the past not control one's present life, but those that have gone should be remembered and honoured, which is why he kept emphasizing that those that survived are not the true witnesses, but the dead are.

Frankl also argues that "[m]an's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone" (2007: 105). For Frankl the meaning that Levi had found in his life, to bear witness and reflect on the atrocities he experienced in the concentration camps, was not driven by the burden of having survived or the guilt he refers to in *The Perodic Table*, but it was a duty that Levi knew, instinctually, he had to fulfil. "There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are nothing but defence mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations"" (2007: 107). Frankl rejects this point of view since it fails to acknowledge the testimonies which were brought into light by the survivors of Auschwitz as meaningful, but rather as "defence mechanisms".

McClellan argues that "[t]he willingness to give one's life is the paradoxical proof of submission to sovereign power" (2005:152). The question which seems to be pertinent throughout Levi's discourse is: who are the victors and who is defeated? Levi does not blame or wholly accuse the officers for being inhumane beasts or monsters, since they were divided between those who enjoyed hurting the prisoners out of pure sadistic pleasure and those who were, to some extent, through their beating unwilling to hurt the prisoners, but were forced by their circumstances and positions to do so. Although Levi does at one point in his first book, *If This is a Man,* reflect upon this based on the punishments they received from the different officers, he does not accuse any of them for their cruelty because he recognizes that human beings when pushed to their limits are capable of anything. However, their involvement does not excuse them from what they had done. McClellan's argument offers a perspective with which one can view and perhaps attempt to understand Levi's concerns. According to McClellan the soldiers and officers submission reveals a level of victimization; their passive refusal to act willingly demonstrates that their role in the event is not entirely out of their own agency. Levi requires that the reader be impartial and not immediately scorn and hate the

perpetrator because the reader cannot know or understand the full effect war, and more specifically Auschwitz, had on the mental well-being of both victims and victimizers.

Levi is unforgiving of the Powers that are responsible for creating such systems of barbarity. Levi writes in *The Grey Zone*, "It must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state, the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators...is always difficult to elaborate. It is a judgment that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstance" (1988: 28); only the individual who bears the scars of having experienced the camps and the war, of having been there, has the authority of passing judgment.

Levi's sudden and unexpected death has raised a number of questions, dividing theorists into two. The first hold that the burden he carried of having survived while many of his comrades died before him, that he could not handle it any longer, Paul Bailey is one of these theorists who in the back cover to his edition of *The Drowned and the Saved* writes, "Primo Levi committed suicide. The manner of his death was sudden, violent and unpremeditated" (1988). However, this viewpoint ignores the fact that Levi was against suicide, and viewed it as a defeat and a submission to what the Nazis had done to them and their loved ones. The second strain of theorists argue that Levi did not commit suicide, but that his illness may have caused him to lose footing in the third floor of his old apartment in Turin, so they regard his death as a violent accident. These theories bring into question, whether Primo Levi was defeated by the Nazis or not; to accept that he committed suicide would lead one to acknowledge the theory that he was defeated since he would have succumbed to the depression and guilt which came with being a survivor. The theory which seems to be more reasonable is the possibility that Levi's death may be a violent accident. Of course, the uncertainty of Levi's death does not allow for a closed conclusion. One aspect of Levi's and many of the other survivors like Viktor Frankl and Elie Wiesel reveals some sense of victory, but an incomplete victory since the Nazi system had claimed and sacrificed countless human beings.

Chapter 3

Elsa Morante: giving voice to the voiceless

Unlike Levi, whose work has gained much attention in Holocaust, Jewish and Literary Studies, especially on the subject of the 'grey zone' and the relationship between victim and perpetrator, Elsa Morante's work has attracted less attention until quite recently. However, *History: A Novel*, her most well-known work, offers a noteworthy reading of the dynamics of Power and the meaninglessness of the glory associated with war. Not much has been written about Elsa Morante's life; Lily Tuck who has published the only biography on her, reveals that "[Morante] once admitted that she detested biography. The biographer, she claimed, always divulged what one is not" (2009: 1) and perhaps Morante was far more complex and profound than Tuck's not altogether academic[37] biography suggests, however, it does offer some useful insight to understanding Morante's work.

Quoting Elsa Morante, Lily Tuck writes, "I should be grateful to Mussolini [...]. By introducing the racist laws in 1938, he made me realize that I myself was a Jew [...]. When the Germans took over Rome in 1943, I learned a great lesson, I learned terror. I was afraid for myself, but even more for Moravia[38]" (2009: 175). In the same year Elsa Morante and Alberto Moravia escaped to the mountains of Ciociaria. On their way Morante recounts that the people they feared the most were middle class Italians, civil servants, teachers and petty officials. The danger was that they would be reported either to the Fascist militia or the Gestapo. They were eventually offered a place to stay by a peasant family; "[t]o them, Jewish or non-Jewish, we were all *cristiani*[39]" (2009: 175), thus revealing that not all Christians were anti-Semites who wanted to rid their society of those they had been led to believe were their natural enemy.

"In the early 1970's, while she was working on her novel *History* (*La Storia*), Elsa Morante took many long walks through the old Roman Ghetto, [in] Testaccio and San Lorenzo" (2009: 176). Unlike Levi who bore witness to his personal experience and his own victimhood along with that of countless others, Morante offers an account of her observations

[37] It is written in the style of a popular novel and the research lacks the scientific rigour of academic work. Most of what she writes is from hearsay and stories she has heard about Morante when she too was living in Rome.
[38] At the time Morante was married to the already established author, Alberto Moravia who was Jewish.
[39] In Italian the term 'cristiani' is colloquially used to mean a 'human being', a 'creature of God'.

of the war and the victimization of common innocent civilians, and of some soldiers too. Morante is not interested in history with a capital *H*, but history with a small *h*, the (hi)story of the day to day life experiences of people struggling for survival. She becomes the voice of ordinary people to whom History never gives a voice. Their silence is due to the fact that History mainly records the deeds of those in Power. By exploring these neglected stories, Morante gives the reader a way in which to view History from a different perspective. History should not only be about dates, events and glorious or infamous exploits, but about the specific devastations and disruptions caused to the lives of people and about the way they have to cope with the chaos and loss for a long time after the supposed 'glory' and material benefits are gained for a country.

My reading of the narrative will not only focus on Morante's challenge of History with a capital *H,* but on her recording of the Power relationships and the dynamics of Power. Morante uses her observations to expound on much deeper sociological and political issues. Significant themes in this novel are the corruptive ability of power and how the roles of victims and perpetrators are circumstantial. Much like Levi, she illustrates how individuals have to adapt their behavior to suit the pressures of society and the prevailing conditions in which they find themselves. The roles each person performs are altered by circumstances and this blurs the divisions between victims and perpetrators. Morante explores these reversals and – like Levi – without passing judgment on the individual.

3.1. The exploitation of Power and quest for the familiar

After providing an impersonal summary[40] of salient historical events from the dawn of the 20th century to the outbreak of war in Europe, Morante's narrative opens with an epigraph that presents a young German soldier walking alone in the streets of San Lorenzo:

> One January afternoon in the year
> 1941
> A German soldier was out walking
> In the San Lorenzo district in Rome.
> He knew precisely four words of Italian
> And of the world he knew little or nothing.

[40] Morante structures her novel along two parallel lines: each chapter (except the first and the last which have a broader focus) deals with one particular year and starts with a brief factual summary of the History followed by the fictional narrative that shows the effects of those events on the faceless masses History ignores.

> His first name was Gunther.
> His surname is unknown. (1985:19)

From these opening words of the first chapter Morante alludes to a very disquieting subject: rather than being fearsome or menacing, a German soldier is presented as an inexperienced young man who understands 'nothing about the world' in which he has become an unwitting player. Morante presents Gunther as a lost boy whose emotional state is "in contrast with his martial stride. [H]e had a desperate expression in his eyes [...] [and h]is face betrayed an incredible immaturity" (1985: 23). The alienation Gunther feels is because of his unfamiliar surroundings and a longing for companionship and for home. His loneliness, marked by his being alone instead of with other members of his squad, serves to alert the reader that not all German soldiers were necessarily enthusiastic believers in Nazism or even desired to conquer the world for the Third Reich. Morante further informs us that he did not even know what he was meant to be doing in Italy: "[p]rivately, his companions […]guessed that the mysterious destination [for which they were headed] was Africa; [... this] had thrilled him from the beginning with its prospect for genuine exotic adventure. AFRICA! For someone who is barely grown [...] is a magic name" (1985: 25). Gunther's desire for adventure made his having to go to war and leave Dachau, the rural village where he grew up, very exciting. Fantasies of adventure he could imagine, while war was an unknown factor: "[t]his stop, here in Italy, was his first foreign experience; and it could already serve as a foretaste of curiosity and excitement" (1985: 25). But reality was not quite the same. Gunther's innocence and naïveté allows the reader to view him as a potential victim of war. However, the mythical power Gunther wields as an allied German soldier, discovered through Ida's fear of him, gives him the opportunity to 'un-maliciously' perpetrate a violent deed before his unexpected demise:

> ...it's finally clear why the poor woman, on a January day in 1941, greeted the encounter with that humble soldier at San Lorenzo like a nightmare vision. The fears besieging her prevented her from seeing anything of him except a German army uniform [...]. For her he had no features of his own [...]. The soldier was offended, feeling the unknown lady's evident and extraordinary disgust was an injustice [...]. However, in his mortification, instead of giving up, he insisted (1985: 75-76).

His act is not premeditated; Morante refers to him as a "humble soldier", who feels offended and mortified as well as surprised by the disgust he arouses since "[h]e wasn't accustomed to inspiring disgust in women" (1985: 76). Gunther's reaction is that of any young male who knows his attractive but unaware of the power of attraction or repulsion of the uniform he

wears. His aggression results from a mixture of humiliation and anger at being so utterly repelled and the sudden awareness of this power. He has no idea why Ida has cause to fear anyone who wears that uniform. He thus takes it as a personal insult and applies bully tactics to assert himself. This is an unacceptable behaviour in an adult, yet Gunther arouses some sympathy because of the way the external narrator stresses his youthful inner conflict:

> ...before arriving, as he crossed the German border, he had been gripped by a ghastly, lonely melancholy, proof of his still adolescent character, filled with contradictions. To some extent, in fact, he was impatient for adventure; but to some extent, also, unknown to himself, he remained a mamma's boy. At times he vowed he would perform superheroic acts [...] and at the same time, he suspected that the war was a vague algebra (1985: 26).

One of the troubling issues that Morante hits at, right from the start, is the way the State depersonalizes soldiers and views them as mere instruments of the war machine rather than susceptible human beings. Morante tells the reader only Gunther's name not his surname, suggesting that for the State he is an anonymous entity but a unique individual for his family and the people whose lives he touches[41]. Soldiers sent off to fight in wars, even if they are not exactly coerced, are themselves victims of the larger socio-political powers at play. Morante juxtaposes the innocence of the boy with what she refers to as the "insane slaughter-machine" (1985: 24) of the State. The German war machine, like all instruments of power, cared little about the young men and boys it sent to fight in its expansionist wars. Generally speaking, it gave them the license to kill and closed a blind eye to much undesirable conduct.

Every political ideology and revolution begins with a form of purity and a level of innocence, equality for all humans and the right to live as others do. But even the best ideologies fail once the humans at the head have large amounts of power over others[42]. Communism in Russia serves as an example which reflects the flaws and perhaps egoism and arrogance of its past leaders, ready to demand the highest sacrifices in the name of egalitarianism, while they themselves enjoy all the benefits of any ruling class. history is written in the blood of those who die and struggle through their daily lives.

[41]In a recent Hollywood film titled *The Messenger*, where two war messengers working for the American government go around to families informing them about the death of their sons and husbands; a young Colonel breaks procedure on one of his visits and his superior – ironically called Tony Stone - scolds him; he responds by saying that "they're human beings, they're just people, they're not like you", they are not objects, but sentient beings (2009).This scene makes the very point Morante wants to stress.

[42]This recurring trend witness by History gives meaning to Lord Acton's maxim that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (MS Encyclopaedia, 2009).

Morante warns against the cycle repeating itself both on a macro and micro scale: from genuine purity of purpose, to consolidation of power, corruption and abuse is one continuous step. She illustrates this both on a national and individual scale, by showing how 'good' individuals have the capacity to abuse momentarily acquired power and commit acts as immoral or inhumane as those perpetrated by the State.

During his solitary walk in San Lorenzo, Gunther encounters Ida as she is about to enter her apartment. His presence frightens her; she is afraid that he may discover that she is a Jew. After entering her apartment, not on any official duty, but seeking companionship and out of a sense of curiosity, Gunther forces himself on her; she is too scared even to put up any real resistance. In her article "Rape, Rapture and Revision", Lydia Oram argues that "Gunther [...] who violently rapes Ida, is portrayed before and after the rape as an essentially human and humane subject […]As a stranger to Italy, he perceives the country through the eyes of the official powers by whom he is employed". (2003: 413). Morante in fact frames the rape between two descriptions – one is of a stammering, insecure Gunther who curses his luck: 'God-damn-it the luck-y ones are still un-der the draft age – and – and – they can enjoy their belongings at home with their mothers! And playing soccer [...] as if war was on the Moon or another planet… Grow-ing up is the worst luck... Where am I anyway? (1985: 80), the other after the rape, of a vulnerable woman, by Gunther who looks like a "damp, brown kitten" that had been licked by its mother. At this point Morante's anonymous external narrator says: "It would have been easy, now, to kill him, following the example of the Biblical Judith[43], but Ida by nature could not even conceive such an idea" (1985:85). Once she comes round from the epileptic fit she has during the rape, which leaves her in a semi-comatose but peaceful state, and she realizes what has happened, instead of feeling the need to take revenge, her maternal instincts prevail and all she is concerned with is to protect Nino, her teenage son, who may come home and be in danger, especially if he finds his mother's rapist still in the house.

Agamben's biopolitical theories focus on the power of the 'sovereign' to have control over a subject's body; applied to Gunther's case this theory makes him a tool of the State whose function is to fight for Nazi Germany and do its bidding wherever he is sent. The State does

[43] The reference is to the account of the beheading of Holofernes by Judith in the Old Testament (Book of Judith 13, 6-8). Holofernes was a general of the Assyrian army that had laid siege to her city and taken her, a young widow, as his unwilling mistress. It is a biblical example of a victim come perpetrator to save her city.

not consider or take responsibility for the effects of displacement on certain people. Once Gunther has embarked on this 'adventure', he realizes he would far rather be at home[44], but there is no going back. He has to adapt to his new situation. "Ironically, Gunther does not seek sexual union out of lust, but out of an instinctual desire for solace and maternal understanding [...]; the young soldier appears not as an assailant, but as a disgruntled adolescent" (2003: 415), says Oram. In fact Ida is neither young nor particularly attractive; she does nothing to encourage him or fuel his lust. She is just a potential source of comfort, but her eyes reveal her terror, he realizes he has power over her: "taking off his uniform, caring nothing that she was old, he hurled himself on top of her, throwing her on that dishevelled daybed, and raping her with rage as if he wanted to murder her"[45] (1985: 82). Gunther rapes Ida not because he is a sex fiend or a 'bad' person, but – if one wants to find extenuating circumstances – because, in an alien environment which frightens him, he realizes that others fear him and this gives him a sense of power. But he is not feared as Gunther, the attractive country boy, but as a German soldier. Arguably, thus, if he had stayed in his village, he would never have committed such a crime, nor would he have died a senseless death just a few days later[46]. He is compelled to go to war because the State says it is his duty, therefore the State has its part of responsible for his crime.

Gunther feels remorseful and wants to make amends; before leaving Ida's humble home he fixes a broken light and as a token he leaves Ida his prized clasp knife. He is no longer a scared bully nor a power-drunk soldier but the simple, helpful small-town boy. The Gunther who could rape and terrorize is an extension of the larger political powers at play; he is not feared by Ida as an individual but for what he represents and the threat he poses to her domestic scene. Hers is submission to the uniform that Gunther wears. Both react in ways that are culturally conditioned. Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-fashioning* remarks:

> I perceived that self-fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions [...] were inseparably intertwined. In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moment of pure unfettered subjectivity [...]. The human subject itself began to

[44] In the words of Oram, "[his] desire for adventure and picture book scenery is countered by his desire to remain securely at home" (2003: 414) and his need to replace his mother with another unthreatening female figure. Upon entering Ida's apartment, "the immediate effect of that place on the young soldier was a savage homesickness and melancholy, because of some slight affinities with his maternal house" (1985: 77).
[45] The mixed emotions and thoughts of Ida and Gunther before, and during their sexual encounter are given considerable attention by the narrator; refer to pages 75-87 of William Weaver's translation of *History, A Novel*.
[46] We are told of his death on route to Africa when his convoy is shot down over the Mediterranean (cf. 1985:88). In spite of the terrible deed he committed, his death is perceived as tragic waste of a young life.

> seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society (1980: 256).

Gunther's uniform carries the power of the Third Reich behind it. Ida knows what terrible things can be done to her and her son and that she cannot count on the protection of her country, since it has joined forces with the enemy of her race[47].

Like many of his faceless compatriots and his victim, Gunther is a casualty of war. In her essay "Decoding Intimate Suffering in Elsa Morante's *La Storia*", Christian Moretti argues that "[w]hether the nature of suffering is physical or mental, individuals receive signals that alert them to their conditions" (2011: 1). It is in Italy that Gunther becomes aware of his misery, his isolation and fear. Morante shows how one's mental state given the circumstances affect behaviour and that culpability thus also lies with the system that made possible those circumstances. This episode is a case of stolen innocence as much as of violent crime; it highlights the undiscriminating nature of war and that anyone at any moment can suddenly become an unfortunate casualty of war, a victim as well as a persecutor.

To judge all soldiers as inhumane monsters, who only know how to rape, murder and cause destruction, makes them less-than-human, while Morante, like Levi, argues that they too are all human, meaning weak, fallible, instinctive, irrational and the inhumanity is often the result of the brutality of the system within which they have to operate. Morality and justice require that the individual who perpetrates a crime be held accountable, but before passing judgement one needs to consider the possible extenuating circumstances which apply both in war and in peace. Judging the perpetrator without attempting to understand what drove him to commit the deeds is to assign agency solely to the individual and fail to recognise the responsibility of the State and/or society. Morante foregrounds the circumstances to urge us to see the broader picture. This appeal is just as valid today when one's immediate reaction is to want to see jihadists, who commit acts of terrorism, but a far more rational and just reaction would be to be proactive in putting a stop to the exploitation of young susceptible youths who have been indoctrinated by leaders with specific agendas.

3.2. History as the mirror of abuse and anarchy

[47]Though deportations had not yet started in Italy (they began only in 1943), from the time the racial laws were passed in October 1938, Jews were being harassed, beaten, imprisoned as spies and even killed on the least provocation by the *camicie nere*, the uniformed Fascist militia and other thugs.

In an article titled "The Relationship Triangle", Robert Taibbi uses the Karpman Triangle theory [48] to assess the fragility of the roles that individuals assume under varying circumstances and how these roles can be easily reversed from one person to the other. Taibbi argues that "[w]hile everyone gets to move among all the roles, often one will fit more comfortably in one role more than another" (2011: 2). The Karpman Triangle theory allows one to reach a better understanding of the thin line and the grey areas which separate perpetrators from victims. In "*Teatro di guerra*: Of History and Fathers", Lucamante argues that Morante "acknowledges that war is imposed upon all sides in the conflict, that the consequences are lived by everybody, and that, even in exceptional events such as World War II and the *Shoah*[49], forgiveness needs to be applied to humans whose role was nothing but a walk-on part" (2006: 231).

Morante's awareness of the fragility of these roles makes her highly critical of those who have the power to set the war machine in motion and create the chain of victimization. The question she asks is 'who is *not* a victim in war?' For Morante the real perpetrators are "the victorious Powers and their allies [who] establish among themselves the new division of the world (1985:14) and divide the spoils of war. Generally speaking, the real enemies are not the soldiers who carry bombs and guns, but the men who send armies to conquer and destroy each other, and will never have to come face-to-face with the devastation their decisions cause or the ramifications they will have long afterwards. In War there is neither moral victory nor glory, as History would have one believe[50]. All Morante sees is loss; families torn apart, homes destroyed and people reduced to having to scavenge like animals.

History: A Novel, illustrates this sad truth through a myriad of ordinary people like Ida, who strives to provide for and protect her two sons Nino and Useppe, the child conceived from rape, and the unrelenting cycle of conflict which keeps repeating itself: "Nothing [is] very

[48] A theory in psychology which defines relationships as the roles humans perform; the 'roles' dictated by power dynamics are: Perpetrator, Victim and Rescuer. See Stephen B. Karpman (M.D.), 1967, *The Drama Triangle*, as the Karpman Triangle is also known.

[49] Word with which people of Jewish origin refer to the Holocaust; the word holocaust derives from the Greek *holo* (whole) and *caustos* (burned) and originally referred to a 'completely burnt offering to God', implying that Jews and other 'undesirables' murdered during World War II were victims like those used in a sacrificial offering (Bankier David, 2008),), while 'Shoah' is a Hebrew word meaning "catastrophe' or 'total destruction'.

[50] To give an example, in her historical summary for the year 1947, she records that "After a thirty-year struggle against the British Empire, led by Mahatma Gandhi with the non-violent means of passive resistance, India obtained its independence. The territory was divided into two States: India […] and Pakistan […] [which resulted] in bloody conflict between Hindu and Moslems that will count millions dead (1985:537).

new in the great world. Like all the centuries and the millennia that have preceded it on earth, the new century also observes the well-known, immobile principle of historical dynamics: *power to some, servitude to others*" (1985: 13). Morante's pessimistic opening observations are echoed – on the micro level – by the ending where Useppe's Eden[51] is disrupted by a belligerent band of street children and he dies as a result of the violent seizure the trauma causes him[52]. As on a national and international level, even in the private world of the simplest of God's creatures, the cycle perpetuates itself: "her novel, by putting into question the future of the human race [by] depicting the recent terrible past, places the onus of responsibility for 'change' on the reader", comments Tuck (2009: 195). Morante's message is clear: each individual bears the responsibility to change his/her personal behaviour and to reclaim agency by rebelling against the ruling classes. The strength of a country, as Morante perceives it, lies in its people and anarchy[53], i.e. in the single minded will of the people not to surrender their power to control their destiny to some constituted Power. However, the author is also sadly conscious of the fact that ordinary people do not change much, so her narrative serves as a warning that the same events will keep repeating themselves (as recent and distant history have proved), unless everyone assumes the responsibility to change, to forsake the allure of power, and the gratification that comes with exerting that power over others.

In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci argues that "[t]he 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [is the problem]; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys" (1999: 145). Gramsci's socialist theories underpin Morante's *History*. War does not offer means of change for the working classes; society always returns to what it was with a dominant class still exerting power over struggling people. The names of the regimes and ruling classes may change, but the essence remains. The narrative ultimately asks: 'what is gained by this senseless 'scandal' which has gone on for centuries and will continue to do so?'[54]. According to this view, nothing is ever gained through violence or other conflicts or by exercising power over others, but only loss

[51] His secret heaven by the river, away from the gruesome horrors of the city.
[52] Like his mother, Useppe suffers from epilepsy and is subject to apoplectic fits.
[53] The anarchy Morante advocates in this novel is anarchy in its purest form that assumes that every single human being has a conscience and values freedom so much that he/she will not infringe on the liberty of others. She knows hers isa totally utopian solution but, such is her disgust with all forms of power that she wouldwant to entrust her future and that that of all humanity to *no* government, *no* party, *no* leader.
[54] The Italian original has, as a subtitle – not translated in the English version, the words *"Uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni"*, a scandal that has lasted ten thousand years. The scandal alluded to is our species'history of conflict.

with the defeated suffering most. Morante's cautioning seems not to have had much of an impact; today's society is still facing the same social and political battles; war, terrorism and confrontation are still the foundations on which those in power construct and maintain the control they have.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag, referring to a photograph of a dead soldier, contends that "[t]here's no threat of protest. They [the countless soldiers who have died in conflicts] are not about to yell at us to bring a halt to that abomination which is war. They haven't come back to life in order to stagger off to denounce the war-makers who sent them to kill and be killed" (2004: 125). Those who have died can never be brought back, no matter how much one grieves, but to honour them society and the people within those societies have to move forward and find ways to build a future where people can live without the threat of domination, subjugation, coercion and oppression.

Dealing with the grey zone of the victim-victimiser relationship, Morante empathizes with soldiers. It is a given that, in war situations, morality is altered and people's latent 'evil' has a greater chance of manifesting itself. Soldiers are taught to kill in cold blood; ordered to massacre one another; told to drop bombs on, use gas, launch flames at innocent civilians, and then they are expected to return to society and be law abiding citizens. One cannot create 'monsters' and expect them, and the people they have harmed, to put aside all thoughts of violence, all resentment and hatred. It is William Pitt who once said that "[u]nlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it"[55]. The world has seen what happened with Germany, Italy and Russia. The men who led these countries during the period of the Second World War treated human life as if it were something to be used or destroyed according to its usefulness, like every other despot and tyrant in History. One sees further evidence of biopolitics when one considers the hundreds of thousand soldiers who died of exposure and fatigue on the long marches back from the Russian front[56]. No adequate transport back was provided for the common soldier, who after a war is lost or won is deemed expendable. If the 'sovereign' has the power to decide the subject's fate, then it can establish that dying for one's country is the indisputable duty of every young man within that society and that conscientious objectors must be punished or made to serve in even harsher ways. In every

[55] http://www.britannica.com/topic/462131/supplemental-information, accessed: 2015-01-16

[56] See pages 423-432 of William Weavers English translation (1985) of Morante's book for the personification of the suffering and loss of life on the homeward march, where she tells the story of Giovannino.

epoch, "humanity is termed the MASS, which means *inert matter*"[57], Davide Segre reminds his audience, "poor [humble] matter to be used and serve a purpose" (1985:625). If men are just 'matter' then their systematic elimination can be turned into an industry (as it was in the extermination camps) and their combined labour into an asset (as in industrialised capitalist societies). All the state's actions are camouflaged as necessary and beneficial for the mass.

In "The Subject and Power" Foucault concurs that "the state is envisioned as a kind of political power which [has to] ignore individuals, [in order to look] at the interests of the totality or, [he adds], of a class or a group among the citizens" (1983: 212). Morante's text illustrates this empirical observation. Throughout Morante's *History* there seems to be an invisible force which controls the fate of every character, and it is not that of a benevolent or malevolent god. The characters seem to be puppets controlled by the strings of an absent yet destructive force. Nevertheless, there are a few whose passive resistance to power reveals individual will; the powers at play may control their fate and dictate their actions, but the refusal of a few to acknowledge this authority indicates that a degree of anarchy may just be the answer; if more people were guided in their actions by morality and conscience.

The Microsoft Student Encarta defines anarchism as "[a] political theory that is opposed to all forms of Government. Anarchists believe that the highest attainment of humanity is the freedom of individuals to express themselves, unhindered by any form of repression" (Anarchism, 2009). Morante sees this type of anarchism as a way of moving forward because without constituted authorities there can be no wars, only conflict of interest and skirmishes between individuals who do not respect each other's freedom. As a gregarious animal, man's instinct is to dominate his environment and others in his space. Morante is aware that Anarchism is a utopian ideal, a wish more than anything else to live free from the threat of exploitation and constrictive laws. Morante realises that an anarchist society will not be a panacea because of man's very nature, but neither is relinquishing authority to governments, which have only harmed and stepped on downtrodden members of society. For Morante, the State should be the servant of the people not the other way round: but governments, to stay in power, need to be able to control those who put them in power; this too can be seen as a reversal of master-servant roles.

[57] Capitals and italics are used by the author for emphasis.

Davide, the young Jewish partisan-cum-anarchist, speaks with the voice of the author when he says:

> 1) The word *fascism* is of recent coinage, but it corresponds to a social system of prehistoric decrepitude, absolutely rudimentary, and indeed less evolved than that used among anthropoids (as anyone who knows something about zoology can confirm).
> 2) Such a system is in fact based on the exploitation of the helpless (people or classes or individuals) by those who have the means to use violence.
> 3) In reality, from its primitive origins, and all through the course of human History, there has existed no other system but this. Recently, the name of *Fascism* or *Nazism* has been given to certain extreme eruptions of ignominy, madness, and stupidity, characteristic of bourgeois degeneration; however, the system as such is still functioning everywhere (under different, even contradictory names and aspect...), always, everywhere, since the beginning of human History... (1985: 624-625).

Ida's teenage son, Nino, Ninnariedu or Ninnuzzu, as he is sometimes affectionately called, joins the Fascist youth movement, much like Gunther, out of a sense of adventure, attracted by the uniform, the propaganda and the sense of powerful identity it gives him. He too dies and is a victim, but he does not die gloriously for the 'Duce' he professes to love and wanted to emulate; he dies having become a dealer in goods stolen from the Americans after being disillusioned with fascism, having joined the *partigiani*[58] and hailed the Americans as liberators. Nino is one of the many youths called *gioventù bruciata* (wasted youth) or 'rebels without a cause'[59] typical of the war and immediate post-war generation. He is a victim of the unstable, fanatical, deprived, disrupted society he grew up in and finds himself in after the war has ended. His fate was decided for him first by the indoctrination of his fascist education, then by the need to survive in a country at war with itself, and ultimately by the allure, after much deprivation and hardship, of making a fast buck and fulfilling the American dream that liberation made possible. He has neither ideals, nor true convictions; he had no real moral guide in his all-important formative years, having been removed from his home and mother's influence at an early, impressionable age. Thus it can be said that he has no real agency; he can no more decide his own fate than a puppet on a string, pulled in every which way. Though he makes many choices and follows his 'own' will, he is always reacting to a different set of coercive circumstances. As Morante continuously reiterates, there is no

[58]Members of the spontaneous resistance movement that after the German occupation arose to fight against the Fascist and the Nazis.

[59]*Gioventù bruciata* is also the name given in Italian to the 1955 American movie, *Rebel without a Cause*, staring James Dean, depicting the life of youngsters without purpose or ideals in the fifties, but who had a taste for danger and fast living.

honour in enticing young men, like Gunther or young Nino, to take up arms enthusiastically and blindly follow others to fight in wars about which they know only what the propaganda says. War irrevocably destroys and brings about death and mayhem:

> ...already the roars of the air flights were approaching with an accompaniment of shots, flashes, explosions, like a formidable fireworks display. All around, families could be heard calling out to one another. Some child would be lost. Some people running in terror, would stumble and fall. Certain women screamed (1985: 186).

This is a description of the confusion caused ironically by the Allied bombing of Rome, after the German occupation of the city; its after-effect (felt for many years to come) was the displacement of survivors left without homes and without even the rudiments of civilization when forced to live in makeshift shelters where they still had to try to educate and instil morality in their children.

The narrator later says that

> [t]he reopening of the schools, which in her new refugee condition had worried Ida since the summer, was now indefinitely postponed in the city of Rome: and Ida's only activity outside the house, at present, was the difficult hunt for food, for which her salary proved more inadequate each month[60] [...]. She herself had grown so thin that her eyes seemed twice as big as before (1985: 218).

Morante gives many such detailed descriptive accounts of Ida and the everyday reality of *I Mille*, "the thousand", all seeming to belong to one extended family, with whom she and Useppe share a shelter during the second half of the war. Such passages allow the reader not only to observe but to feel the pain and anguish experienced by war-affected individuals.

When walking through the old Roman Ghetto, "entering buildings, inspecting rooms [and] peering closely at objects" (Tuck, 2009:176), Elsa Morante was trying to recapture the emotions of the people who had lived there and been deported. Her pages are informed by her anguish at having witnessed people being herded like cattle into train wagons by the Germans or being forced away from their homes by the bombs dropped by the liberators. Morante saw families torn apart by civil war, jobs lost and careers ruined, spaces desecrated and left like empty shells. Each image and story about the devastations of war are recorded in Morante's

[60] In the cities food became so scarce that it was obtainable almost only on the black market. This is another example of a victim (of the effects of war, shortage of food …) forsaking morality and in order to ensure his/her own survival and that of their kin, turning to exploiting other victims.

History…. Debatably, after a war – as was the case in Italy – there follows a period of reconstruction that results in a short lived economic boom and the adoption of new ways and new economic or political policies that eventually result in a different set of people taking control and "…*la storia continua*…", History continues, as are the last words of the novel say (1985: 725)[61].

3.3. The Reversal of Roles

As previously mentioned, the spokesperson for the author is often Davide Segre, who lost his entire family to the Germans. He presents a striking example of a man who is unable to move forward once all the reasons he had to continue living fall away. This character moves through several aliases and metamorphoses: "[h]e who once had been Carlo, then Pyotr and now Davide" (Morante, 1985:390) goes from being an idealistic young Jewish, anti-bourgeois university student, with aspirations of joining the working class, to taking up arms and becoming a partisan and a murderer, then a Christ-like figure[62] that nobody heeds, and ultimately a drug addict and suicide. Segre's character needs to be examined more closely as the shifting 'roles' he assumes closely match those described by the 'Karpman Triangle'. He operates within Levi's 'grey zone' and his case exemplifies the fragility of the roles one assumes in any relationship with the 'other'. Through this figure Morante questions what we would do with sudden power; but she also lays bare her own anti-bourgeois, anarchist views that refute capitalism, any form of constituted government as well as any established religion or belief in God. Christ for her is a symbolic figure that represents an unreachable ideal. She would expect to find a Christ in human being because man is not just 'matter', but this mirage dissolves when it clashes with the 'monsters' that lie hidden within us. Davide, who praises Christ and makes himself a prophet of anarchy guided solely by conscience, is

[61] The book does not end, however, on this totally gloomy note; before she writes: "The End" Morante adds a final postscript in which she quotes a saying of Antonio Gramsci: "All the seeds have failed except one, that I don't know what it is, but that is probably a flower and not a weed".

[62] See Castelli's essay (1990) that analyses the function of Davide in Morante's text and compares aspects of this behaviour and the ideals he rationally stands for to those of an anarchic Christ. The notion of Christian anarchism is not new, however; already in 1902 Lyman Abbott was saying that "Anarchism is defended on religious grounds" and "Jesus Christ is cited as the first of Anarchists". In 1939 Nikolai Berdyaev claims that "a state of perfection is a state where there is no power of man over man, that is to say, anarchy. The Kingdom of God is freedom and the absence of such power [...] the Kingdom of God is Anarchy" ("Christian Anarchism", in WikiQuote, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Christian_anarchism, accessed: 2015-01-20).

haunted by the way he found pleasure in killing a German soldier by stamping on his face and kicking him to death:

> 'I' [...] am a murderer! In war, some can kill heedlessly, like going hunting. But not me. Every time I was murdering! One day I murdered a German: a hateful repulsive being! And while he was dying, I gave myself the pleasure of finishing him off, kicking him, stomping on his face with my boots. Then, in that very act, I was overcome with the thought: *Here I have become just like him: an SS slaughtering another SS*... And I went on stamping on him...' (1985: 649, author's italics).

One cannot understand either the degree of Segre's pain or the blinding anger that brought him to be capable of such violent aggression because we have not experienced the same loss or the irrepressible fury that built up inside this young man when he discovered the fate of his parents and siblings; and one can only imagine the shame, the remorse and the disgust he felt for himself once he faced the horror of having allowed irrational rage to take over. Being a victim seems to make a person all the more vindictive once he/she has the power to inflict the same hurt; however, if one still has a conscience – like Davide has - the shame is unbearable. In his despair and perhaps in his own defence he feels the need to shout out to the world that yes, he is a murderer but:

> "Every one of us […] carries hidden inside us a SS! And a bourgeois! And a capitalist! And perhaps also a monsignor! … and… a Generalissimo adorned with ribbons and medals as if it were carnival time […]. Every one of us … This is why our struggle [with these monsters within] is always inadequate … ambiguous … an alibi. […] *Don't lead us into temptation* means: *help us to eliminate the fascist that is in us!*" (1985: 650).

As Lucamante argues, "[Morante] invites us to consider the need for a "grey zone" within the system of characters... (2006: 231), if one wants to depict man being defeated by his own inner demons, then one must examine the bigger picture. Morante does not judge any of her characters for she sees the ruling classes and man's flawed, ambiguous nature as the true culprits.

Under the Fascist regime the youth were indoctrinated from a young age to accept that the answer to 'what is my duty as a Fascist?' was "to study, until the Fatherland call[s on you]; you do not serve the Fatherland only on the battlefield [but in your every thought and action]" (1985: 173). The Principal at Nino's school in fact reminds the boys of the Duce's motto: "*Libro e Moschetto*" (Book & Musket!). To serve the "Fatherland" only through intellectual

pursuits and with a gun is problematic. The superior intellect and rationality of anyone who studies should lead to renouncing violence, but children who grew up under Fascism were taught that the mind complements a martial spirit. Morante comments on how Segre, going under the name of Carlo Vivaldi at the time, became "[t]he centre of general curiosity and consideration" because of the poetry books in his knapsack. It is presumed that he would be sensitive and gentle, yet

> he behaved exactly like a deaf-mute. Only when Consolata and the Marrocco women inevitably began expounding to him the crucial problem of their missing men, he raised his eyes for a moment, and with the snap of his jaws, he said, gravely and with absolute brutality: 'They'll never come back' (1985: 391).

The cruelty of war changes even sensitive individuals; it hardens them and destroys all hope, and the belief that the world will return to being a moral place. The reality or awareness of hopelessness transforms people into blunt potential perpetrators without the capacity to think rationally or morally. Segre does not murder the German soldier or lose empathy for those around him who grieve because he was born with these characteristics, but the terrible realities of war have transformed him into a cold and cynical individual. As previously mentioned, in war time both the oppressor and the oppressed suffer similar consequences of trauma[63].

Segre, like many other characters presented in the text, is a victim. His light-heartedness, joy of living and hopes for the future have all been stolen from him. The magnitude of his loss has made him become an automaton with no more interest in anyone or anything and a creature of impulse. Ironically Morante states that "Davide [...] was a devotee of happiness, in which, he felt, man's true destiny resided" (1985: 465). Nevertheless, he was never to know happiness again on account of his tragic loss and consequent awareness that he is no better than the worst of the Nazis and Fascists.

[63] Not only movies like *Born On the Fourth of July* and *Apocalypse Now* illustrate this through the central theme of soldiers returning from the Vietnam war. It occurs in serials as one of the episodes of a more recent Japanese anime series titled *Golgo-13*, about a top class sniper who is hired to kill powerful, but corrupt citizens, in episode 49 Golgo-13 crash lands in an island where the American army is testing a new robot weapon of war. He encounters the soldier who is meant to be testing the system on men that the American army deemed to be 'terrorists'. But after experiencing the carnage of thousands of dead men, the soldier's blood pressure and heart rate increases so dramatically that he falls into a state of dementia and a psychologist comments: "Flesh-and-blood humans aren't meant to deal with all this carnage with their minds fully intact" (Takao Saito, 2008: episode 49), thus exposing the cruelty of war on anyone involved.

At the age of 18, Davide was already a pensive but rebellious character, who was deeply concerned about the meaning of human life. For a while he even abandoned his bourgeois roots to work in a factory and be part of the proletariat. After only a couple of weeks however he could not bear the hardships of working class conditions. It struck him that:

> As long as men, or even a single man on earth, is forced to live such an existence, all talk of freedom and beauty and revolution is fraud.
> Now, such a thought made him drawback, worse than a ghostly or demoniacal temptation; for to heed it would mean, for him, the end of his IDEAL, and therefore of every vital hope (1985: 466).

At this stage of his life, Davide is searching for meaning and he sees himself as a rescuer of the oppressed masses. Experiencing the conditions that people at grass-root level are expected to put up with, Davide set out to make them aware of the inhumanity of the capitalist system. "His *moral will*, in short, was to go there" (1985: 467), be one of them and help them change the system, but the journey was a difficult one and he never reached his aim. He realized that he was already the product of a system of class differentiation which had made him unsuited to physical labor and hard living. He had failed in his well-meant task but still thought he could make a difference. After the war, Davide again felt the urge to enlighten the many ordinary lower class people of Rome, but now – after being a victim of Power – it was not socialist but anarchist ideology that spurred him. The meaning and purpose he finds for himself as the sole survivor of his family, is to pass on the discoveries he had made and the lessons he has learnt. So, going into a working class *osteria*, he becomes a self-styled prophet and philosopher. "Ninuzzu always spoke with supreme respect of his Comrade Davide [...] he had [always] considered him not only a *hero*[64] by nature, but a thinker" (1985: 468), but by the war-weary people of Rome, he was again not heeded; no one was prepared to listen to his warnings and philosophical arguments. From being a victim, Davide had metamorphosed into a violent persecutor, and then into a rescuer, who needed to redeem himself by warning people of the dangers of Power in all its forms. As a character, Davide Segre thus reveals the darkness which dwells within the human heart and the need to make amends for the privilege of having survived.

In 1947, Davide is still proclaiming to anyone who may want to listen that "History is a history of fascisms, more or less disguised [...] always and everywhere, *sèmpar e departút*

[64] Italics mine.

[there are] free men and slaves... rich and poor ... buyers and sellers … superiors and inferiors ... leaders and followers... The system never changes ... it was called religion, divine right, glory, honour, spirit , future... all pseudonyms... all masks" (1985: 625). These are all labels used by those in power to disguise control and oppression of the masses. Nothing has changed since the time of the Roman Empire; transformation can only occur when humanity destroys all forms of authority. Segre, however, like Cassandra, and like Jesus Christ, tries to become the 'saviour' of his society, but the message falls on deaf ears: "I don't believe in those [violent] revolutions!... there's never been a true revolution!" (1985: 626), he tells the people gathered in the tavern. A true revolution is not one which involves violence and leaves behind a field of victims, but a revolution in which people's perspectives shift and they hold their own futures in their hands, uncontrolled or willed by any institution or form of authority:

> "[G]enuine revolution is ANARCHY, which means: NO power, of NO sort, for NO one, over NO one! Anybody who talks about revolution and, at the same time, about Power, is a liar!" (1985: 627).

Once Davide realized that his concerns and prophesies were scoffed, he descends into a state of depression and turns into an opiate and sleeping pill addict which leads to his suicide. Through Segre's story, Morante also reveals, that we are guilty of a crime and even though we may never be personally responsible for perpetrating an act of inhumanity; our crime lies in our passivity. Our unwillingness to take responsibility for our actions and, more often, for our non-action against those in Power, whose commands we find convenient to follow, helps to perpetuate the never ending cycle of violence and that can bring to committing violence against oneself. Segre's awareness that he is guilty of murdering a man who was *not* responsible for the death of his family but part of a system that sanctioned the 'Final Solution' and made German men and women become murderers was unbearable. The soldier whom he brutally murdered also had aspirations and a family waiting for him at home. Segre knows that he did not kill him out of a sense of duty to avenge his family, but because he represented Nazi Germany, his real enemy. No one person is innocent in war, but even if one only believes in the anarchist creed, no one has a right to decide to take a life, because each life is and must be respected and has to be treated with the same reverence we would expect for ours.

> When Davide came back […], he no longer seemed the same person; or rather, he had passed a new stage of his exaltation [...]. I for one don't know what other *medicinal* drug he had pumped into his body during his brief absence; I know that lately he had not only

> been using the ones preferred in the past months, but was trying out all sorts of substances, often of opposing effect, mixing or alternating stimulants and narcotics in breathless succession. Especially during the last week, you might say this had become his chief nourishment (1985: 657) [...]
> He was still breathing, though imperceptibly, when they found him. But as soon as they tried to raise him up, he emitted a little child-like sigh, almost tender, and his breathing stopped.
> He had obviously been killed by an *overdose*; but perhaps in injecting it, his desire had not been to die (1985: 685).

As in the case of Primo Levi, one will never know if the horrors of this war claimed another victim, at a distance of some years.

Chapter 4
Conclusion

In this study I have illustrated how, in both their respective works, Morante and Levi aim to make their readers glimpse the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust, and by extension war in general, and understand the devastating long term repercussions of war; they also bring the reader face-to-face with the dark 'monster' which is inherent in all mankind and almost force one to acknowledge that no one can truly say: "I would never be capable to perpetrate such morally reprehensible deeds!". Although both authors detach themselves from addressing this issue from a moral perspective and the attempt to not judge the 'perpetrator', they are unforgiving of the acts of callousness they both witnessed, for Levi at Auschwitz, and for Morante in war-torn Rome. In the biography, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, Anissimov writes that

> [i]n *The Drowned and the Saved,* which looks at the circumstances that led some prisoners to collaborate, Primo Levi first makes the point that in cases of this kind "it is imprudent to hasten to issue a moral judgment. It must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state; the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators [...] is always difficult to evaluate"" (2000: 144).

Referring to the quote from Levi's second chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved,* Anissimov substantiates this point by adding "[t]hat the laws of common morality no longer applied" (2000: 144) in the camps where one's actions were dictated by a need to survive. Many of the prisoners lost all forms of solidarity with fellow inmates and were compelled to forsake moral practices and values by which they had lived in normal everyday society. But, I argued, the two authors underline the responsibility and crime of the State in destroying not only lives but value systems of a society. The physical and moral plight of the people who experienced the Holocaust and war is made tangible because it is personalised through the stories of ordinary folk like Morante's Ida, Gunther, Davide, Nino, Giovannino or Levi's Resnyk, Henri, Pikolo and made others who emerge from the crowd and become individuals. In Levi's text we also witness the total destruction of a person's will to live as in the case of Null Achtzehn, who naturally becomes the prey of the resilient prisoners. The struggle for life, driven by *Eros,* is usually stronger that *Thanatos,* the death drive described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), which is usually at odds with the natural adversity to death and dying, but becomes a compulsive obsession in some people who experienced war or other trauma. If

conditions are such that nevertheless the life instinct prevails, the degree of morality and ethical responsibility diminish. This is a corruption of the human being for which the 'State' not the individual is primarily responsible. Though the two authors make a very convincing case for diminished responsibility of people who find themselves in extreme situations, there is never in their works a hint that it is condoned, only that it is understandable and – given the nature of humanity – almost inevitable. The 'demons' which dwell deep within the pits of our being can suddenly emerge and push us to act outside our own moral principles, as even many of the German officers may have done for preservation and safety of their families. Instead of being concerned with the well-being of others, man's nature is such that one becomes more apprehensive for one's own survival and that of those closest to us. This human trait is also accentuated by Darwinian theories.

When attempting to understand the roles of both victims and perpetrators of war-time crimes, Levi and Morante differ in providing an answer to how to unravel this 'scandal'. Levi offers no other solution than to be a witness and appeal to the rational side of man and sees the need to put an end to war and the exploitation or objectification of others by a select group. He demands that the reader consider the circumstances before judging the perpetrators, but at the same time be sufficiently outraged to be galvanised into doing something to put an end to the violence. Although both authors agree with this point, Morante differs in that she offers some sort of solution, albeit a utopian one. Both Levi and Morante blame the broader political Powers for their part in the degradation of society; for perusing the agendas of some ideology that benefits only select members of the 'Fatherland' and denies others the same rights. Ghandi preached passive resistance, which in a way is a form of Anarchy, Morante takes it a step further and suggests that total anarchy would be the answer. Morante senses that humanity can thrive and evolve only when men can decide their own fates without having to submit to the authority given to a few men whom we believe have the best interests of everyone at heart. Wars and genocides have continued to be the great scandal of human history, because individuals or a group of people are given power to decide the fate of the subjects' whose life is objectified and seen either as an asset or a liability as Agamben's theory postulates. Once sovereignty is established, the 'sovereign', can decide the fate of the subjects. Extreme results of this abuse of power were seen in Nazi Germany, in Uganda during the years 1971 to 1979 under the dictatorship of Idi Amin, in Rwanda from April to July 1994 when close on a million Tutsis and moderate Hutu were slaughtered by the Hutu majority. How many more massacres do we need before we mend our ways and disregard the

'laws', the patriotism, factionalism or any other –ism that leads to the death of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. Under such regimes human life has no value; as Sontag states, "violence turns anyone subjected to it into a thing" (2003: 12). Morante's idea of returning to a more honourable and principled society where the individual is in charge of his/her own life with complete respect for that of others, however, has the flaw of assuming that everyone has a conscience and that it is strong enough to override any other impulse.

The Powers may be responsible for this chain of victimisation and the perpetration of many atrocities, but men do not all have the same sense of right and wrong that urges them to act morally. Moral or ethical judgment is also a social construct. According to Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology

> Conscience is a term that describes an aspect of a human being's self-awareness. It is part of a person's internal rational capacity […]. Conscience is a critical inner awareness that bears witness to the norms and values we recognize and apply. The complex of values with which conscience deals includes not only those we own, but the entire range of values to which we are exposed during life's journey. Consequently, there is always a sense of struggle in our reflective process. The witness of conscience makes its presence known by inducing mental anguish and feelings of guilt when we violate the values we recognize and apply[65].

Although people (like Primo Levi or the fictional character Davide Segre, may be burdened by a sense of guilt in man's mental makeup there are other forces, instincts, drives (such as that to survive) that may make it necessary to override what conscience dictates. Thus thinking that humans can ever live in a society governed by individual conscience cannot be anything but a wishful ideal. The style of Morante's novel that has been described closer to 'magic realism' than 'neorealism, allows for this solution amidst the stark realism of some of its pages and the oneiric quality of many others. But beyond the practicality or not of civil disobedience or anarchy, both authors try to be as humane as possible while raising consciousness of some of the main causes of evil in society which include man's fallible nature and the corruptive effect of Power and Institutions that wield it.

Both Levi and Morante carried to the grave the conviction that they had not done enough; they felt the responsibility to bear witness and reveal to the world the human tragedies which had befallen Levi's comrades and in different ways all those who lived through those terrible

[65] http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/conscience/ (Assessed 26/01/2015)

war-years. Yet there are so many other stories left untold. For Levi the true witnesses to the full horror of the Holocaust are the "drowned": in Anissimov's words, "Levi denied the survivors of the status of witnesses" (2000: 160) for those who returned home from the extermination camps will never fully know what it felt like to be herded into a gas chamber or face a firing squad after having had to dig your own grave. Though words have failed to record everything, their words were written in the firm conviction that they may help in future to avoid similar atrocities. Both lived to see that their sincere efforts to help avert future wars and genocides had made no difference at all[66].

All the young men, women, children and families who were torn apart by war, but whose voices had no space in History are given a space in both Morante's and Levi's works; to attempt to fill some of the gaps that 'canonic' History fails to consider. Both authors felt a need to communicate; both felt a responsibility not only towards themselves and those who had fallen, but a responsibility towards their societies and towards the rest of humanity. We the readers also bear the responsibility not to sit passively and allow such atrocities to happen. As Woody Allen also points out, we are horrified yet at the same time indifferent when we realize that these atrocities do not personally involve or affect us.

Levi and Morante engage in lengthy discussions about war and grey areas when it comes to separating victims from perpetrators; both concur that "the network of human relationships [is] not simple: it [can]not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors" (1988: 23). By giving a name and a face to the type of characters whom 'we' who are 'comfortable in our homes' may outright judge as an inhumane monster, Morante helps us to so to speak to hate the crime not necessarily the person. The three texts discussed engage deeply with the theme of human conflict, mental and physical cruelty that has repercussions for a long time after the violence is over. We have seen how under certain circumstances people feel compelled to act in ways that later their conscience does not accept and they are driven to drug addiction and death, does so because he could not live with his own aggression. We have also seen that certain individuals can rise above their circumstances and show charity even at the risk of their own lives. The two authors confirm what Pirandello has illustrated in much of his work:

[66] Similarly, in spite of this persistent wave of anti-war films produced both in American and Europe, no war was averted, no gratuitous cruelty was avoided. Revealing the humanity of those who wore the mask of perpetrator in distant lands had little effect on the leaders of those countries or any other. At best they perhaps made young men less eager to serve the fatherland and their families less proud to see them go off and die, supposedly for their country and the democratic ideal.

human beings do not know their true selves; only circumstances can reveal what they are capable of doing. In their respective works, Levi and Morante are aware of this existential question, and it is through their own experiences that they reflect on the nature of humanity. We cannot judge because we cannot understand the situation, or even comprehend the feelings of those who had to experience such conditions. It is difficult to look at this world (the realities of war) through moral eyes where normal moral values do not apply.

"The conviction that life has a purpose is rooted in every fibre of man, it is a property of the human substance" (Levi, 1988: 77). Both Levi and Morante had a purpose; it was to launch a strong anti-war statement, in its broadest sense, as well as to honour – through remembrance – the many victims.

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