

## MEMORY AND TESTIMONY IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes two parallel and opposed testimonies of mass annihilation in World War II: Primo Levi's report of his gruesome experiences in Auschwitz, in *The Drowned and the Saved*; the testimony of the fire-bombing of Dresden, that killed 130,000 civilians in 1945, recorded by a young American POW, private Kurt Vonnegut Jr, in his novel *Slaughterhouse-five*. It is basically structured along the phases of the historiographic operation proposed by Paul Ricoeur – testimony and recording of testimonies; questioning of the records and written historical representation of the past – with the objective of drawing conclusions about the role of literature in keeping alive memories that might prevent further atrocities. Steppingstones include the urge to bear witness, the paradoxical links between victims and perpetrators and the choice of literary genders to convey messages. References are made to René Girard's concept of the scapegoat mechanism as an explanation for the eruption of violence in social groups.

**Keywords:** Historical massacres; testimony; Primo Levi; Kurt Vonnegut

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*The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone;  
not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by,  
but often they change, or even grow,  
by incorporating extraneous features.*  
Primo Levi (1988)

## Introduction

In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), Primo Levi (1919-1987) bequeaths humanity a disturbing eyewitness account of the violence exercised against human beings in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Written in 1986, a year before the author's death, the book is an attempt at an analytical approach to facts, following the autobiographical *Is This a Man?* (1947) and *The Truce* (1963). It is still debated whether the fall in the stairwell of the building where the author lived that caused his death was accidental or suicidal.

It is painful to think that Levi gave up on making humanity hear what had happened in the Lager, which he had tried to do in autobiographical works in 1947, shortly after the end of the war, and two decades later, in 1963. "Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument." (...) "The further events fade into the past, the more the construction of convenient truth grows and is perfected" (1988, 23; 27). In fact, as Levi points out further on, with the passage of time the gap between things as "they were 'down there' and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximative books, films and myths" (157) grows wider. Nowadays, when the neologism "post-truth" has been entered into lexicons, the author's warning words perfectly express the dire consequences of historical forgetfulness.

The urge to tell is common to all those who have witnessed catastrophes, an experience shared by the American writer Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), who was taken prisoner by the Germans and lived through the fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945 by the Allied Forces. The young twenty-one-year-old infantry soldier was appalled by the vision of the beautiful town, the Venice of the Elbe, reduced to mounds of mortar and debris, ironically about two weeks after the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops.

Testimonies of the murder of millions of human beings in the Lagers, and the absurd destruction of a defenceless town and around 130,000 of its inhabitants ought to be preserved at all costs, whether they are believed or not. Starting from this premise this paper analyzes how the two witnesses construct their testimonies from the lived experience itself, how they overcome the questioning of their testimonies and, finally, their choice of a literary form as written archive. These analytical objectives correspond to the three phases of the historiographic operation which Paul Ricoeur (2007) recognizes in the epistemology of the historical sciences: 1) testimony and record of testimonies; 2) questioning of the records; 3) written historical representation of the past.<sup>1</sup> We adopt the three-partite scheme to structure our discussion. Ricoeur explains that the proposed phases are not watertight chronological stages, but moments of a methodological

apparatus intertwined with each other. Thus, it is possible that similar experiences will be discussed under different headings, in view of our objective of verifying how historical atrocities, which transcend human imagination, can be translated into literary texts of divergent genres written as warnings for coming generations.

### 1. Testimony and record of testimonies

*Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns.  
And till my ghastly tale is told  
The heart within me burns*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge  
*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798)

One of the reasons that may drive a deported man to survive is the desire to become a witness. Although there are ex-prisoners who prefer to keep silent about the Lagers, Levi admits he is one of those who talk about it constantly. Like the Old Mariner, in Coleridge's poem – the epigraph to *The Drowned and the Saved* – he must tell his “ghastly tale” to relieve his burning heart. His was an irresistible urge to tell his story to everyone, from every walk of life, whether they were willing or reluctant listeners. On the opening page of *The Truce: A survivor's journey home from Auschwitz* (1969), Levi writes:

<p>Dreams used to come in the brutal nights, Dreams crowding and violent Dreamt with body and soul, Of going home, of eating, <i>of telling our story.</i> Until, quickly and quietly, came The dawn reveille: <i>Wstawàch.</i> And the heart cracked in the breast.</p>	<p>Now we have found our home again, Our hunger is quenched, <i>All the stories have been told.</i> It is time. Soon we shall hear again The alien command: <i>Wstawàch.</i> 11 January 1946 (200, emphases added)</p>
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Platonic philosophy posits that the speech of oral memory “inscribes itself in the soul of the man who learns, the one who is capable of defending himself, the one who knows before whom one must speak and before whom one must be silent” (Ricoeur 153). The two modes of discourse – oral and written – remain related as twins, despite their difference in legitimacy; above all, both are scriptures, inscriptions. But it is in the soul that the true discourse is inscribed. It is this deep kinship that allows us to say that the written speech is in a way an image (*eidolon*) of what in living memory is “alive,” “endowed with a soul,” rich in “sap” (153).

Levi repeated his story of the staggering and unbelievable reality of Auschwitz to every available listener; his written reports have spread worldwide. “The aporia of Auschwitz” says Giorgio Agamben (2008), “is really the aporia of historical knowledge itself: the non-coincidence between facts and the truth, between verification and understanding” (20). There were insurrections in Treblinka,

Sobibor, and Birkenau and those few who managed to escape and have access to organs of information were almost never listened to or believed. “Uncomfortable truths travel with difficulty” (Levi 1988, 159).

As prisoners of the Germans, Vonnegut and other American soldiers were kept in a slaughterhouse and were underground in a meat locker the night of the bombardment. It was only two decades later, in 1965, that Vonnegut managed to report what he had seen, but in the form of his science fiction novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or *The Children’s Crusade* (1969), in which his harrowing experiences are lived by Billy Pilgrim, a character who travels in time, both on Earth and to an alien planet, Tralfamadore.

In succinct terms, the novel is about a writer who is both unable to erase the memories of his experiences in the war and to face them openly. Chapter One is a report of Vonnegut’s unsuccessful attempts to write his war book. The fact that Billy Pilgrim does not appear in the opening chapter – an inherent part of the narrative and not a mere foreword or prologue – plus the author’s frequent first-person intrusions in the main plot establish two narrative lines in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with Vonnegut as a minor character in Billy Pilgrim’s story. On the other hand, since private Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was the eyewitness of the bombing, the Billy Pilgrim narrative line constitutes a story within another story, whose action reproduces “more or less” (9) what happened to that particular American soldier during the war.

### *The Drowned and the Saved: an eyewitness in Auschwitz*

Arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and taken to Auschwitz, Primo Levi merely exists while waiting for death. His attitude is one of disbelief at what man can do to a fellow being to the point of reducing him to the indignity of stealing bread from companions.

The three hundred Italian deportees were a despised minority within the prisoner population: they were suspicious, untrustworthy Jews who could not speak Yiddish (the second language of the camp). They were the “badoghlios” for the SS and “mussolinis” for the others. The inability to communicate, to understand shouted orders, to know where to go or what to do was a death sentence. They did not live more than a week or two. The weight of the lack of communication was established back in Italy, from the first contact with the contemptuous men of the black flap – the Nazi swastika – who shouted orders, which were not understood, in increasingly shrill screams, as if speaking to the deaf. If anyone hesitated (everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrified) blows would rain, accompanied by “obvious variants of the same language ... For those people we were no longer human” (91).

Levi had learned some words of German in order to read compendiums of chemistry, but that in no way helped him to understand the language spoken in the Lager. He attributes his survival to a series of circumstances that make up the story of his life in camp, of the liberation by the Russian army and of his circuitous return to Italy across several countries in Eastern Europe.

Levi's need to tell his story was so strong that he began describing his experiences on scribbled notes, when he was assigned to menial tasks in the German laboratory. He threw them away immediately. If they were found they would cost him his life. But he did write his story as soon as he returned to Italy. The manuscript of *Is This a Man?* was initially rejected by important publishers, though accepted by a small printing concern. People in Europe had had enough of war. The book would really come to life in 1958, published by Giulio Einaudi. Its sequel *The Truce* had a different fortune and a more positive reception, in 1963. The twin texts are published together in the kindle edition used in this paper.

In the postscript to *Is This a Man? / The Truce*, Primo Levi answers readers who wonder how he can write so calmly about the Lager.

I believe in reason and in discussion as supreme instruments of progress, and therefore I repress hatred even within myself: I prefer justice. Precisely for this reason, when describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, 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 seeks revenge. (1969, 422, emphasis added)

He feels he has fulfilled his duty by witnessing an event that he lived through to its end. But it is not up to him to judge or to grant pardon. It is possible to deduce from his writings that Levi was more interested in that gray zone where victims become executioners and vice-versa. The outstanding figure in that zone was the *Sonderkommando*, the special group of deportees, mostly Jews, in charge of the gas chambers and crematory ovens. Their existence was a well-guarded secret, but rumors circulated among the prisoners. It is impossible, however, to imagine what it meant to exercise this task, as "the intrinsic horror of this human condition has imposed a sort of reserve on all the testimony" (1988, 52-53).

In fact, Levi sees his memoirs as reflections about what he witnessed rather than descriptions of episodes. His most striking testimony has to do with "useless violence." Is there any useful violence? Levi asks. Assassins or kidnappers act with some objective in mind. Bloody wars are not meant to inflict suffering: suffering is there, it is collective, unjust, distressing, but it is a side product. So, what is the motivation for violence in prison camps?

I believe that the twelve Hitlerian years were as violent as many other periods of time and space, but they were characterized by *useless violence* spread as an end in itself, with the sole purpose of inflicting pain, occasionally for some purpose, but always redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself. (1988, 105-106, emphasis added)

The most demonic crime of National Socialism, however, was the attempt to shift onto the victims the burden of guilt. The Special Squads in charge of forcing the prisoners into the gas chambers were made up largely of Jews, which was to be expected: the Lager's main purpose was the "final solution" and the population of the camps at the time of Levi's imprisonment was up to 95 percent Jews. The SS

felt no guilt; they were indoctrinated to believe that these were despicable beings, enemies of Germany and their only use was to be put to work until they died of exhaustion.

Miklos Nyisli, a renowned Hungarian pathologist, who had worked with Joseph Mengele in the Nazis' monstrous medical experiments, was one of the very few survivors of the last Special Squad in Auschwitz. Nyisli recounts an episode that seems significant to Levi. During a "work" pause he had attended a soccer game between the SS and the SK (*Sonderkommando*). A group of SS guards and the rest of the squad are present at the game. "They take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green" (1988, 55). Behind this "armistice," nevertheless, there lurks a satanic message.

It is consummated, we have succeeded, you no longer are the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich, you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together. (55)

But what makes Jews the prime enemy of the millennial Reich? Jews have been historically blamed for every kind of calamity – plagues, famines, and natural disasters. To give an example, René Girard (1923 -), the prominent French-American cultural critic, refers to a text written by the fourteenth-century French poet, Guillaume de Machaut, relating a series of improbable catastrophic events: entire cities destroyed by lightning and hailstorms, thousands of deaths caused by the poisoning of rivers and fountains, by "the treacherous and contemptible swine, shameful Israel, who hated good and loved everything evil". But then "He who sits on high and sees far revealed it" and every Jew was destroyed, "some hanged, others burned; some were drowned; others beheaded with an ax or sword" (qtd in Girard 1989, 2). Girard points out that despite the absurdity of some of the accusations, something did actually happen, the spread of the bubonic plague, known as Black Death, that killed 60% of the entire population of Europe. This is the starting point of his book titled *The Scapegoat* (1989), which provides a different perspective on the Nazis' fury of extermination.

Girard sees collective action against minorities as re-enacting ritual sacrifice in primitive societies: sacrifice is an obligation, thus social groups feel justified in persecuting individuals or groups they judge to represent, rightly or wrongly, a threat to their hegemony. Ritual violence may be traced anthropologically to *the scapegoat mechanism*, originally the murder of an innocent victim sacrificed ('made sacred') to establish order and community. Violence is double-faced, it destroys but it also gives significance to human events and institutions. Girard sees an identification of violence and the sacred that extends from prehistory to our own time. It is the same mechanism at work from the primitive use of ritual homicide as a kind of cure for the devastation of violence inside the social group

to the threat of nuclear holocaust in the twentieth century. In our contemporary conjunction of nuclear violence and the sacred, “once again, violence prevents violence from breaking out ... [since] nuclear armaments alone maintain world peace” (1992, 258).<sup>2</sup>

Girard recognizes four stereotypes in texts of persecution, such as Machaud’s: 1) a social crisis that brings disorder to the group. (A classic example is the economic, social and political chaos of post-World War I Germany); 2) the types of crimes committed by the guilty parties: the destruction of familial or hierarchical differences, particularly man’s relationship with the transcendental; 3) the selection of the victims: ethnic and religious minorities, poorly integrated individuals, people with physical or psychic abnormalities, etc. It was important that victims should be unable to retaliate; 4) the violence itself. The import of the operation is to lay the responsibility for the crisis on the victims (1989, 12-23). The stereotypes of persecution encompass everything that happens in Auschwitz up to the illusion created in the mind of persecutors that their acts are justified by the “evil” character of the absolutely expendable beings chosen as victims.

As a survivor, Levi is often asked whether Auschwitz will happen again, that is, if other slaughters will take place. He is not a prophet, but it is possible to say something on the matter.

That the German slaughter could be set off – and after that feed on itself – out of desire for servitude and smallness of soul, thanks to the concurrence of a number of factors (the state of war, German technological and organizational perfectionism, Hitler’s will and inverted charisma, the lack in Germany of solid democratic roots) .... (1988, 87)

The parallelism with Girard’s stereotypes of persecution is strengthened by Levi’s conclusion: each of the four mentioned factors is indispensable but insufficient if taken singly. As to what might happen in the future, he thinks it is prudent to suspend judgment: “the nuclear apocalypse, certainly bilateral, probably instantaneous and definitive, is a greater and different horror, strange, new ...” (87).

### ***Slaughterhouse-Five: an eyewitness in Dresden***

From chapter two to the end of the book the task of bearing witness is given over to naive, inefficient, and ridiculous Billy Pilgrim, the epitome of the anti-hero. To catch the readers’ attention, the narrator starts describing his protagonist’s activities with one of the mantras in the narrative “Listen:”

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.  
Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, *he says*, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

*He says.*

Billy is spastic in time and has no control over where he is going next, and the trips are not necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, *he says*, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next. (Vonnegut 1969, 23, emphases added)

The recurrence of “Listen” and “he says” throughout the novel puts Billy’s testimony in check. Kurt Vonnegut was equally met with disbelief, when he informed friends that he was writing an anti-war book: he might as well write an anti-*glacier* book, they said. “And even if wars didn’t keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death” (10).

Death is a marker of the anti-hero’s erratic life. Billy’s father died in a ludicrous hunting accident before he was sent overseas. “So it goes”. Billy saw service with the infantry in Europe and was taken prisoner by the Germans. On his return home he became an optometrist, married the daughter of the owner of the business and became rich. In 1968, he was aboard a plane that crashed on a mountain: Billy was the sole survivor. “So it goes.” While Billy was recuperating in a hospital, his wife died accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning. “So it goes”. After that he began talking on all-night radio programs and writing letters to papers about having been kidnapped by a flying saucer in 1967. “The saucer was from the planet Tralfamadore, *he said*. He was taken to Tralfamadore, where he was displayed naked in a zoo, *he said*. He was mated there with a former Earthling movie star named Montana Wildhack” (23;24, emphases added). “So it goes” echoes throughout the novel at every mention of death; the same occurs with “he says” “he said” when Billy speaks about Tralfamadore. The narrator obviously does not vouch for his character.

Billy Pilgrim’s function as a persona and mouthpiece for Vonnegut is put into relief by the numerous coincidences in their life stories. Both were born in 1922, lived similar experiences in the war and became financially successful by devious means: Billy unwillingly married “ugly Valencia,” because he felt sorry for her; Vonnegut wrote slick stories and pot boilers in order to finance his activity as a serious writer.

But there are also profound differences between Vonnegut and his protagonist. Billy comes to the insight that “*everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does,” whereas Vonnegut draws different conclusions from his Dresden experience: he educates his children to be pacifists, makes moral judgments and underrates his short book about Dresden as “jumbled and jangled, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (20).

## 2. Questioning of the records.

*However this may end, we have won the war against you;  
none of you will be left to bear witness,  
but even if someone were to survive,  
the world will not believe him.*

SS Militiamen  
Levi (1988)



A recurring nightmare plagued the prisoners: their attempts to report what had happened found disbelief or embarrassed evasion on the part of those who had stayed in the outside world. In fact, this is the common core for testimonies in the most diverse situations, as Paul Ricoeur emphasizes. Whether in everyday dialogues or in confrontations with testimonies and witnesses in a space of controversy, we are immediately faced with the crucial question: “How reliable is this testimony?” Our suspicions develop “along a chain of operations that begins in the perception of a lived scene, continues in the phase of retaining a memory, to concentrate on the declarative and narrative phase of the reconstruction of the traces of the event” (2007, 171).

The Dantesque dimension of the events that took place in Auschwitz, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka and other painfully famous places, raises suspicions about the veracity of the reports, as emphasized by the SS militiamen in their cynical warnings addressed to the prisoners:

There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers. (Levi 1988, 11-12)

Levi calls attention to the paradoxical analogy between victim and oppressor: both are caught in the same trap, but it is the latter who sets it up, and if he ever feels guilty, it is just that he should suffer. It is wicked, however, that the victim should suffer, as he does for the rest of his life. It is a wound that never heals. The Austrian Jewish intellectual Jean Améry, who was tortured by the Gestapo, loses faith in humanity: “Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured. ... Faith in humanity, already cracked by the first slap in the face, then demolished by torture, is never acquired again” (qtd in Levi 1988, 25). Jean Améry committed suicide in 1978.

There is a gray area between “we” and “them” in the Manichaeic division of “good” and “bad.” The Lager’s world was terrible because it was also indecipherable. There were countless and confusing boundaries to separate inmates from one another, each one of them trying to defend some minimal privilege, perhaps an extra ladle of soup that could keep death away for a few more days.

The history of the world is the history of men who lived in the past. It is the story of their lives or, in Ricoeur’s words, of our historical condition. But the question of whether things happened exactly as represented continues to bother us until the end of the stage of representation, i.e., after our recollections become part of an archive. At the stage of representation, it is possible to distinguish the antinomic pair true/false from the historical/fictional character of the narratives written by Levi and Vonnegut. But the veracity of testimonies can still be questioned even if the reader accepts implicitly the autobiographical pact proposed by Philippe

Lejeune: the identification of the triad author-narrator-character as an assurance that the author is responsible for the authenticity of the narrated.

Primo Levi states that he entered the Lager as a nonbeliever and lived as a nonbeliever after his liberation. He recalls, nevertheless, having reached the point of almost recurring to divine help, in the imminence of death: he was standing naked and compressed among other naked prisoners, with his personal index card in hand, waiting to file past the “commission” that would decide with one glance whether he should go immediately into the gas chamber or was strong enough to go on working. For the sake of coherence, he resisted the need “to ask for help and asylum” (146). Were he to survive, he would have been ashamed of it later. Levi’s honesty speaks in favor of the veracity of his testimony.

Religious faith is treated in idiosyncratic mocking tones by Kurt Vonnegut. He makes his “hero” Billy Pilgrim a chaplain’s assistant, the most ineffectual of functions, despised by the rest of the troop. Billy has no religion, but he grew up with an extremely gruesome crucifix on the wall of his bedroom, hung there by his mother, who was a substitute organist for churches of various denominations, and had flirted with Catholicism. The narrator adds: “Billy had contemplated torture and hideous wounds at the beginning and the end of nearly every day of his childhood” (32). But how reliable a witness is private Kurt Vonnegut Jr who was in Dresden, in January 1945?

The most effective signs of the presence of Vonnegut as a character in the narrative are his first-person interventions at critical peaks of the action. The American POWs are gathered in a railroad yard and witness the delirious ramblings of an officer who had led his troops to disaster and lost his whole regiment “about forty-five hundred men – a lot of them children, actually” (49), and who is himself close to death from pneumonia: “If you’re ever in Cody, Wyoming, just ask for Wild Bob”. As if drawn by the poignancy of the memory, Vonnegut-as-character comes to the foreground to state: “*I was there. So was my old war buddy Bernard V. O’Hare*” (50). The mention of his friend Bernard V. O’Hare, whom the reader meets in the autobiographical frame, links Vonnegut-as-character to the speaking voice. When urged by Valencia to talk about the war Billy answers “*Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt*”. The narrator’s voice is heard again: “That would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim *and for me, too*” (83; 84). By far the most evident identification occurs in another critical scene, when Vonnegut steps in to declare: “*That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book*” (86).

In Chapter Ten, which closes the novel’s autobiographical frame, Vonnegut reverts to an account of the POWs’ action in excavating “corpse mines” in Dresden, probably the most painful in a host of painful memories. The author-as-character not only refers to himself in the first person, but shifts for the first time to first person plural:

Now Billy and the rest were being marched into the ruins by their guards.  
*I was there. O’Hare was there. We had spent the past two nights in a stable.*

Authorities told *us* what to do. *We* were to borrow picks and shovels ... *We* were to march with these implements to such and such a place ... (141).

### After Auschwitz

Oral or written testimony of the Lager's cruel memories began during the long journey back to Italy, after the liberation from the Nazi death camps, but they haunted Primo Levi's life and work until the end. Why should he be among the saved and not among those who had succumbed? The rule is that the fittest survive, the worst, those who collaborate, steal and lie, while the best perish. Levi believes he must repeat again and again:

We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims," the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. (83-84)

For Levi, as eyewitness to the cruel reality of life in Auschwitz, there are two well differentiated categories among men – the saved and the drowned. It is a pair of opposites much more distinct than others of common usage, such as good/bad, wise/foolish, coward/courageous, unlucky/fortunate. The Muslims, or the *Muselmänner*, as they were known in the jargon of Auschwitz, definitely belonged to the category of the drowned. But who are they and what is the origin of the nickname?

Levi observes that whoever fails to prove oneself useful to the camp hierarchy in some way, or able of gaining material advantages through astuteness and energy soon becomes a *Muselmän*. They are the ones who choose to carry out all the orders, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and of the camp. Only exceptionally could they survive more than three months in this way. According to Giorgio Agamben, a probable explanation for the use of the term refers to its literal meaning in Arabic, someone who submits unconditionally to the will of God. In the sense of religious fanaticism its derogatory use was common in European cultures since the Middle Ages (52). On their entry into the camp, Levi points out, "through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves" (1969, 100). Despite their short life the *Muselmänner* form the backbone of the camp, because their number is endless; an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them. They are the most painful of Levi's memories.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen. (1969, 101)

Different reasons motivate ex-prisoners to bear witness. Levi's first report about sanitary conditions in Auschwitz was written at the request of the Soviet authorities, in 1946, but he had no doubts about the nature of his testimony. He was concerned with man's dignity or lack of dignity. Ethics in Auschwitz started "precisely at the point in which the *Muselmän*, the 'integral witness,' had for ever eliminated every possibility of distinguishing between man and the non-man" (Agamben 2008, 55).

All the *Muselmänner* who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; "they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea" (Levi 1969, 100)

### *Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt*

There are strange resemblances between the *Muselmän* and the unfortunate Billy Pilgrim at the moment he was taken prisoner by the Germans. Billy had been assigned to an infantry regiment in Luxembourg, whose chaplain's assistant had been killed in action. "So it goes". The regiment was in the process of being destroyed by the Germans in the famous Battle of the Bulge. Billy never got to meet the chaplain he was supposed to assist, neither was he issued any equipment or combat boots. Billy survived but became a dazed wanderer behind the new German lines in the company of three other infantry men who reluctantly allowed him to tag along.

Last came Billy Pilgrim, empty-handed, bleakly ready for death. Billy was preposterous – six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon and no boots. On his feet were cheap, low-cut civilian shoes which he had bought for his father's funeral. Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down. The involuntary dancing ... made his hip joints sore. ... Wind and cold and violent exercise had turned his face crimson. He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo. (28-29)

When somebody shot at them, three of the soldiers sought refuge in a ditch, but the filthy flamingo stopped dead center in the road and stood there "politely, giving the marksman another chance" (29). Billy was cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent. He could see no difference between sleep and wakefulness, between walking and standing still. One of the foursome, Roland Weary, an eighteen-year-old survivor of a decimated anti-tank crew, had made it his task to keep Billy going with brutal kicks and shoves, but Billy merely wanted to quit and pleaded to be left alone. When the two experienced scouts decided to move on without them, Weary

was filled with a “tragic wrath.” He had been ditched again, like so many times before in his life, and blamed it on Billy. He would make Billy pay. Weary socked and kicked Billy savagely until he tried to form himself into a ball,<sup>3</sup> leaving his back naked. “There, inches from the tips of Weary’s combat boots, were the pitiful buttons of Billy’s spine. ... Weary was going to break that tube.” But then Weary realized that five German soldiers were looking down at them curiously. The voice of the narrator is heard: they were certainly wondering “why one American soldier would try to murder another one so far from home ...” (40).

In the chronological scheme of the novel, Billy Pilgrim first talks about Dresden to his companion in the hospital room after the plane crash, Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord. At age 76, Rumfoord, a Harvard historian, was convalescing from a skiing accident and simultaneously writing “a readable condensation of the twenty-seven-volume *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two*”, in which he would make Americans finally hear about Dresden. He was profoundly disgusted by Billy’s passivity and said frightful things in his hearing: “He is just a vegetable. Why don’t they let him *die*?” (127) When Rumfoord finally pays attention to Billy’s claims “I was there” he doesn’t believe Billy had witnessed the Dresden bombardment. It had been kept secret from the American people, “for fear that a lot of bleeding hearts might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do” (127).

### 3. The written record

*At any rate, the entire history of the brief “millennial Reich”  
can be read as a war against memory,  
an Orwellian falsification of memory,  
falsification of reality, negation of reality.  
Levi (1988, 31)*

Nobody can explain a sequence of events without resorting to an explicit literary form of narrative – a memoir, as chosen by Primo Levi, or a Sci-Fi novel, in the case of Kurt Vonnegut. One must consult archives to conclude a project of understanding and finding an explanation to what happened to human beings in situations of extraordinary terror and anguish. Yet, Ricoeur warns us that we must not forget that the origin of archives is in testimony.

We must not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony, and that, whatever may be our lack of confidence in principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past, which someone attests having witnessed in person, and that the principal, and at times our only, recourse, when we lack other types of documentation, remains the confrontation among testimonies. (2007, 156)

In restricted sense, the archive is the deposit that catalogues the traces of the already said to consign them to future memory. Primo Levi becomes a writer goaded by the urgency of bearing witness to the atrocities of the Lager. His works

referred in this paper *Is This a Man? The Truce* and *The Drowned and the Saved* are actually the archives of his experiences in Auschwitz. “The Memory of the Offense” – the title of the first chapter – is the substrate of all Levi’s fictional or non-fictional works: *Survival in Auschwitz (If This Is a Man, 1947)*, *The Reawakening* (1965), *The Periodic Table* (1975), *If Not Now, When?* (1982), *Moments of Reprieve* (1986), *The Monkey’s Wrench* (1978), *Other People’s Trades* (1985), among others. The memory of the offense makes it impossible for Levi to forgive his offenders, but nobody is totally exempt from guilt: he recalls trying to give some clues of survival to a terrified newcomer, an eighteen-year-old Italian boy, but that was an exception. The rule was first and last to assure one’s own survival.

Vonnegut was not a writer before Germany either, but the trauma of witnessing “the greatest massacre in European history” set the tone for several apocalyptic novels: *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Mother Night* (1961), *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* (1965).

Like Billy Pilgrim’s slow erratic progress towards Dresden, it took Vonnegut twenty-three years to find the adequate form for his testimony of the raging firestorm that changed “the loveliest city” into a smouldering moonscape (119). He tried to draw an outline on the back of a roll of wallpaper, using his daughter’s crayons, with a beginning, a middle and an end. He thought of reproducing his experiences in Europe as far as possible realistically: its climax would be the execution of “poor old Edgar Derby,” the schoolteacher who had been executed for taking a teapot from the ruins. The end of the story was to take place two weeks after the end of the war, on a beet field outside of Halle, where thousands of allied prisoners of war, among them private Kurt Vonnegut Jr., were exchanged – one for one – for other thousands of Slavic prisoners. The final version of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a living proof that these attempts failed.

Vonnegut evidently realized that his Dresden story required a different fictional form. Using Eliot Rosewater (a character in *God Bless you, Mr Rosewater*) as his spokesman, the author implies that realism, as exemplified in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, a book that contains “everything there is to know about life” is not “enough anymore” (71). Roland Weary downgrades Billy’s short period in night school by saying: “There is more to life than what you read in books” (32). As Raymond Olderman (1973) points out, the blurring of fact and fiction observed in every sector of modern life “does pose a problem for the contemporary novelist that demands a new response” (2). Vonnegut’s tale effectively abolishes the distinction between fact and fiction and violates generic conventions of chronological order and relations of cause and effect, by creating a protagonist that is unstuck in time.

If the realist novel is nothing more than a parody of the outside world. And if all novels are nothing more than a parody of something else – whether from the raw data of experience, from the reconstruction of memories or from mental concepts – then the most interesting will be those that frankly admit the artifice.

### Shame, guilt, compassion

Levi affirms that the feeling of shame or guilt that coincided with the regained freedom was extremely complex: it contained different elements and in different proportions for each individual.

(...) Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished. Not by our will, cowardice or fault, yet we had lived for months and years at an animal level: our days had been encumbered from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold and fear, and any space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotions was wiped out. We endured filth, promiscuity and destitution, suffering much less than we would have suffered from such things in normal life, because our moral yardstick had changed. Furthermore, all of us had stolen: in the kitchen, the factory, the camp, in short, “from the others,” from the opposing side, but it was theft nevertheless. ... We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment. (75)

The Germans were no longer there. The towers were empty. Although he was an atheist, Levi recalls thanking Providence for it. “No one would think of biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity if Auschwitz had not existed” (76). There was no dignity left in the survivors: ragged, decrepit, skeleton-like patients (the healthier prisoners had been marched away by the Germans) dragging themselves everywhere on the frozen soil, like an invasion of worms. They had ransacked all the empty huts in search of food and wood; no longer in control of their own bowels, they had fouled everywhere, polluting the precious snow, the only source of water remaining in the whole camp. The offended evidently have their share of guilt and shame. But Levi would not condemn those “whose part of guilt was minimal and on whom coercion was exercised in the highest degree” (44).

In his written record, Vonnegut shares guilt with his narrator-as-character since his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, has found a way out through the Tralfamadorian concept of time:

All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just that way that we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. (25)

As a corollary, death loses its sting, since a person can be dead in a particular moment, but alive in plenty of other moments. When Billy himself hears that somebody is dead, he simply shrugs and repeats the Tralfamadorian saying, “So it goes”.

But the American writer Kurt Vonnegut will dedicate his literature to unmasking the cruelty of war and the widespread idea of heroic soldierhood

created by the movies. Billy and his fellow soldiers are compared to helpless and disoriented children, hence the subtitle *The Children's Crusade*.

### Exhortation and prophecy

Primo Levi was convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from the description of what happened in Auschwitz. Whatever its purpose the Lager turned out to be a totally unprecedented social and biological experiment: thousands of individuals differing in age, condition, origin, language, culture and customs, are enclosed within barbed wire to live under tightly controlled identical conditions that are inadequate for survival. Instead of accusing mankind of regression into barbarism, however, the only conclusion to be drawn is that in the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts disappear. That rarely happens in ordinary life, where a man is normally not alone, and his life is tied to the life of his neighbors in similar conditions of spiritual, physical, and even financial resources (1969, 102).

Our complete confidence in Primo Levi's testimony as an eyewitness does not preclude other persons from taking it as exaggeration or desire of retaliation on the part of a victim. The Germans are the enemy, and their dark uniforms and black emblem, symbolize certain death. In Vonnegut's testimony, conversely, German civilians become the victims of the same glorious forces that liberate the Nazi death camps.

The referential frame in *Slaughterhouse-Five* – chapters one and ten – besides a rather facetious report of Kurt Vonnegut's life and of his difficulties to write his book, includes extracts from official documents and books about the war, that generally applaud or justify the actions of the Allied forces. Driven by his traumatic memories, Vonnegut argues against them.

In what he calls a Self-Interview, published in *Palm Sunday* (1981) Kurt Vonnegut describes his activities as a POW after the bombardment.

Every day we walked into the city and dug into basements and shelters to get the corpses out, as a sanitary measure. When we went into them, a typical shelter, an ordinary basement usually, looked like a streetcar full of people who'd simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead. ... We brought the dead out. They were loaded on wagons and taken to parks, large open areas in the city which weren't filled with rubble. The Germans got funeral pyres going, burning the bodies to keep them from stinking and from spreading disease. 130,000 corpses were hidden underground. It was a terrible elaborate Easter egg hunt. (90)

Vonnegut facetiously tells the interviewer: "This was kept a secret until very close to the end of the war. One reason they burned down Dresden is that they'd already burned down everything else. You know: 'What're we going to do tonight?'" (91).



Vonnegut-as-narrator delivers a similar testimony, spiced by the resources of fiction:

Billy found himself paired as a digger with a Maori, who had been captured at Tobruk. ... There were hundreds of corpse mines opening by and by. They didn't smell bad at first, were wax museums. But then the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas. So it goes. The Maori Billy had worked with died of the dry heaves, after having been ordered to go down in that stink and work. He tore himself to pieces, throwing up and throwing up. So it goes. So a new technique was devised. Bodies weren't brought up anymore. They were cremated by soldiers with flame throwers right where they were. (1969, 142)

*So it goes.*

### Final remarks

By using the three-partite scheme proposed by Paul Ricoeur, we attempted to reflect upon the unforgettable reports bequeathed by Primo Levi and Kurt Vonnegut. That Vonnegut was capable to continue satirically unmasking the pitfalls of American economic and political institutions and condemning the horror of warfare up to the end of his career furnishes a kind of compensation for Levi's absence from the struggle.

Both authors were troubled by the same need to preach against war and human cruelty which they felt could only be done by keeping alive the memories of the catastrophic events they had witnessed in the hope of preventing their recurrence.

In the conclusion of the *Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi admits that the experiences of the survivors of the Nazi Lagers are extraneous to the new Western generation to whom they sound anachronistic and remote. But they have to be listened to even above the problems that affect this new generation. It was the survivors' duty to warn the world that Auschwitz could happen again. It was almost beyond belief and totally unforeseen that an entire civilized people should have been attracted by Nazi propaganda to the point of singing praises to Hitler right up to the catastrophe. It happened once, "therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say" (199). This is a quote from *The Drowned and the Saved*, its copyright dated 1986, less than a year before Primo Levi's tragic death.

Kurt Vonnegut lived long enough after *Slaughterhouse-Five* to publish several books and to address large audiences about his work and his pacifism, both in the United States and abroad, especially in the then URSS, where his readership was considerable. Possibly because of his unorthodox use of science fiction to discuss serious matters: "Vonnegut always writes from the survivor's stance, where all laughter has to be a step away from madness or fury" (Bloom 2000, 1).

*Um homem sem pátria* (2006) (*A Man Without a Country*) exhibits his indignation with the course of American democracy combined with the generosity and humanism characteristic of his work since *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Comparing the Vietnam War to the Iraq War, he says: “That war only turned millionaires into billionaires. Today’s war is turning billionaires into trillionaires. That’s what you call progress” (77).

By highlighting the world’s wrongs using unconventional writing techniques, Vonnegut emphasizes his unwillingness to accept instances of man’s cruelty, such as the Dresden massacre, as fate beyond the control of human free will.

Primo Levi’s memoir carries the force of personal physical, mental, and emotional suffering. It is impossible to read it without sharing step by step the anguish of being enclosed within barbed wire away from everything that means human dignity.

### Notes

1. Henceforth all translations of quotations from books or other sources not available in English are mine.
2. *Einstein’s Monsters*, a collection of short stories by British author Martin Amis, first published in 1987, explores the *deterrence* that was in place after the Russians successfully tested their first atomic bomb in 1949.
3. Another explanation for the origin of the term *Muselmän*, registered in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* seems less probable to Agamben: the term would derive from those deportee’s characteristic position rolled up on the ground, their legs folded in the oriental manner, their features rigid like masks (53).

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