The Point of Time. Structures of Temporality in Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*.

ABSTRACT
The article, whilst aknowledging that ***Se questo è un uomo*** demands to be read for reasons and in ways that are not exclusively or predominantly aesthetic, analyzes the work as a literary artifact. This is done in the first instance by examining the various ways (**narrative structure**, usage of **verbal tenses**, thematic mention of temporal characteristics) in which internal chronological dimensions are created, connected among themselves and communicated in the process defined as "**chronopoiesis**". A further aspect of **temporality** is then identified as "**exotemporality**", which is structurally connectd with a dimension of **ineffability**: this is the projection of the text toward the (external) time of the reader. Both processes are regarded as intrinsic to the constitution and functioning of the literary text in general; a necessary link is established between **Primo Levi**'s condition as victim, witness and writer and his choice to discharge his self-imposed duty of testimony by means of a narrative account sustained by an entire literary tradition, and, more specifically, powered by the poetic and heuristic energy emanating from **Dante**'s **Divine comedy**.

Preamble

Let us begin with a few propositions, which, in their peremptory but unavoidable succintness, are only designed to provide a context and some general points of reference for the more specific analysis that follows.[1]

If you start thinking about time - not about a specific time, how late you are for a meeting, how much time you have left to complete a task, or how accurate your watch is, but about time itself - and you are not a physicist or a philosopher, there can be only one reason: you are discovering mortality. More precisely, you are starting to face the prospect of your own death. This will not necessarily take the form of morbid thoughts, despair and terror; it may even enhance your enjoyment of life, but in any case it will translate into a new awareness of temporality, and an obscure or vivid sense of the shortness of human time. The most precious commodity is not in infinite supply; eventually it will stop. Hence, for some, an impatience, an hitch, an anxiety: so much to do (or, at any rate, so little done), so little time left.[2]

Once you conquer that point of vantage, you may become more inclined to reach a hitherto unlikely conclusion: that the most specific characteristic of human life - if one could isolate it in its distinctive difference - is time itself. The making of the individual human being

[1] This paper is part of a larger project for a book on time in 20th-century Italian literature, some chapters of which have already appeared in article form. Some of the general concepts expressed here have been presented previously, and in greater detail. Despite the lapidary form in which the following initial references are provided, there is no suggestion that they should be accepted uncritically. On the contrary, each one of them is problematic and would demand and deserve extensive discussion, which is of course impossible on this occasion. It goes without saying that these references do no exhaust the relevant context: from Zeno of Elea to Proust, from St Augustine to Bergson, Bakhtin, Genette and Ricoeur, the reader will realize how vast that broader context is.

[2] The connection (including ethymological) between the perception of time, bodily functions, illness, and mortality is established, at the conclusion of a wider literary exploration, in the final chapter of Harald Weinrich's *Knappe Zeit. Kunst und Ökonomie des befristeten Lebens*, München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2004; Engl. transl.: *On Borrowed Time: The Art and Economy of Living with Deadlines*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Weinrich is also relevant for his *Tempus: besprochene und erzählte Welt*, Stuttgart: W. Kolhammer, 1964. The reference to Martin Heidegger's existentialist philosophy in *Sein und Zeit* (1927; Engl. transl.: *Being and Time*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), and more specifically to the concept of "*Sein-zum-Tode*" ("being-toward-death"), is also inevitable here.

is dominated by the construction of both a past (familiar, cultural, religious, political, mythological, among others) and a future (in connection with personal projects, political ideals, religious beliefs, career expectations, emotional attachments, artistic endavours, and so on). Few will deny that a crucial aspect of being human is to remember (feeling connected to a past) and to anticipate (being projected towards a future). But the secret essence of time (death) can remain invisible, up to the moment of revelation, when (instantly or progressively) we acquire the sixth sense, the sense of time, and painfully start feeling in our very flesh the point of time.

Literature (writing it and reading it) is the human activity that - as far back as the recorded memory of our species can go - best expresses, enacts and performs this temporal essence and destination of our being, on both a personal (or ontogenetic) and collective (or phylogenetic) level.[3] In this perspective, any literary text is, in some ways, a time capsule, an embodiment of temporality, but also a generator of time.[4]

The present of the human person is constituted and infinitely enriched by the obvious or invisible operation of time, and by the multiplication of perspectives that narrative temporality enables; but, as Italo Svevo shows in his trilogy of "*inettitudine*",[5] the cleavage of the present between past and future, memory (nostalgia or trauma) and dream (illusion or nightmare), is also the most potent venom known to thinking beings. Jacques Derrida suggested the undecidable notion of the *pharmakon* (medicine and poison) to designate the ambiguous position occupied by *l'écriture* within this field of contradictory forces.[6]

Literature and temporality.

As Laura and Giulio Lepschy wrote, "some readers may feel a sense of unease at treating Primo Levi's work (and particularly his writings about the camps) as literary objects, rather than texts crucial for their ethical, political and historical value".[7] Although the artistic quality of Levi's production is nowadays generally recognized, it remains true that the vast majority[8] of critical contributions on the Turinese author deal with his "Holocaust writings"[9] as instances of testimony or analysis, rather than linguistic and artistic creation. Furthermore, it is well known that the author himself did not hesitate to state that stylistic considerations played a very small part in the composition of his first (and most fundamental) work, *Se questo è un uomo*.[10]

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[3] The conjunction of mortality, memory, duty, civilization, immortality and poetry set out by Ugo Foscolo in *Dei Sepolcri* (1807) still provides a very powerful - if hypothetical, and nowadays endangered - vision of the role of literature in society and in human life.

[4] For the concept of "time capsule", and in general a novel understanding of temporality, see Julian Barbour, *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in Physics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[5] Italo Svevo, *Una vita* (1892), *Senilità* (1898), *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923). The so-called *Continuazioni* (fragments of a never completed fourth novel) are also of great interest in the light of a discussion of time, human life and literature.

[6] See for instance "La pharmacie de Platon", in *La dissémination*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972, pp. 69-197. Uri Cohen makes the same connection with Derrida (but drawing different conclusions) in "Consider If This Is a Man: Primo Levi and the Figure of Ulysses", *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter 2012), p. 47.

[7] "Primo Levi's languages", in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. by Robert S. C. Gordon, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 121-136 (p. 121).

[8] There are, however, significant exceptions, as the *Cambridge Companion* itself proves, and as the Lepschys indicate (p. 135, n. 2); see for instance the contribution of Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo ("Lingua e scrittura in Levi", now in *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica*, a cura di Ernesto Ferrero, Torino: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 169-242, to mention but one.

[9] The inverted commas seem appropriate, given the reservations expressed by some (including Levi himself) about this label.

[10] Henceforth SQU. I will be using the standard, second edition of the book. All references are to Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo. La tregua*, Torino: Einaudi, 1993 [1958].

And yet, it is the book itself (or at least one of the many layers of meaning contained in its complex structure) that invites the attention of the reader to focus on a metadiscoursive and transliteral dimension of interpretation, which perhaps has not been fully elucidated by the critics. I will therefore proceed to focus on aspects of SQU relating more to its literary nature, than to its object, setting and immediate purpose.

More precisely, I suggest that the specifically literary aspect and intention of the work are crucial for a full (or, at least, fuller) comprehension of its status, functioning and fruition. I am not referring, however, to matters of "mere form and style", which could reasonably be regarded as secondary in comparison with the overwhelming import of the content; rather, to the very essence of the literary act, something that - in Levi's case at least - becomes an indispensable ally and resource in view of the enormous task that he sets himself (or, more truthfully perhaps, that life has burdened him with).

It is the aim of this paper to show that *Se questo è un uomo* is a work of literature,[11] at the very same point where, by fulfilling a duty that is not primarily aesthetic, it demands the full engagement of the writer's and the reader's cognitive powers and moral responsibility. It is not necessary for a book to be consigned to the realm of fiction or entertainment, in order to be recognized as literary creation, and this is quite obvious; more interesting is to explain why and how, for someone like Levi, literature (as opposed to some other form of writing or expression) becomes the conduit and means for discharging an obligation and, at the same time, satisfying a need[12] that are not, in the first instance, literary.

The way that I have chosen to conduct this inquiry is a consideration of temporality in SQU, and the first fundamental assumption is that the book is not just an account of the months spent in the concentration camp, but also an intense effort of repossession and creation of time. In the process of de-humanization of the Jews that Levi recognizes as central to the Nazi ideology as expressed in the *Lager*, one crucial aspect is the total control, in practical terms, over the prisoners' time, but also, and even more importantly, the deprivation of the temporal perspectives and active relationships with time that constitute such an important component of being human; everything in the camp, from the organization of the working day to the ultimate deprivation of life, contributes to that effect. This "loss of time" is one of the aspects (together with the loss of language, freedom, identity, dignity) of the process of systematic de-humanization that is at the heart of the concentration camp, constituting the necessary premise for the subsequent exploitation and extermination.

The writing and publishing of SQU is a revolt against that mutilation, a claming back of the control over time, a reinstatement of purpose, a reactivation of the dimensions of past and future in human life. But it is important to note that this does not simply consist in recovering something that was lost; there is also a very active side to it, because simultaneously

[11] The reader will notice in what follows an oscillation between different meanings of "literature", with varying degrees of generality: 1) I consider SQU an instance of literature as "written narrative", in a fairly strict and traditional sense; 2) however, in some respects, I do not see a neat separation between "the oral" and "the written"; this is borne out both through the strong connection between the two in Levi's specific case, and from a more theoretical perspective (Jacques Derrida's work on *écriture* and *phoné* is very much part of the implicit context here; see *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967); 3) on the other hand, a literary-narrative component may be present in written or oral productions that are nor primarily literary (journalism) or in different media (video, cinema, music); 4) finally, although the specifically "narrative" dimension is particularly relevant in the chronopoietic perspective (creation and manipulation of time) that I will discuss later, it is also nevertheless necessary to think of literature as including non-narrative forms of artistic expression (for instance lyrical poetry). The closest I can get to a definition of literature is by referring the reader to the concluding part of this article; I have, however, no intention of reducing the meaning of "literature" to a single, exclusive or all-encompassing meaning; consequently, I am prepared to tolerate and encourage a degree of ambiguity in using the concept (I hope the specific context will, on each occasion, reduce it somewhat).

[12] A further point to make (with no time to address it properly) is that obligation and need are two separate, equally powerful, but entirely distinct motivations for Levi, at the time of composing SQU.

with the preservating the memory of the past, the book also creates "new time" by inserting memories in a narrative fabric and in a context of purposeful action, neither of which were present before. In connecting the time of the camp (so reconstructed) to a past (both personal and cultural) and to a future (bot Levi's and his readers'), a process of healing is set in motion, and new meaning (within newly instituted temporal coordinates) is created.

Time in *Se questo è un uomo*

There is a great deal to say about SQU on the topic of time. The book's temporal structure is very instructive, as is the use of verbal tenses, and this is the first aspect that strikes the reader in relation to this theme. But there is also more, a lot more, concerning time and our relationship to time, and the way we shape it through language and literature, that SQU reveals in the process of relating the facts. I will address the issue of time in SQU by looking at different aspects, starting from the most obvious (the narrative structure and the use of verbal tenses), to the most impalpable.

Let us begin by looking at the work in its narrative development.[13] Starting from the author's preface, we are immediately placed within a linear temporal dimension, as would be normal in the case of a personal account of events. The opening sentence authorizes this interpretative approach:[14] "Per mia fortuna, sono stato deportato ad Auschwitz **solo nel 1944** [...]" (p. 9).

From now on we expect a personal-historical narrative, a journal, chronologically organized, relating what happened to the protagonist-narrator. And, sure enough, this is how the account proper starts: "Ero stato catturato dalla Milizia fascista il **13 dicembre 1943**. **Avevo ventiquattro anni**, poco senno, nessuna esperienza [...]" (p. 11).

This could work very well as the beginning of a typical *Bildungsroman*. Precise dates continue to punctuate the account: "Al momento del mio arrivo, e cioè alla **fine del gennaio 1944** [...]. Il giorno **20 febbraio** [...]. Ma il **mattino del 21** [...]" (p. 12). We are, quite explicitely, in an autobiographical/historical dimension and a further signal of this is the range of verbal tenses used, all in the past.

But soon something happens, and the temporal perspective of the account changes completely. The transition takes place at the end of the first chapter, when the narrative starts to oscillate between past and present tense:

> Senza sapere come, **mi trovai** caricato su di un autocarro [...].Troppo tardi, troppo tardi, **andiamo** tutti «giù». D'altronde, **ci siamo presto accorti** che non siamo senza scorta: **è** una strana scorta. **È** un soldato tedesco [...]. (p. 18)

This oscillation continues for a while, and into the second chapter ("Sul fondo"):

> "Il viaggio non **durò** che una ventina di minuti. [...] **Siamo scesi**, **ci hanno fatti entrare** in una camera vasta e nuda, debolmente riscaldata. Che sete **abbiamo**!" (p. 19).

The change taking place is revealed in this paragraph by the sequence of verbal tenses, starting with the past historic ("durò"), to the present perfect ("siamo scesi"), to the present ("abbiamo"). From now on, the perspective of the here-and-now (embodied in the present tense) is going to be the main temporal dimension; it is also to be noted that, when time is in

[13] A short dissertation by Daniel Granello provides a synthetic narratological and structural analysis of SQU, including useful summaries of internal chronology. See *La dimensione temporale nell'opera "Se questo è un uomo" di Primo Levi*, Högskolan Dalarna, Akademin Humaniora och medier, Italienska – Falun, 2008 [http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A518578&dswid=4787, consulted 23/02/2019].

[14] I will highlight in boldface temporal references, as well as other significant markers.

focus as the object or the dominant dimension of the narrative, it is usually addressed or denoted in the present:

L'orario di lavoro **è** variabile con la stagione. Tutte le ore di luce **sono** ore lavorative: perciò **si va** da un orario minimo invernale (ore 8-12 e 12,30-16) a uno massimo estivo (ore 6,30-12 e 13-18). (pp. 30-1)

The dominance of the present tense is not an expression of vitality and energy; it conveys instead the sense of an imposing, overwhelming and oppressive relationship with (and dependency on) the present conditions: not so much, therefore, the "historical present", the mode used by Julius Caesar in his *De bello gallico* for vividness; rather a squashing of time, a sort of reconfiguration of temporality, which is first of all a deprivation of temporal depth and span. This dimension of loss of chronological perspective becomes visible, every now and then, also thematically:

... E **fino a quando**? Ma **gli anziani ridono a questa domanda**: a questa domanda si riconoscono i nuovi arrivati. Ridono e non rispondono: per loro, da mesi, da anni, il problema del **futuro remoto** è impallidito, ha perso ogni acutezza, di fronte ai ben piú urgenti e concreti problemi del **futuro prossimo**: quanto si mangerà oggi, se nevicherà, se ci sarà da scaricare carbone. (p. 31)

The future,[15] in this world, to the extent that it is conceivable, is simply the furthest imaginable limit of the present condition, in other terms an extended, repetitive, mechanical and ultimately eternal reiteration of the present, with no end or change in sight:

Per noi invece il Lager non è una punizione; per noi **non è previsto un termine**, e il Lager altro non è che il genere di esistenza a noi assegnato, **senza limiti di tempo**, in seno all'organismo sociale germanico. (p. 75)

What we witness is therefore a sort of obstruction of the future, if the meaning of the future is a possibility of transformation, evolution, change:

... infin che un giorno
senso non avrà più dire: domani.
Qui è così. Sapete come si dice 'mai' nel gergo del campo? 'Morgen früh', domani mattina. (p. 119)

This is confirmed, even when the narrative switches back to the past tense:

[...] **non pareva** possibile che veramente esistesse un mondo e un tempo, se non il nostro mondo di fango, e **il nostro tempo sterile e stagnante** a cui **eravamo** oramai incapaci di immaginare una fine. (pp. 104-5)

In combination with the spacial segregation from the external world, what takes place is a suspension of the normal course of both personal and collective history:

Per gli uomini vivi le unità del tempo hanno sempre un valore, il quale è tanto maggiore, quanto piú elevate sono le risorse interne di chi le percorre; ma per noi, **ore, giorni e mesi si riversavano torpidi dal futuro nel passato**, sempre troppo lenti, materia vile e superflua di cui cercavamo di disfarci al piú presto. Conchiuso il tempo in cui i giorni si inseguivano vivaci, preziosi e irreparabili, il futuro ci stava davanti grigio e inarticolato, come una barriera invincibile. Per noi, **la storia si era fermata**. (p. 123)

As critics have noted, the sentences in the past tense are probably reflections by Levi (as survivor) *a posteriori*, at the time of writing, and therefore at a moment when normal time

[15] We are reminded here of the distinction that Jacques Derrida makes between "*le futur*" (predictable) and "*l'avenir*", or "*l'à-venir*" (unforeseable); see for instance Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 53.

and history have restarted.[16] The effect is one of distancing, and implicitely of emotional and rational control; Levi reverts to the present tense when he places himself (and the reader as spectator) back in the dimension of the victim.

The distance (psychological more than chronological) between the two temporalities at times makes those past events almost unreal:

> **Oggi, questo vero oggi** in cui io sto seduto a un tavolo e **scrivo**, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose **sono realmente accadute**. (p. 93)

From the perspective internal to the camp, the reckoning of time is restricted to the dimension of the day, but beyond that there doesn't seem to be any point in counting: "**I giorni si somigliano tutti**, e non è facile contarli (p. 37). What we have here is an extreme effect of Bergsonian *durée*, of elongation of chronological time, affecting the perception of temporality itself: "Il tempo passa goccia a goccia" (p. 19). There are, of course, time signals and temporal connections, but they are all very vague, subjective and related to the present:

> A giudicare dalla sua [*scil.*: del sole] posizione, **debbono essere le quattordici passate**: addio zuppa ormai, e siamo in piedi da dieci ore e nudi da sei. (p. 42)
>
> **Devono essere passate le ventitre** perché già è intenso l'andirivieni al secchio, accanto alla guardia di notte. (p. 54)
>
> **Prima di** Resnyk, con me dormiva un polacco [...]. (p. 59)

The loss of time is also explicitely connected with the impossibility to establish meaningful, positive relationships with the others: "Qui **nessuno ha tempo**, nessuno ha pazienza, nessuno ti dà ascolto [...]" (p. 33).

The camp of course operates, like any organization, according to a management of resources (including time), but the prisoners are merely the object of it (or, more precisely, one of the available resources in as far as the camp is an economic entity, or burdens in as far as the camp is an imprisonment and extermination project). The difference of this time compared to previous, normal (human) time is highlighted repeatedly, painfully, and again almost always in retrospective mode; violent images and a sense of irredeemable loss prevail:

> **Il tempo di meditare, il tempo di stabilire erano conchiusi**, e ogni moto di ragione si sciolse nel tumulto senza vincoli, su cui, dolorosi **come colpi di spada**, emergevano in un lampo, cosí vicini ancora nel tempo e nello spazio, i ricordi buoni delle nostre case. (p. 14)
>
> Conservavamo **i ricordi della nostra vita anteriore, ma velati e lontani**, e perciò profondamente dolci e tristi, come sono per ognuno i ricordi della prima infanzia e di tutte le cose finite; mentre per ognuno il momento dell'ingresso al campo stava all'origine di **una diversa sequenza di ricordi**, vicini e duri questi, continuamente confermati dalla **esperienza presente**, come **ferite ogni giorno riaperte**. (p. 104)

"Normal" time, involving memory and hope, now becomes intolerable, a sword that wounds, in the monotonous, eternal present.[17] Memory is pain, and this pain is intensified when

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[16] The alternance (and meaning) of the use of past and present tenses is addressed by Levi himself in *Il sistema periodico* (*Opere*, vol. I, Torino: Einaudi, 1987), p. 642. For a discussion, with reference also to contributions by Mengaldo and Segre, see David Bidussa, "Verbi", in *Primo Levi*, a cura di Marco Belpoliti, Riga 13, Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 1997, and *Id.*, "Tempo storico e tempo cronologico nella scrittura di Primo Levi", in *Al di quà del bene e del male. La visione del mondo di Primo Levi*, a cura di Enrico Mattioda, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2000. See also Enrico Mattioda, "Tempo e memoria", in *L'ordine del mondo. Saggio su Primo Levi*, Napoli: Liguori, 1998.

[17] As already suggested in the Preamble, it would be interesting to compare this configuration of temporality with the extensive reflection on past, present and future taking place in another pillar of 20th-century Italian literature, Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923). In that work, too, the *distension* of time in the two directions of the non-present (past and future) is seen as a specific prerogative of humanity (vs. animality), albeit with the very opposite connotation: complete adherence to the present situation is the (only) means to achieve perfect health,

Levi is sent to the camp hospital (the Ka-Be), precisely because there the suspension of the ordinary rhytm of day and work allows a partial and agonizing recuperation of human time:

> Quando si lavora, si soffre e non si ha tempo di pensare: le nostre case sono meno di un ricordo. Ma **qui** [*scil.*: nel Ka-Be] **il tempo è per noi**: da cuccetta a cuccetta, nonostante il divieto, ci scambiamo visite, e parliamo e parliamo. La baracca di legno, stipata di umanità dolente, è piena di parole, di ricordi e di un altro dolore. «Heimweh» si chiama in tedesco questo dolore; è una bella parola, vuol dire «dolore della casa». (p. 48)

But the Ka-Be is an exception, neither the real hell (the ordinary life in the camp), nor true life: "La vita del Ka-Be è **vita di limbo**" (p. 44). The cursory reference to the Christian afterlife, and more precisely to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as we shall see, is neither accidental nor insignificant.[18] The characteristics of time in the *Lager* remind us of those in Dante's *Inferno*, which (albeit perfectly logical in its organization, structure and rationale) is similarly emptied of all hope, and therefore pervaded by a chaotic temporality, a perennial present of suffering. Both in Hell and in that special island in Hell that is Limbo, as well as in the camp and the Ka-Be, the norm is an "absolute present", or suspended time, where the meaningful temporal span is either abolished, or much reduced.[19]

After a while, time itself seems to dissolve, together with the ability to measure it. Significantly, this dissolution of time goes hand in hand with the ever-increasing awareness of impending death:

> **Quanti mesi sono passati** dal nostro ingresso in campo? Quanti dal giorno in cui sono stato dimesso dal Ka-Be? E dal giorno dell'esame di chimica? E dalla selezione di ottobre? [...] **Quanti fra noi giungeranno vivi al nuovo anno?** (p. 121)

We understand that "normal" human time (filled with memories and projects, which have the effect of obscuring the inevitability of death) is being replaced by a different, and - paradoxically - in some ways "purer" notion of time: the incalculable (but not unlimited) gap between life and death, inevitably leading to the latter. Harald Weinrich[20] shows that only when time manifests itself as being finite, "in short supply" (*knappe*), we start feeling it in our body, and realizing what life fundamentally is: a limited span of time before death. One might say that literature is the acknowledgement of, and a response to, that feeling and that challenge; literature only exists because we know that we are mortal. SQU is also this: a challenge to mortality, written by someone who has experienced the imminence of death, as well as the

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however the evolution of the "*occhialuto uomo*" is unfortunately taking him (as opposed to "her": the woman, for instance Augusta, Zeno's wife, occupies a different position) in the exact opposite direction.

[18] Among the numerous critical contributions on Primo Levi and Dante, I wish to mention in particular Jean-Philippe Bareil, *Exil et voyage littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Primo Levi*, Paris: Messene, 1998. For a recent treatment of the specific topic of Dante and time, see Matthew Treherne, "Reading Time, Text and the World", in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, Volume 1, edited by George Corbett and Heather Webb, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015 [https://www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=633753; consulted 6/03/2019].

[19] Dante's masterpiece (which, as we know, and as will become clearer later in this very contribution, is absolutely fundamental for a proper understanding of Levi's work) is also a useful point of reference in relation specifically to time. Each cantica, each realm is allotted a different kind of time: after the non-time of *Inferno* (where time is pointless, because it has no direction, no orientation), we witness the recovery of a more human, purposeful time in *Purgatorio*, where it has again value, can be counted and must be used appropriately, in as much as it is aimed towards purification and ultimately salvation; and finally a cosmic, perfect, circular (but no longer human) time in *Paradiso* - the time of the divine. The analogy between SQU and *Inferno* is more than merely hypothetical; that between *La tregua* (with the anticipation of SQU's last chapter) and *Purgatorio* makes sense, too, since Levi's return home is also a purgatorial journey back to life, and a recuperation of the meaning and the point of time, since now there is purpose, a direction (despite the detour), a sense in movement. The third level, however (the time of the divine and of salvation) is never reached.

[20] Harald Weinrich, *Knappe Zeit* (cit.).

suppression of all the means that we are normally able to apply in order to obscure or neutralize it.

Temporality and ineffability

We have so far seen a transition from the time of human life to the eternal, a-temporal present of the camp, dominated by the overwhelming, overpowering imminence of death. The lack of a meaningful future is the critical component of this mutilated (or perhaps more essential) relationship with time, of this perverted (because inhuman) temporality; but the beginning of a possible salvation resides in the past, in the recuperation of the past accomplished (or at least attempted) through memory. I will return to this crucial point after concluding the survey of the temporal structure of the book.

As already noted, the occasional occurrence of references to historical time takes place when the vantage point of the narrator (in referring to the past) switches to the post-Auschwitz present ("qui"), for instance:

> Ad Auschwitz, **nell'anno 1944**, dei vecchi prigionieri ebrei (degli altri **non diremo qui**, ché altre erano le loro condizioni), «kleine Nummer», piccoli numeri inferiori al centocinquantamila, poche centinaia sopravvivevano. (p. 81)

As alreday suggested, these more precise chronologico/historical references seem to be uttered by another Levi, not the one who still is (or places himself back) in the camp, but the one who has survived and now has a retrospective and more detached perspective on events. There is, indeed, a dual perspective, a dual intention: Levi the character living or re-living the events in a re-actualized present with no hope, and Levi the writer, remembering (and writing) *a posteriori*, from the point of view of the one who knows that there has been a future after the camp; in this light, everything acquires a different meaning. Again, that reminds us of Dante, the pilgrim and the poet: the one who truly suffers with Francesca or Brunetto, and is himself at risk of ultimate loss in the "selva oscura", and the (other) one who retrospectively knows that salvation is possible, and that his own work will become an instrument for salvation.

We might say that this situation allegorizes the condition of all narrative, inasmuch as narrating something means drawing a reader back, close to the narrated events, which can be extremely bleak and painful; but at the same time establishing and institutionalizing a safe distance from them. But the safety is illusory, and not only because evil can always return. For Levi, being faithful to the particular quality of that very peculiar condition (the *Lager*), and making sense of it, are two related but distinct and to an extent incompatible gestures, and endeavours: so that, in a way, the more you make sense of it, the further away you move from it. And perhaps this is one reason why not only one cannot, but also one must not attempt to make full sense of it. This condition pertains to the reader, who (save few exceptions) was not there, does not know the language of true hunger, or the real meaning of utter de-humanization, or the veritable extent of the "grey zone"; but even more (and far more painfully) to the writer, who must forever experience the double-bind of an unsustainable position. The result is that something - the ineffable - must (or, in any case, will) be left in reserve, in order not to betray the truth of the experience, or the veridicity of its communication. The most essential purpose of writing (to tell) paradoxically coincides with its ultimate failure (impossibility to tell); but Dante's precedent, as well as Levi's entire oeuvre, are there to prove that, in literary communication, ineffability does not necessarily have to result in silence. As to the personal cost a human being must pay when the paradox is embodied in flesh and blood, this is an altogether different matter.

At the end of this essay I will return to the question of ineffability, to show how it connects essentially to literary temporality. But for now let us return to the repetitive and

atemporal hell that is the camp; this mode of temporality essentially continues up to and including the penultimate chapter, but changes after that point, with the "Storia di dieci giorni" (chapter 17). It is significant that the word "storia" is used in the title of the very last chapter, together with a reference to a precise period of time (ten days).

The previous chapter ended with the words "e ora **ci opprime** la vergogna" (p. 133), in the present; but the new one starts in the past tense, and with the mention of a precise date:

> Già da molti mesi ormai **si sentiva** a intervalli il rombo dei cannoni russi, quando, **l'11 gennaio 1945**, **mi ammalai** di scarlattina e **fui nuovamente ricoverato** in Ka-Be. (p. 134)

After this, external history suddenly intrudes explosively in the life of the *Lager*; the Germans, pressed by the advances of the Soviet army, evacuate the camp with all the prisoners who can walk. Between 18 and 27 January 1945 we have a sequence of daily diary entries, mostly in the past tense, and dominated by a sense of uncertainty:

> ***18 gennaio***. Nella notte dell'evacuazione le cucine del campo **avevano ancora funzionato** [...] **Nessuno sapeva** quale fosse la nostra condizione. (p. 138)
> [...] **incominciarono** per noi i dieci giorni **fuori del mondo e del tempo**. (*ibidem*)

This is, again, an intermediate, transitional time; no longer that of the concentrationary universe, not yet that of normal life. But despite this, ordinary temporality, with its ability to support narration and expectation, has already restarted. The end of the chapter, and of the book, very clearly signals the full reinstatement of human time:

> **Ho incontrato** a Katowice, in aprile, Schenck e Alcalai in buona salute. Arthur **ha raggiunto** felicemente la sua famiglia, e Charles **ha ripreso** la sua professione di maestro; **ci siamo scambiati lunghe lettere** e **spero di poterlo ritrovare** un giorno.
> Avigliana-Torino, dicembre 1945 - gennaio 1947. (p. 153)

Measurable, purposeful time has resumed, where normal relationships are possible, where a past and a future become meaningful again. It is notable that the act of writing ("ci siamo scambiati lunghe lettere") is explicitely mentioned as part of this return to life.

Chronopoiesis

Levi informs us that SQU was written without a pre-conceived plan, and the various chapters composed "per ordine di urgenza" (Levi's introduction to SQU, pp. 9-10).[21] It is clear that what Levi wanted (and needed) was to narrate his stories, and indeed oral narratives (to family and friends) preceded and accompanied the actual writing. The urge was primarily to tell the story, rather than - say - provide a historical/sociological study on the Nazi *Lager*. Yes, he does describe his work, in his own introduction, as "uno studio pacato di alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano", and undoubtedly there are numerous observations and reflections that go exactly in that direction; but the book does not have, on the whole, the intention or the formal characteristics of a scientific, philosophical or didactic work. It is, primarily, a narrative.

[21] A philological analysis of the differences between the first (Torino: De Silva, 1947) and second edition (Torino: Einaudi, 1958) of the work, with specific reference to the usage of chronology and the articulation of temporality, would of course be very interesting, but is beyond the immediate scope of this study. Marco Belpoliti, in *Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo*, Milano: Guanda, 2015, provides a general comparison of the two versions (pp. 46-71), coming to a conclusion that is highly relevant in the context of a discussion of "chronopoiesis": "così il semplice confronto tra l'edizione '47 e '58 conferma il lavoro per approssimazione compiuto dall'autore al fine di imprimere alla narrazione una maggiore scansione temporale [...]; allo stesso modo sono stati introdotti nel testo alcuni connettivi, sia in funzione di rinvio ad altri luoghi della narrazione, sia per anticipare episodi trattati in forma più ampia in altri capitoli" (p. 70).

Despite the spontaneity of the story-telling, however, it is equally clear even from the simple survey conducted above that the author, when it comes to turning his memories into stories, and the the stories into a book, does exercise choice, and that his choices create a structure: "il lavoro di raccordo e di fusione è stato svolto su piano ed è posteriore" (p. 10);[22] within this structure, a manipulation of time, to create different temporal levels and perspectives, is amply evident.

Any work that is narrative in intention, execution and form, be it fictional or not, does just that. Not only in the sense that it reflects the different temporal perspectives that are already and necessarily present in the way we experience events, but also in the sense that it creates them. I would have no idea what the "story of my life" is, without the models and examples of structuring offered by narrative (including also, of course, oral narratives, cinema, journalism, and all forms of communication where a narrative element is involved). We make sense of our own experience, of our own life, by applying to it the interpretative models that we absorb from literature (in its broader meaning). We constantly turn our own lives into stories, and we learn how to do it from other stories, that we have read or heard. This is a fundamental function of narrative, and of literature. Primarily, it consists of a manipulation (not always conscious, and even less frequently intentionally mendacious) of time.

Lucio Lugnani[23] suggests that it is the duty of literature to "rendere possibile l'espressione di quell'esperienza specifica e tutta umana che è l'esperienza del tempo. La quale è per sua natura anacronica" (p. 106). Time (a temporal network of connections between past, present and future) does not exist as such in raw experience, it is generated *a posteriori*, by means of a story. This is what I call "chronopoiesis".

The purpose of SQU may very well be - at one of its many levels - factual, ethical, analytical (a reflection, an examination, in order to understand, explain, charge, absolve); but it is also, inevitably and fundamentally, chronopoietic. There is no contradiction in that; in order to understand, one also needs to turn facts, information and impressions into a story. It is instructive that when that happens in SQU, when meaning begins to emerge (as opposed to mere factual description), the verbal tense tends to revert to the narrative past, because it is only in retrospect that this story, or web of stories, can be made to make some sort of sense. To say that chronopoiesis is at work in SQU (as in any narrative work) does not demean it, or negate its value as testimony; it simply begins to explain why Levi would turn to literature, to say what he wanted and needed to say.

However, this is not all there is to say about time in SQU, and in order to make the next step I will focus on another chapter in the book: "Il canto di Ulisse". Both the chapter and the canto in question are too well known to require a detailed description, so I will focus straight away on what I regard as an enigma. This chapter is number 11 in the second edition of SQU, but was among the very first to be written (in February 1946).[24] Why should this chapter precede others, "per ordine di urgenza", and "a scopo di liberazione interiore" (Introduction to SQU, p. 9)?[25] In terms of content, it does not present a particularly significant topic or arrowing episode; it does not say anything important about life in Buna-Monowitz. Rather, it describes a rare moment of respite in the routine of the camp, when Levi, taking advantage of a corvée

[22] However Levi himself, in his 1985 intervew with Germaine Greer, debunks the notion of a spontaeous, unplanned germination of SQU: "[...] ho costruito una sorta di leggenda attorno a quest'opera, affermando che l'ho scritta senza alcuna pianificazione, di getto [...]. In realtà, la scrittura non è mai spontanea. Ora che ci penso, capisco che questo libro è colmo di letteratura [...]" (cited in *ibidem*, pp. 69-70).

[23] Lucio Lugnani, *Del tempo: racconto, discorso, esperienza*, Pisa: ETS, 2003.

[24] See Marco Belpoliti, *Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo*, cit., p. 27.

[25] What follows will explain why I fully subscribe to what François Rastier wrote in *Ulisse a Auschwitz: Primo Levi, il superstite* (Napoli: Liguori, 2009): "Così, 'Il canto di Ulisse' appare come la matrice genetica dell'opera" (p. 98).

to the kitchen, has a conversation with Jean, the Pikolo. The topic seems - given the context - rather frivolous: Jean would like to learn Italian and Primo offers to teach him.

After an introduction setting the scene and providing background information on Jean, the action starts with the two setting off on their chore. The conversation begins on a very personal tone; the momentary relief offered by the suspension of ordinary routine (and therefore a re-activation of normal temporality) immeditely triggers (as in the Ka-Be) a reactivation of human time, and personal memories flood in:

> Faceva tiepido fuori, il sole sollevava dalla terra grassa un leggero odore di vernice e di catrame che **mi ricordava una qualche spiaggia estiva della mia infanzia**. (p. 100)
>
> – Tu es fou de marcher si vite. **On a le temps, tu sais** –. [...] Rallentammo il passo. [...] **Parlavamo delle nostre case, di Strasburgo e di Torino, delle nostre letture, dei nostri studi. Delle nostre madri** [...]. (*ibidem*)

The discussion of "readings" and "studies" clearly prepares the terrain for the imminent arrival of Dante and Ulysses, but even before they are first mentioned a hidden reference to the *Divina Commedia* is planted in the text:

> [...] vorrebbe imparare l'italiano. Io sarei contento di insegnargli l'italiano: non possiamo farlo? Possiamo. Anche subito, una cosa vale l'altra, **l'importante è di non perdere tempo, di non sprecare quest'ora**. (ibidem)

"*Non perdere tempo*" is an indirect reference to Dante, not to *Inferno*, but to *Purgatorio*, the cantica (and the realm) where time re-acquires meaning and the souls (as well as Dante, who is himself part of the purgatorial process) are constantly reminded of the need not to waste time, to use it "*utilmente*": salvation begins with a reassessment of the value, of the point of time:

> lo più che padre mi dicea: «Figliuole,
> vienne oramai, ché 'l tempo che n'è imposto
> più utilmente compartir si vuole». (*Purg*. XXIII, 4-6)

In the *Lager*, whose infernal characteristics are evident also in the meaninglessness of its mechanical temporality, the incongruous reappearance of purposefullness indicates that de-humanization is not fully accomplished, and therefore that a (remote) possibility of salvation still exists. The entire chapter 11 of SQU is underscored by a keen awareness of the passing of time, and urgency to stop it, which as we have seen is not the case elsewhere. Suddenly Primo needs time, for a purpose that is not, for once, physical survival.

To teach Jean Italian, there are no textbooks available; Levi must rely on memory, and makes an extraordinary choice of teaching material:

> ... Il canto di Ulisse. Chissà come e perché mi è venuto in mente: ma **non abbiamo tempo di scegliere**, quest'ora già non è piú un'ora. Se Jean è intelligente capirà. Capirà: oggi mi sento da tanto. (pp. 100-1)

Curiously, he decides to use an ancient literary text for an extemporary translation lesson and, inexplicably to himself, the choice (but it is not a choice: "non abbiamo tempo di scegliere") falls on canto XXVI of *Inferno*. Not the most obvious candidate to teach someone contemporary Italian.

Undaunted, Primo begins his lesson, but there are problems; his knowledge of French is inadequate to the task: "Qui mi fermo e cerco di tradurre. Disastroso: povero Dante e povero francese!" (p. 101). Imperfect memory is another obstacle: "E dopo «Quando»? Il nulla. Un buco nella memoria" (*ibidem*). What Levi is trying to communicate must overcome a double hurdle: a linguistic barrier, and the incompleteness of his own memory.

The lesson continues, but time, meanwhile, is almost over: "Quante altre cose ci sarebbero da dire, e il sole è già alto, mezzogiorno è vicino. Ho fretta, una fretta furibonda." (p. 102); time suddenly becomes the most precious of commodities, even more precious than food: "Darei la zuppa di oggi [...]" (p. 102).

Why all the hurry? Surely Levi can continue to excavate his own memory to extract from it Dante's verses, even after the corvée is over. But the point is not remembering Dante's poetry *per se*, the real point is communicating a message to Pikolo, and for this there may well never be another opportunity; hence the urgency of the situation, and Primo's distress:

> Ecco, attento Pikolo, **apri gli orecchi e la mente, ho bisogno che tu capisca** [...]. *(ibidem)*

In the process of communicating, something unexpected happens to Primo himself:

> **Come se anch'io lo sentissi per la prima volta**: come uno squillo di tromba, come la voce di Dio. Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono. (*ibidem*)

So, it is not just a matter of remembering: it is in the act of translating, teaching, communicating,[26] in the moment of talking to someone else, and of doing so under these very difficult circumstances, that Levi himself seems to be on the verge of understanding what Dante's words truly mean, for Jean and for himself ("noi due"), for all the prisoners ("noi in specie"), and for everybody ("tutti gli uomini in travaglio"):

> [...] **forse**, nonostante la traduzione scialba e il commento pedestre e frettoloso, **ha ricevuto il messaggio**, ha sentito che lo riguarda, che riguarda tutti gli uomini in travaglio, e noi in specie; e che riguarda noi due, che osiamo ragionare di queste cose con le stanghe della zuppa sulle spalle. (p. 102)

The message is addressed to all human beings. But what is the message? And where does it come from? Not from Levi, nor from Dante (who receives it from the mouth of Ulysses himself). The message is related from past to future, and is not in the possession of the one who momentarily is entrusted with relaying it further.

It must be reiterated that this is not just a moment of cultural exchange and instruction; the very personal dimension is insistently underlined throughout the chapter, with a surge of personal memories brought about by literary memories, in the context of this particular situation:

> E le montagne, quando si vedono di lontano... le montagne... oh Pikolo, Pikolo, di' qualcosa, parla, non lasciarmi pensare alle mie montagne, che comparivano nel bruno della sera quando tornavo in treno da Milano a Torino! (p. 102)

Despite the failings of memory, in a frenzied crescendo, the revelation of a fundamental truth seems imminent:

> Mi sforzo di ricostruire per mezzo delle rime, chiudo gli occhi, mi mordo le dita: ma non serve, il resto è silenzio. Mi danzano per il capo altri versi: « ... la terra lagrimosa diede vento...» no, è un'altra cosa. **È tardi**, è tardi, siamo arrivati alla cucina, bisogna concludere:
> *Tre volte il fe' girar con tutte l'acque,*
> *Alla quarta levar la poppa in suso*
> *E la prora ire in giú, come altrui piacque...*

[26] For the crucial theme of literature and communication in Levi, a curious but relevant suggestion comes from Stefano Bartezzaghi, *Una telefonata con Primo Levi*, Torino: Einaudi, 2012, in particular pp. 45-9 ("Deve essere un telefono che funziona, il libro scritto").

Trattengo Pikolo, è assolutamente necessario e urgente che ascolti, che comprenda questo «come altrui piacque», prima che sia troppo tardi, domani lui o io **possiamo essere morti**, o non vederci mai piú, devo dirgli, spiegargli del Medioevo, del cosí umano e necessario e pure inaspettato anacronismo, e altro ancora, **qualcosa di gigantesco che io stesso ho visto ora soltanto, nell'intuizione di un attimo**, forse il perché del nostro destino, del nostro essere oggi qui... (pp. 102-3)

But there is no final manifestation of the message, of the meaning that Levi is so desperately trying to grasp and communicate, and the chapter ends with an anticlimax:

Si annunzia ufficialmente che oggi la zuppa è di cavoli e rape: – Choux et navets. – Káposzta és répak. *Infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi rinchiuso*. (p. 103)

It would therefore appear that the effort of communication that drives forward chapter 11 has failed: Primo is not able to express the truth that he himself has seen in a flash. In a similar manner words fail Dante at the end of his voyage; the last *canto* of *Paradiso* is pervaded by the same topos of ineffability, rethorically exploiting the same combination of shortcomings highlighted by Levi (failing of memory and inadequacy of expressive means):[27]

e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio (Par. XXXIII, 57)

All'alta fantasia qui mancò possa (*ib.*, 142)

But is it a real failure? Do we leave chapter 11 or *canto* XXXIII with a sense of profound disappointment?

Exotemporality

We undoubtedly should, if the whole point had been the revelation of a message that did not in fact materialize. But perhaps, rather than asking ourselves "what is the message?", we should wonder about the meaning of the sudden intrusion of high literature and cultural pathos, at this time, in this place; and of the recourse to ambiguity and obscurity, on the part of an adept of the *scrivere chiaro*.[28]

I will not engage with the considerable body of critical literature that has tried to answer the first of these questions ("what is Ulysses' message?"), this is not the object here.[29] I will instead focus on the meta-discoursive significance of the essential ambiguity at the heart of this crucial chapter. I would suggest that "Il canto di Ulisse", whilst retaining its literal and factual meaning as the account of a real event (as subsequently testified by Jean Samuel himself[30]), and together with allowing a variety of ethical, ideological and emotional interpretations, is at the same time also an allegory of what I call "literary exotemporality".

In addition to creating and manipulating time, the literary text also creates (necessarily relying on ineffability) another temporality that escapes all determinations, because it is projected onto an indefinite future. Jean the Pikolo, who certainly is a companion in the immediate present circumstances, is also the allegorical representation of any future reader. Every literary text is addressed, beyond the immediate and the present, and beyond the near and imaginable future, to that reader "*à venir*", who by definition will be missing the basic coordinates to understand the message. To write literature, therefore, means trying to convey to an unknown reader a message that cannot be made fully explicit, because its ultimate meaning is lost, or cannot be fully expressed; or perhaps precisely because its meaning is in

[27] The conclusion of *Vita nova*, too, presents us with the same topos of ineffability.
[28] Concerning the debate on Levi's notion of "*scrittura chiara*", see Bidussa, "Verbi", cit., pp. 505-6.
[29] I am not suggesting, however, that it is impossible to answer this question; my problem is rather: why did Primo Levi not answer it, in the text itself?
[30] See Primo Levi, "L'intellettuale ad Auschwitz", in *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986).

the hands unforeseeable and unfathomable last one, and not in the possession of the one who is trying in vain to articulate it (the author).

There is a message being transmitted from Ulysses (that is, from an almost immemorial past, from the classical and mythical world of pagan antiquity) to Dante and his Christian world, and then from Dante to Levi and his secular world, and then from Levi to us and any reader, represented in this instance by Pikolo. At each step of the process the letter of the text is re-contextualized according to new temporal (and other) circumstances (those of the author and those - different ones - of the receiver), but the ultimate meaning is never fully actualized.

From this point of view, chapter 11 harks back to to the title of the book and to the poem ("Shema") now appearing at its start, enacting the same invocation to future readers ("considerate", "meditate"). Here, too, the answer to the question ("is this a man / a woman?") is not fully articulated, or only in the negative (he who "lavora nel fango", is not a man; she who is "senza capelli e senza nome", is not a woman). The reasons why the aswer is not more precisely expressed could be discussed at lenght; perhaps because, once it is articulated, it would inevitably provide the starting point for the de-humanization of someone else, of men and women who do not satisfy stated criteria?

More generally, a literary text that answers all the questions asked by the present, within the coordinates set in the present, is highly unlikely to be able to speak to the future. Ineffability must therefore be seen as inherent to the structure of literature, and understood in the context of exotemporality: between past and future, between loss and absence, literary discourse relays incomplete messages, and thrives on the abyss of time.

This openness of the literary text to a temporality that is structurally external to it is a constitutive component of literature, and specific to it. Other discourses (like science, politics, philosophy) either don't have it, or have it to the extent that they themselves are "contaminated" by the literary mode, which is intimately connected to the way in which humans use language to put meaning into time.

Chronopoiesis and exotemporality in part go hand in hand, they are both manipulations of time; but in another sense they pull in opposite directions. Chronopoiesis organizes the temporal horizons we know so as to create meaning within a story; exotemporality ensures that whatever meaning the author or the current reader assign to the story is never the final one, because the story is still expecting another reader at another time, and therefore another meaning. Chronopoiesis is the linking of the text to specific (known or imaginable) contexts, past present and future; exotemporality is the appending of the text to another temporality that is still and structurally unknown, and in the absence of which the meaning of the text remains incomplete.

This is perhaps a different way of describing what one might call the universality of literature. Without this, it really cannot be understood why we still read Dante, or Levi; we read them because they matter to us; they matter to us, in the first instance, because they talk to us, directly, beyond the immediate meaning and limits of whatever it is that they are trying and able to articulate.

Literature is the medicine, as well as the poison. It opens up and exploits the chasm of time, it lends time the fullness of its power, which is power to wound (inevitability of death), before attempting to close that abyss and cure that wound through aesthetic means (beauty), but also through the ability to extend time towards an unlimited future; by creating additional time, we gain time and vanquish death.

In the same way that Ulysses is the symbol of the highest human dignity, but also of the greatest danger that reason in the unbridled pursuit of knowledge can incur, so literary writing is the highest revolt of life against death, but is it not also the triumph of death over life? Dead men and women talking to unborn ones, and making little, incomplete and in any

case provisional sense. Can there really be any salvation at all in literature? Or is it but a dream, the very denial of life?

SQU cannot be reduced to a textual example of the categories and dilemmas that I have summarily described. It remains also the expression and communication of a very specific and instructive human experience; that is an essential part of its purpose and meaning and we should never forget it. What I have suggested is that, in the attempt to convey the enormity of his own experience, Levi, too (like any writer) must use the resources and incur the paradoxes pertaining to the mode of communication that he has chosen; among these resources and paradoxes, the relationship with time and the way literary writing deals with it certainly occupy a very significant place.

There is some justified reluctance to treat SQU as any other literary text, as an "example" or "specimen" of literature; but there is also something very important in seeing that, for all its exceptionality, SQU is an attempt to communicate human experience in narrative form, and in that sense (despite the uniqueness of its content matter) it can only function, essentially, and especially in relation to time, in the same way as *La coscienza di Zeno, À la recherche du temps perdu, La cognizione del dolore*,[31] or indeed the *Divina commedia*.

What is the point of time, in literature? The answer could be that, generating a bridge from a vanishing (and at times unbearable) present to an unthinkable future, literature fosters a permanent dialogue between the dead and the living. The vast horizons, fractures and pitfalls of temporality are constitutive of the human condition, and literature is (still) among the most profoundly human answers that we have to the challenge, the power, the sword of time.

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[31] For a parallel between Levi and Gadda, see Fabio Moliterni, "Primo Levi e Carlo Emilio Gadda. Del sapere tragico", in Fabio Molireni, Roberto Ciccarelli e Alessandro Lattanzio, *Primo Levi. L'a-topia letteraria. Il pensiero narrativo. La scrittura e l'assurdo*, Napoli: Liguori, 2000, pp. 48-61.