



## Introduction: The Rhetoric of Survival

It may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question of whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident who by rights should have been killed may go on living. His mere survival calls for coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.

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At the far edge of this ongoing enterprise, the question of history and of ethics can be seen to reemerge, though in an entirely different manner.

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## Opening with Romanticism

Primo Levi's 1984 poem "The Survivor" ("Il superstite") opens with a repeated phrase:

### Il superstite

*Since then, at an uncertain hour*  
Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta,  
Quella pena ritorna,  
E se non trova chi lo ascolti  
Gli brucia in petto il cuore.

### The Survivor

*Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta*  
Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns:  
And till my ghastly tale is told,  
This heart within me burns.

Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni	Once more he sees his companions' faces
Lividi nella prima luce,	Livid in the first faint light,
Grigi di polvere di cemento,	Gray with cement dust,
Indistinti per nebbia,	Nebulous in the mist,
Tinti di morte nei sonni inquieti:	Tinged with death in their uneasy sleep.
A notte menano le mascelle	At night, under the heavy burden
Sotto la mora greve dei sogni	Of their dreams, their jaws move,
Masticando una rapa che non c'è.	Chewing a nonexistent turnip.
"Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa,	"Stand back, leave me alone, drowned men,
Andate. Non ho soppiantato nessuno,	Go away. I haven't dispossessed anyone,
Non ho usurpato il pane di nessuno,	Haven't usurped anyone's bread.
Nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno.	No one died in my place. No one.
Ritornate alla vostra nebbia.	Go back into your mist.
Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro	It's not my fault if I live and breathe,
E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni."	Eat, drink, sleep and put on clothes." <sup>3</sup>

When Levi's bilingual poem identifies a point after which everything will have changed, it repeats—and translates—a prior work: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1817). This verse is familiar to readers of Levi, for it also appears as the epigraph to *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). In "The Survivor," the verse—its first line in English and all four lines translated into Italian—also offers an opening. Yet more than an epigraph, which appears as a precursor to the work of which it nevertheless becomes a part, the quotation with which the poem opens is an unmarked part of it.

Levi's poem abruptly cuts off Coleridge's English stanza at its first line—even before the meter or the rhyme has been established, and just as it is about to state what has been happening "since then" and what an "uncertain hour brings." This interruption is also a repetition (albeit one that does not recover the measure of the poem it repeats), for the English verse is interrupted by its translation into Italian.<sup>4</sup> The translation translates the experience of a past time ("then") that the Ancient Mariner can neither remember nor forget, and that orients and measures the future. Indeed, translation may be one way of describing this carrying over of the past into a new context. A translation is what neither remembers nor forgets; it is what Walter Benjamin calls *Überleben*, or survival.<sup>5</sup>

If Levi's poem begins first in Coleridge's English, and then in a "literal" translation of Coleridge's poem into Italian that at once cuts it off

and repeats it, it also describes an experience of interruptive repetition: “Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni . . . [Once more he sees his companions’ faces . . .].” The poem’s formal opening (in Coleridge’s poetry, both English and Italian) gives way to a narrative that is both new (not drawn from Coleridge) and a continuation of Coleridge’s poem (insofar as its third-person subject is indistinguishable from Coleridge’s Mariner). In this way, the poem not only enacts a repetition in translation or repeats Coleridge’s fictional testimony; it also accounts for an experience of repetition—seeing again—that it also performs. Levi’s poem, like Coleridge’s, accounts for a spontaneous interruption, yet unlike the Mariner (whose burning heart leads him to accost an unwilling listener), the survivor in Levi’s poem is not driven by a compulsion to speak. Rather, he is the unwilling object of a (mute) address. In “The Survivor,” there is no tale told, except for the tale, absent from the “Rime,” of the addressee.

“The Survivor” describes and enacts within the text the return of an unsettled past, a return that accompanies survival. It recounts the disruption of the present by an experience that has not ended, by faces that illustrate the “indistinction” of death and life, an indistinction that is both cause and effect of their agonizing return. This agony, framed as guiltless guilt (“Nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno [No one died in my place. No one]”) haunts and accuses the survivor.<sup>6</sup> It steals away the present for a past that—because “no one” died as millions were murdered and deprived of a proper death and burial, because *he* did not die—will not have come to an end, a past that endures and persecutes the one who has lived beyond its apparent end. In the poem, the painful, uncontrollable interruption by memory is inseparable from the return of a romantic work and is voiced through a reiteration of its lyric figures. If this implies that the return of romanticism (and perhaps lyric poetry generally) in post-Holocaust writing is tied to guilt, the connection is not accidental.

The recurrence and translation of Coleridge’s lyrical ballad within Levi’s post-Holocaust poem, and the implicit suggestion in this poem that the experience of the survivor of Auschwitz is continuous with and repeats the experience of a fictional, supernatural character, seems to mock Theodor Adorno’s early claim that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>7</sup> Levi’s poem undertakes a guilty act by writing an avowedly lyrical poem, one so intimately tied to a romantic poem that it includes it.

The poem—as a guilty act—stands in for the causeless yet interminable guilt that the survivor suffers merely for having survived.

Levi was aware of Adorno's early disavowal of poetry—and disagreed with it. In her biography *Primo Levi: The Tragedy of an Optimist*, Myriam Anissimov quotes Levi:

I am a man who has little belief in poetry, and yet goes in for it. There is certainly a reason. . . . I have the impression that poetry in general has become a vector of human contact. Adorno wrote that after Auschwitz there could be no more poetry, but my hope has been just the opposite. In 1945–46, it seemed to me that poetry would be better suited than prose to explain what was weighing inside me. When I say poetry, I have nothing lyrical in mind. In those days I would have reformulated Adorno's remark like this: After Auschwitz, there can be no more poetry, except about Auschwitz.<sup>8</sup>

Levi's response to Adorno's injunction—which was part of a 1984 interview on the occasion of the appearance of his book of poems entitled (again after Coleridge) *Ad ora incerta* (At an Uncertain Hour) and in which "The Survivor" was published—is instructive, not least for its clear debt to Paul Celan's account of poetry as "intending another."<sup>9</sup> Here Levi reflects upon poetry's immediacy and his belief that poetry, rather than narrative, would be "suited" to explanation, if not to description. Thus, it was not poetry's impossibility but its necessity that Levi seems to have felt. What had come to an end was "lyrical" (or idyllic) poetry—that is, poetry about anything other than Auschwitz.<sup>10</sup>

Levi's poem "The Survivor" may seem to satisfy the requirement that poetry after Auschwitz must be *about* Auschwitz, but its opening citation—and ultimate translation—of a poem that knows nothing of Auschwitz is unsettling. Opening as if it were a continuation of Coleridge's poem, "The Survivor" literally emerges as a poem from "before Auschwitz." Another way of understanding that there can be no poetry *after* Auschwitz, is to hear this impossibility of poetry, as Maurice Blanchot hears it, to imply that from now on all poems will be from *before* Auschwitz.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it carries a poem from "before Auschwitz" to Auschwitz, at once interrupting it (cutting it off, translating it) and leaving it uncomfortably uninterrupted. Levi's poem can be understood, on the one hand, to incorporate the performance of a guilt for which the poem accounts, correlating the guilt of survival with the guilt of writing poetry (even poetry about

Auschwitz); and on the other hand, it can be understood to dramatize the claim that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz in an altogether different sense: poetry belongs to another time, for “from now on” poetry will be from before Auschwitz. Levi’s lyric turn reflects two critical responses to the question of literature’s possibility—or impossibility—after Auschwitz.

I know of no more explicit instance of a post-Holocaust testimony repeating a romantic poem than Levi’s poem. That the poem is called “The Survivor” and aligns the familiar fictional mariner of a pseudohistorical work with the historical survivor of the camps implies that a post-Holocaust work can emerge in and through a romantic one, and yet it also shows—as I have been explaining—the risks and questions that attend this emergence. A brief summary of Coleridge’s best-known poem illustrates why Levi might have voiced his survival of Auschwitz in terms of the Mariner’s compulsion to tell, but it also shows that in citing Coleridge’s poem, Levi threatens to undermine the specificity and authenticity of his testimony.

## Returns

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the Mariner tells the story of how he shot an albatross while at sea, an event that unforeseeably brought about the destruction of his shipmates and his own apparent, but uncertain, death. Indeed, in Coleridge’s poem one is never sure of whether the speaker—who in many ways exemplifies the figure of the poet as a man speaking to men and whose poetry is a spontaneous overflow of feeling—is alive or dead.<sup>12</sup> Upon returning to life in the world, the need to tell the story of this destruction overwhelms him. The poem opens with the Mariner accosting a man about to attend a wedding and ends when his tale is told and its addressee—who by that point has missed the wedding ceremony that corresponds to the duration of the tale—is left “like one who hath been stunned,” one who, we are assured, will wake the next day “a sadder and a wiser man.” In some sense, then, the position of the survivor in Levi’s poem is not that of the Mariner, whose ballad it appropriates as its own, but that of the Wedding Guest accosted by a ghost.

While the incorporation of any lyric poem might trouble a post-Holocaust poem, especially one written by a survivor aware of and engaged in contemporary discussions of poetry after Auschwitz, the fabrication of

history and authenticity that is so much a part of this poem is perhaps more troubling than its lyricism. While Levi's lines seem to pick up seamlessly from the lines of the ballad that it translates, the ballad is not only explicitly lyrical—the outcome of an invention in lyric poetry—but it is also a historical fiction. Coleridge's ballad deploys conventional signs of age, authenticity, and history in order to imitate a relic. Like other ballads popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Coleridge's poem gives the impression of being a weathered artifact whose tale of untimelessness still speaks to the living despite being palpably out of date. Even upon its initial publication, the poem appeared an archaic work, not a forgery but a fake bearing a falsified patina. First published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), the earliest version of the poem employed archaic spellings as one of its atmosphere-creating techniques. In later editions of the poem, those upon which Levi relies, Coleridge modernized the spellings, rewrote large sections of the poem, included a Latin motto, and "glossed" the ballad, emphasizing rather than resolving the obscurity contemporary readers already had noted. These revisions of the "Rime" appear to be the work of an editor rather than an author, so that even this modernization continues to tie the poem to its initial suggestion that history (and authorship) can be simulated. Coleridge's ballad is an example of what Susan Stewart has called a "distressed genre," works that create the illusion of being artifacts. Yet their "artifactual nature" is a guise—the performance of the very sort of "self-referentiality" that one assumes is *truly* operative in Levi's poem, even if the "I" in that poem only ever appears in quotation marks.<sup>13</sup>

Works in distressed genres, Stewart seems to imply, are not contingent: they do not refer to historical events that could be located outside the text and account for its production; nor are they properly "self-referential"—that is, texts that designate their own systems, limits, figures, and conventions. That said, Stewart gives a historical explanation for the emergence of false histories in the eighteenth century. She links the emergence of this particular form to a "deepening historical awareness of the classical world . . . supplemented by a rising archaeology that demonstrated both the reappearance and the disappearance of the past." She goes on to explain that "the desire to produce speaking objects, objects both in and out of time, seems an inevitable outgrowth of this development."<sup>14</sup> In her analysis, the false relic emerges as a means of bearing the absent past,

giving what cannot speak—what may not even have survived to speak—a voice through contemporary literature. When Stewart describes works motivated by “the desire to produce speaking objects,” she describes the trope of prosopopoeia, the act of giving face and voice to an inanimate object or an imaginary, absent, or dead person, which Paul de Man has called the “master trope of the lyric” and J. Hillis Miller has shown to be constitutive of narrative.<sup>15</sup> If, as Stewart’s theory suggests, the fictional authenticity of the “Rime” is tied to a desire to make a lost object speak in its own voice, it also reveals that the very device that would seem to threaten Levi’s authority as a survivor is intimately a part of it: the “true witnesses,” those who, as he describes them in the poem, were never able to give testimony and who nevertheless remain to persecute the survivor, are the lost objects in whose place Levi speaks.<sup>16</sup>

But the analogy is also more complex, and thus the poem once again might be understood as the source of the guilt it describes. For rather than care for and resuscitate the lost voices—rather than remember and ventriloquize them—Levi uses his poem to reject them. Again, in the same manner that the Wedding Guest in Coleridge’s “Rime” wishes to free himself from the Mariner, Levi uses the poem to dismiss the dead who live on. But Levi also associates the survivor with the Mariner, whose self-referential verse leads seamlessly to a description of the survivor’s experience. In the poem’s sixth line, Levi turns from translating the Mariner’s implicitly first-person speech (in line 2, “Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta . . .”) to an explicitly third-person account (“Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni”).<sup>17</sup> As I already pointed out, the first line to break with Coleridge’s ballad opens in a repetition: “Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni” (“Once more he sees his companions’ faces” [my emphasis]). It suggests the continuation of the repetition of the traumatic haunting cited in the first lines but also recalls the explicatory glosses Coleridge appended to later versions of the poem, glosses that appear merely to summarize the events described in the main body of the poem.<sup>18</sup> It is not only the return of romantic agony, but also the return of the faces of the “drowned men” of the camp.

The first part of the following sentence (ll. 6–10) mobilizes the central terms of Levi’s ethical vocabulary: “grigi [gray]” and “indistinti [indistinct].”<sup>19</sup> The faces (*visi*) return to visibility: they are livid, gray, death-hued and “indistinct,” neither living nor dead. But haunting the living

as they refuse to remain dead, they are at once the specters of Coleridge's romantic ballad (including the Mariner) and of Levi's post-Holocaust poem (including the survivor). Their indistinction is not just personal, but textual. The poem renders these companions the ghostly corpses that reboard the ship in Coleridge's ballad ("They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose/ Nor spake, nor moved their eyes; / It had been strange, even in a dream, / To have seen those dead men rise" [ll. 331–35]), just as it describes the return of Levi's "companions" murdered in Auschwitz.<sup>20</sup>

Earlier I suggested that Coleridge's fictioning of history might be the symptom of a more insistent desire to give life and voice to a silent history, that it may indicate the emergence of a rhetoric of survival, even as it appears to threaten Levi's authority. More specifically, I suggested that inseparable from the threat of inauthenticity is the prosopopoeia through which Coleridge gives life and voice to the Mariner-poet. Levi's "The Survivor," which finds its opening—its voice—in Coleridge's prosopopoeic poem, dramatizes the relation between prosopopoeia and survival; it shows how prosopopoeia might not only be a trope through which the dead are given voice and made to speak, but it might be one offered in a desperate attempt to take voices away—a silencing that might interrupt the ventriloquism of the dead that Levi describes or, as is the case in a text to which I later will turn, a measure that might preclude the choking on too many words that Robert Antelme describes in *The Human Race* (*L'Espèce humaine*). This wish—which might seem perverse, seeming to go against the desire to bear witness to which so many survivors' testimonies, including Levi's and Antelme's own testimonies, attest—suggests that prosopopoeia is no less essential to testimonial writing than it is to the lyric, but that it is prosopopoeia's interruption rather than its fictional restoration that renders it essential. Whether or not this interruption is sustainable—whether, as we will see in Levi's case, prosopopoeia can be a means through which one averts persecution by the too animate dead, or whether, as I think the romantic poets discovered, prosopopoeia sustains an interminable life beyond life—is this book's concern. In other words, it is not the dead that are at issue in this discussion of prosopopoeia, but rather the living, those who live on.

The men that the survivor describes are "gente sommersa" (the drowned, the *Muselmänner*, or "true" witnesses). The poem leaves initially uncertain whether the survivor sees the faces of people that he knew and



whom he watched die in Auschwitz, or whether they are the faces of people about whom he has read—the living-dead in Coleridge’s “Rime.” In other words, it is not clear whether he is remembering and reliving his experience or summarizing the Ancient Mariner’s experience (and that of the Wedding Guest, audience of the Mariner’s tale). And it is not even clear whether this difference is important:

Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni	Once more he sees his companions’ faces
Lividi nella prima luce,	Livid in the first faint light,
Grigi di polvere di cemento,	Gray with cement dust,
Indistinti per nebbia,	Nebulous in the mist,
Tinti di morte nei sonni inquieti:	Tinged with death in their uneasy sleep.

The initial confusion is resolved when Levi describes the night in which these living-dead deportees dream only of a turnip and eat only in their dreams:

A notte menano le mascelle	At night, under the heavy burden
Sotto la mora greve dei sogni	Of their dreams, their jaws move,
Masticando una rapa che non c’è.	Chewing a nonexistent turnip.

The poem describes the urgent hunger of the camps, which Blanchot, reading Antelme, understands to reveal the human as nothing but need that endures: “one who has need of nothing other than need in order to maintain the human relation in its primacy.”<sup>21</sup> This insistent, impersonal “attachment to life,” the appearance of a mouth that moves but does not speak and chews nothing at all, signifies that “man is the indestructible that can be destroyed,” and that even in this state of extraordinary privation, even in apparent death, the face remains an address.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, as soon as these faces emerge as belonging to the living rather than the dead, as soon as the mouth that moves even in sleep indicates that the dead remain alive (both a truth of Auschwitz and a truth of the survivor’s life after Auschwitz), the survivor turns from a “he” into a speaking “I”:

“Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa,	“Stand back, leave me alone, drowned men,
Andate. Non ho soppiantato nessuno,	Go away. I haven’t dispossessed anyone,
Non ho usurpato il pane di nessuno,	Haven’t usurped anyone’s bread.
Nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno.	No one died in my place. No one.
Ritornate alla vostra nebbia.	Go back into your mist.