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If wood were an element: Primo Levi and the material world

Abstract

The precarious survival of a single shed from the Jewish slave labour quarters of the industrial complex that was Auschwitz-Monowitz offers an opportunity to reflect upon aspects of the materiality of the signs of the Holocaust. This shed is very likely one that Primo Levi knew and its survival incites us to interrogate its materiality and significance by engaging with Levi's own writings on these matters. I begin by explicating the ways the shed might function as an 'encountered sign,' before moving to consider its materiality both as a product of modernist genocide and as witness to the relations between precarity and vitality. Finally, I turn to the texts written upon the shed itself and turn to the performative function of Nazi language.

Keywords

Holocaust, icon, index, materiality, performativity, Primo Levi



Fig. 1 - The interior of the shed, December 2012 (Photograph by kind permission of Carlos Reijnen)

It is December 2012, we are near the town of Monowice in Poland. Alongside a small farmhouse, there is a hay-shed. The shed is in two parts with two doorways communicating and above these, "Eingang" and "Ausgang". In the further part of the shed, there is more text, in Gothic font, in German. Along a crossbeam

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running across the second room, a text about water and plague, and on the far wall “So wirst Du rein!” (see fig. 1). We are less than a kilometer from the site of the IG-Farben synthetic rubber factory that, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, was the Buna-Werke, part of the Monowitz complex of factories, Auschwitz III, a component part of the Auschwitz system of extermination and slave-labour camps. It is very likely that this particular shed was scavenged from the Monowitz camp after the German retreat of January 1945 (Citroen and Starzyńska 2011). This is probably one of the “sixty wooden huts, which are called Blocks, ten of which are in construction”, that confronted Primo Levi when, in late February 1944, he was thrown into Auschwitz-Monowitz (Levi 1987a [1958]: 36). Levi describes the buildings in which the inmates of the camp (*Häftlinger*, prisoners), were stored:

The ordinary living Blocks are divided into two parts. In one *Tagesraum* lives the head of the hut with his friends. [...] [O]n the walls, great sayings, proverbs and rhymes in praise of order, discipline and hygiene [...]. The other part is the dormitory: there are only one hundred and forty-eight bunks on three levels, fitted close to each other like the cells of a beehive, and divided by three corridors so as to utilize without wastage all the space up to the roof. Here all the ordinary *Häftlinge* live, about two hundred to two hundred and fifty per hut. Consequently there are two men in most of the bunks [...]. (Levi 1987a [1958]: 38)

At the time of my visit, this particular shed was under threat, too decrepit to be useful to its current owner (STIWOT 2012). Why, and how, should people care for this shed? What is the significance of it the shed, its importance and its meaning?

1. Material traces

To ask about the significance of the shed requires thinking of it as a sign of the murder of millions of Jewish people in Europe in the period of Nazi tyranny. Recalling Peirce’s classification of signs, there is merit in reflecting upon the tension between icon and index. For Peirce (1991 [1885]:183), with the icon there must be “a relation of reason between the sign and the thing signified”, whereas for the index there would be “a direct physical connection between sign and signified”. It is perhaps easiest to recognize the hut as an index, a clear trace of the murderous savagery that once assembled so many huts, and fences, and watchtowers in this region. In this respect, it might appear that the hut is rather like the photograph, as described by Hirsch (2001: 14): “the index par excellence, pointing to the presence, the having-been-there, of the past”. Considered in this way, the hut is important as physical evidence, something that has a clear provenance and that, as far as we know at present, may be the only such structure surviving from the Jewish slave quarters at Monowitz. But the hut is also iconic, and it functions as something of a synecdoche. Many aspects of this hut confront us with more general features of the

Holocaust. In this sense the hut is important because it provokes reflection upon the ideology, logistics, and networks of responsibility that produced the genocide.

This provocation relies upon two sets of relations. The first concern the materiality of the sign that the shed could be. Alphen (1997:10) writes of “Holocaust effects” working in a manner somewhat like an affect: “The Holocaust is not made present by means of a constative speech act—that is, as a mediated account, as the truthful or untruthful content of the speech act; rather it is made present as a performative effect”. This performative effect is rather like what Jill Bennett refers to as “empathic vision”, incited by our knowing that we live in a post-Holocaust world and this recognition will “compel us to deal with Holocaust memory, and to account for the ways in which the Holocaust has touched us either directly or indirectly” (Bennett 2005: 6). The shed is not a work of art that secretes in some fashion the Holocaust relations that shaped its making, but rather it is akin to something Bennett takes from Deleuze’s work on Proust; that is, it has the character of an “encountered sign” (*ibid.*, 7). The provocation is unbidden. Deleuze (2000 [1964]: 16) suggests that: “Truth depends upon an encounter with something that forces us to think and to seek the truth”. The truth that we seek is the meaning of the encountered sign: “the sign [...] constitutes the object of an encounter and works this violence upon on us” (*ibid.*).

But the shed is not only a material object, it is one that is already hanging in a web of contested interpretations. Signs, as Petrilli (1986) points out, do not exist outside the interpretative process that gives them meaning. This consideration must somewhat close the gap between index and icon (Doane 2000). For this reason, there must also always be an oscillation between “affective and intellectual operations” (Bennett 2005:13). The shed, unbidden, might urge us to think about the lives, cruel and brief, that were conducted within and around its walls. Its authenticity and the belief that the shed was intended at one time to serve the murderous purpose of the genocidal Nazi regime may flood our mind with emotional responses, sufflated by our involuntary empathy with victims, collaborators and perpetrators. Yet, coincident with the affective moment, we might also be tumbled into the intellectual challenge of reflecting upon how a structure like this came to serve the purposes it did. This responsibility is both the more urgent and the more facile given the association of this shed with Primo Levi, for there is no surer guide in explicating the shed as trace, as index of the Holocaust. Finally, then, the significance of this shed is that it incites an engagement with the Holocaust testimony of Primo Levi, and in a manner that few material traces still can. In this essay, then, I propose to respond to the challenge of explicating this hut both as icon and as index, both in the ways it is representative of the ideological and logistical structures of the genocide, and in the ways its production in this form for this place is itself indicative

of the procedures and practices of the Nazi murder machine. I begin by reflecting upon the question of uniqueness. I have already suggested that few of the huts from the Jewish slave labour quarters at Monowitz yet survive, but in many respect the important thing about this hut was precisely its standardized form and the repetition and industrialization of murder it implied. The modernity of the Holocaust is a contentious theme and by interjecting Levi's own reflections upon the social order produced among the inmates by the mass killing, we can perhaps resist the seduction of what has been termed the holocaust sublime (Braiterman 2000); that is the numbing effect upon rational discrimination produced by the enormity of the slaughter. I turn, then, from these matters of icon and index to matters relating to the materiality of the shed. I note the unlikely survival of this wooden structure after years of weathering and moments of assembly and disassembly. Again, I interject Levi's own reflections upon the relations between materiality and memory and find in the peculiar character of wood an ironic manner in which the shed serves as a metaphor for the tragic human condition as understood by Levi. Finally, I take up the matter of the texts within and upon the shed. This is again a topic that obsessed Levi and the shed serves here too as a powerful foil for Levi's own writings. Levi tracked the deformation of language within the brutal Nazi social order, and the painful elaboration of a new camp language out of the Babel of its multinational occupants. The particular peremptory form of Nazi language as command produced a sort of performativity for language. The scream of the order not only felt like a blow, not only usually presaged a blow, but it was intended to fail so that blows were the more readily justified. In this context the German language Old Testament texts rendered as sanitary advice within the shed poses particular questions of irony and performativity. Certainly the advice to keep clean could not have been sincerely intended for the edification of the inmates. Rather, it was part of the way language was used to interpellate the camp officials as civilized guardians dragged down by the lower humanity over which they were forced to maintain order. In this respect, this shed is a very precious remnant of a world of words, words that projected Jewish people as vermin, no more than animal life.

2. Form: The one and the many

Reflecting upon the particular form of this shed raises a number of issues about the relations between the one and the many: about the industrialization of the killing of Jewish people, about the dehumanizing reduction of individuals to identical elements within a mass, and about memorial strategies that treat the distinctions within collectivities. Together, this focus upon mass production, seriality and particularities might help address the problem of the "holocaust sublime" (Braiterman 2000).

At Monowitz, Levi was first allocated to Block 30 and he described the washroom that was an adjacent block:

The washroom is far from attractive. It is badly lighted, full of draughts, with the brick floor covered by a layer of mud. The water is not drinkable; it has a revolting smell and often fails for many ours. The walls are covered by curious didactic frescoes: for example, there is the good Häftling, portrayed stripped to the waist, about to diligently soap his sheared and rosy cranium, and the bad Häftling, with a strong Semitic nose and a greenish colour, bundled up in his ostentatiously stained clothes with a beret on his head, who cautiously dips a finger into the water of the washbasin. Under the first is written: *'So bist du rein'* (like this you are clean), and under the second: *'So gehst du ein'* (like this you come to a bad end); and lower down, in doubtful French but in Gothic script: *"La propreté, c'est la santé."*

On the opposite wall an enormous white, red and black louse encamps, with the writing: *"Ein Laus, dein Tod"* (a louse is your death), and the inspired distich:

*Nach dem Abort, vor dem Essen
Hände waschen, nicht vergessen.*

(After the latrine, before eating, wash your hands, do not forget). (Levi 1987a [1958]: 45-6)

The shed I visited had similar slogans, including a space beneath "So wirst Du rein!" that may indicate that there once had been a drawing there (Fig. 2). Perhaps this shed too was once such a washroom. At Monowitz, there was one washhouse for each set of five dormitory huts, laid out as a grid of serial repetition.



Fig. 2 - Inside the hut, 2012 (Photograph by kind permission of Hans Citroen)

Reflecting upon seriality and repetition risks what Zachary Braiterman (2000) identifies as a sublime disposition towards the enormity of the mass slaughter. There is a certain way of allowing the scale of the killing

to invite the notion of a limit, such that human understanding shivers into stiff incapacity at the thought of the replication of death upon death, murder without end. As Braiterman suggests, we would, then, be very close to Immanuel Kant's notion of the mathematical sublime, with all its dubious pleasure. For Kant (1892 [1790]: 106), the sublime begins when we apprehend something as being "great beyond all comparison". In accepting that faced with certain phenomena, their scale induces "a feeling of the inadequacy of [the] Imagination for presenting the Ideas of a whole, wherein the Imagination reaches its maximum, and in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced" (Kant 1892 [1790]: 112). We can read Kant as warning us that there can be a sort of self-satisfaction in imagining that we are thinking beyond the limit, after the failure of understanding.

There are relations between the shed as an industrial form and the mass killing that it was deployed to serve. There is a seriality not only to the form of the camp but also to the way the inmates were imagined by their murderers and even were at times able to think of themselves. Not the least among Levi's many achievements was to have brought back from this maelstrom an understanding of the diversity of human deformations that allowed and were produced by this perverse human ecology.

2.1. *Mass Production*

Modern war has ever energized design and innovation, mobilizing social and economic forces in depth in what is understood as a struggle for survival. For many commentators this mass mobilization gives war a central part in the creation of the modern state as demotic rather than monarchic. Clausewitz (1878 [1832]: 54) noted this relationship when he wrote of the army mobilized by Napoléon in 1793: "[S]uch a force as no one had any conception of [...]. War had suddenly become again an affair of the people, [...] every one of whom regarded himself as a citizen of the State". By imagining a people as no more than a nation-state, the citizen-army joined total war: "Henceforward, the means available—the efforts which might be called forth—had no longer any definite limits; the energy with which the war itself might be conducted had no longer any counterpoise, and consequently the danger for the adversary had risen to the extreme" (*ibid.*). The modular units at Auschwitz are testimony to a different sort of total war, excited by racial hatred, and directed at categories of person condemned as subhuman, *Untermensch*. When the large camp of Auschwitz II (Birkenau) was under construction, the original plan had been, for want of timber nearby, to cannibalize bricks from the houses of displaced Jewish and other Polish people in the region. Yet, without proper tools this proved slow and dangerous, killing many of the Soviet prisoners of war allocated to the task. During October 1941, 1,255 Soviet prisoners had died and from Berlin the officials of the SS-

Main Office Household and Buildings allocated instead to Birkenau some 253 prefabricated huts that had been designed as horse stables for the army (Pelt and Dwork 1996: 272). These were the Pferdestall Type 260/9, nine bays, eight with six stalls and one with three; thus designed for fifty-one horses. The adaptation of a stable for use in extermination – and slave-camps says something about the imagination that could treat the storage of people in such a fashion, so far below a horse, for the human packing ratio for the stable was normally about 400. This genocide was designed, a perverse modernity (Bauman 1986). The process was planned, it involved many accomplices, and it was knowable to many more. These huts, sixty RAD/RL/IV at Auschwitz III, perhaps two-hundred-and-fifty stables at Auschwitz II (Birkenau), and probably another five hundred modular sheds of various kinds elsewhere in the Auschwitz, were a cruel application of the scale economies of mass production. This was industrialized murder: “inverted factories: trains laden with human beings went in each day, and all that came out was the ashes of their bodies, their hair, the gold of their teeth” (Levi 2005d [1974]: 33).

There were many huts like this one. They were modular in form and were distributed as kits to be assembled on site, disassembled and reassembled elsewhere as needed. The standard form produced economies in the production of the wooden planks as well as efficiencies in distribution. This particular shed was known at the RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke Type RL IV and was originally developed for the Reich Labour Service in 1933 so that they might counter unemployment and deploy young German men for the healthy work of digging drainage canals in the countryside². This shed was produced in modular form for barracks, 8.14m wide and in multiples of 6.60m in length. This particular shed descends from an earlier form that was used for stabling horses at the field hospitals that followed the German army’s frontline. This particular hut was thrown up to house the Jewish slaves who were to work constructing the Buna-Werke, a factory for producing synthetic rubber. To provide the kit for this hut, earlier requisitions had to be made for felling trees and preparing timber. All of this required securing space on trains for the transport of timber, and then of kit. Under the wartime conditions, and with the deteriorating military situation, the German planned economy continued to allocate very significant material support both to the slave-labour system and to the systematic killing of Jewish people. Forced labour was integral to the Nazi economy and probably eleven million people, primarily from Eastern Europe, but also including prisoners of war from many places, were impressed into the Nazi economy at the end of the war, and Jewish people from the camps were included in this workforce although in their case with the understanding that they would be worked until completely exhausted, and then they would be killed (Tooze 2006).

² Personal communication, email, 25 February, by R. J. VAN PELT.

This hut is emblematic of that murderous economy. The Nazis planned for a “symbiotic relationship” between the IG-Farben synthetic rubber works at Monowitz and the concentration camp system that included Auschwitz-Birkenau (Pelt and Dwork 1996: 208). Indeed, the camp as a source of labour for constructing the industrial plant, allowed resources allocated to German industry to be appropriated by the SS for the purpose of building the extermination camp, with the promise that the doomed Jewish people would have their energies extracted for the war effort. The hut highlights some of the relations between total war and mass production, a genocidal-industrial complex. To have one original cell from that matrix, impels us to think again about the relations between the one and the many.

2.2. Seriality

This hut was a member of a series and this replication was echoed in the treatment of the Jewish inmates as mere pieces. The serial form is integral to the production of bare life and highlights the dark side of modernity that Bauman, Adorno, and Horkheimer identified after Auschwitz (Eyerman 2013). In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre writes about seriality, a form of relation between the one and the many that produces as the perceived form of the many an assemblage of monads. Under conditions of seriality, a bureaucracy interpellates a functionary as operating on the assumption that those under its control are inert, or at least passive:

[O]ther-directedness is based on the passivity of the masses; but this passivity conditions their own passivity: first, because for those who are other-directed they themselves become the embodiment of the standard lists, solidified exigencies, etc., and, in the unity of a single petrification, the representatives of the law—that is to say, of sovereignty—as an individual in so far as this produces itself as a universal power. (Sartre 2004 [1960]: 655)

As with “bare life”, “seriality” is the form in which the perpetrator views the collectivity of victims, or in the more general terms of Sartre’s analysis that in which the bureaucrat views its subjects. This submersion of the individual in the mass can dehumanize. Primo Levi had his first encounter with the process when, together with his fellow imprisoned Jewish Italians, he was summoned to their last muster before leaving Italy for Auschwitz. It was his first contact with the SS manner:

With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked “*Wieviel Stück?*” The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty ‘pieces’ and that all was in order. (Levi 1987a [1958]: 22)

No longer a man, Levi was now simply a piece, and worse was to



follow. Hannah Arendt (1958 [1951]: 447) wrote that the “insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses”. She described three stages in the production of living corpses, or what Giorgio Agamben (1998 [1995]) has called “bare life”. The victim first loses their rights, then with survival seeming improbable they lose the sense of solidarity with others that is the basis of moral conduct, and, finally, they lose their own sense of their unique individuality under the impress of “monstrous conditions” and the free play of a sadistic “resentment”, “calculated to destroy human dignity” (*ibid.*: 447, 448). Certainly, something like this process happens in the perpetrators’ perception of the victims, perhaps, as Levi put it, in order to “safeguard the mental health of the military” (2005i [1985]: 88). While Levi was made to feel like “cheap merchandise” being packed into a goods wagon for the journey from Italy to Poland, and while he recalls looking upon his fellow travelers as “poor human dust” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 23), the “useless cruelty” of the transport, the lack of sanitary facilities or drinking water, “a deliberate creation of pain that was an end in itself” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 109), was important for the effect it had upon the attitudes of the perpetrators. Levi described the “trauma” of “evacuating in public”, once even at:

[A] stop in an Austrian railroad station. The SS escort did not hide their amusement at the sight of men and women squatting wherever they could, on the platforms and in the middle of the tracks, and the German passengers openly expressed their disgust. (Levi 1989b [1986]: 111)

Of another occasion Levi reported that the SS took pictures of Jewish transportees who were squatting alongside the train to defecate in the snow (Angier 2002: 285). Levi spoke of:

The useless cruelty of violated modesty [that] conditioned the existence of all Lagers. The women of Birkenau tell how once having acquired a precious receptacle (a large bowl of enameled metal), they had to employ it for three distinct uses: to draw their soup; to evacuate into at night, when access to the latrines was forbidden; and to wash themselves when there was water at the troughs. (Levi 1989b [1986]: 112)

The denigration of Jewish people as beasts, less than horses, and as things, counting only to be counted, was an important part of the Nazis’ sentimental education, preparing them as perpetrators for the work of disposing of living corpses. For this reason, Levi speculated, members of the Hitler Youth were brought to the camp at Monowitz to look through the fence at Jewish people in the filthy condition that young Nazis should comprehend as the Jewish state of nature (Levi 2005f [1979]: 119). Wolfgang Sofsky draws upon Sartre’s work to explain the relations between density, equality and seriality for the people populating



the camps. In broad terms, Sofsky understands the camps as producing a war of each against all where there is no room for the individuality that might ground resistance:

Equality is negative. The greater the mass, the smaller the space left for the individual. In the coerced mass, each human atom is one too many. One person steals the other's place, the other's air to breathe. Density is transformed into the superfluity of each individual. (Sofsky 1997 [1993]: 154)

This claustrophobic assault on individuality, Levi wrote of as the “compressed identity” (Levi 1987d [1981]: 10) inflicted upon him in Auschwitz. He recognized the Social-Darwinian order of the camp, feeling that “[a]round us, everything is hostile” and “[a]ll are enemies or rivals” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 48), he even described his fellow inmates as “a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 23). This seriality may even have been the dominant form of social relation among the inmates. Seriality is rather like Karl Marx's (1979 [1852]: 187) despairing description of the lack of solidarity among contemporary French peasants: “the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes”. The seriality of the grid, of the barracks, and, in the mind of the perpetrators, of the Jewish inmates, is a technology of control, dehumanizing through its repetition. Sofsky made this aspect of seriality central to his account of the way authority worked within the camps: “These laws of seriality correlate directly with the strategies of absolute power. [... D]ensity spurs the antagonistic struggle for scarce goods. Superfluity presents the power to kill with a free field for action” (Sofsky 1997 [1993]: 154). Competition prevents solidarity among the inmates, while the sheer press of humanity relieves murder of some of its horror; in such circumstances, what is one fewer among so many? Levi, himself, was occasionally given to such a description of some of the people around him, the doomed, those who:

[K]now no secret method of organizing. [... O]ne knows that they are only here on a visit, that in a few weeks nothing will remain of them but a handful of ashes in some near-by field and a crossed-out number on a register. [... They are t]he *Muselmänner*, the drowned, [who] form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-me who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (Levi 1987a [1958]: 95-6)

Under the most intense pressure, Levi here describes his own painful decisions about choosing with whom to engage, given his own needs, material and spiritual. The seriality of the drowned allowed Levi to



limit the claims he might admit they could make upon himself. In one poem, *The Survivor*, Levi speaks of these “companions” the “submerged people”, who haunt his dreams, but he insists that took no one’s bread, and with no responsibility for their deaths, he can be sure “No one died in my place” (Levi 1987d [1981]: 13).

2.3. *Particularities*

The form of the hut was not unique but its use for a concentration camp during 1944-5 constitutes a singularity (Attridge 2004). Improvising a new horror with existing forms, the camp system was not only a chilling adaptation of mass production techniques – a distinct experiment with the dehumanizing techniques of seriality – but also a dreadful novelty in its social form. Levi offers us ways to avoid indulging in the sublime of incomprehension through his refusal to treat the mass murder as so enormous as to have no correlates left on earth. He retains humanity and its diversity as the proper measure and explanation of what happened to him and his fellow inmates. Levi is anti-metaphysical and he proceeds by detailing how things happened, the logistics, mechanics, and consequences. He also attends to particularities. In other words, he always breaks down the apparent mass into types, and even into individuals. Although he cannot describe each individual, he makes clear that each will have a personal story, replete with interest. Of the Polishman Resnyk, Levi recorded: “He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story; because so are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 71-72). Detailing types and individuals gives a way to resist the numbing effect of treating people and events solely in the mass. It is one way of responding to the serial form of things such as this hut.

Levi described the camp as replete with diverse “specimens” of human nature, “food for my curiosity” and thus for an activity “that certainly contributed to keeping a part of me alive and that subsequently supplied me with the material for thinking and making books” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 141). Or, again, Levi reflected that “this attention of mine, turned to the world and to the human beings around me, was not only a symptom but also an important factor of spiritual and physical salvation” (Levi 1987d [1981]: 11). Although at times he wished for a certain forgetfulness, writing in one poem that after “the bite | Of frost has left its mark | On flesh, minds, mud and wood. | Let the thaw come and melt the memory | Of last year’s snow” (Levi 1993b [1986]: ll 25-29), Levi was sure that his naturalist curiosity and probably his youth meant that “my memory of that period [...] is excellent” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 184). In consequence, he was able to take up the task of giving an account of the camps. Throughout his testimonial writing he insists upon the moral purpose



of explaining how things happened, almost leaving the question of why to one side as metaphysical. When Levi writes of the natural history of exploding stars, that at present “we must have the courage to dominate all adjectives that tend to excite wonder: they would achieve the opposite effect, that of impoverishing the narrative”, and concludes that “we understand only—and approximately—the how, not the why: we’ll be satisfied with the how” (Levi 2001c [1978]: 156, 160). This echoes his concern about excessive realism in memorial narratives from the camps, where he worried that the effect of the text might be to inspire pity rather than incite comprehension (Angier 2002: 561). Of life in the camps, he insisted that “having seen all this from within hasn’t given me the tools to explain it. I can provide the data but I can’t answer the whys” (Levi 2001e [1983]: 245). Because “[o]ur imagination has our dimensions and we cannot demand that it exceed them” (Levi 1991f [1985]: 115), when giving the data, the evidence of the Nazi crimes, humanity must be the measure of all things, as when a Jewish-Polish man, Schmulek, explains the significance of Levi’s own tattoo: “Show me your number: you are 174517. This numbering began eighteen months ago and applies to Auschwitz and the dependent camps. There are now ten thousand of us here at Buna-Monowitz; perhaps thirty thousand between Auschwitz and Birkenau. *Wo sind die Andere?* Where are the others?” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 54). With scholarship and research we can try to narrate some aspects of the life of people very much like Schmulek, or even of such a shed as this one. If we narrate the responsibility of diverse individuals, some with names we can recover and some with names that we cannot, then, we have a chance of describing the links between the seriality of this form and the murderous economy of which it was an integral part. We might trace the links between the mass production of the hut and what Arendt (1958 [1951]: 447) referred to as the “mass manufacture of corpses”.

3. Materiality

The existence of the shed provokes us to describe how it came to be attached to this farmhouse in Monowice. Its survival thus far is, in itself, quite remarkable. To build the camps, the Nazi authorities commandeered local land and this meant razing the homes of the farmers who had lived there before. The area that includes this site of the shed was designated for the future expansion of the *Buna-Werke* although defeat supervened. After the war, local people moved onto the camps and scavenged what they could, wood for fuel, or, as in this case, as a shell that could be reassembled somewhere else and for some other purpose. The stables barracks at Birkenau were very largely taken to Warsaw to “shelter construction crews” (Pelt and Dwork 1996: 364). Given the “crippling

lack of housing in Poland in 1945”, some camp buildings, brick and stucco, were taken for local residents (*ibid.*: 360). Earlier removal or reuse constrained the creation of museum landscapes in the Auschwitz region. But, here we have a hut, and one that we can surely provenance to the nearby *Buna-Werke*, and one that matches very well the description Levi gave of the barracks in which he tried to sleep after days of torment, hunger, and abuse. The shed is a material thing. Things were important to Levi, and his writings only add to the claims that such things make upon our attention (Miller 2005).

Comparing his first, *If This is a Man* (1958), and his second, *The Truce* (1963), works of Auschwitz memorial, Levi claimed that: “In the first book I had paid attention to ‘things’ I wrote the second one fully aware that I could transmit experiences” (Levi 2005e [1976]: 103). There may be some false modesty about the distinction between the claim that the first book eschewed subjective matters, but the materialism comes in part from Levi supplementing the authority of witness with that of chemist, a scientist of matter. This was the tone of his first writing on the camps, when, in 1945 and stationed at a Soviet infirmary at Katowice, together with his friend and fellow-inmate, Leonardo de Benedetti, he produced a *Report on the Sanitary and Medical Organization of the Monowitz Concentration Camp for Jews (Auschwitz, Upper Silesia)*. When the report was reworked for an Italian medical journal in 1946, the authors were credited as Dr Leonardo de Benedetti, physician and surgeon; Dr Primo Levi, chemist. Some of the material from this Report was re-worked for *If This is a Man*, notably the description of the Infirmary at Monowitz. In the *Report*, the barracks were described, with particular attention to their internal arrangements, detailing the mattresses, “more or less filled with wood-shavings, reduced to dust from long use” (de Benedetti and Levi 2006 [1946]: 41) as well as the tiered arrangement of bunk beds:

In the structure of the “castles” the supporting beams and the planks on which the pallets [mattresses] rested, lived thousands of bed bugs and fleas which gave the prisoners sleepless nights; nor were the disinfections of the dormitories with nitrogen mustard vapour, which were carried out every three or four months, sufficient for the destruction of these guests, which continued to vegetate and multiply almost undisturbed. (*Ibid.*: 42)

So began a life of testimony, countering the cynical attempt of the SS to erase the evidence of their monstrous crimes. Although, in 1942, when one German citizen had complained about the leaving of the corpses of Jewish victims in public places, an official at the German foreign ministry had shrugged, “[i]n a place where wood is chopped, splinters must fall” (Spector 1990 [1987]: 156), in fact from 1942 to 1945, the Nazis took every care to create the conditions for plausible deniability, but they failed: “in the autumn of 1944 the Nazis blew up the gas chambers and

crematoria at Auschwitz, but the ruins are still there, and despite the contortions of epigones it is difficult to justify their function by having recourse to fanciful hypotheses” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 12-13).

3.1. *Memory*

Things are important to memory, as a scaffold (Spelman 2008) that stimulates associations prompted by images, smells or sounds. The material focus of Levi’s writings is a discipline for his objectivity. In *Moments of Reprieve*, his tales of fellow inmates, Levi (1987d [1981]: 144) noted somewhat ruefully perhaps that “over long distances human memory is an erratic instrument, especially if it is not reinforced by material mementoes”. In “The Mnemogogues”, Levi may speak for himself when he has his character, Montesant, exclaim: “I by my nature can only think with horror of the eventuality that even a single one of my memories should be erased” (Levi 1991a [1966]: 13). In the story, Montesant holds on to his individual memories by creating scents to evoke uniquely each one of them. When describing the demolition of personality in Auschwitz, Levi began with the loss of things:

Nothing belongs to us anymore [...]. [C]onsider what value, what meaning is enclosed [...] in the hundred possession which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; [...] the personification and evocation of our memories. (Levi 1987a [1958]: 33)

Words cannot replicate such things. In 1965, Levi returned to Auschwitz for the twentieth anniversary of the liberation. He found the museum at Auschwitz I sterile and “was rather angered” by its having been diverted to the commemoration of victims as Polish, ignoring the “resounding fact that the overwhelming majority of the victims of Auschwitz were Jews” (Levi 2001g [1987]: 217). He went also to Auschwitz III (Monowitz): “As for my own Camp, it no longer exists. The rubber factory to which it was annexed, now in Polish hands, has grown so that it occupies the whole area” (Levi 1987c [1976]: 390):

[I]t was impossible for him to imagine the *Lager* as he had known it. After the war the barracks had been razed for jerry-built Polish workers’ quarters; of Blocks 30 and 48 where Levi had been interned, only the charred foundations remained. ‘That really hurt me,’ he said in an interview. (Thompson 2002: 313-14)

We do not know he might have responded to finding one of his own huts nearby but he did recall from that visit:

[A] feeling of violent anguish when I entered Birkenau Camp, which I had never seen as a prisoner. Here nothing has changed. There was mud, and there is still

mud, or suffocating summer dust. The blocks of huts (those that weren't burned when the Front reached and passed this area) have remained as they were, low, dirty, with draughty wooden sides and beaten earth floors. There are no bunks, but bare planks, all the way to the ceiling. Here nothing has been prettied up. With me was a woman friend of mine, Giuliana Tedesche, a survivor of Birkenau. She pointed out to me that on every plank, 1.8 meters by 2 meters, up to nine women slept. She showed me that from the tiny window you could see the ruins of the cremation furnace. (Levi 1987c [1976]: 390)

Material remains can help “renew the nerve of outrage”, in the resonant phrase of Edward Thompson (1979: 241), or they might twist anguish, in Levi's experience, and this is surely why Levi revised his earlier wish to see all trace of the camps obliterated:

If we had been asked as we were liberated: “What do you want to do with these infested huts, these nightmare barbed wire fences, these multiple cesspits, these ovens, these gallows” I think most of us would have said, “Away with it all. Flatten it, raze it to the ground, together with Nazism and everything that is German”. This is what we would have said, and what many did say as they pulled down the barbed wire and set fire to the huts. But we would have been wrong. These were not horrors to be wiped out. As the years and decades go by, those remains lose nothing of their meaning as both monument and warning: indeed, they become more meaningful. Better than any treatise of memorial they show the extent of the inhumanity of Hitler's regime, even in its scenographic and architectural choices. (Levi 2005h [1985]: 82-3).

The scale of the inhumanity is less believable without the spoor of these deeds in these places, and equally less reproducible is the appropriate “feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist” but, with these traces, “the scars of the outrage [...] remain [...] in the places where it occurred and in the stories that we should tell of it” (Levi 1987b [1963]: 188).

3.2. *Dialectics*

Levi repeatedly linked his life-saving curiosity to his training as a chemist insisting that he was “interested in the contact with matter, in understanding the world around me” (Carmon 1989 [1987]: 65), even describing the camp as, “that ferocious sociological laboratory” (Levi 1991d [1985]: 92). Many of the tales that he told of, and alongside the memory of, Auschwitz were natural histories. Levi believed that in his case “this ‘naturalistic’ attitude [...] came] from chemistry” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 141), bringing a “habit of penetrating matter of wanting to know its composition and structure, foreseeing its properties and behavior, [...] a] constant desire not to stop at the surface of things” (1991g [1985]: 175), and in one story he described “an alchemist” as someone who

“always learns something from matter” (1993c [1986]: 52). This is what Levi, echoing Antonio Gramsci’s insistence upon militant criticism, called militant chemistry. Natasha Chang has explicated some of these associations and suggests that: “What is distinctive about the concept of militant chemistry is that it underscores the value of experience, and is therefore intimately linked to writing as testimony of a particular experience” (Chang 2006: 553). For Levi, this experience of the camp revolved around structures like this hut, here, this one. He described the “topography of the Lager” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 37), gave the numbers and the names of the huts, described the experience of reveille at which “[t]he entire hut shakes to its foundations” (*ibid.*: 44), explained how the huts changed with the seasons for “[w]hen it rains [...] [e]verything made of wood smells of mushrooms”, attended to the particular arrangements in the convalescent ward with “its bunks on three levels, in three rows throughout, separated by two narrow corridors. [...] The patients in the upper bunks, squashed against the ceiling, can hardly sit up” (*ibid.*: 56), and remarked that this place of partial recuperation allowed reflection so that it held not only inmates but their dreams: “[t]he wooden hut, crammed with suffering humanity, is full of words, [...] memories of the world outside [...] and] we become aware with amazement, that we have forgotten nothing” (*ibid.*). After the Germans take the mobile prisoners away on the death march of retreat, the 800 left at the Monowitz scavenge for survival and, again, Levi’s account is thoroughly materialist. He wrote that “[t]he Lager, hardly dead, had already begun to decompose”, and that “[t]he work of the bombs had been completed by the work of man: ragged, decrepit, skeleton-like patients [...], like an invasion of worms [...] had ransacked all the empty huts in search of food and wood’ and had invaded the rooms of the block leaders which ‘they had violated with senseless fury” (*ibid.*: 164). The huts in their materiality are motile in decay, but Levi was struck that fragile humans were stiff in their mortality: “[B]y now there were beds in all the huts occupied by corpses as rigid as wood” (*ibid.*: 171). This concern with observing how materials behave marks a particular relationship with applied science, as when Levi reflected after retirement that he had “not forgotten thirty years of militancy in minor chemistry, and my private museum is not mental but material” (Levi 1993a [1985]: 138). This practical focus was not only materialist but moral. Pierpaolo Antonello has remarked that Levi saw “knowledge as being both a material and an existential construction, rather than a purely abstract or theoretical one” (Antonello 2007: 89) and that distrust of abstract philosophy directed Levi “to look from simultaneously opposing angles and to correct all-encompassing generalizations with the wisdom of ‘local’, ‘circumstantial’ knowledge” (*ibid.*: 91). This epistemology expressed also his resistance to fascist ideology. Levi’s relationship with Chemistry changed over time and each transformation signified ways to learn about fascism and the camps. At first Levi found in the study of

Chemistry and Physics an “antidote to fascism [...] because they were clear and verifiable at every step, and not a tissue of lies and emptiness” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 35). Fascist education emphasized hierarchy and authority, but in the laboratory each person had to take responsibility for their own conclusions and in this empirical fashion, Levi found that his own “relationship with Matter changed, became dialectical” (*ibid.*: 32). Chemistry became, for him, a synthetic science of observation rather than a philosophical exposition of material essences and this quiet example dispersed the “stench of Fascist truths, [...] all the dogmas, all the unproved affirmations, all the imperatives” (*ibid.*: 35). This modest science is exemplary in its fidelity to truth and here is a virtue that education can promote as “moral restoration” for “from the moment you abdicate your own conscience, as soon as you replace it with a cult of the leader ‘who is always right’, you risk becoming guilty of the gravest crimes” (2001a [1961]: 182). When Gramsci wrote of militant criticism he described it as a “type [...] suitable to [a] philosophy of praxis”, engaging “cultural struggle”, and undertaken with the “impassioned fervour of one who is committed, one who has strong moral and political convictions and does not hide them nor even attempt to” (Gramsci 2000 [1934]: 394). Levi considered the camp a “world turned upside down” and he wanted to understand this new world, assuring his readers that while “[i]t might be surprising [...] in the Camps one of the most frequent states of mind was curiosity” (Levi 1987d [1981]: 97), but his imagination was also engaged in just the way Gramsci described (Buttigieg 1991). He wanted to understand the camps in order to prepare the case so that others might judge. The title, *If This is a Man*, directs our attention to this aspect of Levi’s memoir. The poem, variously given the title “Shema” or “If This is a Man”, that Levi composed in Auschwitz and wrote down when back in Turin, directs the comfortable folk to “Consider whether this is a man [...] | Who dies at a yes or a no” (Levi 1989a [1946]: ll 5, 9). Clearly Levi expected the happy people to recognize the humanity of the prisoners in the camp for they are then asked to “Consider that this has been” (*ibid.*: l. 15) and to teach it to their children. The question of humanity cuts both ways, the Jewish victims are human even unto the moment at their murder, and the German perpetrators are likewise human and yet are capable of such crimes. It is this dual reflection that makes Levi such a despairing “theoretician of moral biochemistry” in Philip Roth’s (2001 [1986]: 18) felicitous phrase. Levi wanted his German contemporaries to read his testimony: “To find myself, man to man, having a reckoning with one of the ‘others’ had been my keenest and most constant desire since I had left the concentration camp” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 180). He wanted them to recognize that they had known and had accepted Hitler’s vile anti-semitism, “out of mental laziness, myopic calculation, stupidity and national pride”, and in their cowardice had not spoken against it (Levi 1989b [1986]: 170). For others, Levi wanted them to accept that “[i]t

happened, therefore it can happen again” (*ibid.*: 167) and thus we must “ensure that the horrendous fruit of hatred [...] do not give up new seed” (Levi 2005g [1980]: 72). Cleaving to the fundamental truth that “man is, must be, sacred to man, everywhere and forever” (Levi 2005a [1959]: 5), people might be helped by the example of practical Chemistry which in its dialectical engagement with matter, submits all received wisdom to the test of experience, cultivating a modest militancy.

3.3. *Metaphor*

Chemistry in its engagement with matter not only gave Levi an empirical and dialectical method, it also gifted him a “reservoir of metaphors” (Levi 2005e [1976]: 104), an “immense patrimony of metaphors” (Levi 1991g [1985]: 175). Explaining the inspiration for his collection, *The Periodic Table*, Levi wrote that there were few stories about the lives of chemists:

[T]ransformers of matter [...]. [I]t seemed opportune to me to explore the chemist’s relationship with matter, with the elements, as the Romantics in the nineteenth-century explored the ‘landscape’; the chemical element became a state of mind, as the landscape was also a state mind. Because for those who work with it, matter is alive: mother and enemy, indolent or an ally, stupid, inert, dangerous at times, but alive, as was well known by the founders of our discipline. (Levi 2005e [1976]: 104)

Metaphors suggested by his work as a chemist are found throughout his writings and they illuminate morality and memory. *The Periodic Table* begins with stories about the transition from pure to applied science; his dialectical engagement with the material world. In one respect, the apparent focus on isolated elements is misleading for the practical chemist did not live in such a world. The race laws of 1938 marked Levi as a Jewish person and, sensing his Christian classmates pull away from him, “following an ancient pattern, I withdrew as well” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 33). Yet, Levi did not recognize himself in the racist propaganda: “I was not particularly stingy or cunning, nor had my father been” (*ibid.*: 29.) Yet there are ambivalences embedded in Levi’s use of chemical analogies to describe the condition of Jewish people under fascism. In the first story of *The Periodic Table*, “Argon”, Levi describes some of his Jewish ancestors are rather inert, like the gas argon. But the inert gases are also called noble and while his forebears seemed to accept “relegation to the margins of the great river of life”, this is described as an “attitude of dignified abstention” (*ibid.*: 3). This might even be understood as a noble spirit of resistance, comparable to Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Herman Melville’s story about Bartleby, who faced with an unacceptable request, simply disengages: “I would rather not” (Agamben 1998 [1995]: 33). In “Potassium”, the tolerant young assistant who, defying the race laws, gave Levi an opportunity to complete a research project, is “suspicious of every

activity that sets itself a goal: therefore he was nobly lazy and, naturally, detested Fascism” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 47). Levi shared this skepticism: “I personally have a certain distrust for whoever ‘knows’ how to improve the world: not always, but often, he is someone so enamoured with his system as to become impervious to criticism” (Levi 1991b [1985]: 65). With sufficient personal drive, utopian thinkers could be dangerous, “unleash[ing] wars and slaughters” (*ibid.*). Dignified abstention is one way of refusing to follow such leaders.

Levi was aware of the ambivalence of poetic comparison: “[Y]ou have to be careful with similes, because they may be poetic but they don’t prove much. [...] Beware of analogies: for millennia they corrupted medicine” (Levi 1988 [1978]: 77). Yet sometimes the ambivalence is part of the message. In “Zinc”, Levi writes about impurity. To get zinc to react with sulphuric acid, a reagent, or impurity is required. In the context of the race laws, Levi is Jewish: “I am the impurity that makes the zinc react, I am the grain of salt or mustard” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 29). But this apparent complicity between chemistry and fascism is swiftly undercut when Levi suggests that one of the conclusions one might draw from this is that it is impurity “which gives rise to changes, in other words, to life” (*ibid.*: 28). Comparable to the shift from pure to applied science, the transition from inorganic to organic chemistry was very important to Levi and in several ways he underlined this association between impurity and life, between purity and sterility. The final, beautiful story in *The Periodic Table*, concerns carbon and it is striking that Levi traces his literary ambition to an epiphany at Auschwitz: “To carbon, the element of life, my first literary dream was turned, insistently dreamed in an hour and a place when my life was not worth much: yes, I wanted to tell the story of an atom of carbon” (*ibid.*: 189). In that place of soot and ashes, Levi dreamed a biography as carbon.

As a chemist he explains that “[c]arbon [...] is the only element that can bind itself in long stable chains without a great expense of energy, and for life on earth (the only one we know so far) precisely long chains are required. Therefore carbon is the key element of living substance” (*ibid.*: 190), and the only way that carbon can be incorporated into living material is through photosynthesis, whereby a molecule of carbon dioxide is zapped by the sun, freeing the oxygen to return to the atmosphere while the carbon combines with hydrogen inside the leaf. And this brings Levi back to his metaphor, because carbon dioxide is such a minuscule part of the atmosphere (three parts in ten thousand) that it is “rather a ridiculous element, an ‘impurity’” even (*ibid.*: 191). But ... no impurity, no life.

Levi makes similar remarks Jewish culture. He describes Yiddish as a hybrid language: “[A]fter drawing on German, Hebrew, Russian, Polish and Lithuanian, now [in the United States] it is becoming English, adapting itself to English. [...] Linguists can watch a truly hybrid language, the most hybrid in the world, surviving precisely because it

is hybrid” (2001d [1979]: 268). Levi also insists that the great “Jewish tradition of tolerance” (2001f [1984]: 288) was made in the diaspora, a place of “interethnic exchange and relations, in other words a school for tolerance” (*ibid.*: 292). Levi learned these things about Jewish culture, largely under the pressure of Fascist oppression. After the passing of the racial laws, he began to meet with other young Jewish people and they studied together “and taught each other to find again in the Bible justice and injustice and the strength that overcomes injustice” (1990 [1975]: 52). In the camp, he learned about Ashkenazi Jewish culture and its Yiddish language and he was then ever respectful of its achievements: “In the space of little more than one generation the Eastern Jews passed from a secluded and archaic way of life to lively participation in workers’ struggles, national revindications, and debates on the right of man (and of woman)” (Levi 1991c [1985]: 71).

On one side, then, there was Nazi ideology and practice with its purity, and sterility; and on the other, there was Jewish culture with its distinction and fertility. Fascism was all about Spirit, thus Chemistry should be cherished because “[i]t led to the heart of Matter, and Matter was our ally precisely because the spirit, dear to Fascism was our enemy” (Levi 1990 [1975]: 52). Jewish culture was an example of “[s]piritual independence” and he appreciated “the Talmudic tradition of impassioned but precise argument, and the tradition of the Book” (Levi 2001b [1976]: 262). The Nazis claimed to receive authority from Nature and respected force alone, as Levi made a Jewish partisan explain in his novel, *If Not Now, When?*, “killing is the only language [Nazis] understand, the only argument that convinces them” (Levi 1987e [1982]: 78), but how different was the Jewish people of Eastern Europe, “a people for whom [...] the Book has substituted [for] Nature as a fount of excellence for each and every mystic, philosophical or poetic insight” (Levi 2005c [1966]: 22). The organic basis of life, dependent upon impurity, is also fragile, and one of Levi’s most lyrical reflections upon precious living matter, brings us back directly to our shed and its provisional testimony. Levi appeals to experience:

Anyone who has had the opportunity to handle wood for professional, craft, or amusement reasons knows that it is an extraordinary material, hardly equaled by the most modern plastics. It has two great secrets: it is porous and therefore light, and it has very different properties with the grain or against the grain. (Levi 1991e [1985]: 96)

Yet, although wood is a most ancient material for construction, its antique past is lost because “wood, like all organic substances, is stable only in appearance. Its mechanical virtues go hand in hand with an intrinsic chemical weakness. [...] W]ood is anxious to oxidize, that is, to destroy itself” (*ibid.*: 97). This returns us to carbon, through fire and ash: “The path to destruction can be very slow, can take place silently, coldly, as in buried



wood through the agency of air helped by the bacteria underground; or it can be instantaneous, dramatic, when the impulsion comes from a source of heat" (*ibid.*). Fortunately the "contours of this fragile stability which chemists call metastability are ample. Included in them, besides all that which is alive, are also almost all organic substances, both natural and synthetic" (*ibid.*: 99). This reflection upon the fragile stability of life, and of organic material in general, offers Levi an irresistible opportunity for metaphor:

But the temptation is great to stretch those contours even further, to the point of enclosing in them our social behaviours, our tensions, all of today's mankind, condemned and accustomed to living in the world in which everything seems stable and is not, in which awesome energies (I am not speaking only of the nuclear arsenals) sleep a light sleep. (*ibid.*)

The vulnerability of wood, for Levi, recalled the fragility of life and the frightening energies released in social conflagration. This unlikely hut is both evidence and, animated by Levi's writings, a profound metaphor.

4. Text

This shed, has texts of its own, and what strange texts they are. The injunction, "So wirst Du rein!", even including its exclamation mark, comes from the thirteenth verse of the fifth chapter, of the Second Book of Kings. This is the story of a general from Syria who suffering from leprosy goes to Israel because a female slave from Israel tells him that in Samaria there was a prophet who could cure him. The instruction from Elisha, the prophet, is that Naaman should wash seven times in the River Jordan, but Naaman is offended with the suggestion that a river in Israel shades all in his own land: "And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" (2 Kings 5:13, King James version). As given in Luther's version of the Old Testament: "Da machten sich seine Knechte zu ihm, redeten mit ihm und sprachen: Lieber Vater, wenn dich der Prophet etwas Großes hätte geheißsen, solltest du es nicht tun? Wie viel mehr, so er zu dir sagt: Wasche dich, so wirst du rein!" (1912 version). "So wirst Du rein!", wash and be clean, but in such a place as Auschwitz this quotation in German from a book holy to both Christian and Jew alike, can never have been intended or received as sincere advice. It is symptomatic of a curious linguistic universe where language serves many different purposes, and not all of them self-evident.

John L. Austin (1962) distinguished between constative statements, making claims about things and which could be evaluated as true or false,



and performative statements that rather intended certain effects and could not be true or false but were rather to be judged felicitous or infelicitous, since they either did or did not produce the outcome they announced. Performative speech acts try to do something, to be of consequence beyond communicating meaning (Butler 1997). Performative speech acts were integral to camp existence. Levi described a “collision with the linguistic barrier” that began when the Italian police at the internment camp of Fossoli passed the Italian prisoners to the SS. Orders were now given in German and faced with the incomprehension of the Italians, these orders were screamed, and “[i]f anyone hesitated (everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrorized) the blows fell” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 91). Levi comprehends immediately that this violence “was a variant of the same language” and that speech was no longer a tool of interpersonal communication. Rather for the Germans, the Italians “were no longer men. With us, as with cows or mules, there was no substantial difference between a scream or a punch” (*ibid.*). For the Germans, understanding German separated the civilized from the barbarians; indeed, as Levi remarked, the word barbarian is of Sanskrit origin and means one who stutters, whose speech is thus unintelligible (cited in Alexander 2007). Speaking German to non-German speakers was one way that the SS produced for themselves a distance that animalized the inmates.



Fig. 3 - The gate at Sachsenhausen, March 2012 (Photograph by kind permission of Karen Till)



Levi realized that he would limit beatings and give himself a better chance of accessing resources (shoes, soup, spoon, and so on) if he could understand this world. With precious bread he bought lessons in German from a Frenchman from Alsace, and thus learned many things, including “the foolish or ironic mottoes written in Gothic letters on the hut’s roof trusses” (Levi 1989b [1986]: 97.) And yet these were not adventitious. They are found in many surviving huts, including those at Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen where at least some of the SS were trained in camp management. Describing his arrival at Monowitz, Levi referred to one of the most famous mottoes: “[T]he lorry stopped, and we saw a large door, and above it a sign, brightly illuminated (its memory still strikes me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, work gives freedom” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 28). The motto was also over the gate at Auschwitz I and part of the gates at Dachau and Sachsenhausen (fig. 3). Rudolf Höss, the first commandant of the Auschwitz system (4 May 1940 to 1 December 1943, and then again 6 May 1944 to 18 January 1945), was adjutant at Sachsenhausen (1938-40), had spent four years (1934-8) as a block-boss at Dachau, the first concentration camp, originally for political prisoners, and it was there, from his own boss, Theodor Eicke, that he learned the ideology of work. Work, as he claimed in his last testament, written in the months before his execution in 1947, was:

[A]n effective, positive disciplinary measure, insofar as it helps maintain self-control, [...] a means of education for those prisoners [...] who need to get used to regularity and endurance [...]. That’s how the motto “ARBEIT MACHT FREI” (“Work sets you free”) is to be understood. It was Eicke’s firm intention that those prisoners, no matter from what category, who stood out from the mass because of their continued diligent work performance, were to be released [...]. However, because of the war, these good intentions did not materialize on a larger scale. (Höss 1996 [1958]: 93)

The phrase had deep resonance within German culture. During feudal times, some towns claims to be allowed to release people from serfdom should they have lived within the walls of the city for a year and a day, hence the saying, “Stadtluft Macht Frei” (the city air makes one free). This was adopted as a motto by many cities and is reputed to have been “proclaimed [on] the city gates of the Hanseatic League” (Hård and Misa 2008: 4). Wolfgang Brückner (1988) tracks two translations from “Stadtluft Macht Frei” to “Arbeit Macht Frei”, and both were imbued with German nationalism. The first was in 1873 as the title of a novel by a nationalist Lorenz Diefenbach in which a gambler and wastrel was reformed through hard work, and the second was in 1922 in relation to a Viennese organization promoting Germanness by raising funds for German schools in parts of Europe where German-speakers were in a minority. In the context of the death camps where Jewish people were to be murdered, or worn out and then killed, there could be no question of



anyone being made free. On his first day at Auschwitz Levi was told that “the only exit is by way of the Chimney” (Levi 1987a [1958]: 35), and he soon concludes for himself: “No one must leave here and so carry to the world [...] the evil tidings of what man’s presumption made of man in Auschwitz” (*ibid.*: 61). Nor could work carry any redemptive possibility when the slaves were fed only sufficient to postpone death a little while, and indeed when work was deadly by design: “To sink was the easiest of matters: it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp” (*ibid.*: 96). When Levi left Monowitz “for the last time there filed before my eyes the huts where I had suffered and matured, the roll-call square where the gallows and the gigantic Christmas tree still towered side by side, and the gate to slavery, on which one could still read the three, now hollow, words of derision: “*Arbeit Macht Frei*”, “Work Gives Freedom” (Levi 1987b [1963]: 193). The slave who cannot possibly keep clean is instructed about hygiene. The emaciated and condemned person is told that if only they could work properly they might yet be free. Levi described such mottoes as “an anticipation of the new tablets of the law, dictated by master to slave, and valid only for the slave” (Levi 2005b [1959]: 9). The slaves must work, the master is a parasite:

In reality, and despite appearances to the contrary, denial of and contempt for the moral value of work is fundamental to the Fascist myth in all its forms. Under each form of militarism, colonialism and corporatism lies the precise desire of one class to exploit the others, and at the same time to deny that class any human value. (Levi 2005b [1959]: 8)

Yet these mottoes may also do something for the master. The adjacency of the admonition and the degraded condition of the inmate, allows the murderous official to see the Jewish person as dirty and thus inferior, as work-shy and thus in thrall. This shed is part of that braggart manner in which the camp produced its own version of the Social-Darwinian world that was the Nazi view of the human condition. Within that world, language was often a cosh, performative in its capacity to produce anguish, ever haunting Levi and able to pull him back from his home and family: “[A] well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, ‘*Wstawàch*’” (Levi 1987b [1963]: 380). And they did.

5. Conclusion

The movement between the affective and intellectual moments that is intrinsic to our engagement with signs of the Holocaust, is aided both by

the survival of such material remains as this hut and by the possibility of explicating the sign through an engagement with the writings of its most famous associate, Primo Levi. When we contemplate this hut as part of an extended series of such huts, it serves as an index of the integration of the murder machine within the wider planned economy of the Nazi empire. This underlines the intentionality, planning, widespread guilt, and even more broadly dispersed knowledge implicit in the genocide. Levi spent much of his life challenging denial, first among those Germans who said they knew nothing about the genocide and then in the sad last years of his life among French conservatives who denied the very occurrence of the events themselves. Against all these deniers, the witness of Levi and the intersection of his testimony with the unexpected survival of this hut, are potent. Levi's own insistence upon specifying the mechanisms of the genocide was resolutely anti-metaphysical. This is part of his way of determining causality and deciding culpability. This anti-metaphysical stance thus serves as the basis for Levi's moral engagement.

The materiality of the traces of the Holocaust were important for Levi's understanding of the political potential of memory. The scale of the genocide is difficult to accept without physical evidence of the number of camps, the size of the camps, the number of trains, the volume of Zyklon-B gas used, and the number of Jewish people moved from the occupied lands into the camps. This was done by people, some of whom can be named, and others who have evaded explicit detection. Bringing it down to specific individuals and determinable dispositions of materials avoids the amorality of the Holocaust sublime. This perspective is amoral because it elevates the crimes beyond the reach of causal explanation, and thus beyond the reach of blame and justice. Material evidence such as the hut is vital in the elaboration of these causal explanations. We need to care for them. One of the most important material bases of this memory work was the mind of Primo Levi and it is one of the tragic developments in this story that as Levi began to worry about the continued precision of his memory he began to despair of their being any further purpose in living. In fact, the fear that he might mis-remember due to the organic failure of his mind intensified the despair visited upon Levi by Holocaust deniers of the 1970s.

The presence of texts upon camp barracks has begun to attract the attention of scholars. Myers (2008) notes the graffiti that accumulated on the wooden planks of the barracks, both during the period of the genocide and thereafter. This hut is embellished with German texts exhorting personal hygiene. This is important evidence of how language was used by the Nazi administration of the camps. Levi made the conversion of language into a club a central feature of his account of the Nazi dehumanization of the Jewish people. His own felicitous texts show the failure of the Nazi attempt to reduce all inmates to nothing more than animal life. It is important to preserve such a hut, along with

its insulting biblical texts, because it reinforces the account given by Levi of the deformation of German culture within the world of the camps. Material traces, if read in conjunction with Levi's testimony, can amplify Levi's despairing cry that this has happened once and among people who fancied themselves civilized. It can happen again.

Postscript

While I was writing this essay I learned from Robert Jan van Pelt that the shed may now have disappeared. Let us hope that this is part of a plan for conservation and not one more example of the instability of wood and of the force that drives carbon to reunite with atmospheric oxygen. We will have lost an important artifact. Most of the sheds at Birkenau were dismantled after the War and only later were some returned from Warsaw to be reassembled at Auschwitz. The provenance of individual structures is uncertain. But with this shed we can be pretty sure that it travelled less than one kilometer in the years since 1945. There is so little trace of the Jewish camp at Monowitz, so much to learn by integrating material histories with the luminous literary testimony of Levi, that it would be truly tragic if this shed is no more.

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