

FIGURATIONS OF SUFFERING IN CONCENTRATION CAMP
TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a close reading of the figurative language used to represent suffering in literary testimonies of the Nazi concentration camps. It begins with an overview of the debate over the legitimacy of figurative language in representations of the Holocaust and considers the arguments against metaphor by scholars in the field of pain research and Holocaust studies. Bringing into dialogue the disciplines of pain studies and Holocaust studies, the article advances the claim that figurative language is an effective means of expressing suffering and that an analysis of this language is valuable for understanding the experiences of the victims of Nazism. The article subsequently presents a comparative analysis of *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) by Primo Levi, *Le grand voyage* (1963) by Jorge Semprún, and *K.L. Reich* (1963) by Joaquim Amat-Piniella. It identifies two patterns in the representation of suffering by these author-survivors: first, the use of

zoomorphic metaphors to describe bodily pain and, second, the depiction of anthropomorphized landscapes to portray psychological anguish.

KEYWORDS: Nazi concentration camps, testimony, Holocaust studies, pain studies, animal metaphors, natural landscapes

The survivors of Nazi concentration camps often question whether language is able to convey the horrors they experienced as prisoners. In his memoir of life in Auschwitz, Primo Levi claims that words such as hunger, fear, pain, and cold offer only a pale reflection of the realities prisoners faced. Levi speculates that had the camps been around for longer, a harsh, new language would have evolved within their confines.¹ But in the absence of this imagined linguistic system that might have furnished resources better suited to representing the camps, the authors of concentrationary testimonies make use of certain tropes to portray suffering at the extremes of human experience. In a comparative analysis of *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) by Primo Levi, *Le grand voyage* (1963) by Jorge Semprún, and *K.L. Reich* (1963) by Joaquim Amat-Piniella, this article identifies two patterns in the representation of suffering by these author-survivors: first, the use of

zoomorphic metaphors to describe bodily pain and, second, the depiction of anthropomorphized landscapes to portray psychological anguish.

The article begins with an overview of the debate over the status of figurative language in representations of the Holocaust. After summarizing the arguments of thinkers who have questioned the legitimacy of using metaphors to write about the Holocaust specifically and about suffering in general, the first part of the article argues that figurative language is an effective means of expressing suffering and that an analysis of this language is valuable for understanding the experiences of the victims of Nazism. The second part of the article explores the role of animal imagery in the above-mentioned works by Levi, Semprún, and Amat-Piniella and illustrates how zoomorphic metaphors are used to describe the physical suffering and loss of humanity to which deportees and prisoners were subjected. The third part of the article examines how psychological suffering is articulated in descriptions of landscapes, onto which the protagonists' emotions are projected. By identifying these zoomorphic and anthropomorphic tropes shared by works written in Italian, French, and Catalan, the article seeks to determine the commonalities in the ways suffering is represented across a range of testimonial narratives of the Nazi camps and, at the same time, to

elucidate the contribution of testimonial works to our understanding of victims' experiences.

Concentration camp testimonies use similar metaphors to those found in patient narratives and in literary accounts of pain. Arthur W. Frank places trauma survivor stories alongside illness narratives, transgender narratives, and spiritual autobiographies as cognate genres of self-narration.² Like illness narratives, concentrationary testimonies are born of what Frank calls a "narrative wreckage"; both types of narrative instantiate the act of reclaiming the self from that wreckage.³ The connection between these two types of self-story at the macrostructural level of the narrative is also reflected at a granular linguistic level. In his survey of metaphors of pain used by patients and by creative writers, David Biro pinpoints three distinct metaphorical strategies used to represent pain: first, that of pain as a weapon, in which the phenomenon is ascribed external agency and responsibility for injury to the body through the action of stabbing or shooting; second, that of pain as a mirror, in which the sensation is projected onto other objects, such as animals or trees; third, anatomic metaphors that generate an X-ray image of pain and its causes hidden inside the body.⁴ The figurative strategies used to represent pain in the concentrationary testimonies under analysis in this

article present some points of contact with Biro's schema: the instances in which suffering is described with animal imagery or is projected onto the landscape correlate with the mirror-type metaphors theorized by Biro; weapon metaphors are evident on the occasions when pain is described by its impact on the skin. And yet the patterns of figurative language in these concentrationary texts—and the narrative arcs in which this language is embedded—are not wholly assimilable to those found in the illness narratives on which Biro's study is based. Illness narratives are concerned with making sense of a changing identity marked by pathology. Such narratives are prompted by the sense of alienation resulting from physical and psychological alterations induced by illness and are aimed toward forging a sense of continuity between past and present selves.⁵

Concentrationary narratives share some of these features, particularly the sense of alienation and the desire for self-repair through the act of storytelling, but the ostensible object of concentrationary discourse is to denounce crimes against humanity and to testify to the suffering of victims of genocide. Furthermore, concentrationary testimonies are not consistent with the narrative types underlying stories of illness. Frank identifies three recognizable types or modes of storytelling prevalent in illness narratives:

the restitution narrative that enacts the plot of restoring health; the chaos narrative that denies the possibility of restitution and fails to mediate and impose order on the confusion of lived experience; the quest narrative that does not seek to negate illness—in the vein of the restitution narrative—or become overwhelmed by illness and its attendant disasters—as in the chaos narrative—but rather seeks to accept illness as part of a journey from which something is to be gained.⁶ Concentrationary testimonies differ in some important respects from these illness narrative types. Unlike restitution narratives, they are concerned with the residual trauma of the experience and with the impossibility of returning to normalcy. Although they share with chaos narratives a disbelief in the promises of restitution and narration, concentrationary testimonies chart their protagonists' endeavor to reconcile themselves with chaos and to adapt to chaos in the struggle for survival. Finally, concentrationary testimonies are quite unlike quest narratives in their negation of the potential to find meaning in needless suffering and death. In the narratives by Levi, Semprún, and Amat-Piniella, the customary metaphors of projection typically found in writing about illness are intimately connected with the contexts of incarceration and dehumanization to which the testimonies bear witness. Physical pain in these texts is beastly

precisely to the extent that the prisoners of Nazi camps are reduced to the status of animals by their captors. Emotional anguish finds expression in the natural landscape logically as a result of the protagonists' captivity.

Concentration camp testimony presents a unique rhetorical profile that has been neglected by the field of pain research, which shows a marked preference for illness narratives as the corpus from which linguistic studies of pain are derived. Despite its value in documenting suffering at the very limits of human experience, concentration camp testimony has remained for the most part outside of the purview of pain studies. This article seeks to establish a dialogue between pain studies and Holocaust studies: an analysis of the rhetorical and linguistic strategies by which pain is articulated by authors such as Levi, Semprún, and Amat-Piniella complements and indeed broadens the traditionally narrow focus of pain studies on illness; at the same time, insights from the field of pain research can illuminate the linguistic mechanisms by which suffering is expressed in concentration camp testimony.

Immoral metaphors

The relationship between Holocaust writing and metaphor has been uneasy. In a study of the controversy surrounding the role of metaphors in representing the Holocaust, James Young traces the mistrust of figurative language back to the victims' own struggle to transmit the facts of their experience.⁷ The chief purpose of writing about the Holocaust has long been regarded as the transmission of accurate historical data. The emphasis on hard facts is partly a reaction to the Nazis' endeavor to conceal their criminal acts and negationists' subsequent efforts to persevere with that enterprise. Establishing a factual historical record was of paramount concern in the war crimes trials after World War II. The prosecution's preference for documentary evidence over victims' testimony in the Nuremberg trials helps to explain why some concentration camp survivors became preoccupied with the factual status of their narratives as they struggled to assert the legitimacy of first-hand accounts. The mistrust of metaphor stems also from a wider suspicion of the literary medium, which is felt to be inappropriate in the context of the solemnity that ought to mark the memory of the Nazis' extermination of the European Jews. Among the specific charges leveled by scholars in the discipline of Holocaust studies are that metaphors distort

facts and deflect our attention from reality. It has been argued that metaphors are essentially escapist.⁸

Metaphors have attracted criticism also within the discipline of pain studies. Elaine Scarry observes that there is a limited linguistic repertoire for describing pain and that tired verbal strategies, such as the metaphor of pain as a weapon or external agent, can misrepresent the nature of pain and obscure the physical suffering of victims.⁹ Susan Sontag also discusses the perils of metaphors used in the context of illness. According to Sontag, the use of illness as a metaphor demonizes the ill and obscures understanding of their condition. Such metaphors are potentially dangerous in the hands of totalitarian movements, which use metaphors of disease to galvanize hostility toward enemies and political opponents. Sontag concedes that metaphors have filled a vacuum in public discourse as the decline of religious and philosophical language has left us without the tools to discuss evil, but nonetheless she urges resistance against the allures of facile metaphors and advocates the virtues of plain speaking.¹⁰

The misgivings over metaphor shared by scholars in the fields of pain studies and Holocaust studies point to a wider practical and ethical problem concerning the relationship between language and the phenomenon

of human suffering. At stake in both fields of study is the question of whether language is able to or should be free to express suffering. Pain researchers thus ponder whether language can make such a private experience as pain available to others or whether the experience simply underscores the isolation inherent in the human condition.¹¹ Holocaust scholars wonder whether there is a danger that cultural works create a false sense of intimacy with victims and the illusion of comprehending their experience.¹² In both fields there is a concern about what is lost in the passage from the private realm to the public, and these parallel debates over the relationship between language and suffering constitute a further point of intersection between pain studies and Holocaust studies, which reveals the potential for mutually enlightening cross-fertilization of ideas and concepts.

The idea that figurative language in some way falsifies the reality of pain and does a disservice to its sufferers does not imply that such language fails on a communicative level. Descriptions of suffering need not be representationally accurate in order to achieve the aim of sensitizing readers to the plight of others, and figurative language is able to make the subjective experience of pain intelligible to readers. Pain is a notoriously slippery concept. Within the various disciplines that are concerned with pain

research, such as philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience, there is a lack of consensus regarding the nature of pain.¹³ In philosophy, representationalist accounts view pain as a perception that conveys information regarding actual or potential tissue damage. Conversely, in phenomenological accounts, pain begins as a raw feeling, which only subsequently is ascribed to an object or source. The difficulty of pinning down exactly what constitutes it has led some philosophers to advocate dispensing with the folk concept of pain. The variety of attributes that have been assigned to pain—a pure sensation occurring within a subjective experience; a detection of tissue damage; an unpleasant feeling; an impulse to protect the damaged area—suggests that it cannot be considered something in and of itself but is rather a complex neurobiological mechanism involving the processing of nociceptive stimuli across many different areas of the nervous system and feedback through an equally complex system of pain inhibition. The elaborate neurobiology of pain helps to explain the coexistence of its seemingly incompatible characteristics as both subjective and objective, incorrigible and yet subject to error. Pain can be all of these things because it is not an isolated phenomenon, but a generic term for a complex interaction of physiological processes.¹⁴ Given the

instability of pain as a concept and the private and subjective aspects of the experience, it is plausible that metaphors might well be useful for capturing the unique sensory qualities of that experience.¹⁵ As regards the description of suffering, which is a secondary emotion that stems from prolonged reflection on the initial physical experience of pain, the extended duration of the experience expands the opportunities for stylization.¹⁶ Protracted meditation on the longer-term consequences of pain is likely to bring in its wake a heightened concern with expression. In clinical practice, metaphorical language is used by patients to communicate their symptoms to physicians, and it is unreasonable to expect literary works to be divested of figurative expression.¹⁷ Some scholars go as far as to argue that figurative expression is no mere ornament but is rather a necessary precondition for sharing the experience of pain. Frank puts it memorably when he observes that the “ill body is certainly not mute—it speaks eloquently in pains and symptoms—but it is inarticulate.”¹⁸ Biro claims that “metaphor isn’t merely a rhetorical device that dresses up language but a powerful and necessary resource of the imagination that literally extends the boundaries of our shared world.”¹⁹

Just as pain researchers recognize that pain and the linguistic and narrative forms used to describe it are in some sense inseparable, Young insists that metaphors are an unavoidable corollary of the use of language to discuss the Holocaust. Their presence in the earliest Holocaust testimonies suggests they played a significant role in how victims perceived the experience: “Rather than seeing metaphors as threatening to the facts of the Holocaust, we must recognize that they are our only access to the facts, which cannot exist apart from the figures delivering them to us.”²⁰ The paradigm shift in Holocaust studies that has catapulted survivor testimonies to the center of historiography is predicated on the belief that these testimonies offer a perspective that cannot be subsumed within traditional historical accounts.²¹ The significance of survivor testimonies, beyond their utility as historical sources, derives from the unique manner in which they transmit awareness of the experience.²² To the extent that they facilitate a connection with survivors’ experiential knowledge of the Nazi camps, testimonies are a compelling medium for drawing attention to the suffering endured by victims of Nazism. Representations of psychological and physical torment are a salient feature of concentrationary testimonies. They constitute some of the most memorable and haunting images in these texts

and are central to the pathos generated by testimonial works. An analysis of the figurative language through which the theme of suffering is articulated helps to account for the peculiar affective potency of the testimonial genre as well as to illustrate the precise ways in which author-survivors transmit their experiences of Nazi atrocities to readers.

The three texts under analysis in this article are all works of concentration camp testimony in the sense that their authors were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps and depicted their experiences there, albeit with varying degrees of literary-fictional artifice. Although all three texts might be categorized broadly as testimony, each can be assigned a slightly different generic designation, depending on its narrative perspective and the extent to which its content could be described as factual. The three texts can be further differentiated according to whether the author was a political prisoner or a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* is a memoir of life in an extermination camp written by an Italian Jew. The text is written in the first person and the narrator is identical with the author himself. The text maintains a fairly strict relationship with historical fact in the sense that the people and events depicted are presented as actual people and events.²³ We might assume that

some of the dialogue is fictionalized, and the text is evidently replete with poetic imagery and metaphor. But the core of Levi's text is a factual account of the author's experience in Auschwitz, and the propositional content of that account is true. The paratextual material, such as the blurb included in editions of the text and Levi's own prologue and epilogue, encourages us to view the text as a *memoir*. And because it was written by a Jewish survivor of the Nazis' policy to exterminate European Jews—a survivor, moreover, of one of the death camps in which the exterminatory policy was put into practice—Levi's text is a *Holocaust* memoir. Jorge Semprún and Joaquim Amat-Piniella were political prisoners in Nazi camps: Semprún was deported because of his activity in the French resistance movement, while Amat-Piniella, an exiled Spanish Republican, was captured by the Wehrmacht while working in one of the Companies of Foreign Workers on the Maginot line and subsequently sent to a concentration camp as a foreign undesirable after a brief spell of administrative limbo in various prisoner-of-war camps.²⁴ Political prisoners in Nazi concentration camps endured torture, starvation, beatings, and forced labor. However, they were targeted not because of their identity but, notionally at least, in punishment for their acts and, therefore, unlike Jewish prisoners, were not subject to systematic

extermination. Set apart from Levi's Holocaust memoir by the identity of their authors, Semprún's and Amat-Piniella's concentration camp narratives can be distinguished from one another by the formal features of each text. *Le grand voyage* is a first-person autofiction that blends autobiography with fictional conceits. It shares with Semprún's other texts the trompe l'œil theatrics by which pseudonyms blur the readily apparent correspondences between narrator and author, and Semprún even admits to fictionalizing certain aspects of his deportation to Buchenwald.²⁵ *K.L. Reich* is more openly fictional: it is a novel written in the third person that is inspired by the author's experiences in Mauthausen. The three texts under consideration in this article constitute different approaches to testimonial genre. At one end of the spectrum is a Holocaust memoir by a Jewish writer; at the other end is a concentration camp novel by a Spanish political prisoner. Semprún's narrative sits somewhere in the middle: vaguely autobiographical, it resembles a memoir, but with a liberal dose of fiction that approximates the novel. This article will show that despite these generic differences and the status of these texts with regard to the canon of Holocaust literature, there are commonalities in the representation of physical and psychological suffering across the three works.

Zoomorphism

K.L. Reich is a novel written in Catalan and based on Amat-Piniella's experience in the Mauthausen concentration camp, where he was deported in January 1941. Amat-Piniella spent the following four and a half years in the main camp and its satellites and was freed in May 1945. A Catalan patriot, Amat-Piniella had fought for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and had gone into exile in France following the Nationalist victory. He spent a number of months in French internment camps, which were hastily erected in the south of the country to receive the hundreds of thousands of Republican refugees who crossed over the Pyrenees, and subsequently enlisted in the *Compagnies de travailleurs étrangers*. When the workers' legions fell under the German occupation, Amat-Piniella was among those sent to prisoner-of-war camps.²⁶ However, the German government did not consider the Spaniards among those captured in the workers' legions to be prisoners of war, given that Germany and Spain were not at war, and they were subsequently deported to concentration camps.²⁷ The majority of the Spaniards—around ninety percent—were sent to Mauthausen, a category

three concentration camp in which delinquents, undesirables, and political prisoners considered beyond redemption by the Nazi authorities were worked to death in the infamous quarry, as well as being subjected to torture, execution, starvation, and medical experiments. Although Mauthausen did have a gas chamber, the camp was not specifically designed for the extermination of Jews. Jews nevertheless passed through the camp and were subjected to the harshest treatment, a fact to which Amat-Piniella attests in his novel. Mauthausen was a particularly brutal camp: according to the best estimates, only 2,000 Spaniards survived out of the 7,000 who were deported there.²⁸ The minority deported to other camps tended to fare better, but in most cases the statistics are unreliable and fail to account for the numbers who died in transit or during the period immediately before and the year following liberation. All in all, around sixty percent of the 8,000 Spanish prisoners in Nazi camps died, which represents the highest mortality rate among national groups.²⁹

Thanks to the intercession of a friend, Amat-Piniella was first assigned to the *Effektenkammer*, and was therefore initially spared the very worst of the brutality and privations that reigned in the outdoor labor battalions. Although in the autumn of 1941 Amat-Piniella spent three harsh

months in the quarry, once again his contacts soon intervened and he was transferred to a *Kommando* under César Orquín Serra, a fellow Spaniard who organized exterior work details with more generous rations and less brutal conditions, in which the prisoners' chances of survival were substantially improved.³⁰

K.L. Reich shadows the vicissitudes of Amat-Piniella's own experience in Mauthausen: newly arrived in the camp, the main character, Emili, escapes its horrors through his assignment to the *Effektenkammer*; after a fall from grace Emili finds himself facing a death sentence in an outdoor work detail and is subsequently rescued by joining a *Kommando* headed by August, a character based on César Orquín Serra, where he is able to wait out the end of the war. The author filters his own experience through those of a number of fictional characters, some of whom are based loosely on people he knew. The novel as a form enables Amat-Piniella to explore characters and their experiences from the inside; events witnessed are invested with the quality of lived experience, as the author uses his first-hand knowledge to flesh out the lives of his characters in a third-person narrative that captures eloquently the severity of conditions in the camp. Amat-Piniella's portrayal of the brutality of the concentration camp system

is especially vivid in the scenes describing the physical torture meted out by the SS to punish misdemeanors. A public flogging in the roll call square is described with a lexis rich in animal imagery: “Per tota la plaça es percebien netament els espetecs del fuet a un ritme de martell sobre l’enclusa, talment com si batessin un coixí de couro. De sobte, un crit esgarrifós esquinçà el silenci de la multitud, un crit que s’arrossegà diversos segons com un udol” (Throughout the square the cracking of the whip was heard clearly with the rhythm of a hammer against the anvil, as if a leather cushion were being beaten. Suddenly, a bloodcurdling cry sliced through the silence of the crowd and lingered on a number of seconds like a howl).³¹ The cadence of the cracking whip is likened to a hammer against the anvil, and the victim’s skin is a cowhide resembling the leather cushion used in metalwork. The victim’s cry tears violently into the silence of the assembled prisoners, trails on the air, and drags itself through space with the motion of a cowering beast. The scream is made especially vivid by Amat-Piniella’s use of alliteration in the phrase “un crit *esgarrifós esquinçà* el silenci” and in the sibilance that reverberates in the first and last syllables of “*esgarrifós*,” “*esquinçà*,” and “*silenci*.” The cry is invested with a lupine quality as Amat-Piniella likens it to a howl. The victim of the flogging is forced to count

aloud the number of blows inflicted, but the words themselves are dispossessed of their human quality; they are “deformats pel dolor, guturals i inintel·ligibles” (94) (deformed by pain, guttural, and unintelligible). As the torture nears its end, the prisoner’s sounds become increasingly beastlike:

Eren uns gemecs allargassats com els d’un animal ferit, tan aviat aguts i penetrants, com apagats igual que ecos dels anteriors. . . . Uns moments després, els gemecs eren dominats pels lladrucs i els grinyols dels gossos. Una esgarripança sotraguejà l’assemblea com un corrent elèctric. La matinada semblava un aigüafort goyesc. (95)

(The moaning was drawn out like that of a wounded animal; it ranged from shrill and piercing to a muffled echo of the former. Moments later the moaning was drowned out by the barking and howling of the dogs. A shudder ran through the crowd like an electric current. The daybreak seemed like a Goya etching.)

The prisoner’s voice has become that of a wounded animal. His plaintive ululations have an Orphic quality as the intonations of this nightmarish chant awaken the camp commandant’s dogs. In this ghoulish communion of the human and animal worlds, the barking drowns out the prisoner’s agony and

the assembled witnesses to the scene are gripped with horror. The comparison with a Goya etching reinforces the savagery of the scene, calling to mind the mutilated bodies and grotesque scenes of torture captured in the *Disasters of War*. The analogy is pertinent for another reason: animals feature prominently in Goya's portrayals of suffering, which include allegorical wolves, horses, vultures, and giant beasts feeding on human carrion. Just as human-animal hybrids bring out the ghastly aspects of human nature in Goya's *Disasters*, in *K.L. Reich* animal metaphors convey the barbarous nature of physical torture. Amat-Piniella traces the process by which the governing principles of morality break down when respect is lost for the inviolability of the individual. The human body, divested of its sanctity, becomes animal flesh. Language becomes mere sound: the grunting or howling of prey.

Other scenes of torture in *K.L. Reich* illustrate this same loss of language and subsequent transition into the animal kingdom. After stealing a fellow prisoner's bread, a starving prisoner is stripped, forced into a cage, and subjected to water torture. The transformation from human to animal is traced in the decomposition of language. In the first part of the description the words "gemec" (moan) and "xiscle" (scream) describe ostensibly human

sounds: “Se li escapà un gemec prolongat que sense transició es transformà en un xiscle allargassat i agudíssim, dominant per uns moments la remor de l’aigua i les rialles dels botxins” (139–40) (He let out a long, uninterrupted moan that morphed into a drawn-out, high-pitched scream, which for a moment drowned out the murmur of the water and the laughing of the torturers). The progressive deformation of the sounds is conveyed by the qualifiers “prolongat,” “allargassat,” and “agudíssim,” which begin to remove the prisoner’s cries from the realm of ordinary human noises. His peculiar cries are juxtaposed with the laughing of the human torturers, and in the second part of the description the cries become howls:

Els udols se succeïen, cada vegada més atroços. ... [El] fred ... debilitava la seva veu fins a reduir-la al somiqueig d’una criatura. El baiard havia esdevingut balder, d’encongit que estava el cos que empresonava. A través dels llistons no es distingia més que una massa informe i bruna, sacsejada de tant en tant pels espasmes d’una agonia que començava. (140)

(The howls came in succession, each more monstrous than the last.

His voice was weakened by the cold and was reduced to the

whimpering of a creature. The cage had become spacious as the body imprisoned within it had curled up. All that could be made out through the bars was a shapeless, brown mass, which was convulsed from time to time by the death throes that were underway.)

The prisoner's voice is now the whimpering of an animal and his body is a shriveled brown mound, devoid of human form.

In Jorge Semprún's testimony of his deportation to Buchenwald, human bodies also lose their defining features. Packed into a freight wagon, the compressed mass of individuals in *Le grand voyage* are fused together: they are "entassés les uns sur les autres" (heaped on top of each other) and "imbriqués l'un dans l'autre" (enveloped within one another); the human shipment resembles the cargo for which the transport container was designed.³² The deportees' individual identities are subsumed in this morass of bodies, which acts as one and moves in unison. The bodies amalgamate in a "gelée épaisse" (66) (thick jelly), which sways with the jolting movements of the train and culminates in the decomposition of individual identity: "Ce n'était plus ni moi, ni lui, ni toi, qui criait ou chuchotait, mais le magma gangueux que nous formions, par ces cent dix-neuf bouches anonymes" (241) (It was no longer I, nor he, nor you who shouted or whispered, but the

molten compound in which we were fused, with our hundred and nineteen anonymous mouths).

Among the techniques employed by Semprún to convey the dehumanizing nature of his deportation, animal metaphors play a significant role. Early in the text, an enraged fellow deportee voices the first of these zoological similes. Incensed at having been mistaken for a maquis sympathizer and arrested, the hothead spits invectives at the protagonist: “Vous allez crever comme des rats” (30) (You are going to die like rats). In his hysterical tirade, he likens the maquis to rodents whose insignificant lives will be taken without a second thought. As well as articulating the idea that the deportees are no more than vermin in the eyes of their captors, the rat simile is also suggestive of the deportees’ own state of mind. The allusion to rats in this context calls to mind the expression “être fait comme un rat” (to be trapped) and connotes the wretched conditions of deportation. Later, as the compressed mass of bodies recoils from a corpse in its midst, Semprún uses the metaphor of an oyster retracting within its shell to describe the deportees’ motion (76). The human body, when it appears, is described with metaphors of sickness and disease, which capture its frailty and the process of its decomposition. The protagonist’s growing sense of

anguish caused by his confinement is characterized as the spread of dead tissue: “Elle envahit comme une gangrène mon corps brisé par la fatigue” (81) (Like gangrene it invades my body, which is broken through exhaustion). Some prisoners, fortunate enough to survive the deportation, will be poisoned by the camp’s water the very night of their arrival. Semprún writes that their lack of restraint in quenching their desperate thirst will leave them “malades comme des chiens” (141) (sick as dogs). The narrator uses the image of a galloping horse to express the pain that ravages his body: “Je ne suis plus qu’une morne étendue piétinée par le galop des douleurs lancinantes” (148) (I am but a desolate expanse trampled by the gallop of shooting pains). In another carriage, the deportees are stripped naked in punishment for their attempted escape, and the narrator refers to the “spectacle grotesque de ces hommes nus, sautillant comme des singes” (164) (grotesque spectacle of these naked men hopping along like apes). As he dies in the suffocating final hours of the deportation, the protagonist’s companion gasps for breath with “la bouche ouverte comme un poisson” (243) (his mouth wide open like a fish).

Just as in *K.L. Reich*, in which language disintegrates under physical torture, the sounds emitted by the deportees in *Le grand voyage* follow a

similar regression to grunting and other animal sounds devoid of linguistic content. As the protagonist's companion grumbles discontentedly, his voice is described with the verb *grogner* (70). The verb captures the character's brooding tone and, at the same time, infuses the description with the bestial nuances conveyed by this polysemic verb, which is also used to describe the sounds made by pigs and bears. When the word recurs later in the narrative in its nominal form "grognements" (163) (grunts), it does so with more deliberately porcine overtones as the deportees are corralled into the wagon like livestock. Semprún uses the verb *braire* in a similar fashion to underscore the herd-like quality of the prisoners in the transport wagon (251). This disfigurement of human language appears in the narrator's recollection of a prisoner's "voix rauque...déjà inhumaine" (156) (hoarse, already inhuman voice) and the "plainte interminable, inhumaine" (243) (interminable, inhuman cry) of another on the cusp of death. The dying prisoner who emits this infernal sound is but the shadow of a human being; no longer a man, he is just "cette bête" (244) (this animal).

Amat-Piniella and Semprún use animal metaphors to capture the sensation of pain inflicted on the body and to trace the disintegration of the human body and language under conditions of extreme hardship. Primo Levi

deploys an abundance of animal metaphors to similar ends, but these metaphors are more developed in Levi's work and are used to convey philosophical ideas about the Nazi camps. The frequent allusions to animals in Levi's work have been the subject of sustained critical attention.³³ On the most basic level, these allusions articulate the idea that the Nazi camps were a place where men were divested of their human condition. Upon their arrival in the camps prisoners were dispossessed, stripped naked, shaven, given a uniform, and assigned a number. The trappings of human identity were eliminated in accordance with an ideology that viewed these prisoners as subhuman. The title of Levi's celebrated testimony of Auschwitz announces the theme of dehumanization that is developed at length in the work itself. The words "se questo è un uomo" (if this is a man) are taken from a poem, written by Levi and appended as a preface to the book. In the poem, Levi juxtaposes the implied readers of his book, safe in their warm homes, with the miserable beings who dwelled in the Nazi camps. Levi asks that we consider if those beings who labored in the mud, knew no peace, fought for scraps of bread, and were murdered arbitrarily might be called men. "Considerate se questo è un uomo" (7) (Consider if this is a man), the

poem beseeches us, and the book proceeds to illustrate the manifold ways humanity is crushed by the camp regime.

The frequent references to animals are part of what Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon describe as Levi's ethological vocabulary.³⁴ Levi describes the concentration camps as a "gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale" (79) (giant biological and social experiment), which provides an opportunity to study human behavior and its adaptations in the absence of social institutions. The camp system refuses to satisfy prisoners' basic needs of survival and thereby suppresses their social instincts and reduces them to the condition of any other animal. The camps are a laboratory that reveals the "comportamento dell'animale-uomo di fronte alla lotta per la vita" (79) (behavior of the human animal facing the struggle for life) and on more than one occasion Levi uses the metaphor of an aquarium to capture how the camp resembles a controlled environment, in which social variables have been tuned out to enable the study of human beings in the wild (17, 95).

Levi initially dons the attitude of disinterested naturalist observing a hitherto unknown specimen. After giving an account of his arrest and deportation, he reports his initial impressions of the camp upon disembarking from the transport. He describes the columns of prisoners

emerging from the darkness as one might another species. They are described as having a curious gait, with “il capo spenzolato in avanti e le braccia rigide” (18) (their heads dangling out in front and their arms rigid). The detached gaze of the naturalist soon assumes a more ominous complexion as the narrator comments, “Questa era la metamorfosi che ci attendeva” (18) (This was the metamorphosis that awaited us). The Ovidian overtones of the word “metamorfosi” are inescapable, for what Levi’s book documents is precisely a transformation from humanity into brutality, a descent into an animal underworld ruled by the basest of instincts in the struggle for survival.

This metamorphosis is already palpable in Levi’s description of the conditions of deportation. Levi refers to the compacted human bodies in the transport wagon as “materia umana” (16) (human matter). The expression has an oxymoronic quality: the word “materia” suggests an inorganic substance, while the adjective “umana” stands in contrast to this formless mass and struggles to invest it with life. These human beings are on the cusp of mutation. Packed into transport wagons as chattel, they waver between animate and inanimate; a shapeless plasma resembling the mass of bodies in Semprún’s *Le grand voyage*, they are on the brink of assuming a new form.

By the time the deportees climb down from the wagons at their destination, the mutation is underway, as their movements on the platform are described with the verb *brulicare* (16), which is redolent of the swarming of insects.

The initiation in the camp evokes a fall from grace as the prisoners are divested of their human condition and regress through the ranks of the animal kingdom in a reversal of the Genesis creation narrative. Levi calls it “la demolizione di un uomo” (23) (the demolition of a man). All their earthly possessions are taken away—the clothes on their back, the hair on their heads, their shoes, their names—and even the power of speech: “Se parleremo, non ci ascolteranno, e se ci ascoltassero, non ci capirebbero” (23) (If we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen to us, they will not understand). They have descended to the very depths of creation and are now merely creatures, mute and subject to the dominion of their human masters: “Siamo arrivati al fondo. Più giù di così non si può andare: condizione umana più misera non c’è, e non è pensabile” (23) (We have reached the bottom. You cannot go any lower than this: there is no human condition more miserable, nor is one even conceivable). Like livestock they will be culled when no longer useful. After a fortnight of suffering and chronic privation the prisoners begin to resemble another species, and the

metamorphosis is complete. With distended bellies, stiff limbs, disfigured faces, and yellow or gray skin, the prisoners no longer recognize their own bodies or each other (32).

Levi uses a wealth of animal imagery to articulate the bestial condition imposed on the inmates by the camp regime, which reduces their behavior to the instincts necessary for survival. The pain inflicted by beatings teaches the new arrivals to cower instinctively in the corners, “come fanno le pecore” (33) (as sheep do). The word *bestia* appears in multiple forms: from the inmates obliged to urinate bestially while running to save time (34) to the description of the camp itself, which is characterized as “una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie” (35) (a great machine to reduce us to beasts) and as “l’opera di bestializzazione” (152) (the work of bestialization). Levi describes the prisoners working in the outdoor labor battalions as “bestie stanche” (39) (tired beasts) and later, when he finds himself among the chemists selected for menial tasks in the laboratory, he describes how he and the others report for work with a timid, suspicious, and disoriented demeanor as if they were, “bestie selvagge che si addentrino in una grande città” (124) (wild beasts creeping into a big city). The Allied bombing raids leave the prisoners toiling amid “la polvere e le macerie

roventi, e tremare come bestie, schiacciati a terra” (105) (the dust and smoldering rubble, and trembling like beasts, hugging the earth). The prisoners face the conditions in the camp with brutish impassivity: “Non era rassegnazione cosciente, ma il torpore opaco delle bestie domate con le percosse, a cui non dolgono piú le percosse” (106) (It was not conscious resignation, but the dull numbness of beasts tamed by blows, whom the blows no longer hurt). Other prisoners are described as having “gli occhi come le bestie impaurite” (137) (the eyes of frightened cattle). Levi reinforces the metaphor of prisoners as animals with a number of similar lexical choices. The adjective *selvaggio* appears frequently, such as when a prisoner is said to exhibit “l’istintiva astuzia degli animali selvaggi” (88) (the instinctive astuteness of wild animals). Elsewhere the oxymoron “selvaggia pazienza” (71) (savage patience) is applied to the lupine individuals who prowl the underground market hoping to appease their hunger and whose savagery is transferred through hypallage to the patience they show in speculating on the stock market of bread and soup. The ferocious haste with which the prisoners eat is compared with the way animals feed (62, 68). The prisoners are often likened to sheep, such as when they are portrayed as a “gregge muto innumerevole” (106) (silent

innumerable flock) or when their smell is described as that of a kennel or sheepfold (62). On occasion, they are compared with worms, for example, in Levi's description of the abandoned camp, in which prisoners suffering from dysentery drag themselves across the snow in search of food and wood while no longer in control of their bodily functions (63, 140–41). Elsewhere, they are “fantocci di fango” (118) (mud puppets) or “automi” (45) (automata).

Levi uses these animal metaphors in the ethological vein highlighted above and illustrates the ways prisoners adapt to the conditions of the camp amid what he perceives as a brutal application of the Darwinian mechanism of the survival of the fittest. Jonathan Druker regards Levi's use of Darwinian terminology as fallacious because it is applied not to describing biological change in a natural environment but to an artificial environment engineered by the Nazis to eliminate populations they deemed undesirable. Druker finds fault with Levi's insistence on interpreting the Nazi camps through the lens of natural laws and observes that the Italian writer unwittingly lends credence to the ideas from which the Nazis' racial theories derived.³⁵ Although Levi does indeed imbue his testimony with a pseudo-scientific flavor, he does not make any great claims for the empirical validity of his work as a study of human behavior. When outlining the ways the

camp might be understood as a biological and social experiment, he avoids overreaching and rejects the facile assumption that the Nazi camps reveal fundamental truths about human nature (79). Like Semprún, who is equally coy about drawing general truths regarding the human condition from prisoners' behavior in the camps (*Le grand voyage* 72), Levi settles for the relatively circumspect conclusion that social instincts are dampened by acute necessity and hardship. Levi's Darwinian tropes should be interpreted not as an attempt to prove a scientific thesis but as a powerful rhetorical device. Thus Levi describes the human adaptations he witnesses in the camp using the metaphor of an animal digging a niche or a secreting a shell, and he gives examples of prisoners who are well adapted to the conditions of the camp, again, often using animal metaphors (50). One has a nose for civilian soup that rivals that of "le api per i fiori" (68) (bees for flowers); he catches a whiff in the air and follows its tracks, "come un segugio" (68) (like a bloodhound). There is a prisoner who resembles a ferocious beast (87), while another moves like a cat and is as cunning as "il Serpente della Genesi" (90) (the snake of Genesis).

Levi uses animal metaphors also to express the failure of some to adapt to the punishing conditions. Null Achtzehn gives the impression of

being as empty as the slough left by molting insects (37). He lacks the draft horse's instinct of self-preservation and, like a sled dog, toils until he reaches a state of exhaustion (38). The *Muselmänner* are ultimate example of the failure to adapt to this "lotta per sopravvivere" (80) (struggle for survival), in the battle of the "bruti contro gli altri bruti" (83) (brutes against other brutes). Non-human, non-organic even, the *Muselmänner* are the formless masses that make up the backbone of the camp: "Loro, la massa anonima, continuamente rinnovata e sempre identica, dei non-uomini che marciano e faticano in silenzio, spenta in loro la scintilla divina, già troppo vuoti per soffrire veramente" (81–82) (They, the anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, the non-men who march and struggle in silence, the divine spark extinguished within them, already too empty really to suffer).

While Levi uses animal metaphors systematically to develop his ideas regarding the prisoners' Darwinian adaptation to the subhuman camp conditions, animal metaphors are used to a similar end, albeit in a more rudimentary fashion, in Amat-Piniella's and Semprún's work. Here, too, we witness transformations undergone by the prisoners as they adapt to the world of the camp. In *K.L. Reich* Emili is disfigured by hard labor in the

quarry, which mutilates his hands and body, leaving him with a skeletal appearance: “Les feines dures li deformaven les mans. ... Deixà una bona part de les seves carns a la pedrera” (201) (Hard labor deformed his hands. He lost all the meat on his bones in the quarry.) His body is reshaped by the harsh conditions. The extreme hunger that typifies the prisoner’s existence is personified as a bird of prey whose “urpes afuades” (201) (sharp claws) whittle away his flesh. Levi’s text is populated with human-animal hybrids whose survival instinct is likened to a capacity for assimilating the characteristics of disparate species. Similarly in *K.L. Reich* and *Le grand voyage* the price exacted for survival is the dispossession of human qualities and a descent into animality. But for Amat-Piniella and Semprún, this descent into animality is linked not so much with the brute physical competition that characterizes the animal world but instead with a loss of morality. Levi’s text would appear to suggest that the Jewish prisoners are spared some of the more pedantic bellyaching over the loss of one’s moral compass. Such is the unrelenting mercilessness of their struggle that Levi’s foremost concern is with sheer physical exertion, for which his animal imagery stands as a potent metaphor. Amat-Piniella and Semprún are more preoccupied with the prisoners’ moral degradation, which they regard as a

bestial regression. Amat-Piniella refers to this moral corruption and ruthless ethical egoism as “realisme animal” (201) (animal realism). Semprún also regards the erosion of altruism as a characteristic shared by the camps and the animal kingdom: “Dans les camps, l’homme devient cet animal capable de voler le pain d’un camarade, de le pousser vers la mort” (72) (In the camps, man becomes this animal that is capable of stealing a comrade’s bread, of nudging him toward death). The assumption is that no human being worthy of the name could exercise the radical egoism necessary to survive in the camps. In line with Levi, who envisages the camps as a biological and social experiment that lays bare the survival instincts of man in the wild, Semprún regards the camps as an extreme situation in which self-interest becomes a powerful tool for survival: “Les camps sont des situations limites, dans lesquelles se fait plus brutalement le clivage entre les hommes et les autres” (72) (The camps are an extreme situation in which the division between each and every man is made brutally clear). Amat-Piniella is also attuned to the “embrutiment de la gent” (202) (degradation of the people), who have become desensitized to the suffering of their fellow prisoners. The decline of individual concern for collective well-being has turned the camp into a “jungla” (202) (jungle). Amat-Piniella reflects on the

dual processes of physical and moral annihilation at work in the camps: “El nazisme provava d’anihilar físicament els seus enemics i, per si no ho aconseguia totalment, preparava l’atmosfera que pogués anul·lar-los moralment per sempre més” (71) (Nazism was aimed at the physical annihilation of its enemies and, in case it did not succeed completely, it provided the climate for their total moral ruin). Levi contemplates the destruction in the camps as a stripping away of the social refinements that define human beings and a double annihilation of both body and spirit as they are reduced to expendable beasts of burden (23). Amat-Piniella echoes Levi in his meditation on the destruction wrought by a coalition of physical degradation and moral corruption, as the corporeal annihilation of the weakest in the camp is compounded by the spiritual annihilation of the youngest and strongest, such that “si un dia sortien, ja no fossin homes” (229) (if they ever came out, they would no longer be men). The perversion of moral norms becomes yet another noose around the prisoners’ necks, an additional link in the chain of their enslavement, further impetus in their brutalization: “L’esperit del camp tenia l’home vençut i endogalat” (238) (The spirit of the camp had men subjugated and tethered).

The linguistic and rhetorical strategies used to represent pain in these concentrationary testimonies by Levi, Semprún, and Amat-Piniella bear evident similarities with the strategies found in illness narratives, in which pain is figured as a weapon or mirror.³⁶ It is noteworthy that similar strategies can be found in the depiction of suffering in fictional texts that are detached from the specific historical circumstances of European genocide or from the concrete realities of illness. J. M. Coetzee's work offers a useful comparison both because of its thematic and philosophical concern with animals and because of its evocation of scenes of acute human suffering. Louis Tremaine observes a pattern in Coetzee's novels whereby animal imagery is employed in the context of descriptions of suffering and death.³⁷ Even in *Disgrace*, which has a palpable thematic concern with animal welfare articulated in its protagonist's growing sensitization to the plight of the animals around him, Coetzee's descriptions of human pain use animal imagery to articulate the dehumanizing nature of suffering. Thus a scene of sexual violence in *Disgrace* compares the victim to a "rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck," and the protagonist's trauma in the aftermath of his own and his daughter's vicious assault is likened to the draining of lifeblood of a fly immobilized in a spider's web: "It may take weeks, it may

take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding. When that is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spiderweb, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away.”³⁸ Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* employs a variety of animal similes to represent the oppression of its main characters: Anna K relates the suffering caused by poverty to being a “toad under a stone”; she and her son huddle like “mice” amid the breakdown of social order around them; the protagonist K’s impotent and forlorn gaze on his dying mother is compared to the attitude of a “dumb dog.”³⁹ The scenes set in a relocation camp in *Life and Times of Michael K* are reminiscent of concentration camp narratives. The depiction of deprivation and brutality in the camp exemplifies a wider interest in the Holocaust present in Coetzee’s work and typifies the author’s meditations on the parallels between the German Third Reich and South African apartheid. Brett Ashley Kaplan classifies this novel as a “landscape of Holocaust postmemory within South Africa” on the basis of its setting in a “quasi-concentration camp” and its central character, a “starving man reminiscent of a Holocaust victim.”⁴⁰ Coetzee uses the Holocaust in an allegory of South Africa in the apartheid era and interweaves tropes of dehumanization and animalization that recall the zoomorphic metaphors of concentrationary testimony. In Levi’s, Amat-

Piniella's, and Semprún's works, the suffering depicted is of a different order of magnitude, but the zoomorphic imagery deployed differs only to the extent that it is more metaphorically elaborate and more thematically developed in the case of the testimonial works. Coetzee's understated and terse style shows a preference for animal similes to represent his characters' suffering: characters are likened to dogs, rodents, flies, and rabbits by virtue of situations in which their fragility is exposed by terrible circumstances. In concentrationary testimony, zoomorphic metaphors are integrated in a broader denunciation of Nazi ideology and of the enormity of human suffering in the camps. In its use of animal imagery, concentration camp testimony mobilizes similar figurative expression to that employed in other narrative accounts of pain, such as in illness narratives or literary fiction. These different genres display at their core a shared lexis for the articulation of suffering, which attains some of the most vivid and forceful expression and variety in testimony of the Nazi camps.

Anthropomorphism

Zoomorphic metaphors in *K.L. Reich*, *Le grand voyage*, and *Se questo è un uomo* vary in prominence across the three works. Nevertheless, in all three there is a link between the sensation of bodily pain and animal imagery.

Animal imagery is also associated with a debasement of the human condition and with loss of language and morality, all of which are secondary symptoms of the prisoners' suffering. At certain points in these narratives when physical discomfort subsides or the prisoners' situation improves, the absence of pain does not herald a moderation of suffering, rather the nature of the suffering changes, as does the figurative language used to describe it.

In *K.L. Reich* Emili becomes more sensitive to the emotional anguish of life in the camp once his more pressing needs of hunger and physical safety are satisfied by his assignment to the civilian clothing storeroom. Emili's role in the *Effektenkammer* earns him the status of a privileged prisoner, and he enjoys the protection of the SS officer for whom he produces pornographic drawings. Similarly, in *Se questo è un uomo* Levi reports how a period of respite from the physical hardship of forced labor during his convalescence in the prisoners' hospital brings in its wake a sharpening of psychological sensitivity. The "lunghissime giornate vuote" (long empty days) spent in the infirmary usher in a rekindling of the

prisoners' conscience and a realization of the fragility of their personality: "abbiamo imparato che la nostra personalità è fragile, è molto piú in pericolo che non la nostra vita" (48) (we have learned that our personality is fragile and in much graver danger than our life). The moderation of intense physical discomfort affords Levi a heightened awareness of time's passing, just as in *K.L. Reich* Emili's sudden change of fortune with his assignment to the storeroom grants him "una impressió més exacta de la inexorable continuïtat del temps" (68) (a more accurate impression of the relentless continuity of time). Whereas forced labor is synonymous with beatings and a daily struggle to avert starvation, days spent in the prisoners' hospital or in a privileged *Kommando* are comparatively empty. Levi's "lunghe giornate vuote" correlate with the "grisor buida i dissolvent d'aquest present" (104) (gray, empty, and evanescent present) in which Amat-Piniella's protagonist languishes. Levi explains that as physical pain subsides, it gives way to self-conscious reflection and the psychological anguish of "Heimweh" (48), or homesickness. Levi's nostalgia is shared by Amat-Piniella's protagonist: "L'enyorament pren una violència desacostumada; mai no s'ha sentit tan perdut, tan orfe, tan sol" (104) (The longing becomes more brutal than ever. He has never felt so lost, so

orphaned, so alone). Levi and Amat-Piniella suggest there is no solution for this particular ill, which is more oppressive than physical suffering. Levi writes of his comrades' envy when he manages to escape the outdoor labor battalions with a comparatively tranquil position in the laboratory. But he struggles to find consolation in having traded the "rabia del vento" (126) (fury of the wind) for the "pena del recordarsi" (pain of memory). The resurfacing of his buried consciousness brings a ferocious longing to feel human. Amat-Piniella is resolute in his judgment of physical suffering as the lesser of the camp's evils:

Homes que no trobaven cap protecció, que passaven fam, que s'anaven morint a poc a poquet, no sofrien tant com d'altres per als quals, en tenir les necessitats peremptòries més cobertes, era l'imaginació la que creava els problemes irresolubles i, pitjor encara, sense esperança. (69)

(Men who found no protection, who went hungry, who were slowly dying did not suffer as much as others who had their basic needs more or less covered and whose imagination created the insoluble and utterly hopeless problems.)

This hierarchy of pain, in which the physical torture of beatings and starvation is relegated behind the emotional anguish of the privileged prisoners, is suggested also in Levi's discussion of the *Muselmänner*, whom he regards as "troppo vuoti per soffrire veramente" (82) (too empty really to suffer). These statements convey the abject condition of a human body that has become inured to pain. Whereas Amat-Piniella, Levi, and Semprún exhibit a preference for animal imagery in their representation of pain inflicted on the body, their portrayal of psychological suffering utilizes images of the landscape and natural world, which have an ethereal quality to the extent that they are landscapes remembered or viewed from afar. The prisoners' emotional hardship is often articulated using the device of personification, by which depictions of surrounding landscapes are anthropomorphized through the projection of the characters' emotional anguish.

In *K.L. Reich*, Emili sees his despondency reflected in the rainfall he watches from the window of his barracks: "Les flors mateixes, l'herba, els fruiters, semblen queixar-se de la tristesa que els embolcalla. ... Una comunitat de sentiments s'ha establert entre [Emili] i les plantes, ja que també ell protesta contra la tristesa de la diada" (102–03) (The flowers

themselves, the grass, the fruit trees, seem to lament the sadness that surrounds them. A community of feeling has been established between the plants and Emili, since he too is protesting against the sadness of the day). The natural world stands witness to Emili's suffering and participates in his mournful vigil. Emili's distress is compounded by the memory of a different landscape, that of Barcelona "sota el cel refulgent i uns sentiments en efervescència" (103) (under a dazzling sky with feelings of ebullience). In Emili's memory of his wedding day, the brilliance of the sky resonates with his elation, and the contrast with his current misery pains him. Watching the dark sky from a window, Emili is assailed by memories of polychromatic landscapes from his past, which surge into his consciousness: "El cap li barrina terres enllà, passats molts sembrats, moltes prades, molts rius i moltes serres. L'ofega la grisor buida i dissolvent d'aquest present, i més avui que l'exciten els records d'uns colors al·lucinants" (103–04) (His head carries him away to faraway lands, through an array of pastures, meadows, rivers, and mountains. He is drowning in the gray and evanescent emptiness of the present, and even more so today that he is animated by memories of marvelous colors). Amat-Piniella associates his protagonist's melancholy with the color gray, using synesthesia to relate Emili's visual impressions of

the surrounding winter landscape with the character's psychological state. By contrast, happier times are connected with vibrant colors and an untamed wilderness of fields, rivers, and mountains, which contrasts with the regimented flowerbeds and lawns that are enclosed by the concentration camp barracks. The fertile landscapes of Emili's past bring into sharp relief the sterility of his present existence. Amat-Piniella evokes a desert landscape to capture Emili's desolation, which is metaphorized as "aquesta secada en la meva ànima" (105) (this drought in my soul).

Levi also renders emotional states in descriptions of the natural world. The prisoners' fear of an impending selection, in which the more emaciated among them will be singled out for extermination, is associated with the arrival of winter: "In quel modo con cui si vede finire una speranza, così stamattina è stato inverno" (111) (In the same way as one sees hope evaporate, winter came this morning). Levi's use of the pathetic fallacy, as the prisoners' foreboding is reflected in the ominous approach of winter, is apt given that the weather was truly a matter of life or death in the camps. Winter was synonymous with death in the outdoor labor battalions, so the prisoners' apprehensions about the imminent selection, in which they will have to feign optimum health in order to have any chance of being spared,

are doubly justified. The prisoners' gradual loss of hope as the days draw in is described in terms that echo the seasonal transformation of the natural world:

Ognuno sentiva, giorno per giorno, le forze fuggire, la volontà di vivere sciogliersi, la mente ottenebrarsi; e la Normandia e la Russia erano così lontane, e l'inverno così vicino; così concrete la fame e la desolazione, e così irreali tutto il resto, che non pareva possibile che veramente esistesse un mondo e un tempo, se non il nostro mondo di fango, e il nostro tempo sterile e stagnante a cui eravamo oramai incapaci di immaginare una fine. (104–05)

(Day by day we all felt our strength fade, our will to live melt away, our mind grow dark. Normandy and Russia were so far away, and winter so near. Hunger and desolation were now concrete facts, and everything else was so unreal that it did not seem possible that there was a world and time other than our world of mud and our sterile and stagnant time, whose end we were now incapable of imagining.)

News of Allied victories fails to overcome their gloom. Their remaining strength diminishes like the fugitive hours of daylight and their thoughts

darken; their will to live is consumed in the cold. Desolate, sterile, and stagnant, their existence resembles their harsh surroundings.

The spiritual suffering in Semprún's depiction of Buchenwald becomes palpable, as in Amat-Piniella's *K.L. Reich*, in visions glimpsed of the outside world. Thus Emili has a favored spot from which he can gaze at the countryside beyond the walls of the camp, yet the vibrant green hues remind him not of regeneration and renewal but of his own impotence (68). In *Le grand voyage* too, the surrounding landscape taunts the protagonist and reinforces his condition as prisoner. His gaze on a nearby village that lies just beyond the camp enclosure is imbued with a sense of poignancy that stems from its unattainable quality:

On voyait la plaine de Thuringe, riche et grasse. ... C'était le printemps, c'était dimanche, les gens se promenaient. Il y avait des gosses, parfois. Ils couraient en avant, ils criaient. Il y avaient des femmes, aussi, qui s'arrêtaient sur le bord de la route pour cueillir les fleurs du printemps. (28)

(You could see the Thuringian plain, rich and fat. It was spring, it was Sunday, people were out walking. There were kids sometimes.

They ran ahead shouting. There were women too, who stopped at the side of the road to pick the spring flowers.)

The vision of the landscape is the reverse image of the protagonist's melancholy existence in the camp. At first glance, *riche* and *grasse* seem a strange choice of adjectives to describe a landscape, but these qualities connote the sustenance that is absent from the prisoners' diet and from the thin and watery soup on which they subsist. The village therefore constitutes an idealized projection of the happiness and bounty lacking within the camp.

Other landscapes in *Le grand voyage* exemplify a comparable function. In the midst of his deportation, the protagonist catches snapshots of a sedate and homely existence beyond the pandemonium that reigns within the cattle car: "Mon train à moi siffle dans la vallée de la Moselle et je vois défiler lentement le paysage de l'hiver. Le soir tombe. Il y a des promeneurs sur la route, en bordure de la voie. Ils vont vers ce petit village couronné de fumées calmes" (25) (My train whistles in the Moselle valley and I see the winter landscape slowly file past. Night is falling. There are people walking on the road alongside the track. They are heading toward this small village crowned by calm plumes of smoke). The calm he perceives outside is the very sensation for which the protagonist yearns amid the turbulence in

which he is enveloped. The contrast between the interior and the exterior torments Semprún's protagonist (26). Later he begins to hallucinate, as his restricted movement induces a suffocating sensation of stasis, and his craving for freedom generates the illusion that the surrounding landscape has become animated with the capacity for independent locomotion that he lacks. It is, then, the night that appears to move and the surrounding landscape that rushes forward, enveloping the deportees within its unfurled contours (81).

As a symbol of immemorial calm, the landscape bodies forth the composure and peace that Semprún's protagonist desires.⁴¹ At times, the contrast serves merely to heighten the protagonist's anguished sense of imprisonment. But there are other occasions in which the protagonist derives encouragement from the landscape and counterpoises his troubled spirit against the solace he perceives in the outside world. His ambivalence about the landscape, which is charged with both positive and negative emotion, is palpable when the Moselle valley, viewed from inside the cattle car, monopolizes the protagonist's attention. The first time the valley appears there is the same sense of communion with nature found in *K.L. Reich* as a dejected Emili perceives his sorrow reflected back at him in the rainfall

outside. Semprún writes, “Ma vie n’est plus que ce battement de paupières qui me dévoile la vallée de la Moselle. Ma vie a fui de moi, elle plane sur cette vallée d’hiver, elle est cette vallée douce et tiède dans le froid de l’hiver” (15) (My life is nothing more than this blinking that lays bare the valley of the Moselle. My life has broken away from me, it hovers over this winter valley; it is this sweet and warm valley in the cold of winter). The protagonist transmigrates from a corporeal form into an ethereal mountain spirit via his gaze that enables an escape from his incarceration. But the use of oxymoron in the juxtaposition of “douce” and “tiède” with “le froid de l’hiver” suggests the instability of this spiritual union. The valley seems to offer consolation but it does so at the price of self-annihilation: “La Moselle me rentre par les yeux, inonde mon regard, gorge d’eaux lentes mon âme pareille à une éponge. Je ne suis rien d’autre que cette Moselle qui envahit mon être par les yeux. Il ne faut pas me laisser distraire de cette joie sauvage” (15–16) (The Moselle rushes in through my eyes, flooding my gaze and filling my sponge-like soul with its slow waters. I am nothing other than this Moselle that invades my being through my eyes. I cannot allow myself to be distracted from this wild joy). The verbs *inonder*, *gorger*, and *envahir* transmit a sense of violence that undercuts the soothing properties of

the landscape. The protagonist's gaze is conditioned by an overriding sense of anguish, so that even consolatory symbols are contaminated by his suffering. Thus the coming of dawn, a traditional symbol of hope, is corrupted by the deportees' despair. While the new day seems to mark progress toward their destination, it carries the promise of a return to darkness: "L'aube se déploie d'elle-même ... vers son anéantissement rutilant" (117) (Dawn advances on its own, toward its shimmering annihilation). The melancholy of the deportees' nightly ritual of suffering shapes the protagonist's perception of the cycle of day and night. The night is conceptualized as inherently lugubrious, a harbinger of the fate that awaits the deportees at the end of their journey.

In *Le grand voyage* representations of the landscape are marked by the protagonist's emotions and particularly by the anguish of incarceration. On occasion, these landscapes are a channel for the expression of desires and reflect back at the protagonist the ideals missing from his own barren existence. The idealized qualities of the exterior world are the reverse image of the narrator's suffering. When pain reaches its apogee in *Le grand voyage*, Semprún shifts our attention to the landscape as a cathartic escape. When suffering becomes inexpressible, the landscape substitutes it as an

alternative reality, a place where pain is sublimated in the ethereal. In these instances the landscape functions as a metaphor for the absence of pain, the world beyond the protagonist's current torment, and as an embodiment of the positive emotions deriving from the protagonist's spiritual escape from confinement. The Moselle valley is an emotional buttress and is anthropomorphized as a travelling companion (81). But elsewhere the natural world fails to ameliorate the protagonist's foreboding and sense of turmoil.

The commonalities in the representation of suffering in Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, Semprún's *Le grand voyage*, and Amat-Piniella's *K.L. Reich* are not indicative of any direct influence, although the possibility that Semprún and Amat-Piniella were influenced by the earlier work of Levi certainly cannot be ruled out.⁴² The range of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic tropes and the variety of ends to which they are employed suggest that the authors arrived at these devices independently. The coincidence of animal imagery in the three works can be explained by the dehumanizing nature of the concentrationary experience. Animal metaphors are a compelling device for describing pain inflicted on the body: the sensory experience of pain brings

about a heightened consciousness of the body, and the realization of physical frailty purges delusions of immortality and forces sufferers to reckon with their ineluctable condition as terrestrial creatures. Similarly, a gaze directed toward the natural world is an effective medium for the expression of psychological suffering. Emotional concord with nature constitutes a vehicle for the spirit to rebel against the constraints of the physical world. The pathetic fallacy is, moreover, a coherent rhetorical device for depictions of an experience that was affected in such great measure by the weather. Wet and cold signified death, whereas the summer brought temporary respite from the more pressing hardship in the outdoor labor battalions.

The distinction between the physiological and psychological facets of suffering, which is enunciated at the level of the divergent figurative lexicon used to capture the nature of the experience in each case, reveals a dualist understanding of pain in these three texts. Physical pain is strongly linked with animal imagery, whereas mental pain tends to be associated with natural imagery. While such a distinction goes against the grain of current scientific thinking on pain, which rejects dualist models, dualism has been common in religious and philosophical treatment of pain.⁴³ Drawing on these traditions, the three texts reveal the ways suffering was conceptualized

in the Nazi camps and suggest the commonalities in how the experience was later aestheticized in testimonial works.

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Notes

1. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 4th edn (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 110. Hereafter cited by page number.

2. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 69.

3. Ibid.

4. David Biro, *The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief* (New York: Norton, 2010), 16.

5. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "The Story of 'I': Illness and Narrative Identity," *Narrative*, 10: 1 (2002), 9–27 (11–13).

6. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 115.

7. James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 89.

8. For a summary of these criticisms, see Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 90–91 and Andrea Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, tr. Patrick Camiller (London: Continuum, 2005), 95–101.

9. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 15–17.

10. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 85.

11. Biro, *The Language of Pain*, 19.

12. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 161.

13. Jennifer Corns, "Introduction: Pain Research: Where We Are and Why It Matters," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*, ed. by Jennifer Corns (Abington: Routledge, 2017), 1–14.

14. For an overview of the representational, phenomenological, and neurobiological approaches to pain, see Valerie Gray Hardcastle, "A Brief and Potted Overview on the Philosophical Theories of Pain," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*, 19–28.

15. For a discussion of the centrality of the first-person perspective in defining the experience of pain and an analysis of the sensory and affective dimensions, see Donald D. Price, "A View of Pain Based on Sensations,

Meanings, and Emotions,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*, 113–23.

16. See Price on the distinction between pain and suffering, “A View of Pain Based on Sensations, Meanings, and Emotions,” 116–19.

17. Price discusses the metaphorical nature of the sensory descriptors used in the McGill Pain Questionnaire, “A View of Pain Based on Sensations, Meanings, and Emotions,” 114.

18. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 2.

19. Biro, *The Language of Pain*, 16.

20. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 91.

21. See Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998) for an account of testimony's rise to prominence.

22. For a version of this argument, see Dominick LaCapra, “Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim's Voice,” in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) 2nd edn, chap. 3, 86–113. For LaCapra, testimonies “provide something other than purely documentary knowledge” and are “significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath,” 86. Although here LaCapra makes the case for the significance of survivor testimony in the specific context of oral and video testimonies, elsewhere he does consider literary testimonies and argues along similar lines that such texts give a “plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods,” *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 13.

23. Levi insisted on the unpremeditated and artless nature of *Se questo è un uomo*, which he claimed was written without any literary concerns. Nevertheless, the extent to which the text can be considered a historical work or a pure autobiography or memoir has been debated by Berel Lang who adduces Levi's stylized narrative techniques and particularly his use of pseudonyms as evidence of the literariness of the text, *Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 52–63.

24. On Amat-Piniella's wartime experiences and on the genesis of *K.L. Reich*, see Marta Marín-Dòmine, “Por una epistemología de la deportación española: El legado *K.L. Reich* de Joaquim Amat-Piniella,” *Quaderns de Filologia: Estudis Literaris*, no. 21 (2016), 135–53. doi: 10.7203/qdfed.21.9339.

25. See Jorge Semprún, *L'écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 336 and *Le mort qu'il faut* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 187–88. On Semprún's use

of autofictional techniques, see Ursula Tidd, *Jorge Semprún: Writing the European Other* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014).

26. On the biographical background to the novel, see Marta Marín-Dòmine's postface in Joaquim Amat-Piniella, *K.L. Reich*, 12th edn (Barcelona: Club Editor, 2017), 329–64 (331–36).

27. David Wingeate Pike, *Spaniards in the Holocaust: Mauthausen, the Horror on the Danube* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.

28. On the proportion of Spaniards deported to Mauthausen and on the mortality rate of Spanish prisoners, see Pike, *Spaniards in the Holocaust*, 11; on the classification and characteristics of Mauthausen, see *ibid.*, 13 and Marín-Dòmine, "Postfaci," in Amat-Piniella, *K.L. Reich*, 336–44.

29. Pike, *Spaniards in the Holocaust*, 12.

30. Marín-Dòmine, "Postfaci," in Amat-Piniella, *K.L. Reich*, 334–35.

31. Amat-Piniella, *K.L. Reich*, 94. Hereafter cited by page number. All translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

32. Jorge Semprún, *Le grand voyage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 12. Hereafter cited by page number.

33. See, for example: Damiano Benvegnù, *Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Work* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Marco Belpoliti, "Animali," in *Primo Levi, Riga* 13 (1997), special issue edited by Marco Belpoliti (Milan: Marcos y Marcos), 157–209. Judith Kelly, *Primo Levi: Recording and Reconstruction in the Testimonial Literature* (Leicester: Troubador, 2000), 53–57. Marco Belpoliti and Robert S. C. Gordon, "Primo Levi's Holocaust Vocabularies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. by Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51–66 (52–57).

34. Belpoliti and Gordon, "Primo Levi's Holocaust Vocabularies," 52.

35. Jonathan Druker, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 63–64.

36. Biro, *The Language of Pain*, 16.

37. Louis Tremaine, "The Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee," *Contemporary Literature* 44: 4 (2003), 587–612 (595).

38. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999), 25, 107.

39. J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 1988), 9, 12, 28.

40. Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 160.

41. For a discussion of nature as a soothing presence in camp testimonies, see Andrea Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, 105–23.

42. Semprún was influenced by Levi, although his engagement with the Italian writer emerges in works published a number of years after *Le grand voyage*. See Greg Herman, “Exploring the Canon: Jorge Semprún and the Legacy of Primo Levi,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 10:4 (2017), 356–69.

43. Mark D. Sullivan, “Psychogenic Pain: Old and New,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*, 165–74.