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## SUMMARY

Primo Levi's works of testimony, from *If This Is a Man* to *The Drowned and the Saved*, seek not only to connect history and memory but also to provide general social and political perspectives relevant to the end of the twentieth century. The voice of this diaspora Jew has had echoes in a country which has recently begun to acknowledge its historical responsibilities. Levi's thoughts on shame, on violence and on the need to face collective responsibilities have been applied by Australian intellectuals to two specifically Australian issues. The first is a literary hoax which triggered a major cultural controversy in 1995, now widely known as the 'Demidenko affair'. The second is the relationship between Australian identity and the 'stolen generations' of Aboriginal children and young adults forcibly taken from their families between 1910 and 1970 and compelled to grow up isolated from their culture. The aftermath of the forced removals has produced widespread debates about national responsibility and the need to offer a public apology to Aboriginal Australians for this and other wrongs. I attempt to show how dialogue with Levi's reflections expands the ethical and political dimensions of Australian self-examination, particularly in some works by the philosopher Raimond Gaita (who comes from a Romanian-German background) and the political scientist Robert Manne (son and grandson of Holocaust survivors).

## KEYWORDS

Primo Levi, Australia, dialogue, 'Demidenko affair', 'stolen generations'

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DIASPORIC DIALOGUES.  
PRIMO LEVI IN AUSTRALIA<sup>1</sup>

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LEVI, THE DIASPORA AND LEARNING FOR THE PRESENT

In 1984, soon after Ariel Sharon was readmitted to the Israeli Cabinet, Primo Levi discussed Israeli policies with the Italian Jewish journalist Gad Lerner for the left-of-centre weekly magazine *L'Espresso*. The interview, controversial and now well-known, was given the problematic title 'Se questo è uno Stato' (If This Is a State). In the context of the cultural differences between Israeli and Diaspora Jews, Levi twice stated his opinion that "il meglio della cultura ebraica è legato al fatto di essere dispersa, policentrica" and that it was up to Jews of the Diaspora to "custodire gelosamente il filone ebraico della tolleranza" (Belpoliti 1997, 308).<sup>2</sup> And he explained why he held this opinion:

La storia della Diaspora è stata, sí, una storia di persecuzioni, ma è stata anche una storia di scambi e di rapporti interetnici, quindi una scuola di tolleranza. (Belpoliti 1997, 308)<sup>3</sup>

What Levi calls 'tolerance' and identifies as one of the central values of Jewishness can be interpreted in secular ethical terms as the responsibility, both individual and collective, to accept difference and diversity. The essential significance of this principle persists in Levi's writings from 1947, the date of his preface to *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*):

A molti, individui o popoli, può accadere di ritenere, piú o meno consapevolmente, che "ogni straniero è nemico". Per lo piú questa convinzione giace in fondo agli animi come una infezione latente; si manifesta solo in atti saltuari e incoordinati, e non sta all'origine di un sistema di pensiero. Ma quando questo avviene, quando il dogma inespresso diventa premessa maggiore di un sillogismo, allora, al termine della catena, sta il Lager. Esso è il prodotto di una concezione del mondo portata alle sue conseguenze con rigorosa coerenza: finché la concezione sussiste, le conseguenze ci minacciano. La storia dei campi di distruzione dovrebbe venire intesa da tutti come un sinistro segnale di pericolo. (Levi, *Opere* I, 5).<sup>4</sup>

"For as long as the concept persists, the consequences are a threat to us". From his first works to his last, Levi consistently stressed that in order for the 'infection' to be recognized and fought at its outset the lessons of the death camps need to be applied to the present – not only within Italy, not only within Jewish culture, and not only with reference to the Holocaust. In 1968, in his foreword to Leon Poliakov's *Auschwitz*, Levi again uses disease as a metaphor:

La peste si è spenta ma l'infezione serpeggia: sarebbe sciocco negarlo. In questo libro se ne descrivono i segni: il disconoscimento della solidarietà umana, l'indifferenza ottusa o cinica per il dolore altrui, l'abdicazione dell'intelletto e del senso morale davanti al principio d'autorità. (Levi, *Opere I*, 1176-1177)<sup>5</sup>

Later, in a 1974 article entitled 'Un passato che credevamo non dovesse tornare piú' (A Past We Thought Would Never Return), after referring to the concentration camps set up in those years by the military dictatorships in power in Greece and Chile, he again stated that oppression has its origin in abandoning the ethics of solidarity and responsibility:

A questo si arriva in molti modi, non necessariamente col terrore dell'intimidazione poliziesca, ma anche negando o distorcendo l'informazione, inquinando la giustizia, paralizzando la scuola. (Levi, *Opere I*, 1186-87)<sup>6</sup>

He made an explicit connection between past and present in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), in the context of the complex ethics of the 'grey zone' of those victims who in the death camps chose to collaborate with the Nazis. In his view, it is indispensable for this zone to be investigated and understood

se vogliamo conoscere la specie umana, se vogliamo saper difendere le nostre anime quando una simile prova si dovesse nuovamente prospettare, o se anche soltanto vogliamo renderci conto di quello che avviene in un grande stabilimento industriale. (Levi, *Opere II*, 1020).<sup>7</sup>

#### A DIALOGUE ON MEMORY AND HISTORY: LEVI, MANNE AND THE 'DEMIDENKO AFFAIR'

Levi's perspective has had echoes in many debates on ethics after the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> In this essay I focus primarily on Australia, where I live and work, and where – although he is still read and studied primarily as a Holocaust witness – in the past twenty years some of Levi's reflections have resonated in wider debates about history and ethics among historians, intellectuals and politicians.<sup>9</sup> I refer mainly to two monographs published in Australia in the 1990s, *The Culture of Forgetting* by Robert Manne and *A Common Humanity* by Raimond Gaita, and examine the way these texts enter into dialogue with some of Levi's works. By 'dialogue' I mean, in a loosely Bakhtinian sense,<sup>10</sup> the two-way interaction between Levi's texts and the works of Manne and Gaita. The two Australian authors quote and interpret Levi in the context of Australian cultural, political and historical issues, showing how some elements of the writings of this Italian Diaspora Jew can speak to readers in contexts different from the Holocaust. At the same time, their readings of Levi open up Levi's works by adding implicit, new cognitive and ethical meanings.

Memory as a source of meaning for the present is part of Levi's teaching for the political scientist Robert Manne, the son of a German Jewish mother and an Austrian Jewish father, both of whom had sought refuge in Australia before the outbreak of World War II. In 1996 Manne published the monograph *The Culture of*

*Forgetting – Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust*, an account of a wide-ranging cultural and political controversy triggered by a literary hoax. In 1993 a young woman who claimed that she was of Ukrainian background and who called herself Helen Demidenko published a novel entitled *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. The novel is multi-vocal, but the main narrator is Fiona Kovalenko, a Ukrainian-Australian university student, who investigates the history of her father's and her uncle's membership of the SS in Ukraine during World War II, their participation in the Babi Yar massacre, and her uncle's experience as a guard at Treblinka. Fiona comes to the conclusion that the choices of her relatives, and by extension those of all the Ukrainians who collaborated with the Nazis, were acts of revenge for the role Jews had played in the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 and for a variety of wrongs the Ukrainians had suffered in the early 1930s at the hands of 'Jewish Bolsheviks' (the terms 'Jews' and 'Bolsheviks' are continually used together throughout the novel). In the final chapter Fiona's uncle, who was to have been tried as a war criminal, dies before the trial, saying that he is "trying to be sorry" (Darville 1994, 154). One page, the last one, is devoted to Fiona's visit to Treblinka and her encounter with a descendant of one of the victims, who significantly is Quaker rather than Jewish.

*The Hand that Signed the Paper* was awarded two important literary prizes, the Vogel Award (given to young, previously unpublished authors) in 1994 and the Miles Franklin Award (the most prestigious Australian prize) in June 1995. In the wake of the second award, fierce arguments arose in the Australian media between readers who saw the novel as morally complex and objectively dispassionate and readers who saw it as anti-Semitic and devoid of any moral perspective.<sup>11</sup>

In August 1995 it was revealed that Demidenko's real name was Helen Darville and that she was the daughter of two English migrants. By that time the controversy had gone beyond issues of 'authenticity' and escalated into a wider, bitter argument on Australian attitudes towards the Holocaust and the relationship between literature and history. Some of the members of the Australian literary establishment were critical of the Miles Franklin judges for their indifference to the novel's 'anti-Semitism' and 'moral ambiguity', while others were more or less openly opposed to what they saw as a campaign against the book and against free speech organized by the 'Jewish lobby'.<sup>12</sup>

Robert Manne found himself shocked and bewildered, more as an Australian than as a Jew:

I had long ceased to practise the Jewish religion. Most of my close friends were non-Jews. [...] I had always assumed that there existed in the Australian intellectual culture a rough historical knowledge of what had happened during the Holocaust and a general awareness of the ideological forces which lay behind it. [...] I had assumed that we all knew that no one worth reading would dare to write about the Holocaust without humility and high seriousness, without a recognition of what was at issue here not for Jews but for all human beings. And I had, finally, assumed that all Australians – not only intellectuals – would find it easy to understand why an event like the Holocaust should matter so deeply to those of their fellow

citizens who happened to be Jewish. As the Demidenko affair deepened, I discovered, rather suddenly, that not one of those assumptions was sound. (Manne 1996, 105-107)

The Demidenko affair became for Manne evidence of lingering anti-Semitism and 'historical amnesia' on the part of a culture that had chosen to 'move on' from the memory of the Holocaust and to consider it an event that had affected only Jews rather than humanity at large. His response to the controversy was shaped by a passage from Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* which he quotes at length: the survivor's nightmare, in the chapter 'Le nostre notti' (Our Nights):

Qui c'è mia sorella, e qualche mio amico non precisato, e molta altra gente. Tutti mi stanno ascoltando [...] Racconto [...] diffusamente della nostra fame, e del controllo dei pidocchi, e del Kapo che mi ha percosso sul naso e poi mi ha mandato a lavarmi perché sanguinavo. È un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile [...] ma non posso non accorgermi che i miei ascoltatori non mi seguono. Anzi, essi sono del tutto indifferenti: parlano confusamente d'altro fra di loro, come se io non ci fossi. Mia sorella mi guarda, si alza e se ne va senza far parola. Allora nasce in me una pena desolata, come certi dolori appena ricordati dalla prima infanzia: è dolore allo stato puro. (Levi, *Opere I*, 54)<sup>13</sup>

Levi's nightmare of being disregarded and betrayed is recontextualized by Manne into late twentieth-century Australian culture. He refers to it twice, first in the context of Demidenko's flippancy about the Holocaust and later in the context of the accusations of an anti-Demidenko campaign carried out by vengeful Jews. His historical and moral focus is the need for Australian society not to forget that the Holocaust was "a crime in one essential aspect [the planned extermination of an entire people] unparalleled in human history" (Manne 1996, 181) and to draw a lesson of historical responsibility from collective Holocaust memory. Rather than presenting Levi as an 'authentic' voice as opposed to Demidenko's 'inauthenticity', Manne stresses that Levi's dream coincides with his own fear that the Holocaust may come to be equated with other kinds of mass abuse.

In the context of the Demidenko affair, Levi was quoted not only by Manne, but also by the philosopher Raimond Gaita, a first-generation migrant to Australia and the son of a Romanian father and a German mother. In a public lecture in 1995 Gaita states forthrightly:

I have no doubt that if Darville's defenders had read Levi or [Martin] Gilbert immediately before or during the controversy, then that controversy could not have been the same. (Gaita 1995, 8)<sup>14</sup>

Levi and Darville are brought together in the context – both ethical and cognitive – of the notions of 'humanity', 'evil' and 'truthfulness'. Levi's writings, Gaita argues, "show up Helen Darville" because they are "truthful", namely based on "understanding which is inseparable from disciplined feeling" and "reverence for each individual life whose fate they record" (Gaita 1995, 15).<sup>15</sup>

## TRUTHFULNESS AND MENDACITY: LEVI AND GAITA

What Gaita refers to as Levi's 'truthfulness' adds an extra level of historical and political meaning to several of Gaita's other discussions on ethics. In the long essay entitled 'Breach of Trust. Truth, Morality and Politics' and published in 2004, Gaita critiques both the 'mendacity' of the 'coalition of the just' regarding weapons of mass destruction prior to the invasion of Iraq and the then Australian Liberal government's treatment of refugees. "Mendacity can [...] degrade a body politic", he argues, before mentioning Levi again, this time with an indirect reference to a passage in the story 'Ferro' (Iron) in *Il sistema periodico* (*The Periodic Table*):

Lui, ragazzo onesto e aperto, non sentiva il puzzo delle verità fasciste che ammorbava il cielo, non percepiva come un'ignominia che ad un uomo pensante venisse richiesto di credere senza pensare? (Levi, *Opere I*, 775)<sup>16</sup>

"'Polluted' is his [Levi's] word," stresses Gaita, using the reference to Levi to foreground the continuity between twentieth- and twenty-first century government mendacity (Gaita 2004, 26-7). Here, too, the interaction between the two texts can work both ways: if the passage from 'Ferro' is re-read with an awareness of the contexts where Gaita later placed it, the warning that "the [fascist] plague has died away, but the infection still lingers" is likely to be recalled with a new shock of recognition.

## THE HUMANITY OF OTHERS: LEVI, GAITA AND CLENDINNEN

Gaita's best-known philosophical monograph is *A Common Humanity. Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice*. The title foreshadows the idea that the notion of 'humanity' is not to be found in secular discourses about rights or in religious discourses about the sacredness of each human being, but rather in our responses to, and respect for, the humanness of one another.

The greater part of *A Common Humanity* is informed by dialogues with Levi. The most striking example is Gaita's choice – in the context of a discussion on whether the Holocaust has "blighted faith in [...] goodness"<sup>17</sup> – to quote at length a scene from the chapter 'Storia di dieci giorni' (The Story of Ten Days) in *Se questo è un uomo*. The scene is a detailed description of the way in which, among survivors almost completely devoid of solidarity, a relatively healthy man called Charles acknowledges 'common humanity' by tenderly caring for a young fellow-prisoner who soils himself while he is unconscious and close to dying of typhus:

Charles discese dal letto e si rivestì in silenzio. Mentre io reggevo il lume, ritagliò col coltello dal pagliericcio e dalle coperte tutti i punti sporchi; sollevò da terra Lakmaker colla delicatezza di una madre, lo ripulì alla meglio con paglia estratta dal saccone, e lo ripose di peso nel letto rifatto, nell'unica posizione in cui il disgraziato poteva giacere; raschiò il pavimento con un pezzo di lamiera; stemperò un po' di cloramina, e infine cosparsé di

disinfettante ogni cosa e anche se stesso. Io misuravo la sua abnegazione dalla stanchezza che avrei dovuto superare in me per fare quanto lui faceva. (Levi, *Opere I*, 163)<sup>18</sup>

“This is goodness to wonder at”, comments Gaita. He goes on to add that Levi’s writings reveal how “the distinctive evil of the Holocaust” is a violation of “the preciousness of each individual,” while the recognition of this preciousness, especially in degraded circumstances, constitutes ‘goodness’ (Gaita 1999, 152-3).

Gaita continues his dialogue with Levi’s Lakmaker episode in an article he wrote in 2003 for the Melbourne daily paper *The Age* and which he the following year expanded into the section ‘Torture’ of his essay ‘Breach of Trust. Truth, Morality and Politics’. The context in this case is a discussion about the possibility of legalizing the torture of suspected terrorists in circumstances where many innocent lives might be at stake. “Torture is the radical denial of what moves us in Levi’s story”, Gaita states. “A torturer [...] assaults that to which Charles responded in Lakmaker and which exists in every human being. That is why we say torture turns human beings into things”.<sup>19</sup>

For Gaita, to deny the humanity of others – or to deprive them of it – is absolute evil. This is why he takes issue with a reading of Levi by another Australian intellectual, the historian Inga Clendinnen. In her 1998 book *Reading the Holocaust*, Clendinnen discusses Levi at great length and with great respect, viewing him as a humanist who can produce revelatory insights from small single details. However, at one point she openly disagrees with him. In her chapter on the Auschwitz *Sonderkommandos* – mostly Jewish prisoners who were co-opted by the SS to help with the killing process and the disposal of the corpses – she mentions the well-known account of a football match which took place in 1944. The match was organized by the SS, who played against the *Sonderkommandos*, and it has been described in several accounts by survivors, including Levi’s *I sommersi e i salvati*. Clendinnen quotes Levi’s reflections:

Dietro questo armistizio si legge un riso satanico: [...] Vi abbiamo abbracciati, corrotti, trascinati sul fondo con noi. Siete come noi, voi orgogliosi: sporchi del vostro sangue come noi. Anche voi, come noi e come Caino, avete ucciso il fratello. Venite, possiamo giocare insieme. (Levi, *Opere II*, 1032-33)<sup>20</sup>

Levi reads the football match as the ultimate manifestation of the ‘diabolical’ process of dehumanisation carried out by the Nazis (*Opere II*, 1031). Clendinnen, instead, reads it “as men being allowed to recognise each other, even if briefly, as fellow humans” (86) and claims that “some small sense of community [...] seems to have bloomed in that unlikely place, and in the blooming lightened one corner of the darkness that was Auschwitz” (87). Robert Manne, in his review of *Reading the Holocaust*, acknowledges that Clendinnen was aiming to reach a better understanding of the perpetrators as well as the victims, but argues that here she “appears to sentimentalize” (Manne 1998). Gaita joins in this dialogue, on Levi’s and Manne’s side, in *A Common Humanity*. In the context of whether moments of humanity are

possible in the midst of evil, he points out that for the football match to have been one such moment, there would have needed to be some sign of guilt on the part of the oppressors:

Confronted by someone who wrongs us, especially if it is a terrible wrong, we need a sign that he understands the wrong he has done, if there is to be anything between us that counts as a sense of common humanity. He must show that he hears the cry that [Simone] Weil says is at the bottom of every human heart. [...] Nothing in the behaviour of the SS shows that they heard it. Playing football and laughing with their victims does not in itself show they did, except perhaps as sadists do, which is why Levi says the game is demonic. (Gaita 1999, 51)

#### COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY: LEVI, GAITA AND THE AUSTRALIAN 'STOLEN GENERATIONS'

For Gaita, guilt (that is to say, acceptance of responsibility, both individual and collective) and shame (that is to say, acknowledgement of the wrong committed at a collective, national level) are necessary ethical responses to the Holocaust; they are also necessary responses on the part of any nation to any major wrong, ethical or political, committed in its history.<sup>21</sup> The failure on the part of the wrong-doers to acknowledge 'a common humanity' with their victims is a common factor between the Holocaust and other mass crimes. Gaita further develops this notion with reference to a particularly shameful event in Australian history.

Between 1910 and 1970, tens of thousands<sup>22</sup> of 'part-Aboriginal'<sup>23</sup> Australian children were, on government authority, forcibly removed from their families and communities and brought up, often brutally, in children's homes or foster homes. The rationale behind the removals was to 'breed out the colour' by means of what was called an 'absorption program': in order to destroy their difference, the children were compelled to live 'as white people' and encouraged to marry other 'part-Aboriginals' or whites.<sup>24</sup> As one senior government official put it in 1937, "Eliminate the full blood [...] and permit the white admixture [...] and eventually the race will become white".<sup>25</sup>

After World War II the policy of 'breeding out the colour' was gradually replaced by policies of cultural assimilation, but the forced removals continued. Over the decades, the lives of the 'stolen children' were devastated: they lost much of their culture, their language and their identity, and this seriously damaged their relationships with their own children and the following generations. The general Australian public became aware of the full extent of this injustice after the publication of a report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*,<sup>26</sup> which came out in 1997 and was the catalyst for a general re-examination and re-evaluation of the nation's history.

Raimond Gaita discusses the ethical implications of the removal policies in *A Common Humanity* and other essays. He only mentions Levi once,<sup>27</sup> but his analyses are in constant implicit dialogue with Levi's.

*Bringing Them Home* called the removal policies "destruction by forced assimilation" and defined them as genocide. Gaita does not argue outright that the



policies amounted to genocide,<sup>28</sup> but looks at their 'genocidal elements' in terms of the moral categories 'good' and 'evil':

The absorption program expressed the horrifyingly arrogant belief that some peoples may eliminate from the earth peoples they believe to be less than fully human.<sup>29</sup>

Behind this statement it is possible to hear an echo of Levi's preface to *Se questo è un uomo*: "when the unspoken dogma ['Every stranger is an enemy'] becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the *Lager*".

Further echoes of Levi are perceptible when Gaita looks at the question of collective responsibility and argues strongly against conservative politicians (such as the then Liberal Prime Minister John Howard) and conservative historians (such as Geoffrey Blainey, who in 1993 coined the expression "the black armband view of Australian history").<sup>30</sup> In the 1990s the common conservative view was that the Australian population did not need to feel any shame for events which had taken place decades earlier, and that no official national apology was owed to the members and descendants of the 'stolen generations' because "such an apology could imply that present generations are in some way responsible and accountable for the actions of earlier generations."<sup>31</sup> Gaita maintains instead that shame not only needs to be expressed, but in fact becomes the necessary condition for the whole Australian nation to move forward:

Shame is as necessary for the lucid acknowledgement by Australians of the wrongs the Aborigines suffered at the hands of their political ancestors, and to the wrongs they continue to suffer, as pain is to mourning. It is not an optional emotional addition to the recognition of the meaning of their dispossession. It is, I believe, the *form* of that recognition. (Gaita 1999, 92)

For this reason, Gaita – with Robert Manne and a number of Australian public intellectuals, including Anne Deveson – repeatedly expressed the need for the symbolic gesture of a national apology followed by some kind of national reparation, without which there could be no discussion of the notions of 'reconciliation' and 'forgiveness'.<sup>32</sup>

Reflections on individual shame and guilt, or their absence, are central in Levi's works, where 'shame' and 'guilt' are often a blurred continuum. These reflections lend themselves to multiple possibilities of recontextualization. No one who is familiar with Levi's writings could fail, when thinking about guilt and shame, to recall the opening of *La tregua* and the description of four young Red Army soldiers who are speechless at their first glimpse of Auschwitz:

Non salutavano, non sorridevano [...] Era la stessa vergogna a noi ben nota, quella che ci sommergeva dopo le selezioni, ed ogni volta che ci toccava assistere o sottostare a un oltraggio: la vergogna che i tedeschi non conobbero, quella che il giusto prova davanti alla colpa commessa da altri, e gli rimorde che esista, che sia stata introdotta irrevocabilmente nel mondo delle cose che esistono, e che la sua volontà buona sia stata nulla o scarsa, e non abbia valso a difesa. (*Opere*, I, 206)<sup>33</sup>

Levi's general observation that shame for evil-doing afflicts the just as well as the guilty is a valid comment on all instances of oppression, including the 'stolen generations' policies. At the same time, differentiations between shame and guilt, such as those made by Gaita and Belpoliti – who defines 'shame' as awareness of individual helplessness and 'guilt' as admission of having done or not done something, and as a result having caused others to be harmed<sup>34</sup> – may be useful to help readers of Levi to redefine the network of connotations each of these terms has throughout Levi's works.

The chapter 'Vanadio' in *Il sistema periodico* charts the developing awareness on the part of Levi's narrated autobiographical self that honesty in acknowledging guilt is the necessary condition for forgiveness. The unsent letter written by the narrated self to 'Dr Müller' ends with the uncompromising statements "mi dichiaravo pronto a perdonare i nemici, e magari anche ad amarli, ma solo quando mostrino segni certi di pentimento, e cioè quando cessino di essere nemici" and "di Auschwitz deve rispondere ogni tedesco, anzi, ogni uomo".<sup>35</sup> This attitude was clarified during a public lecture given soon after the publication of *Il sistema periodico*. In answer to a question from the audience, Levi differentiated between collective and individual repentance and forgiveness:

Nelle scuole i ragazzi mi chiedono sovente: ha perdonato? No, non ho perdonato: non posso perdonare in blocco come non posso odiare in blocco. E non potrei nemmeno perdonare al singolo, a meno che non si ravvedesse dimostrandolo con i fatti e non a parole. ma allora non sarebbe più un nemico. [...] Se fossi un giudice non perdonerei, farei giustizia.<sup>36</sup>

In *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi applies his reflections on the survivors' shame and guilt to the general human responsibility to react to collective wrongs:

I giusti fra noi [superstiti dei Lager] [...] hanno provato rimorso, vergogna, dolore insomma, per la colpa che altri e non loro avevano commessa, ed in cui si sono sentiti coinvolti, perché sentivano che quanto era avvenuto [...] avrebbe dimostrato che l'uomo, il genere umano, noi insomma, eravamo potenzialmente capaci di costruire una mole infinita di dolore; [...] Basta non vedere, non ascoltare, non fare. (*Opere II*, 1057-58)<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

To quote and discuss Levi in contexts other than the Holocaust – contexts that involve universal ethical issues such as forms of oppression and forms of acknowledgement – is not, in my opinion, an appropriation: it is consistent with Levi's own views and is part of the process of bringing the lessons of the Holocaust to the post-Holocaust world. Manne's and Gaita's applications of Levi's reflections to Australian issues help to challenge problematic Australian discourses on political responsibility, such as the presentation of the Holocaust as 'ethnic revenge', the view of torture as a necessary evil, and approaches to the issue of the 'stolen generations' which are devoid of either guilt or shame. The voices of an Italian Jew, an Australian-

born child of Jewish refugees and a first-generation European migrant to Australia meet and illuminate each other in a dialogue about responses to difference and responses to evil.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All my most sincere thanks to Miriam Lang for her invaluable assistance with both language and content.

<sup>2</sup> "The best of Jewish culture is bound to the fact of being dispersed, polycentric" [...] "jealously guard the Jewish tradition of tolerance" (Belpoliti & Gordon 2001, 290-91).

<sup>3</sup> "The history of the Diaspora has been a history of persecution but also of interethnic exchange and relations, in other words a school for tolerance." (Belpoliti & Gordon 2001, 292).

<sup>4</sup> "Many people – many nations – can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'. For the most part this conviction lies at the bottom of our souls like some latent infection; it manifests itself only in random, disconnected acts, and is not the foundation of a system of thought. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the *Lager*. The *Lager* is the product of a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion: so long as this conception persists, the conclusion remains to threaten us. The history of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm signal" (*If This Is a Man*, 15). My own translation of the second last sentence would be "The *Lager* is the product of a conception of the world carried to its conclusion with rigorous consistency: for as long as this conception persists, the conclusion is a threat to us".

<sup>5</sup> "The plague has died away, but the infection still lingers and it would be foolish to deny it. In this book the signs of the infection are described: rejection of human solidarity, obtuse and cynical indifference to the suffering of others, abdication of the intellect and of moral sense to the principle of authority" (*Black Hole of Auschwitz*, 29). My own translation of the second half of the sentence would be "disavowing human solidarity, showing thoughtless or cynical indifference to the pain of others, renouncing reason and morals in the face of the principle of authority".

<sup>6</sup> "There are many ways of reaching this point, not just through the terror of police intimidation, but by denying and distorting information, by undermining systems of justice, by paralyzing the education system" (*Black Hole of Auschwitz*, 34).

<sup>7</sup> "if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls should a similar trial once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory" (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 25-26).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Hirsch 1995, Roth 1999 and the essays collected in *L'insegnamento di Auschwitz* (2009).

<sup>9</sup> In Australia Levi has been widely quoted as the most authoritative Holocaust witness in different contexts. Unflattering comparisons with Levi were used in Australian critiques of the film *LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL* (see Cicioni 2005, especially 280-82). In 2003 journalist and novelist Anne Deveson published *Resilience*, an investigation of the nature and manifestations of this quality. Levi's testimony is central in the chapter titled 'Violence', which deals with survivors of mass imprisonment and slaughter. Former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr in 2008 published *My Reading Life. Adventures in the World of Books*, a book which catalogues all the texts which Carr found especially meaningful

throughout his life. The first book mentioned (“the most important book of the twentieth century”) is the one-volume English translation of *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua* (*If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*).

<sup>10</sup> See Bakhtin 1981 and Todorov 1984, 61-62.

<sup>11</sup> Different analyses of the controversy have been written by two Australian Jewish intellectuals, Manne 1996 and Riemer 1996. A lucid account of the ‘multicultural’ aspect of the Demidenko affair is provided by Gunew 1996.

<sup>12</sup> See Manne 1996, 98-105 and Riemer 1996, 121-46.

<sup>13</sup> “This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friends and many other people. They are all listening to me I speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people, and to have so many things to record: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. A desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one’s early infancy. It is pain in its pure state” (*If This Is a Man*, 66; quoted, with some minor changes, in Manne 1996, 58).

<sup>14</sup> The lecture (‘Remembering the Holocaust: Absolute Value and the Nature of Evil’, Mannix College, Monash University) was published in the journal *Quadrant* (Gaita 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Gaita 1995, 15 (*passim*).

<sup>16</sup> “Didn’t he, an honest, open young man, smell the stench of Fascist truths which polluted the sky? Did he not perceive it as an ignominy that a thinking man should be asked to believe without thinking?” (*The Periodic Table*, 42).

<sup>17</sup> Gaita 1999, 150.

<sup>18</sup> “Charles climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Lakmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tinfoil, diluted a little chloramine and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself. I judged his self-sacrifice by the tiredness which I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done” (*If This Is a Man*, 173; quoted in Gaita 1999, 151).

<sup>19</sup> Gaita 2003. Reprinted in Gaita 2004, 59.

<sup>20</sup> “Behind this armistice one hears Satanic laughter: [...] We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people, dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together” (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 38; quoted in Clendinnen 1998, 86).

<sup>21</sup> Gaita 1999, 5-11 and 92-93.

<sup>22</sup> The number of children who were forcibly removed has been estimated as being between 10,000 and 100,000 (approximately one in ten and one in three of the overall number of children of mixed descent respectively). Robert Manne, after assessing the available evidence, puts the figure at “no fewer than one in ten” and probably between 20,000 and 25,000 children. See Manne 2001, 24-29 and 103.

<sup>23</sup> Indigenous Australians consider everyone with any degree of Aboriginal ancestry to be Aboriginal. Until the 1970s nearly all Australian government officials referred to ‘full-blood’ and ‘half-caste’ Aboriginals.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on the 'stolen generations' is extensive. Overviews with a left-wing perspective are Elder [1988] 2009 and Reynolds 2001. A strong critique of Reynolds is presented in Windschuttle 2009. Bird 1998 contains both critical essays and testimonies from 'stolen children'.

<sup>25</sup> A.O. Neville, government official in Western Australia, quoted in Reynolds 2001, 152.

<sup>26</sup> The full title is *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*.

<sup>27</sup> Levi is mentioned as an example of descriptions of injustice that are "informed by feeling" [but] not distressed by it" (Gaita 1999, 89).

<sup>28</sup> On the philosophical and moral question of whether the term 'genocide' is appropriate, see Gaita 1999, 110-127; Gaita 2000a, Reynolds 2001 (especially Chapters 2 and 9) and Manne 2001, 34-35. Neil Levi 2009 discusses comparisons between the Holocaust and the fate of Australian Aborigines since the beginning of colonial settlement.

<sup>29</sup> Gaita 1999, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Blainey first used the expression in his 1993 Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture. See Gaita 2000b and 'History Wars'.

<sup>31</sup> The then Minister for Employment Peter Reith, in a 1997 letter to the human rights advocate Father Frank Brennan; quoted in Gaita 1999, 99.

<sup>32</sup> See the essays collected in Grattan 2000. Deveson 2003, 120-21 makes an explicit connection between Levi's writings, the need for the persecutors to make a public apology, and the wrongs committed against Australian Aboriginal people. The national apology was eventually, and movingly, made by newly-elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008.

<sup>33</sup> "They did not greet us, nor did they smile [...] It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that engulfed us after the selections, and every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime; the feeling of guilt that such a shame should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defence" (*The Truce*, 188). My own translation of the last few words would be "and that his own will for good should have proved to be non-existent or weak, and was not effective as a defence." This scene is analyzed in depth in the chapter "Auschwitz" of Belpoliti's important study of shame *Senza vergogna* (2010, 80-97).

<sup>34</sup> See Belpoliti 2010, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Levi, *Opere*, I, 932 and 933: "I declared myself ready to forgive my enemies, and perhaps even to love them, but only when they showed certain signs of repentance, that is, when they ceased being enemies"; "every German must answer for Auschwitz, indeed every man", *The Periodic Table*, 222 and 223.

<sup>36</sup> "In schools, children often ask me: Have you forgiven? No, I have not forgiven: I cannot forgive collectively, just as I cannot hate collectively. And I could not forgive an individual either, unless he repented and showed it in his deeds rather than his words, but then he would no longer be an enemy. [...] If I were a judge I would not forgive, I would administer justice" Lecture given in Turin on 19 November 1976. Quoted in Poli & Calcagno 1992, 102 (Translated by Mirna Cicioni).

<sup>37</sup> "the just among us [survivors of the camps] [...] felt remorse, shame, and pain for the misdeeds that others and not they had committed, and in which they felt involved, because they sensed that what had happened [...] would prove that man, the human species – we, in short – were potentially able to construct an infinite enormity of pain [...]. It is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act" (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 66).

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