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In *Survival in Auschwitz* Primo Levi speaks of his pressing need to find “interior liberation” from an “immediate and violent impulse” to tell his story, which had seized him while he was still a prisoner. Given the urgency with which Levi wrote, the measured, reflective tone he achieves in his narrative is astonishing, and that much more so, considering that Levi published his testimony only two years after his liberation. Levi became internationally famous for *Survival in Auschwitz*, which, after its second run in 1957, was translated into many languages and adapted for radio and theatre.

There are two subjects of this testimony, Levi and the *Muselmänner*, the latter being the name used in the camps for a prisoner who was not equipped to survive. The title of Levi’s testimony—literally “*If This Is a Man*” is a reference to the *Muselmänner*, who, in the eyes of the other prisoners, appeared to have lost their human qualities before their biological deaths. The title of the

2. *If This Is a Man* is the original title of the first English translation.
3. Levi writes that he does not know why this term was used by the oldest survivors of the camp to describe those prisoners “doomed to selection,” *Survival in Auschwitz* (88). The term *Muselmänn* itself means “Muslim.” For a discussion of the significance of the word and its usage, see Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, The Arab: A History of*
text thus directs the reader’s attention to the *Muselmänner*. They are also the focus of the central chapter of Levi’s testimony, called “The Drowned and the Saved.” “Drowned” is Levi’s name for *Muselmänner*, while “saved” is his name for the rest of the prisoners. In 1987 Levi brought this division among prisoners into even greater prominence by titling his final text *The Drowned and the Saved*.

In what follows I will explore how the very process of constructing the categories of “drowned” and “saved” was instrumental to Levi’s “interior liberation.” These categories enabled Levi to analyze the lives and deaths of the prisoners of the German death camp in a way that simultaneously brought his own self into focus in the aftermath of survival. I do not mean to suggest that these categories were significant because they enabled Levi to see himself as one of the “saved,” though that was also the case; rather, I will emphasize the way these categories served as an oppositional structure through which Levi expressed, and managed, his own psychic disarray. So compelling was Levi’s use of these categories as heuristic tools that their status as metaphors that evolved over time has been forgotten by readers. It is important to keep in mind, though, that Levi first presented the categories in *Survival in Auschwitz* and then returned to them forty years later in *The Drowned and the Saved*. As such, their specific elaboration in each text reflects different phases in the evolution of Levi’s identity as a survivor.

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, “drowned” and “saved” are “particularly well differentiated categories among men” (87). They reflect an absolute difference among victims, essential to Levi’s presentation of the range of prisoners’ experiences. In his view, “Other pairs of opposites (the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the cowards and the courageous, the unlucky and the fortunate) are considerably less distinct; they seem less essential, and above all they allow for more numerous and complex intermediary gradations” (87–88).

Levi’s portrait of the *Muselmänner* emphasizes their isolation. The other prisoners in the camp believed it was not worthwhile to speak to these “men in decay,” because they only complained or talked about eating (89). They were not enterprising, so they had nothing to offer prisoners by way of food or useful items. On the contrary, they were the embodiment of what any prisoner could easily become, and as a result, they were ostracized. The *Muselmänner* were considered non-men, existing alone, without awareness of other people or consciousness of them-

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selves. Levi writes, “They suffer and drag themselves along in an opaque intimate solitude [una opaca intima solitudine] and in solitude they die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone’s memory” (89). Dying was not death; it was “disappearing,” because the Muselmänner did not exist in the eyes of others while they were alive. Their deaths were therefore not witnessed, much less mourned.

Levi first introduces the figure of the “drowned” man through an extended metaphor:

To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way. All the musselmans [sic] who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea . . . Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (90)

The Muselmänner impinge upon Levi’s mind. He writes, “They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen” (90). Where did Levi’s knowledge of the Muselmann’s experience come from? How could he fathom the inner life of a figure who he claimed had no inner life? The answer is obvious: by looking into his own depths. Or rather, by projecting those depths onto an image of otherness from which he could then dissociate. In Survival in Auschwitz, before Levi introduces the categories of “drowned” and “saved,” he narrates three episodes whose descriptive language directly affiliates him with the “drowned,” notwithstanding his intention to use this category as the marker of absolute difference between them and himself.

4. All references to the Italian text are from Primo Levi, Se questo è un uomo (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 112. Subsequent page references are included, in square brackets, in the body of this text.
The first of these episodes occurs in a section titled “On the Bottom” [Sul fondo] (22) [23]. The episode concerns Levi’s arrival at Auschwitz. Thirsty, tired, confused, the prisoners have been taken off the train and are now standing in a cold room where they are forced to strip. They are shaved and then moved into another room. Levi writes, “[H]ere we are, locked in, naked, sheared and standing, with our feet in water—it is a shower-room. We are alone” (23). Standing with his feet in the water, Levi is literally and figuratively in the region of the “drowned,” on the bottom. After the shower, the prisoners are dressed in rags and destroyed boots:

There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces . . .

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence [la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa], the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. (26) [29]

The scene indicates that the speechlessness Levi will associate with the Muselmänner originates in this response to the “demolition” he witnesses in this region of the “drowned.” The absence of language to express offense will be reflected in Levi’s writing as a relentless muteness characteristic of the Muselmann.

The second episode in which Levi appears among the “drowned” concerns a recurring dream he had in Auschwitz. Levi provides an account of the actual dream and also a description of its emotional effect on him. In the dream itself, Levi has returned from Auschwitz and is telling a story to his sister and some friends. He is describing what it is like trying to sleep in the camps. The focus of his story is the neighbor (“il mio vicino”) with whom he is forced to share his hard bed [74]. In the dream Levi has the feeling that he would like to move the neighbor, but he is afraid to wake him, because he knows that the neighbor is stronger than he. Levi also speaks “diffusely” to his audience about other details of camp life, but nevertheless he enjoys the pleasures of storytelling, until something changes (60). Levi writes, “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” (60). Still in the dream, Levi writes,
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, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim \textit{[risalire]} once again up to the surface, but this time I deliberately open my eyes to have a guarantee in front of me of being effectively awake. (60) [74]

To escape from his pain Levi must “swim” (literally “go up again”) to the surface, a metaphor that suggests how his dreamscape, like the shower room, is the nether region of the “drowned.” In the story Levi tells to his sister and friends, Levi, the speaker, is represented as two separate figures: he is the narrator of the account of his difficult night, and he is the neighbor, \textit{il mio vicino}, literally his “near” (\textit{vicino}) one. In keeping with this doubling, the language in which the dream scene is represented exhibits a web of associations between the neighbor and the “drowned.” Like the “drowned,” the neighbor is defined as a body. He is asleep, just as the “drowned” man is “too tired” to think (90). The neighbor is physically immovable—Levi cannot get him out of his bed. His presence in the bed forces the two into a physical intimacy, but without communication: the neighbor and the “drowned” are both mute and psychically impenetrable. Last, they both dwell in the metaphorical waters of the “drowned.”

As a figure appearing in Levi’s dream, it is clear that this “drowned” man reflects aspects of Levi himself. His speechless corporeality suggests the existence of foreclosed psychic spaces that comprise the prehistory of the figure that will signify absolute otherness. The troubling presence of the neighbor in Levi’s dream underscores the personal utility of the category of “drowned” as an epistemological construction—one that enables Levi to externalize this impenetrable internal other and thereby dissociate himself partially from it.

The figure of the neighbor also bears consideration in relation to Levi’s wish, represented in the dream, to be recognized as a skillful storyteller. If Levi is to command the attention of his audience, the dream suggests that he will have to tolerate the presence of the slumbering yet imposing psychic material crowding his mind. Levi’s wish to move the neighbor rather than communicate with him could be read as an expression of Levi’s fear of being overpowered by this material. At the same time, in its capacity as wish fulfillment, the dream also presents a way for Levi to tolerate this fear, insofar as its own narrative procedures could be seen as tools for the management of the anxiety that the neighbor
generates. Specifically, the dream uses projection to distance Levi from his fears. For example, although Levi feels devastated when his friends and family ignore him while he tells them his story, he does not blame them for their inattention. Instead he projects his narrative incompetence onto them: in the dream, they, not he, speak “confusedly,” or what is worse, they cannot speak at all. In another instance of projection, Levi awakens from his troubling dream, and now the dream stands before him, which is to say, he has projected it outside of himself in an effort not to be subject to it again. He will keep his eyes open (“I deliberately open my eyes”), avoiding his unconscious in order not to encounter his fears. The dream also demonstrates how, through projection, Levi’s impalpable inner silence is configured as speechless material entities: the neighbor, but also Levi’s sister, whose silence makes her a “related” variant of the “drowned.”

In the dream, Levi has been abandoned by his audience just as he has been abandoned to his fate in Auschwitz. Possibly to protect himself from personalizing his response, he associates his feelings to “barely remembered pains of one’s early infancy,” in other words, to an imagined time of prememory. As such, the analogy between Levi’s grief and pains of infancy expresses Levi’s emotion in a form that removes it from the current situation, which is its point of origin. This has the effect of depriving the feeling of its “sense of reality” by shielding it from “the intrusion of extraneous circumstances.” One could reverse this last formulation and say that this displacement of the origin of his pain into the past through the analogy has the effect of preventing Levi’s pain from intruding on the “extraneous circumstances” of the present: the painful rejection of his audience. By not openly expressing “this offense,” Levi may thus be protecting his ties to his listeners and protecting his listeners from a more accusatory expression of his grief. It is important to remember that Levi repeatedly dreamt this dream in Auschwitz. By creating in fantasy a way of repudiating the impulse to accuse, the dream may itself have been a means of tolerating the complete powerlessness of his situation, including the impossibility of being able to level accusations at the tormentors.

Levi has a second dream, which he relates before introducing the category of the “drowned” into the text. In this dream, which is a daydream, Levi is on a train. When the train stops, he steps outside into the warm country air and lies down upon the ground. An Italian woman passes him and asks who he is. Levi tells her his story in Italian. He writes, “[S]he would understand, and she would give me food and shelter. And she would not believe the things I tell her, and I would show her
the number on my arm, and then she would believe . . .” (43–44). This maternal figure feeds and protects Levi, and speaks his mother tongue. But even with a common language and willingness to listen, she remains a reluctant listener. Levi cannot secure her recognition as a witness to his story. Like the audience in the first dream, she does not receive his story in the way that he expects. To convince her of the authenticity of his testimony, he must show her a physical sign, his tattoo. While the tattoo does not “say” anything, its reality guarantees the legitimacy of his narrative. Like the mute, slumbering neighbor, the tattoo is an essential presence within the story that must remain visible and that, as an element of the dream, strengthens the association of the body as a representation of internal otherness and the “drowned.”

The most prominent image of the body in *Survival in Auschwitz* is a poem by Levi that is separate from the main text and included on an unnumbered page between the preface and the first page of the narrative. Its placement suggests that it is an alterity existing within the main textual body though distinct from it, like the tattoo of the daydream. Though separate, the poem is central: Levi takes the title of his book from a line in it, which presents images of the “drowned”:

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You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
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Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you. (11)

The first and subsequently repeated word in the verse, “consider,” indicates that this poem is an apostrophe. As such, it is an appeal to those who can see, to consider or recognize those who cannot. The addressee of the call is named in the opening lines: “You.” This “you” could refer to Levi’s readers, but it could also be the poetic voice addressing the narrative voice of the main text. For insofar as it is a call to “consider” and “[m]editate that this came about,” it is prescribing what Levi should do as a witness. Given this, Levi’s statement in the preface that his immediate purpose in writing was to “furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind” suggests that his text is a response to this poetic apostrophe (9). In other words, Levi, the first-person speaker of the main text, may be holding a dialogue with the poetic voice. The images in lines 5–14, depicting men and women who have become Muselmänner, would seem to confirm that Levi has followed the command of the poetic voice: he has made the “drowned” the subject of his testimonial record.

When the poem was later included in a published collection of Levi’s writing, it was accompanied by the title “Shemà.” The title indicates that the poem is a rewriting of the central prayer of Jewish faith. Levi’s use of this Biblical model establishes a parallel between his poem and obedience to God’s law, a parallel that continues in the poem’s final lines, which echo the second portion of the Shema. The Biblical passage reads, “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.”

5. Ian Thomson notes that the poem was originally entitled “Psalm” and was written as the Nuremberg trials were underway; it was intended not for publication but rather as “a private ritual cleansing. Before Levi could chronicle the story of his persecution in prose, the rage had to be excised first in poetry. Far from being an afterthought to the cool analytic prose to come, the verse was a vital part of the book now incubating.” Ian Thomson, “The Genesis of If This Is a Man,” in The Legacy of Primo Levi, ed. Stanislao G. Pughese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 45.

illness impede you, / May your children turn their faces from you.” The threat here is undisguised. If the poem’s addressee—be it Levi or the reader—does not meditate upon the figures depicted in the verse and how they came to be, a curse will befall him, the precedent for which is God’s anger. While the model for this poetic voice is not human, the accumulating weight of its decree is. It is spoken in the voice of one who stands outside the “warm houses” looking in, fearing that his message will not be received.7

How do we reconcile this poetic voice with the measured voice that narrates the main text? Excluded from both the preface and main narrative, compressed into a verse, this voice is raging. The poem’s relation to the main text as a fragment to the whole is mirrored in the imagery of the verse itself: hair, eyes, womb, hearts, faces are as elements of a body that has been blown apart, as if by the force of the speaker’s emotion. In both form and content, this poetic textual fragment represents another figural body associated with Levi’s inner “drowned.” But unlike the slumbering neighbor or the tattoo, this fragment is animated by a rage that has the potential to destroy the coherence of the main text. This, however, does not occur. Instead, the rage implodes upon itself. The images of the shattered body are confined to a circumscribed textual field, pressed to the bottom. As delimited expressions of rage, they, along with the images of the drowned within the text, may express Levi’s divided wish both to express a rage and to silence it. In Levi’s words the relationship of textual body to poetic fragment reflects the “love and rage” with which he composed his text.8

Forty years later, in The Drowned and the Saved, Levi returns to the “drowned.” In the final chapter of that text, he provides an account of the publication history of Survival in Auschwitz:

It was published for the first time in 1947, a run of two thousand five hundred copies, and was well received by the critics but sold only in part: the six hundred unsold copies stored in Florence in a remainder warehouse were drowned in the autumn flood [vi annegarono nell’alluvione

7. I am extremely grateful to an anonymous reader for pointing out that the placement of the poem at the threshold of Levi’s text aligns it with the placement of the mezuzah (which contains a piece of parchment inscribed with the Shema) affixed to the doorframe of Jewish homes and that the poem thereby not only engages dialogically with Jewish rites and tradition but even redefines them.

8. This is how Levi described his work on the book to Jean Samuel; quoted in Thomson, “The Genesis of If This Is a Man,” 52.
of 1969. After ten years of “apparent death,” it came back to life when the Einaudi publishing company accepted it in 1957.

The description reads as an uncanny allegory of the structure of *Survival in Auschwitz*. Just as the main textual body of *Survival in Auschwitz* speaks in the “saved” voice of Levi, so too were the majority of copies “saved” from the flood. Further, the “drowned” remains of the book correspond to the voice of the poetic fragment in the text, which is also a kind of remainder cut off from the main textual body to protect the dominant voice from the rage infusing the poetic fragment. It could be said, then, that the raging poetic voice is the “remaindered” voice of Levi himself, which, like the remaindered part of the book run, is “drowned.” Levi’s comment about the book’s reception by the critics brings into focus his investment in being received as a good storyteller, which his first dream conveyed. As such, it enables us to understand how the neighbor, as a figure of slumbering rage that “awoke” in the poetic fragment, had to remain confined in that space so as not to interfere with the more hearable dominant narrative voice. On some level Levi may have known that this internal voice of the “drowned” would not have been well received by the critics.

Levi’s description of *Survival in Auschwitz* as having come back or returned to life, “ritornò alla vita,” is an apt description of *The Drowned and the Saved*, which itself can be read as an uncanny return of the foreclosed aspects of *Survival in Auschwitz*. On the one hand, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, the category of the “drowned” becomes more sharply divided from the rage of the voice in the poetic fragment. At the same time, however, the voice of the poetic fragment associated with the “drowned” also seems poised on the margins of the text in a less contained way than in *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Levi reintroduces the category of the “drowned” in what could be described as a moment of crisis: the voices of the “saved” and the “drowned” momentarily seem to merge into one another. This is the only time that Levi explicitly identifies anger as an appropriate response in the survivor, though neither the voice of the “drowned,” nor of the

“saved,” seems to lay claim to this anger. The naming of anger occurs in the context of Levi’s attempt to trace an enduring feeling of “something like shame [forse non era propriamente vergogna, ma come tale veniva percepito].”\(^{13}\) His discussion leads him to make following statement:

Changing moral codes is always costly: all heretics, apostates, and dissidents know this. We cannot judge our behavior or that of others, driven at that time by the code of that time, on the basis of today’s code; but the anger that pervades us [la collera che ci invade] when one of the “others” feels entitled to consider us “apostates” or, more precisely, reconverted, seems right [giusta] to me (80).\(^{14}\)

Levi calls attention to a split within the survivor, between the moral code of the community to which he has returned and the amoral code that he had been forced to adopt to survive, which dictates: “‘I come first, second, and third. Then nothing, then again I; and then all the others.’”\(^{15}\) Levi’s concern in this passage is with those who assume that the survivor can renounce his prior amoral self of incarceration, which is what the image of the survivor as “reconverted” implies. This assumption arouses anger, because, as I understand Levi, it presupposes that the survivor has now rejected the part of himself that survived in the camps precisely by rejecting the moral code of the community to which he has returned. Were the survivor to repudiate his experience of having lived in the absence of his present community’s code, he would be repudiating the basis of his existence as a prisoner and hence, his right to have existed. The anger that is right (or “just”) is on behalf of that past self that is at odds with the survivor’s present community. By the same token, because the survivor is in fact a part of the community, his anger, though just, nevertheless feels like an invasion: it is at odds with the moral code that he has adopted. Directly after this passage Levi leaves a blank in the text, as if to signify a rupture from that self-dividing anger. The blank can also be read as indicating that for Levi, the storyteller, such anger is disruptive and he must therefore dissociate himself from it.

Following this blank, the voice that resumes speaking is the moral voice of the community within the survivor. Levi writes,

13. Ibid., 55 (my translation). This comment is similar to Jean Améry’s reference to “what is called ‘resentments’ in relation to revenge that cannot [purify].” Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, 40.
Are you ashamed because you are alive in the place of another? And in particular, of a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, worthier of living than you? You cannot block out such feelings: you examine yourself, you review your memories, hoping to find them all, and that none of them are masked or disguised. No, you find no obvious transgressions, you did not usurp anyone’s place, you did not beat anyone (but would you have had the strength to do so?) . . . you did not steal anyone’s bread; nevertheless you cannot exclude it. It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother’s Cain, that each one of us (but this time I say “us” in a much vaster, indeed, universal sense) has usurped his neighbor’s place [il suo prossimo]16 and lived in his stead. It is a supposition, but it gnaws at us; it has nestled deeply like a woodworm; although unseen from the outside, it gnaws and rasps.17

This voice, the representative of conscience, seems to have absorbed the invasive anger of the victimized self of the passage directly preceding it, and to have metabolized that anger into critical self-interrogation. While this voice does not succeed in uncovering a basis for shame in past deeds, it does find something more and less shameful than deeds themselves: a universal mark of Cain. On the one hand, the curse of fratricide implicates everyone in shame. But on the other hand, as an archetypal image of guilt, the curse also renders shame nonspecific, and in so doing, displaces blame away from the community that failed to protect the victims.

The reference in the curse to the neighbor, “il suo prossimo” (like “il mio vicino,” literally “his near one”), suggests that there has been a shift in Levi’s relation to the internal alterity symbolized in the sleeping neighbor of his dream of forty years ago. In Survival in Auschwitz, the neighbor was a presence that could not be ignored. He was dead weight, but the speaker in the dream continued to share his bed with him, and the voice of his rage was ex-communicated to the poetic text, where it could at least be recognized. By contrast, in The Drowned and the Saved, the “near one” has become an intolerable threat, a suspected murderer. In this sense Levi’s suspicion that each of us is our brother’s murderer can be read as indicating an active turning against the slumbering neighbor and, as such, as a further repudiation of the possibility of even tolerating the presence of opaque sites of meaning within himself.18

16. Levi, I sommersi e i salvati, 63.
18. For a discussion of Levi’s shame in terms of survivor guilt, see Ruth Leys, From Guilt to
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In this same section of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi introduces the image of the Muselmann as one who had seen the Gorgon:

I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims,” the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception. . . . We speak in their stead, by proxy.\(^{19}\)

This mythological figure seems far removed from the physicality of the suffering men and women who died in the camps. Their abject reality recedes beneath the complex chain of descriptive phrases Levi uses to signify them: they are “the true witnesses . . . who saw the Gorgon . . . ‘the Muslims,’ the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones . . . the rule . . . .” Thus, it becomes difficult to recognize the corporeality of the Muselmann, which I have read as the metaphoric materiality that absorbed and silenced the rage on display in the poetic fragment. It is as if, through the image of the Gorgon and the accompanying description, Levi removes the symbolic bodies visible in *Survival in Auschwitz*. In other words, a nonhuman figure, “the Gorgon,” displaces the images of the human body through which Levi’s internal “drowned” man had been legible. In this regard, the designation of the figure of the Muselmann as “the complete witnesses” can be understood as an act of self-authorization: through it Levi constitutes his own testimonial voice, but only by transmogrifying the body symbolically containing his foreclosed rage.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 83–84. Sara Horowitz calls attention to the fact that, notwithstanding Levi’s conceptualization of the dead as the true witnesses, whose stories the survivors tell “by proxy,” the large body of ghetto writings—diaries, chronicles, and archives—left by murdered victims constitutes a “powerful and direct testimonial form”; Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 48.

\(^{20}\) Giorgio Agamben traces the contours of “an impossible dialectic” between the Muselmann, or “complete witness,” and Levi, the witness “by proxy” (120). He writes, “Testimony appears here as a process that involves at least two subjects: the first, the survivor, who can speak but who has nothing interesting to say; and the second, who ‘has seen the Gorgon,’ who
Coincident with the disembodiment of the “drowned,” a blankness begins to inhabit Levi’s words, evident in Levi’s discussion of the origins of anguish: “Anguish is known to everyone, even children, and everyone knows that it is often blank, undifferentiated. Rarely does it carry a clearly written label that also contains its motivation; any label it does have is often mendacious.”

Levi’s reference to children’s anguish as reflective of his own enduring anguish replicates his discussion in *Survival in Auschwitz* of his “desolating grief” in terms of “certain ‘has touched bottom,’ and therefore has much to say but cannot speak. Which of the two bears witness? Who is the subject of testimony? (120, italics in original). Agamben answers his question: “Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the ‘imagined substance’ of the ‘I’ and, along with it, the true witness” (120). According to Agamben, through the movement of testimony the difference between Levi and the *Muselmann* collapses into a “zone of indistinction.” In this way, the testimonial “dialectic” undermines the very position of the subject and thus renders unanswerable Agamben’s initial question about the subject of testimony. The suspension of the subject position, which for Agamben specifies the “place” where testimony occurs, results in a series of uncanny displacements and substitutions in Agamben’s text: at certain points in his analysis, the *Muselmann* displaces Levi, and elsewhere both seem to be displaced by Agamben himself, as in the following passage: “To say that Auschwitz is ‘unsayable’ or ‘incomprehensible’ is equivalent to *euphemien*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god. Regardless of one’s intentions, this contributes to its glory. We, however, ‘are not ashamed of staring into the unsayable’—even at the risk of discovering that what evil knows of itself, we can also easily find in ourselves” (32–33). In this passage, Agamben openly appropriates an odd, synesthetic metaphor from a work by the early Church Father John Chrysostom—“‘staring into the unsayable’”—to emphasize the ethical importance of his exercising his own un-*Muselmann*-like ability to speak. Even so, the image itself recalls Levi’s description of the *Muselmann* as having been rendered mute by staring at the Gorgon. Thus, through association, the appropriated metaphor locates Agamben with the *Muselmann*, and through the “dialectic,” also with Levi in the “zone of indistinction” where testimony takes place. The passage also illustrates who else Agamben has in mind when he writes that testimony involves “at least” two subjects in the dialectic: Levi, the *Muselmann*, and also himself. *Remnants of Auschwitz* ends with a section composed of quotations by former *Muselmänner*, indicating that Agamben can “leave them—*Muselmänner*—the last word” because from within the “zone of indistinction,” they are authorized to speak for him and he for them. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 165.

Agamben installs himself in the testimonial space with Levi and the *Muselmann* because he believes that the testimonial “I” consists of “‘imagined substance.’” This assumption authorizes him to invoke Chrysostom’s words to bolster his own viewpoint about testimony, in disregard of the fact that Chrysostom delivered eight sermons against Judaizing Christians that were attributed with facilitating the rise of Christian anti-Semitism. *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, trans. Paul W. Harkins, The Fathers of the Church, 68 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1979). In contrast to Agamben’s reading of the “zone of indistinction” inhabited by the subject of testimony, I understand the testimonial “I” as anchored not in “imagined substance” but in historical and experiential specificity that lends authority to that “I” and which, in retrospect, serves as the material basis for images that configure the survivor’s affective responses to persecution.

barely remembered pains of one’s early infancy” (60). It prevents Levi from pointing a finger at his community and thereby risking a second estrangement. By the same token, the passage is also significant because for the first time, Levi indicates that he is aware of a space inside of himself that contains feelings that are inaccessible. He continues his discussion of this blank anguish specifically in relation to his experience as a prisoner:

[E]veryone suffered from an unceasing discomfort that polluted sleep and was nameless. To define this as a “neurosis” is reductive and ridiculous. Perhaps it would be more correct to see in it an atavistic anguish whose echo one hears in the second verse of Genesis: the anguish inscribed in everyone of the “tohu-bohu” of a deserted and empty universe crushed under the spirit of God but from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished.22

The phrase “atavistic anguish” suggests that the anguish Levi felt was older than humanity, not created by it. As such, it aligns the passage with the others in which Levi also fills in the “blank” of his anger with abstract and abstracting analogies that serve to mitigate blame. But what is distinct about this passage is that it is stripped of references to human beings—Levi cannot even recognize this anguish in children or infants. Nevertheless, in the absence of such a recognizably human form he can hear “an echo” of his anguish in Genesis. This may be because Levi recognizes himself in an image, also present in a sentence from that passage, which he does not explicitly discuss but which resonates with his own rendering of “the drowned.” The sentence reads, “Darkness was upon the face of the deep.”23 The description of the earth’s watery surface as a darkened face, which is to say, as a face that cannot be seen, recalls Levi’s category of the “drowned”: first, because the Muselmann also beheld a face—that of the Gorgon—that humans cannot see; and second because the passage concerns the deep waters of the earth, the very environment of “the drowned.” If Levi reads himself in this passage, it can only be because it reflects back to him the very faceless anguish that he associates with the “drowned” man. The phrase “tohu-bohu” could be read as a graphic rendering of the joined state of Levi and the Muselmann; each sound is distinguishable only in terms of the other.

22. Ibid., 85.
Why would Levi have heard the echo of this anguish in a text about the faceless “drowned”? Insofar as his anguish marked the persistence of a continuing sense of abandonment that was experienced as a deprivation of language, the only images that could possibly commemorate this experience may have been those that pointed to an otherness beyond language itself, such as the one Levi found in this empty universe of the “drowned.”

The Bible is only one of the texts that Levi discusses in *The Drowned and the Saved*. In fact, Levi presents himself as an engaged reader of many forms of writing—philosophy and literature, but also letters; the last chapter includes correspondence with German readers of *Survival in Auschwitz*. Levi also includes a discussion of the writing of Jean Améry. In reference to Améry Levi writes that he feels compelled “to polemicize with a dead man,” whom he also regards as a potential friend. Before engaging with Améry’s thought, Levi introduces Améry as “the philosopher who committed suicide and [as a] theoretician of suicide.” Reading these lines, it is impossible not to think of Levi’s own death in 1987, when he went over the rail of the landing outside his front door and plunged three stories down the inner stairwell of his apartment building. While Levi’s attentiveness to Améry’s interest in suicide does not substantiate the assumption that Levi took his life, it does provide further impetus for considering what it was in Améry’s writings that might have led Levi to see Améry as a potential friend or kindred spirit.

As he did with “the drowned,” Levi takes his distance from Améry, describing him as a man who lived “his life without peace and without a search for peace.” Levi attributes Améry’s misery to his willingness to exchange figurative blows with his enemies throughout his life as a survivor. By contrast, Levi writes of himself:

I must admit . . . my absolute inferiority: I have never known how to “return the blow,” not out of evangelic saintliness or intellectual aristocracy, but due to an intrinsic incapacity . . . I admire Améry’s change of heart, his courageous decision to leave the ivory tower and go down onto the battlefield, but it was and is beyond my reach. I admire it, but I must point out that this choice, protracted throughout his post-Auschwitz existence, led him to positions of such severity and intransigence as to make him incapable of finding joy in life, indeed of living. Those

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25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
who “trade blows” with the entire world achieve dignity but pay a very high price for it because they are sure to be defeated.27

Unlike Améry, who made it his mission to strike out and back at those who had persecuted him, Levi professed not to have written “to formulate new accusations” (9). To Levi’s mind, Améry’s capacity to wage war enabled dignity but made living impossible. Reading the following passage in view of Levi’s comments about Améry, I wonder whether it indicates something about the price Levi was paying to live: “[A] memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystalized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense.”28 In view of Levi’s comments about Améry, we might ask whether Levi’s own story had grown to perfection at the greatest expense, for by 1986 Levi’s fame was predicated upon an image aligned with the voice of the narrator in the main part of *Survival in Auschwitz*, and not with the inner “drowned” man.

The language in which Levi introduces Améry into his text suggests a more complex investment than his polemicizing would indicate. Levi’s profile of Améry as a “theorist” of suicide and as a suicide hints at why Améry may have been a particularly compelling figure for Levi. In his theoretical work, *On Suicide*, Améry describes the impact of contemplating suicide: “Those who step to the threshold of voluntary death carry on the great dialogue with their body, their head, and their ego as they never have before.”29 In this dialogue the self becomes aware of the ego as “that part which, ranked highest, is first experienced phenomenally,” and it does so by entering into a relationship with the body.30 Améry describes how the body fills the mind contemplating voluntary death:

I often stand on the balcony of a particular seventeenth floor, then climb over the railing (fortunately I am always free of dizziness) and, keeping only my left hand fastened to the iron bars of the railing, hold my body far out over the void and stare into the depths. I only need to let go. How will my body plummet down? In the elegant turns of a corkscrew, as do the springboard divers I so often admire? Or like a stone? Headfirst, I

27. Ibid., 136.
28. Ibid., 24.
30. Ibid.
fancy, and anticipate in my imagination how my skull shatters to pieces on the asphalt.\textsuperscript{31}

For some of those who believed Levi had committed suicide, the way he had died was more shocking than the (putative) fact of his having made the choice to take his own life. One biographer wrote, “As a chemist he could have ended his life discreetly, like Arthur Koestler, with a lethal drug. Instead, he chose to die like a character in a tabloid crime-sheet, down the stairwell. By this violent and theatrical death, it was pointed out, he had exposed his loved ones to a gruesome sight.”\textsuperscript{32}

Striking as it is, the formal correspondence between the manner in which Levi died and Améry’s representation of voluntary death does not prove that Levi’s death was intentional. Though this question remains open, what can be known with certainty is that Levi saw Améry as a “potential friend.” I would suggest that Levi’s felt affinity with Améry was based on what Améry’s writings revealed to him: that it was possible to renew contact with the imaginary bodies through which his foreclosed inner “drowned” man had been visible: the sleeping stranger, the tattooed arm, the poetic fragment. In this regard Levi’s fall from great heights, intentional or not, brought to light the “raw” flesh of his memory, held captive for many years, in the form of a story “tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned.”

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 65–66.