

Martina MENGONI, *The gray zone: Power and privilege in Primo Levi*

Primo Levi was a twenty-four years old chemist when he was arrested with a group of partisans and deported to Auschwitz, in 1944. He remained in Auschwitz for one year, until the Allied troupes finally arrived and liberated the camp. It would be another year before he returned to Turin, his hometown.

In 1947, a small publishing house published *If This is a Man*, in which he narrated his experiences in the concentration camp. This book became famous both in Italy and abroad. Levi continued to write novels, short stories, poems while still working as a chemist in a factory.

Forty years after *If This is a Man*, in 1986, he published *The Drowned and the Saved*, his last book, since he would committed suicide the year after in April 1987. In this work, he tried to rethink the experience of Lager against the risks of simplification and the fallacies of memory. This book is commonly linked with the concept of *gray zone*, a term which Levi coined to which he dedicates an entire chapter. After *The Drowned and the Saved*, the concept has come in the common use, in the everyday language and in political and social analysis. In trying to understand where this concept comes from and how Levi arrived to create it, we find an interesting genealogy that it is worth exploring.

On November 20th of 1977, Primo Levi published a short novel on the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*: it was called *Story of a Coin* and it was based on the story of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the leader of the Łódź ghetto (Poland) between 1941 and 1945. It is in this novel that the expression *vast zone of gray consciences* shows up for the first time, nine years before *The Drowned and the Saved*. It is stated as follows:

It is typical of regimes in which all power rains down from above and no criticism can rise from below, to weaken and confound people's capacity of judgment, to create a *vast zone of gray consciences* that stands between the great men of evil and the pure victims. This is the zone in which Rumkowski must be placed¹.

In this short passage, two main features of the *gray zone* are already developed: its topographic position, between *great men of evils* and *victims*; and the moral problem which it brings – that is: the difficulty of judgment. Furthermore, since this *vast zone* has here its first inhabitant, Rumkowski, we need pay a specific attention to the uncommon story of the Elder of Łódź if we want to understand the roots of this concept in Primo Levi's work.

I. A step back: origins of *gray zone*

The concept of *gray zone* never appears in *If This is a Man*. The ninth chapter, however, shows some particular theoretical remarks that – I think – one can see as a kind of *germ* of the concept itself. The chapter is called significantly *The Drowned and the Saved* and contains the analytic distinction between these two categories of prisoners in Lager. According to Levi, in fact, this pair – *drowned* and *saved* – is more forceful than other pair of opposites as good/bad, wise/foolish, coward/courageous, unlucky/fortunate: all of them are “considerable less distinct, they seem less essential, and above all they allow for more numerous and complex intermediary gradation”².

The most interesting pole of the opposition are *the saved*. Levi individuates three categories of people that *were surviving* when he arrived in Auschwitz in 1944:

¹ Primo Levi, « Story of a Coin », in *Moments of Reprieve*, New York, Summit Books, 1986, p. 171.

² Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, London, Abacus, translated by Stuart Wolf and Paul Bailey, 1987, p. 94.

1. Everyone that could have a useful profession and could be rewarded with some more food for this, or just everyone who for some reasons reached the favor of the SS;
2. Individuals that Levi defines as *particularly merciless, strong and inhuman*;
3. All the ones that, without having a specific useful function in Lager, were able to obtain material advantages from situations and showed this ability to their superiors.

Levi concentrates his attention on the first and second categories, who calls *Prominenten*. He chooses four character to exemplify his concept of *saved* and introduces them as follows: "We will try to show in how many ways it was possible to reach *salvation* with the stories of Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias and Henri"³. We should notice that here Levi uses the world *salvation (salvazione)* instead than *safety (salvezza)*; this is the correct etymology from *saved (salvati)*. *Salvation* suggests a preservation/conservation of something during a certain prolonged time, while *safety* is just the punctual result of being safe/saved. It has nothing to do with any kind of predestination theory, since Primo Levi, as he himself remembers in a passage of the chapter "Shame" in *The Drowned and the Saved*, find this theory absurd, monstrous and unacceptable⁴.

As far as the characters are concerned, they have very different stories: Schepschel was an ex saddler, without any specific ability, who tried to reach his everyday food ration with contingent expedients, included the sacrifice of a companion's life. Alfred L. was an engineer that cultivated a specific obsession for cleanness, and its decorous aspect was in strict connection with the power he was more and more acquiring. Elias was a dwarf with an enormous physical strength; he was an odd-jobman and in the same time a demented clown. Finally, Henri: a twenty-two years old, cultured, polyglot guy who, since his brother died the year before, *cut off every tie of affection*, and elaborated a three element strategy to survive: organization, piety and robbery.

The common feature of all this characters is a special aptitude to preserve themselves in Lager, stressing a particular quality, ability, or skill that was enough strong to survive in those extreme circumstances. When Levi writes this chapter, he only knows that Henri has survived; he does not know anything about the others. It is another proof that *saved* does not mean *survived*; the biological fate does not really matter. What it matters is the individual approach to Lager.

The saved are the ones who tenaciously preserve themselves from the de-personalization that the Lager operates on the prisoners. They reach this aim using a particular feature of their character, a particular aptitude that can be natural or acquired. The result is that throughout their ability, they reach a different position of power: they become the *Prominenten*, that is to say, they acquire a position of privilege.

II. Between the first and the last: « Story of a coin »

Between *If This is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, forty years pass by. Primo Levi continued to be both a chemist and a writer till 1975, when he retired from the factory in which he was the director. He composes short stories, a novel, a chemical-tales book, and publishes a collection of poetries. The majority of these works does not deal with the Lager at all. The only one collection of short stories in which at least a part is dedicated to his experience in Auschwitz is *Lilit*, in which he republishes also *Story of a Coin*. Both the topic and the theoretical issue of the first part of this book – the one settled in Lager - can be very well reassumed by a passage of the preface of *Moments of Reprieve*, in which, in 1986, only the first part was translated in English. Levi wrote:

³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴ P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York, Vintage International Edition, 1989, p. 82.

In these stories, written at different times and on different occasions, and certainly not planned, a common trait seems to appear: each of them is centered on one character only, who never is the persecuted, predestinated victim, the prostrate man, the person to whom I had devoted my first book, an about whom I have obsessively asked myself if this was still a man. The protagonists of these stories are “men” beyond all doubt, even if the virtue that allows them to survive and makes them unique is not always one approved of by common morality⁵.

This passage requires a couple of comments. Firstly, Levi himself underlines a shift from the first book to these tales. While in *If This is a Man* he was fully engaged on demonstrating the level of aberration and extreme annihilation of human features in Lager – and, in a sense, the focus was in the *drowned*, and in all the horizon of human expression that they lost – in *Lilith* his attention seems much more concentrated on the *saved*. The definition of these characters is interesting: they are men beyond all doubt, even if “men” is in quotation marks, and even if “*the virtue that allow them to survive and makes them unique is not always one approved of by common morality*”.

In shifting the accent from the drowned to the saved, Levi explores a sample of humanity that requires a new understanding of the Lager – a new conceptual framework. This can be considered one reason for which, in one of these tales, the last one, *Story of a Coin*, he introduces for the first time the concept of *gray zone*. This is the same story I quoted at the beginning of this essay, the one that appeared in *La Stampa* in 1977. Levi republished it in *Lilith* five years later. This story constitutes one of the most important starting points to understand the *gray zone*. Levi himself declares in *Itinerary of a Jewish Writer* that “one of these stories [recollected in *Lilith*], the most important to my mind, sketches in a few pages the story of Chaim Rumkowski, president of the Judenrat in the Lodz ghetto”⁶.

Story of a Coin starts with a reproduction obverse-reverse of a coin that Levi found in Auschwitz after the arrival of the Allies. It is a coin of the Jewish ghetto of Łódź. The ghetto was officially instituted by Germans in 1941 and it was the oldest and the longest of all the European ghettos; it was liberated at the beginning of 1945.

It is the only one case in all Levi’s work in which an image supports the writing. We could ask why. If you read the beginning of the story without looking at coin, the *incipit* still remains very powerful. As we will see in a moment, the character of Rumkowski poses many problems in both analytical and moral side. It begs the question: how is it possible that this story really happened? And also: how should I judge this man? The juridical metaphor permeates the entire story; again, it is the only one case of all Levi’s work in which he explicitly asks for a judgment of a character. In this sense, the coin can be seen as a first process evidence: the story is true and it asks for a judgment, even though we are not sure yet if Levi really himself wants to return a verdict.

Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski was an elderly Jewish man, apparently a carpet seller, chosen by the Nazis to be the Elder of the ghetto; he remained in this post for four years. From the beginning, his leadership was characterized by obsessive ostentation and foolish ambitions of dictatorship that Levi describes in detail:

He had a coach drawn by a skeletal nag, and in it rode about his minuscule kingdom, through the streets swarming with beggars and petitioners [...]. He wore a regal cloak, and surrounded himself with a court of flatterers, lackeys, and cutthroats; he had his poet-courtiers compose hymns celebrating his “firm and powerful hand” and the peace and order which thanks to him reigned in the ghetto; he ordered that the children in the nefarious schools, constantly

⁵ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶ Primo Levi, « Itinerary of a Jewish Writer », in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, Cambridge, Polity Press, ed. by Marco Belpoliti, transl. By Sharon Wood, 2005, p. 165.

decimated by death from hunger and the Germans' roundups, be assigned essays extolling and praising "our beloved and provident President". Like all autocrats, he hastened to organize an efficient police force, supposedly to maintain order but in fact to protect his person and enforce his control: it was composed of six hundred policemen armed with clubs, and an indefinite number of informants. He delivered many speeches, which in part have come down to us, and whose style is unmistakable. He had adopted (deliberately? Knowingly? Or did he unconsciously identify with the man of providence, the "necessary hero" who at that time ruled over Europe?) Mussolini's and Hitler's oratorical technique – that inspired performance, that pseudo-exchange with the crowd, this creation of consensus through moral plunder and plaudits⁷.

Rumkowski seems to be a collaborationist Jew subject to the fascination of personal power. But this definition is partial and too simple: the character is much more complex, at least in his being simultaneously both Jewish victim and oppressor: "Paradoxically, his identification with the oppressor is flanked by, or perhaps alternates with, an identification with the oppressed [...] although despised, derided, and sometimes beaten by the Germans, Rumkowski probably thought of himself not as servant but as a lord"⁸. The Elder of Łódź identified himself with a dictator but at the same time, he empathized with the oppressed, the Jews, his co-citizens. He looked at himself as the savior of his people, their Lord. He looked at the Nazis sometimes as the dominators sometimes as collaborators, evidently without reciprocity. There is a continuous non-dialectic alternation between these two identities. This double contradictory self-awareness makes this character, this story, so difficult and interesting for Levi.

The first account of the story of Rumkowski appeared in the American Jewish review "Commentary", in 1948, by Solomon Bloom, who titled *Dictator of the Łódź Ghetto. The Strange History of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski*⁹. The same article was translated few months later in French and published in *Les Temps Modernes*¹⁰. It is quite certain that Levi read the article, probably in the English version, since there are some specific textual correspondences.

An account of Rumkowski story was then reported in some of the most important historical books about the Nazi extermination of Jews: Leon Poliakov's *Le Breviaire de la Haine*; Gerald Reitlinger's *The final solution*; both were quite for sure Levi's sources¹¹. Moreover, Primo Levi has not been the only writer to be strongly inspired by this character: a famous Polish writer, Adolf Rudnicki, wrote a tale about Rumkowski, « The merchant of Łódź », published in Italy in 1967¹² that Levi probably read.

Both Léon Poliakov and Gerald Reitlinger underline the spread of Nazi's use to nominate a Jew as the Elder of the ghettos. This happened in many eastern cities of the Reich: Warsaw, Leopoli, Krakow are the most notable examples. The peculiarity of Łódź's case, however, resides in the longevity of Rumkowski's dictatorship. In fact, a considerable number of the other Elders of ghettos committed suicide during 1942. After the Gross-Wannsee conference, January 20th 1942, in which the "final solution" was scientifically planned by the Nazis in half a day, the deportations began. The ghettos were the first places in which they

⁷ Primo Levi, « Story of a Coin », *op. cit.*, p. 166-67.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Solomon F. Bloom « Dictator of the Lodz Ghetto. The Strange History of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski », in *Commentary*, December 1948, pp. 111-122.

¹⁰ Solomon F. Bloom, « Dictature au ghetto (le règne de Chaim Rumkowski à Lodz », in *Les Temps Modernes*, 01/01/1948.

¹¹ Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution*, New York, Beechhurst Press, 1953, Italian translation: *La Soluzione Finale*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1962; Léon Poliakov, *Le Bréviaire de la haine. Le IIIe Reich et les Juifs*, Paris, Calmann-Levy, 1951 ; Italian translation: *Il nazismo e lo sterminio degli Ebrei*, Torino, Einaudi, 1955.

¹² The tale is collected in Adolf Rudnicki, *I topi*, Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1967.

took place. The majority of the Elders refused to sign the deportation lists, and the ones who did not commit suicide were arrested or killed by the Nazis.

Rumkowski, however, did not commit suicide. He accepted his role. Levi does not stress this historical turn of 1942. He seems much more interested in the relationship between the man and the power than in reproducing the chronological plot of the events. After the account of Rumkowski's story, he comments: "A story like this goes beyond itself: it is pregnant, asks more questions than it answers, and leaves us in suspense; it cries out and demands to be interpreted because in it we discern a symbol as in dreams and signs from heaven, but it is not easy to interpret"¹³.

Again: it is the only one tale (in the entire work of Primo Levi) in which the reader is asked for an interpretation. Rumkowski is not simply a character: it is the way through which Levi tries to interpret a certain portion of reality, and try to find and formulate new meanings.

In trying to interpret this story, we can resume in a brief account all its specificities:

1. Rumkowski is "not a monster, but he isn't like other men either".
2. He "was not only a renegade and an accomplice. In some measure, besides making people believe it, he himself must have become progressively convinced that he was a *mashiach*, a Messiah, a savior of his people, whose good he must, at least intermittently, have desired".
3. "Paradoxically, his identification with the oppressor is flanked by, or perhaps alternates with, an identification with the oppressed".
4. He "probably thought of himself not as a servant but as a lord".
5. Finally, "if the hypothesis of a Rumkowski intoxicated with power is valid, it must be admitted that the intoxication arose not because of but despite the ghetto environment, that indeed it is so powerful as to prevail even under conditions that would appear to be likely to extinguish all individual will"¹⁴.

We have already discussed the first four points. The intermittent identification with a lord/savior and with a Jew/victim is at their core. The last feature seems much more independent and complex. What Levi seems to argue appears, at the first moment, paradoxical: one would be led to think that Rumkowski's behavior could find a justification in the extreme physical and psychological condition of life in the ghetto. With starvation, dirtiness, epidemics and hundreds of deaths every day, it is possible, as to say, to lose your mind and wander dreams of power as a dictator. This is exactly what Primo Levi seeks to counter. For Levi, Rumkowski was the exact opposite of a fool: he was a man with a very strong will and who was able to conserve it *even* in very extreme conditions. This is why his story is so peculiar, so different from the one of the other Elders; and so near to the *saved of If This is a Man*. Like them, Rumkowski was able to maintain a specific aptitude despite the circumstances. With Rumkowski, there is a closer examination of the concept of *saved/salvation* in its most extreme case. This is another decisive step in the elaboration of the concept of *gray zone*.

¹³ Primo Levi, « Story of a Coin », *op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-170.

III. Gray zone

1.1. General laws, individual characters

Primo Levi first tries to define the gray zone in the Preface of *The Drowned and the Saved*. He says:

The inside of the Lager was an intricate and stratified microcosm; the “gray zone” of which I shall speak later, that of the prisoners who in some measure, perhaps with good intentions, collaborated with the authority, was not negligible. Indeed, it constituted a phenomenon of fundamental importance for the historian, the psychologist, and the sociologist. There is not a prisoner who does not remember this and who does not remember his amazement at the time: the first threat, the first insult, the first blow came not from the SS but from other prisoners, from “colleagues”, from these mysterious personages who nevertheless wore the same striped tunic that they, the new arrivals, had just put on¹⁵.

This passage has to be read in very close connection with the other fundamental passage in which Levi defines the gray zone, this time at the very center of the second chapter:

The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistences, is an anguishing but unending phenomenon: only in utopias it is absent. It is the duty of righteous men to make war on all undeserved privilege, but one must not forget that this is a war without end. Where power is exercised by few or only one against the many, privilege is born and proliferates, even against the will of the power itself. On the other hand, it is normal for power to tolerate and encourage privilege. Let us confine ourselves to the Lager, which (even in its Soviet version) can be considered an excellent “laboratory”: the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary, constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge¹⁶.

While in the first passage the description of the gray zone is very local and specific, the second one tries to state a generalization concerning the power and the privilege. This is one of the main motions of this book: a continuous oscillation between generalization and specificity, universal and particular. It is the nature of the gray zone itself, a generalization created to fight against the oversimplification of the vision of the Lager. After 1947, when *If This is a Man* was first published, Primo Levi actively continued its testimony: talking with students in the schools, speaking in public, with the readers, contributing to maintain the memory of the Shoah all over Italy and abroad. Nevertheless, the more the years passed, the more he assisted to a progressive crystallization of the image of Lager: a process that Levi does not condemn, but that – as he mentions for the privilege – he tries continuously to fight. *The Drowned and the Saved* was born precisely with this aim: give back its own complexity to the Lager; and in doing it, try to reinsert the Lager in the history of men, pulling it out from a presumed-never-happened history of monstrosity. This was obviously not an easy task: considering especially Levi’s obsession for clarity and research for semantic precision. The text is full of these alternate moments of specific details and broad statements. Levi is always trying to remain in the Lager, and in the same time to overcome it, and bring the gray zone in a more extended theorization of power.

However, it is essential to remember that Primo Levi has never been a theorist, nor a philosopher; his big deal, throughout all his career as a writer, were single stories, characters, fiction. Nevertheless – and here is

¹⁵ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

his specificity – his characters are quite often assumed as *exempla* of existential conditions and philosophical dilemmas. That is why, according to me, he concludes the chapter *The Gray Zone* with two examples: the *Sonderkommando*, and again, the story of Rumkowski.

His way to state general truths is throughout characters: and this is a specific choice. A character is different from a general law: it can never transcend his time and space; time and space are not variables, they are constants. However, if you look, for instance, to Erich Auerbach's *figurae*¹⁷ as he analyzes them in the *Divine Comedy* or to Giambattista Vico's distinction between *physical truth (vero fisico)* and *poetic truth (ritratto ideale)* in *The New Science*¹⁸, it is clear how a certain way to portrait characters can assume a heuristic function or a cognitive importance: and, particularly, when the truth we can try to reach is so viscous, difficult and delicate as the *gray zone* is.

1.2. Isolation, privilege and contagion

One of the first images that Levi shows at the beginning of the *gray zone* chapter is the shock that the prisoners had at the arrival in Lager:

[T]he arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitate was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the "we" lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us. One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one's companion in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle¹⁹.

Here, Levi is trying to make a contrast with a common sense view of the relations between victims: the mutual solidarity and the alliance. In Lager, a strong struggle existed between the prisoners and each one was isolated in his own. The key expression here is *a thousand sealed off monads* probably chosen by Levi to underline the contrast between the indefinite multitude of people that inhabited the Lager and the segregation of each of them in a specific, single fight in which there was not *we* or *us*, but just *me*. This struggle had a specific aim: the conquest of a certain sort of privilege.

The privilege is the second ring of this chain, and it is probably the most planned of the three. Nazis knew very well that with the institution, or at least the toleration, of privilege, the struggle between prisoners would have increased, and so the possibility of organized riots would have significantly diminished. Of course this is the first main reason for the construction of such a system of power; Levi, however, seems much more interested in finding explanations for the single behaviors, taking the Nazi plans as given. He finds three reasons for the hostility between prisoners: a) "[T]he « newcomer » was envied because he still seemed to have on him the smell of home" b) "an unconscious attempt to consolidate the « we » at the expense of the « they »"; c) "vying for prestige ... the despised crowd of seniors was prone to recognize in the new arrival a target on which to vent its humiliation, to build for itself and at his expense a figure of lower rank on whom to discharge the burden of the offenses received from the above"²⁰.

17 Erich Auerbach, "Figura", in *Scenes from the drama of European Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp. 67-68.

18 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, Cornell University Press, 1961, translated in English by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch p. 74. I suggest that the men after Auschwitz – after the big lack of meaning that this experience produced – can be in a certain way compared to the *first men* Vico is describing.

¹⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

Why does Levi choose Rumkowski as a maximum example of privilege? He was selected by Nazis to lead the ghetto, and he accepted; so, of course, he acquired a position of privilege throughout a compromise. Nevertheless, there are some differences: the story of Rumkowski was not settled in Lager, but in the ghetto, where freedom was very limited, but not as limited as in the lager; and then, most important, even if at the very beginning Rumkowski accepted the privilege in order to survive, then his dictatorship resisted for four years. And we cannot really say that he maintained his role to survive: it is more probably the opposite: he survived to maintain the power (since he did not suicide as many other Elders). This difference makes possible to understand the third feature of the gray zone: the contagion of power. That is the very innovation of *The Drowned and the Saved*. It is explained in the core of the chapter, as Levi quotes one of his favorite Italian writers, Alessandro Manzoni, that inspired him for this analysis: "Alessandro Manzoni, the nineteenth-century novelist and poet knew this quite well: « Provocateurs, oppressors, all those who in some way injure others, are guilty, not only of the evil they commit, but also of the perversion into which they lead the spirit of the offended »"²¹.

This is a quote from the novel *The Betrothed*. Manzoni is referring to a young man, Renzo, who cannot marry Lucia, his girlfriend, because a local country gentleman, don Rodrigo, infatuated with Lucia, threatens the priest of the small village not to celebrate the marriage. When Renzo, a very pacifistic man, discovers these machinations, he develops very violent thoughts, and he wants to kill don Rodrigo with his hands. Levi totally decontextualizes Manzoni's consideration about power to show how it is possible to transmit, as a real contagion, the perversion from the oppressor to the victim. This is exactly what happened to Rumkowski: as we have seen, Levi defines him *intoxicated*. This can be one of the most important reasons for which Levi chose specifically this character to display the features of power in Lager. This is one of the points that really differentiate the first analysis of the Lager – the one in *If This is a Man* – from the last, in *The Drowned and the Saved*: the intoxication of power, the possibility that the victim can be corrupted by the oppressor.

One of the crucial consequences of contagion is that it brings the victim back to isolation. In fact, since the victim contributes, in a certain way, to the crime, he/she is not innocent anymore, cannot really be equalized anymore to the other victims. The intoxicated prisoner loses his defined space, in a way, his specific moral place. He/she is isolated from the others because he first has lost his identity. He is a monad, like thousands of others. In this sense, one can say that the gray zone is a paradoxical category: it is a set in which all the elements are radically different each other, in which each story is *sealed off*. The elements of this set are defined in negative relation to the couple victim/oppressor, but an intersection of them cannot be possible. Everyone who cannot be defined simply victim nor simply oppressor is directed towards the gray zone. But there is not an affirmative definition for it; neither an ostensive definition could completely convey its essence.

1.3. Moral judgment?

In a conversation with Vittorio Foa, Carlo Ginzburg affirms to consider the gray zone as an analytic category more than a moral one:

I believe that when Primo Levi mentioned *gray zones*, he did not want to discharge all these zones: he rather wanted to indicate that there was a moral involvement in the gray zones ... It was an analytical

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

position. After the analysis, one can give a moral judgment, condemning or absolving each single case. Nevertheless, there is no coincidence between the analytical level and the moral one²².

According to Ginzburg, the gray zone is not a tag, nor a moral judgment; it is rather an useful category for the analysis. It precedes the judgment and gives the presuppose for it; but it does not coincide with it. "the claim to reflect on the gray is the opposite of the saying tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner".

To discuss and eventually verify Ginzburg's position, let's move to the very incipit of the gray zone chapter. Levi writes:

Have we – we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand our experience? What we commonly mean by "understand" coincides with "simplify": without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions²³.

As I already underlined, the problem of the oversimplification of the larger experience is one of the big deal of the entire book. The passage quoted, however, seems going much more deeper. It matches simplification with understanding. We need to simplify for two main reasons: to orient ourselves and to decide upon our actions. These two expressions are paraphrases to indicate the understanding of the surrounding world (orient ourselves) and the moral attitude towards it (decide upon our actions). So, in the first lines, Levi already defines what are the two vectors of his inquiry: the analytical and the moral. In identifying them, Ginzburg is surely right. Are these two vectors linked, or completely separated? Is the gray zone just an analytic category, or it is rather also a moral one?

I briefly touched on the fact that in this chapter Levi frequently refers to judgment, justice, trial. Of course the anxiety of judgment permeates the most part of the chapter. All the text seems unstably balanced between the story and the need to understand, and the exigency to pronounce a sentence. Remaining concentrated on Rumkowski - the character through which we are trying to investigate the *gray zone* – we find a quite explicit moral judgment at the end of his story:

All this does not exonerate Rumkowski from his responsibilities. That a Rumkowski should have emerged from Łódź's affliction is painful and distressing. Had he survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor certainly, can we absolve him on the moral plan²⁴.

Apparently, the verdict has been pronounced. But was this the real aim of this story? Was the gray zone an expedience to extend the culpability, or to confuse the possibility of a clear moral judgment? If we look better at the entire text, we see that any time Levi is supposed to judge a certain character, or a certain behavior, he remains very cautious:

Before discussing separately the motives that impelled some prisoners to collaborate to some extent with the larger authorities, however, it is necessary to declare the imprudence of issuing hasty moral judgment on such human cases... It is a judgment that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances and had the opportunity to test for themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion... The condition of the offended does not exclude culpability, which is often objectively serious, but I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgment ... If it were up to me, if I were forced to judge, I would

22 Vittorio Foa, Carlo Ginzburg, *Un dialogo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2003; on *gray zone*, see pp. 93-114 (not translated in English, my translation in the passages quoted).

²³ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

lightheartedly absolve all those whose concurrence in the guilt was minimal and for whom coercion was of the highest degree²⁵.

Here, the paradox is between *objectively serious* and *human tribunal*: culpability is something objective, but human tribunals cannot really judge. One can see a split between the culpability and the culpable. The first one is objective, can be examined and possibly judged; but what about the attitude towards the second one? The desire to understand prevails, and the judgment remains suspended, uncertain. This seems Levi's position concerning specific inhabitants of the gray zone. And Rumkowski's introduction confirm such approach:

The same *impotentia iudicandi* paralyzes us when confronted by the Rumkowski case... Rumkowski, a symbolic and compendary figure, must be placed in this band of half-consciences. Whether high or low, it is difficult to say: only he could clarify this if he could speak before us, even lying as he perhaps always lied, also to himself. He would in any case help us understand him, as every defendant helps his judge, even though he does not want to, even if he lies, because man's capacity to play a role is not unlimited²⁶.

The moral judgment is even *paralyzed*. If we assume that the gray zone is a moral category, we difficulty explain these passages.

What Primo Levi needed was rather another instrument for the analysis. As a chemist, he often uses in his text verbs as *distilling*, *separating*, *weighting*. They are much more than metaphors: they show his approach to the understanding of the world. He transposes – or translates – his practice as a scientist in the practice of observing and classifying human being and their experience. When he finds that his instruments are too rough to analyze a given substance, a system, a material, he tries to find much more sophisticated ones, even if it entails much many risks. The concept of gray zone is not an easy one: it has many complications, and it has to be handled very carefully. But it can be very helpful in understanding the Lager, and maybe in discovering some features of human being.

What is the conclusion of this analysis? Unfortunately, it is not an affirmative statement. The concept of *gray zone* poses many problems that maybe cannot be exhausted in the chapter itself, nor in this essay.

On one hand, the *gray zone* is the answer to an attempt to find a finer concept for the analysis of the Lager; within its application, Levi tries to give a more specific and less simplified image of the relationships of power in the concentration camp.

On the other hand, we find that there is something that the generalization of the *gray zone* cannot really grasp: is the infinite complexity of each singular story. The *gray zone* can maybe show the mechanisms of the guilt, but it never brings to a global verdict of the gray consciences. Each story can be understood throughout the help of this concept; and this is the basis for the judgment; but understanding and judgment – as Ginzburg says – cannot be overlapped.

As a chemist, Levi knows that each experiment, lead under the guidance of the same general laws, is always different from another one. This is the point that he continuously stress all across his chemistry-based-theses, *The Periodic Table*. This does not mean that it is not worth continuing to observe, distill, separate and take note, nor that in this way we cannot find new general laws, possibly true. It means perhaps that we should put the same confidence either in theory and in the single cases and try to understand why it eventually does not fix. And the *gray zone* is the last, finest, most refined – even if problematic and paradoxical – instrument that Levi found in order to pursue this uneasy task.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 60-68.

Abstract (English)

Primo Levi is mostly known for his *If This is a Man* (1947), in which he narrated his experience in Auschwitz. Forty years after, in 1986, he published *The Drowned and the Saved*, in which he rethought the understanding of Lager against the risks of simplification and the fallacies of memory. This book is commonly linked with the concept of *gray zone*, a term which Levi himself coined and that nowadays has come in the common use and in socio-political analysis. In understanding how Levi developed this concept, we find an interesting genealogy that is worth exploring.

Abstract (French)

Primo Levi est universellement connu pour *Si c'est un homme* (1947), où il raconte son expérience dans le camp d'Auschwitz. Quarante ans après, en 1986, il publie *Les naufragés et les rescapés*, où il se pose de nouvelles questions concernant le camp, contre les risques de simplification et d'oubli. Ce livre est lié au concept de *zone grise*, un terme que Levi lui-même a forgé et qui est entré dans l'usage commun sociopolitique. En cherchant à reconstruire le parcours qui a conduit Levi au développement de ce concept, on trouve une généalogie très intéressante, qui vaut la peine d'être explorée.

Keywords:

Primo Levi
Gray zone
The Drowned and the Saved
Rumkowski
If This is a Man
Story of a Coin
Lager
Moral judgment
Privilege
Power
Salvation
Isolation
Contagion