"Free also to make mistakes and masters of one's own destiny": Primo Levi the (Anti)alpinist

Abstract
The tradition of alpinist literature had a significant, yet still understudied, impact on Primo Levi, who frequently quoted mountaineers such as Edward Whymper and Eugen Lammer. This impact is even more surprising because the canon of alpinist literature was inextricably tied to the Fascist ideals of control over the environment, the territory of the Italian peninsula, and its citizens. Through the analysis of Levi's texts on mountains and mountaineers, in particular "Bear Meat" and "Iron," this article shows how the writer confronted the tradition of alpinist literature and ultimately utilized its *topoi* to create a new, anti-Fascist mountaineering hero, emphasizing the generative power of failure and mistakes rather than conquest and domination.

Keywords: Sandro Delmastro, fascism, Primo Levi, mountaineering, Edward Whymper

> "When there before us rose a mountain, dark / because of distance, and it seemed to me / the highest mountain I had ever seen" […]. And the mountains when one sees them in the distance…the mountains….oh Pikolo, Pikolo, say something, speak, don't let me think of my mountains, which would appear in the evening dusk as I returned by train from Milan to Turin! (Levi, *If This Is a Man* 196)

In one of *If This Is a Man*'s most famous passages, Primo Levi recalled that he recited and translated passages of the *Divine Comedy* to his comrade Pikolo. Dante's text was so powerful that Levi for a moment, forgot "who [he was] and where [he was]" (187). He even intuited "the why of our destiny, of the fact that we are here [in the concentration camp] today" (Levi, *If this Is a Man* 187). While the philosophical implications of Levi's commentary on Dante have been the object of intense critical debates,[1] it is worth noticing that the most emotional moment of Levi's exegesis comes when he pictures *his* mountains. Dante's description of a dark mountain appearing in front of Ulysses resonated with Levi as an individual and brought him back to his life before and outside the

concentration camp. Escaping the temptation to even try expressing the feelings evoked by the memory of his mountains, Levi concluded, "enough, one has to go on, these are things that one thinks but does not say" (*If This Is a Man* 189).[2] Marco Belpoliti, one of the few scholars who commented on the role of mountains in this passage, focused on its literary precedents, arguing that it echoed Manzoni's "farewell to the mountains," a key text in the Italian literary canon and a staple of the high school curriculum to this day (Belpoliti 112). While Manzoni's memory is certainly present in the text, this passage also signals Levi's deeply personal relationship with the mountains and the practice of mountaineering.

Primo Levi started hiking as a teenager: as he recalled in a 1984 interview published in the magazine *Rivista della montagna*,[3] in his family "there was this tradition of the mountains as something that strengthens you, a bit like the environment that Natalia Ginzburg describes in *What We Used to Say*" (*L'alpinismo?* 28).[4] This quote also suggests that Levi's experience of the mountains was filtered and mediated by the tradition of those who wrote about them. Indeed, throughout the interview, Levi interspersed the memory of his own adventures in the Alps with the fond memory of the texts that informed and shaped these experiences, outlining an ideal genealogy of alpinist-narrators, from Edward Whymper and Albert Mummery to Eugen Lammer. Building on his familiarity with the mountains and the literary and rhetorical tradition surrounding them, Levi repeatedly tried to write his own epic of mountaineering. His first attempt was a short story centered on the notion of the *valico* (mountain pass), an early text that was never published and does not appear to have survived. Years later, Levi described this story in *Rivista della montagna*:

> I wanted to represent the feeling you have when you climb up, with the line of the mountains closing the horizon in front of you: you climb, you don't see anything but this line, nothing else, then suddenly you pass it, you find yourself on the other side, and in a few seconds you see a new world, you are in a new world. That's it, this is what I tried to express: the mountain pass. (Levi, *L'alpinismo?* 31)[5]

Levi's own (somewhat ironic) commentary of this short story revealed both his ambitious goals and his discomfort with the results, which appeared too steeped in rhetoric: "I never finished, it was not published and such it will remain, because all in all it's

really quite bad. All the epic of the mountains was there, and the metaphysics of alpinism. Mountains as the key to everything*"* (Levi, *L'alpinismo?* 31).[6]

After the experience of the war and the concentration camp, Levi returned to his project of writing an epic of the mountains with "Bear Meat" (1961), a short story published in the journal *Il mondo* and later re-elaborated in "Iron," part of *The Periodic Table* (1975). While Levi's first youthful attempt focused on a feature of the mountain landscape, these two later texts centered on mountaineers. "Bear Meat" was structured as a frame narrative: an autobiographical first-person narrator recalled his encounter with two older alpinists, who each told the story of the ill-advised, naïve climbs of their youth. Both tales thematized the relationship between a young, inexperienced climber and a more experienced one (Luigi in the first tale, Carlo in the second). The second tale explained the title of the short story: the two protagonists, having planned a quick ascent to a nearby mountain, found that the path was much more difficult than they expected and ended up bivouacking in the mountains, with no food or shelter, thus tasting the "bear meat" — the difficult but energizing experience of having to rely only on one's own means in a challenging environment. The same episode constituted the core of "Iron," the fourth chapter of *The Periodic Table.* In "Iron," the author eliminated the frame narrative and emphasized the autobiographical components of the story, explicitly identifying the protagonists as himself and Alessandro (Sandro) Delmastro. A skilled alpinist and a chemistry student, Sandro would go on to become a prominent member of the anti-fascist Resistance and be killed by a 15-year-old fascist fighter in March 1944.

Through these stories, Levi took on the challenge of talking about the significance of the mountains and alpinists without giving into the traditional rhetoric of mountaineering. I suggest that "Bear Meat" and "Iron" are Levi's attempt to create an alternative to the mountaineering heroes of the past alpinist literature, a tradition that — as we will see — profoundly influenced Levi but, at the same time, was inextricably tied to the Fascist project of control over the environment, the territory of the Italian peninsula, and its citizens.

Levi's Genealogy: Alpinist Literature

The control and conquest of the mountain environment were crucial components of the practice and the rhetoric of alpinism well before

Fascism. In fact, while one of the most widespread *topoi* of alpinist literature is the contrast between the urban power struggles and the quiet freedom of the mountains, alpinism was from the beginning a deeply political, nationalistic enterprise. In the nineteenth century, the Alps became a testing ground for the competition between national states, with British, French, German, and later Italian mountaineers struggling to uphold the pride of their countries by being the first to reach new peaks, while modeling a new kind of ideal citizen.[7] Many of the alpinist writers that Levi mentioned in his 1984 interview belonged to this first generation of mountaineers. Whymper and Mummery, in particular, had a key role in shaping the canon of alpinist literature. Their autobiographical writings,[8] combining adventure, self-discovery, and the scientific exploration of uncharted territories, codified the "type" of the alpinist hero. Male, affluent, and cultured, canonical mountaineering heroes viewed the mountains as an opportunity to escape the boring urban life of the plains and to test their limits. They controlled and dominated nature by climbing routes that appeared inaccessible and mapping uncharted territories, while studying and classifying natural elements. Symmetrically, they controlled their own bodies and minds through harsh discipline, exercise, and willpower, overcoming their natural instincts.[9]

For the newly born Italian state, the exploration and mapping of the Alps was part of the process of centralization essential to the construction of the modern national state. It is no coincidence that many of the nineteenth century Italian alpinists were members of the Piedmontese intellectual elites that also filled the ranks of the first governments of the newly formed Italian kingdom. The renowned Ministry of Finance Quintino Sella, for example, was a prominent alpinist and the founder of the Italian Mountain Club. His open letter, *Una salita al Monviso,* published in 1863, is an emblematic example of the role of alpinism in the construction of Italy as a modern, centralized national state. Not only Sella described with pride how his group conquered the peak of Monviso "without the need for foreigners" (Sella, *Una salita al Monviso* 49),[10] but he also pushed for a greater involvement of government and military institutions in mapping and renaming alpine peaks. Sella complained about the confusion resulting from the wide variety of names utilized by the local populations to designate a given site — a great inconvenience for alpinists as well as for government officers who tried to understand and control these territories. To address this challenge, Sella had an easy solution:

official government maps should not hesitate to impose new names on key mountain sites, which would certainly "quickly be adopted by everybody" (Sella, *Una salita al Monviso* 29), eliminating the need to make sense of the local toponymy.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the political implications of mountaineering narratives became clearer and more explicit. Strong, disciplined bodies made for excellent soldiers, as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century mountaineering stories remarked with increasing frequency. The First World War was largely fought in the mountains, and the tradition of alpinist narratives provided the building blocks for the construction of the alpinist soldier hero.[11] After the war, Fascism (as well as Nazism) coopted this tradition. The fascist government took control of existing mountaineering institutions such as the Italian Mountain Club (Club Alpino Italiano, CAI) as part of the institutionalization of sports that sanctioned recreational outlets for the Italian population while instilling the values of comradery, self-sacrifice, discipline, physical, and mental strength. As a 1935 article which appeared in the magazine *Lo scarpone* put it, mountaineering offered a way to escape "alcoholic degeneration and the useless inactivity following the hard work in the fields": with their heavy backpacks and mountain boots, Italian citizens could go "towards the glory of the heights, the physical and spiritual elevation," becoming "soldiers of the mountains."[12] To say that Fascism appropriated the rhetoric of alpinist literature, however, is somewhat reductive, because in many ways, the fascist intrepid yet disciplined heroes were the natural culmination of the tradition of mountaineering heroes from the mid-nineteenth century onwards: they fully embodied the search of danger as the ultimate test of human limits and the desire to dominate the natural environment through the control of one's body that, as we have seen, characterized alpinist heroes from Mummery and Sella onwards. Indeed, this same model of mountaineering heroes outlived Fascism: postwar alpinist literature adopted not only the same rhetoric of control and self-control, but also the same combination of individualism and nationalistic pride. Climbing expeditions only shifted their focus from the European Alps to the Himalayas, making the nationalistic and colonial undertones of alpinism even more evident.

In Search of New Models

This tradition is essential to understand Levi's relationship with the mountains, and it is explicitly evoked not only, as we have seen, in his 1984 interview, but also in his short stories. "Bear Meat" is an especially emblematic example of the ways in which Levi inserted himself in the tradition of alpinist writers, while at the same time seeking to revolutionize it to create a new kind of mountaineering hero. This short story started with a celebration of "a little-known human subspecies" that frequented the last real *rifugi* (mountain huts), a group at risk of extinction due to "the advent of chairlifts" (Levi, "Bear Meat" 1139) that opened mountain peaks to mass tourism. The readers familiar with alpinist literature would immediately recognize one of its most widespread *topoi*: the contrast between the "real" alpinists who ventured outside the bounds of civilization and the tourists who only experienced a filtered, embellished version of the mountains, with safe trails, mountain roads, and the comfort of warm hotels. Already in 1871, Whymper insisted on differentiating himself from the tourists who crowded the lower slopes of the mountains he climbed. Twenty years later, recalling his first ascent to the Matterhorn, Mummery complained about "the vulgarization of Zermatt," the small village at the foot of the mountain, "the cheap trippers and their trumpery fashions," and missed the good old days when the mountain "was still shrouded with a halo of but half banished inaccessibility," before "the ascent had become fashionable" (Mummery 3). His book, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus,* included drawings of "Zermatt Fashions" and "Tourists" leisurely walking on well-marked trails. In the years since, the alpinists' contempt for the tourists and the tools they used to ensure their access to the mountains only grew: if the first alpinists despised ladders and fixed ropes, their twentieth-century imitators complained about roads and chairlifts.

While Levi seemed to embrace this model, the description of the "human subspecies" that interested him clearly marked a departure from the traditional alpinist heroes. In fact, Levi explicitly indicated that his mountaineers "should not be confused with other, vaguely similar types […]: hot shots, extreme climbers, members of famous international expeditions, professionals, etc" (Levi, "Bear Meat" 1139). What set Levi's heroes apart was precisely the fact that they stood outside the narrative tradition of alpinism, refusing to tell their stories and thus avoiding the spotlight. Professional

alpinists — Levi claimed — were people who "do speak, and of whom others speak" (1139). His mountaineers, in contrast, were people "who don't speak much, and of whom others don't speak at all, so there is no mention of them in the literature of most countries" (1139). In other words, what made the difference among the various "subspecies" of alpinists was not their relationship to the mountains but, more crucially, their relationship to language and discourse. Indeed, narration was an intrinsic component of modern alpinism from its origins, so much so that Mummery remarked that "fate decrees that the mountaineer should, sooner or later, fall a victim to the *furor scribendi*" (1) and alpinists, to a fault, wrote reports, open letters, and autobiographies, creating and disseminating their own myth. Almost by definition, telling the story of the kind of mountaineering heroes who refused to talk and were not spoken about required building a different language, departing from the codified *topoi* of the alpinist literature.

With "Bear Meat," Levi sought to create an epic of mountaineering built on other literary models, explicitly evoked in his text: Dante and Conrad. As Andrea Cortellessa (2013) and Riccardo Capoferro (2014) already noticed, the entire structure of this short story was modelled after *Youth* by Joseph Conrad: the narrator listened to old adventurers telling stories of their youth around a table (in a port in *Youth*, in a mountain hut in "Bear Meat"). Conrad's ghost loomed in the story, evoked first as the "sailor" who wrote that *"*the sea's only gifts are harsh blows and, occasionally, the opportunity to feel strong*"*[13] and then again as the author of "a beloved book," that described the value of being young and free in nature.[14] While existing scholarship focused on the role of Conrad as a model for Levi's short story, the role of Dante's Commedia was equally as important, and perhaps more interesting. If Conrad was Levi's model to describe the epic struggle between humans and nature, the writer turned to Dante to represent people's inner struggles and the generative power of mistakes that make you lose your way. One of "Bear Meat"'s narrators, somewhat unrealistically, quoted six different passages from the Divine Comedy (from *Inferno* I and XXIV and *Purgatorio* XVIII), claiming that while he wasn't a specialist, he was convinced that "Dante couldn't have just invented these founding principles of rock climbing — he must have been here or in a similar place" ("Bear Meat" 1143). In sum, he never doubted that Dante was "del mestiere," a connoisseur with first-hand experience of the

mountains. Reading these passages, one cannot help but remember the powerful impression that the revocation of Ulysses' mountain had on Levi in Auschwitz. In Dante, it seems, Levi found the model of a language that could describe the perils of the mountains with precision and without rhetoric, without wasting too many words.

Re-elaborating "Bear Meat" into "Iron," Levi dropped all references to Dante and Conrad. Most notably, Conrad was not mentioned in the list of Sandro's readings, which included instead other adventure writers such as Emilio Salgari, Jack London, and Rudyard Kipling. Capoferro argued that Conrad's expungement strengthened "Iron"'s connection with the autobiographical roots of the story. This choice, I suggest, also helped reinforce the connection with the tradition of alpinist literature, which was itself typically autobiographical. In fact, "Iron" explicitly evoked this tradition by mentioning the Austrian alpinist Eugen Lammer, described as an authority in survival techniques: "we had removed our shoes, as described in the books by Lammer that Sandro liked" (*The Periodic Table* 792). The source of this reference was almost certainly the collection of essays *Jungborn*, published in Italy in 1932 by L'Eroica in Milan, under the title *Fontana di giovinezza*. In one of these essays, Lammer indeed admonished that "in bivouacs, one should remove one's shoes because they conduct heat too easily, and one should put their feet in the emptied-out backpacks" (*Fontana di giovinezza* 464). Judging from this passage, one may think that Lammer was simply an expert in alpine techniques. In addition to a skilled alpinist, however, Lammer was also a narrator and a philosopher. His books alternated technical descriptions of the first ascents he conducted with mystical digressions clearly inspired by Nietzschean philosophy — a combination that is the perfect illustration of the complexity of the tradition of alpinist literature. Alongside discussions on boots and ropes, in Lammer's books one finds emphatic declarations about the need for danger to keep a person alive:

> I consider having experienced mortal danger with lucid consciousness as one of the highest forms of pleasure, one of my most precious treasures, and I wouldn't give up that memory for anything […]. I can easily renounce many joys on this earth, but if you take from me the fear and my generous fight with fear, my existence will become so boring that I would yearn for death. (Lammer, *Fontana di giovinezza* 222)[15]

It is not surprising that Lammer's books, full of mystical undertones and Nietzschean references, became an inspiration for Nazi alpinism.[16] What is surprising is to find him quoted among Sandro's favorite books. One may be tempted to say that Sandro (and Levi) extrapolated Lammer's technical teachings from his mystical celebration of an alpinist Übermensch, but that would be an oversimplification. Levi himself, in his 1984 interview for the *Rivista della montagna,* evoked Lammer's philosophy of mountaineering and listed him, as we have seen, among the authors who instilled in him the idea that one should "always measure oneself with the extreme" (Levi "L'alpinismo?" 29). While Mummery and Whymper were only quoted by name in this interview, Lammer was mentioned alongside his book *Fontana di giovinezza*. In fact, even if Lammer's philosophy was not discussed explicitly in "Iron," its echo can still be perceived in the narrator's words when he claimed, for example, that "nothing, even at a distance, has had the taste of that meat," that is the taste of freedom and the challenge of the mountains (*The Periodic Table* 792). These crucial words bring to mind Lammer's description of the pleasures of the danger and the excitement that comes with stretching ones' limits in the mountains.[17]

An Anti-Fascist Alpinist Hero

As we have seen so far, "Iron"'s explicit and implicit references to Lammer illustrate Levi's complex relationship with the tradition of alpinist literature. In many ways, Sandro was a model alpinist, formed in the same mountaineering culture that imbued the Fascist heroes. Fully extricating Sandro from that rhetorical tradition was not possible. Levi tried to do so in "Bear Meat," but a sailor like Conrad was not the right model for a mountaineering story. Yet, on the other hand, clearly the rhetoric and the language of the tradition of alpinist literature were inadequate to represent the mountaineering hero that Levi was building. This paradox lies at the foundation of "Iron": the analysis of Sandro's character, I argue, reveals how Levi utilized the *topoi* of the genre of alpinist literature as the building blocks to create a new kind of hero who not only embodied anti-fascist values, but was antithetic to the model alpinists codified since the nineteenth century.

First, Sandro was a man of the land, in contrast to the typical urban alpinists (and to Levi himself). Sandro "spent the

summers as a shepherd. Not a shepherd of souls: a shepherd of sheep, and not out of Arcadian rhetoric or eccentricity but happily, for the love of the land and the grass, and generosity of spirit" (*The Periodic Table* 786). The description of Sandro's shepherding experience reused, with minimal variations, the phrases used to introduce Carlo in "Bear Meat." In "Iron," however, Levi added details about Sandro's father, a mason, thus emphasizing Sandro's rural, working-class background, which set Sandro's character apart from most alpinist heroes, who were by and large wealthy.

From the Swiss and Italian shepherds who served as guides for the first wave of nineteenth-century alpinists to the "sherpas" serving as high-altitude porters in the Himalayas, rural populations are featured prominently in the tradition of alpinist literature. The relationship between the alpinists and their local guides is one of symbiosis and subordination. Despite depending on their guides, alpinists are in a position of power. If guides determine the itinerary, alpinists choose the destination and first set foot on the mountain peaks. They are the ones who get to tell their stories, representing themselves as the bearers of a superior form of knowledge. In these stories, while guides appear to have an in-depth knowledge of the environment, physical strength, and technical expertise, alpinists are portrayed as those who really understand the mountains, as they can classify them, map them, and scientifically study them.

Once more, in "Iron," Levi initially seemed to embrace this traditional paradigm, only to flip it. The character Primo imparted a wealth of theoretical and philosophical knowledge to Sandro, explaining to his friend "that the nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, consisted in making himself a master of matter" and that "chemistry and physics […] were […] the antidotes to fascism […], because they were clear and distinct, at every step verifiable" (*The Periodic Table* 787). However, Levi reversed the power dynamic between the urban scientist-philosopher and the local "guide," insisting that he had a lot to learn from Sandro beyond alpine technique, the traditional real of expertise of the native guides. Indeed, Sandro was represented as an authoritative teacher who could see through Primo's rhetoric and who demonstrated that his education, too, was "lacking":

> Matter might be our master, and maybe even, for lack of a better, our political school, but he had another matter to show me, another educator: not the powders of Qualitative

> Analysis but that true, authentic timeless Urstoff, the rock and ice of the nearby mountains. (*The Periodic Table* 784)

Levi, for all his theorizing, "did not have the credentials to speak on the matter" (*The Periodic Table* 784). For all his familiarity with the four Empedoclean elements, he ignored their manifestation in nature and did not know how to interact with them: "Did I know how to light a stove? Ford a stream? Did I know a high-altitude blizzard? The germination of seed?" (788). For the young Primo, matter was to be conquered, dominated. Sandro, in contrast, felt a friendly familiarity with matter: "When he saw in a rock a red vein of iron, [he] seemed to have found a friend" (787).

By the same token, Sandro rejected all tools that could interfere with his immediate, natural friendship with the elements and the environment. In Levi's description, Sandro (as well as his fictional predecessor, Carlo) rejected watches, feeling that their "quiet admonishment" was "an arbitrary intrusion" (*The Periodic Table 790*). Similarly, he didn't need any maps and only carried the trail guide published by the Italian Mountain Club to mock it and expose its shortcomings. In a particularly funny episode narrated both in "Bear Meat" and in "Iron," Carlo/Sandro and the narrator hiked through what was described in the guide as "the easy north-western ridge" (*The Periodic Table* 791), only to find that the conditions on the ground made this ridge almost impossible to traverse.

Such an attitude, of course, set Sandro apart from the stereotypical tourists, who depended on watches, books, and maps to make up for their lack of experience in the mountains. However, Sandro's rejection of these tools was also antithetical to the attitude of professional alpinists, whose reports and autobiographies insisted on the importance of being fully prepared and equipped with all the right tools to conquer the mountains. It is also worth noticing that the Italian Mountain Club was not only the embodiment of institutionalized alpinism but also — since 1929 — an official Fascist institution, and one of the ways in which Fascism expanded access to the mountains as a training ground for the minds and bodies of the Italian citizens (and future soldiers). One may argue that the gap between the guide that described the trail through the "easy north-western ridge" and the experience of the friends who found the same ridge incredibly difficult due to adverse atmospheric conditions represented the gap between the theoretical knowledge of

those who believed that they dominated the mountains just because they mapped them, and those — like Sandro — who knew that the only possible way to understand mountains was by experiencing them. From this vantage point, the role of silence and the rejection of rhetoric that characterized the "human subspecies" that interested Levi. As a prime example of this kind of mountaineers, Sandro "was extremely sparing in recounting his adventures":

> He didn't belong to the race of those who do things so that they can talk about them (like me): he didn't love big words, or, indeed, words. It seemed that, as with climbing, no one had taught him to speak; he spoke the way nobody speaks, saying only the essence of things. (*The Periodic Table* 789)

The parallel between Sandro's unique and instinctive way of talking and his way of climbing is especially interesting because it signals that his contempt for words and rhetoric was symmetrical to his contempt for watches and guidebooks: Sandro rejected of all things that mediated his relationship with the natural environment.

Such an unmediated, instinctive, familiar relationship to the environment manifested itself, first and foremost, in Sandro's choice to embrace mistakes, wrong turns, and deviations. In "Iron," in response to Primo's cautious attempts to find the "correct" official path in the mountains, Sandro emphasized that "it is not worth being twenty if one cannot afford the luxury to make mistakes" (Levi, *The Periodic Table* 793). These words were already used by Carlo in "Bear Meat," with minimal variations. In the same short story, as we have seen, the other narrator similarly discussed how he and his friends took a wrong turn and got lost in the mountains, only to be saved by local mountaineers. As a scientist, Levi was fully aware of the importance of mistakes as necessary steps leading to scientific discoveries. Similarly, traditional alpinist narratives were full of the tales of wrong turns taken on the way to the summit. However, Sandro's philosophy of mistakes was radically different from that of scientists and alpinists, for whom mistakes were means to an end, while the goal remained getting to the top, figuring out the correct hypothesis. For Sandro, mistakes were an integral part of the purpose of climbing: one cannot be late if there are no watches, one cannot take a wrong turn if they were not following a path. While scientists and alpinists aim at conquering and dominating Matter, control and conquest were

never a goal for Sandro — freedom was. By making mistakes and suffering their natural consequences, one only acquired the power to control one's own destiny, as Sandro taught Levi. But that was the only control that counted, because it was the only one that set you free. This was, in Levi's words, the taste of "bear meat": "the taste of being strong and free — free even to make mistakes — and master of one's destiny" (*The Periodic Table* 792). It was this attitude that made Sandro an exemplary anti-Fascist mountaineer. Before joining the Resistance, before sacrificing his life to fight the fascist government, Sandro embodied anti-Fascist values because he instinctively rejected the fascist way of being in the world, rooted in a desire to conquer and dominate the environment.

Language, Dialect, and Toponymy

The significant difference between the two modes of being in the mountains that we have outlined so far is reflected not only in the contrast between language and silence, but also between the standard Italian language and the local dialect: in Levi's short stories, the outsiders, intellectuals and scientists who sought knowledge as a way to control and dominate the environment spoke in Italian, whereas the local mountaineers spoke in dialect.[18] This contrast was especially evident in "Bear Meat"'s first tale, centered on a group of friends who climbed up a mountain, only to find themselves lost and unable to climb down the last cliff that separated them from the mountain hut where they were headed. The friends, all urban and educated youths, not only conversed in Italian, but, as we have seen, recited verses from the Divine Comedy. Stuck on top of the cliff, they were saved by a group of local mountaineers who instead spoke in dialect: "'Who are they?' a voice asked from below. 'A l'è mach tre gagnô brôdôs' was the fierce response. Then, turning to us: 'L'è lon ch'i 'v môstrô a scola?'" (*"*Bear Meat*"* 1144). As the narrator clarified, *gagnô* was a mocking expression that literally meant "child." The same narrator proudly explained that "Gagnô" became his nickname, making this episode almost literally a baptism into the community of the "real" mountaineers.

This section was not included in "Iron," like the majority of the first tale of "Bear Meat." However, in the Periodic Table, Levi inserted another section on dialects — a long digression on the climbing walls located around Turin. Levi listed and commented on their names, most of which were dialectal, rather than Italian: "the peaks of the Pagliaio with the Wolkmann Tower, the Teeth of the

Cumiana, Roca Patanüa (meaning 'bare rock'), the Plô, the Sbarüa, and others, with modest domestic names" (*The Periodic Table* 790). Toponymy is among the most debated issues in mountaineering. Naming new peaks and new routes, alpinists (and the countries they represent) establish and manifest their control over the peaks they climb. Within a typically colonial dynamic, local names, in local languages, have often been replaced by names created and imposed by foreign alpinists and outsiders. The English names attributed by Western explorers to many Himalayan peaks are obvious and well-known examples of this dynamic, but — as we have seen — as early as 1863 Quintino Sella already advocated to rename local mountains. Indeed, most of the modern names of alpine peaks are almost as recent as the names of the Everest and the K2, and they are the result of a similar imposition of Italian names that replaced the original dialect ones. Reversing, once again, the *topoi* of alpinist literature, Levi valued the local, dialect names of the boulders and climbing walls he listed. Such a contrast was especially evident in the case of the Sbarüa. This wall was discovered by Sandro himself, or maybe by his brother, and its shape evoked for Levi "il Veglio di Creta" (*The Periodic Table* 790). However, neither the identity of the alpinist who discovered it, nor the mythological associations it evoked were relevant to understand the name of this boulder. With the precision of a linguist, Levi dove into the dialect etymology of the name, explaining that Sbarüa was "deverbative derived from 'sabrüé', which means 'to frighten'" (*The Periodic Table* 790).

Levi was no stranger to etymology, and Linguistics was one of his great passions — a real "third trade" for the writer, as Beccaria characterized it (2020). It is no coincidence that in another essay on etymology, "Fossil Words," Levi returned to the vocabulary of the mountains, recalling that, since he was a kid, he was struck by the resemblance between the Italian word "baita" (mountain hut) and the Hebrew word "bait" (home, shelter). It was as if the Jewish people had, at least in this case, triumphed over the Roman conquerors: politically, of course, the Roman empire had defeated the Jewish people, but at least one word in the Hebrew language resisted, and even supplanted its Latin equivalent.

Later, Levi realized that the real etymology of the word was even more interesting: baita, in fact, predated not only Latin, but also Hebrew as it belonged to a shared "Paleo-European substratum" (*Other People's Trades* 2214). In other words, the young Primo Levi had unknowingly stumbled onto "a confirmation of the theory of areas that is so dear to linguists, and according to

which the presence of a given word in outlying areas is evidence of its antiquity" (*Other People's Trades* 2214). In the rest of the essay, Levi explained that the dialect of the rural areas of Piedmont still included words that were derived directly from Latin, whereas in Italian they had been supplanted by words with a more recent etymology:

> It stands to reason, but at the same time it's surprising and moving, that the weasel [*donnola*, in Italian] should still be called musteila in Piedmontese (mustela in Latin): in the Italianized city of Turin, weasels have never been seen, and there has been no need to hand down the name from one generation to the next. (*Other People's Trades* 2215)

This linguistic coincidence was moving, for Levi, because it was a testament to the continuity between the contemporary dialect and an ancient language, as well as the trace of a long-lost geopolitical community, which had long been supplanted by the fragmentation of modern languages and national states. Once again, local languages had the nuance and depth that were lacking from the names imposed by the latest cultural and political powers.

Conclusions

While most of the existing scholarship on "Bear Meat" and "Iron" focuses on their literary models, and in particular on their relationship with Conrad's works, I argue that one should read these stories against the background of the tradition of the autobiographies, expedition reports, and essays that, from the nineteenth century onwards, codified the natural environment of the mountains as something that was to be conquered, controlled, and catalogued, Levi utilized *topoi* and images from this tradition as the building blocks for a new kind of mountaineering hero, who rejected all tools used to dominate the natural environment, from maps and watches to language and rhetoric, revealing the anti-Fascist power of digressions, mistakes, and failures.

In building this new model of mountaineering hero, Levi recognized the value of his friend Sandro's instinctive, practical, un-mediated knowledge of the natural environment, even (or because) it was antithetical to his own abstract scientific and philosophical knowledge. But the reverse was also true — Sandro was not insensitive to Levi's knowledge. In fact, Sandro himself, while

primarily a man of action who experienced nature as a friend, was also a chemistry student, a scientist.

Finally, "Iron"'s conclusion draws our attention to another facet of such a tension: the paradox of narration itself. As we have seen, Sandro's contempt for language was an essential component of his way of being in the world, a crucial element of Levi's new mountaineering heroes. Sandro, like the other members of the human subspecies described in "Bear Meat," "was not a man to talk about, or to build monuments to, he who laughed at monuments" (*The Periodic Table* 793). Yet, precisely because he was a man of action, who "was all in his actions," now that he is gone there is nothing left of him. "Nothing, except words" (793). Levi was left with the impossible, yet utterly necessary task, to "clothe [him] in words, make him live again on the written page" (793).

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NOTES

[1] This passage is especially problematic because of the parallel that Levi seems to draw between Ulysses (punished by God for his hubris) and the Jewish people. On this issue, see for example Boitani (*L'ombra di Ulisse*), Belpoliti (*Primo Levi*) and Cavaglion (notes to the 1989 edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, which provide a helpful overview of the debate).

[2] Given the context, it is easy to connect this silence to "the usual motif of the impossibility of the word, Dante's unspeakable Good translated and adapted in reference to Evil" (Cavaglion 189). However, Levi's hesitation also brings to mind Francesca's hesitation in *Inferno* V, and her remark that there is no greater pain than to remember happiness while one is in hell.

[3] "L'alpinismo? È la libertà di sbagliare," an interview conducted by Alberto Papuzzi, first appeared in *La rivista della montagna* in March 1984. It is now included in Primo Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste,* edited by Marco Belpoliti, pp. 27-32.

[4] *"*Ho cominciato ad andare in montagna a 13, 14 anni […]. Nella mia famiglia c'era la tradizione della montagna che fortifica, un po' l'ambiente che Natalia Ginzburg descrive in *Lessico famigliare*. Non l'alpinismo propriamente detto, non le scalate… Si andava in montagna così, per il contatto con la natura…*"* (My translation. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine).

[5] *"*Volevo rappresentare la sensazione che si prova quando si sale avendo di fronte la linea della montagna che chiude l'orizzonte: tu sali, non vedi che questa linea, non vedi altro, poi improvvisamente la valichi, ti trovi dall'altra parte, e in pochi secondi vedi un mondo nuovo, sei in un mondo nuovo. Ecco, avevo cercato di esprimere questo: il valico."

[6] "Non l'ho mai finito, è rimasto inedito e tale resterà, perché tutto sommato è proprio molto brutto. C'era tutta l'epica della montagna, e la metafisica dell'alpinismo. La montagna come chiave di tutto."

[7] For a detailed account of one the first episodes of nationalistic competition in the Alps, see the illuminating and well documented *Fall of Heaven,* by the alpinist Reinhold Messner (2017).

[8] See for example Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871) and Mummery's *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* (1895).

[9] In the past decades, a growing number of scholars have investigated European mountaineering narratives. Existing scholarship, however, focuses on Victorian alpinists (see for example Reidy, "Mountaineering" (2015); Hansen, "Albert Smith" (1995); and Van Sittert, "The Bourgeouis Eye Aloft" (2003) and on Germany and Austria (see Keller, *Apostles of the Alps*, which also provides a helpful overview of existing bibliography). Italian mountaineering narratives remain largely unexplored, despite their popularity at the time, with the exception of Pastore, *Alpinismo e la storia d'Italia* (2003) and Cuaz, *Le Alpi* (2005), who have published detailed histories of Italian alpinism and its protagonists.

[10] "We succeeded; and a group of Italians has finally climbed the Monviso! […] In an instant, tiredness, doubts, fears, sufferings, everything was forgotten. We were finally successful! […] We came by ourselves, without the need for foreigners. This is the national pride!" (Sella, *Una salita al Monviso* 49).

[11] On this topic, see for example Segesser, "Fighting Where Nature Joins Forces with the Enemy."

[12] Quoted in *Scarpone e moschetto* (Serafin and Serafin 31). My translation. See also Armiero and Von Hardenberg, "Green Rhetoric" (2013) for an interesting discussion of Fascist mountaineering in the context of Fascist environmental policies.

[13] As Cortellessa remarked, the words of Levi's narrator are almost an exact quote from the conclusion of Conrad's *Youth.* Levi included this passage in *The Search for Roots,* his anthology and celebration of the authors who shaped his writing.

[14] On the relationship between Levi and Conrad, see also Mengoni "Ordinary, irresponsible, and unruffled."

[15] My translation from the Italian edition that Levi read and quoted in his interview: "L'avere esperimentato con coscienza lucida il pericolo di morte, io lo considero tra le più alte voluttà, lo tengo tra i miei tesori più preziosi e a nessun prezzo vorrei perderne la memoria […]. A molte gioie della terra voglio facilmente rinunziare, ma toglietemi la paura e la mia lotta generosa con la paura, e l'esistenza diventa noiosa fino a far sospirare la morte" (Lammer, *Fontana di giovinezza* 222).

[16] While there are still very few studies on Lammer, the preface to the most recent edition of his *Fontana di giovinezza* includes a helpful overview of its reception, including its role in inspiring Nazi alpinism (cf. Crivellaro, "Introduzione" 21).

[17] In "Bear Meat," the corresponding section was longer and more explicit: "penso, e mi auguro, che ognuno di voi abbia avuto dalla vita quanto ho avuto io: un certo agio, stima, amore, successo. Ebbene, ve lo dico in verità, nulla di tutto questo, neppure alla lontana, ha avuto il sapore della carne dell'orso." Levi's relationship with Lammer should also be interpreted in the context of his relationship with literatures in German (on the topic, see Mengoni, "Primo Levi e i tedeschi"). It is difficult to imagine, for example, that in writing about the mountains Levi did not think of his beloved Thomas Mann. However, it is worth remarking that Levi never mentioned *The Magic Mountain* when talking about the mountains. For him, the mountains were a space for adventure, much closer to the oceans and the exotic lands described by Salgari, Conrad, and Kipling than to the introspective, magical, and intellectual atmosphere of Hans Castorp's sanatorium.

[18] On Levi's dialect, see for example Deganutti, "Il dialetto mistilingue" (2015) and Villata, "Primo Levi e il piemontese" (2013).

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