# Abyssal Foundations: Primo Levi and Giambattista Vico on Terror

**Abstract**
Primo Levi and Giambattista Vico, extremely different writers living two centuries apart, both made occasional, conceptually significant uses of the word *terrore* and its cognates. Levi traced the collapse of human beings into terror in the Nazi Lager, whereas Vico posited terror at the origin of human history. Reading them together reveals a chiastic structure — from civilization to terror, from terror to civilization — that raises difficult questions about the perdurance of primordial fear even in advanced societies.

To speak of terror today is to think automatically of terrorism.[1] In some respects, at least since 2001, such a connection may be historically obligatory insofar as certain figurations of terrorism, notably associations with Islamism, became automatic mainstays of the early twenty-first century. At the same time, terroristic labeling is always mutating. For example, such language has come to refer to American white supremacists and Russian actions in Ukraine. Historical variation thus always attends any historical obligation. Indeed, the contemporary understanding of terrorism as non-state, ideologically inspired political violence is itself contingent. Even if the ahistorical prejudice that "it" has existed in all times and places remains popular, in point of fact, familiar views of non-state terror/terrorism have only predominated since the 1970s. Before then, from the 1930s through the 1960s, terror/terrorism characteristically referred to state or state-sponsored action, especially totalitarian and authoritarian violence, for which the Nazi camps served as the *exemplum horrendum*.

Primo Levi captured this mid-twentieth-century state of affairs. His evocations of *terrore* in reference to the Shoah revealed, beyond rhetoric, particular conceptual moves which themselves gestured toward human experiences, posthuman happenings, and their social and historical conditions of possibility. While occasionally alluding to terror/terrorism during the 1970s "Years of Lead," when left- and right-wing violence fractured Italian society, his discussion of Nazi terror contrasts, amplifies, and reframes our

own familiar paradigm (*I sommersi e i salvati* 30, 161/*The Drowned and the Saved* 43, 197).[2] If contemporary terrorism conventionally understood can be considered to pose fundamental questions about security and legitimacy, Nazi terror during the 1930s and 1940s attacked social foundations in qualitatively distinctive ways. Levi used the word *terrore* and its derivatives to refer to extreme, mortal fear as it related to Nazi rule, the ethos of the camps, and the breakdown of subjectivity. This vocabulary reinforced his famous depiction of the gray zone of the Lager in which language and representation themselves became inoperable. To be sure, *terrore* was a marginal term in Levi's lexicon, appearing only five times each in *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) and *La tregua* (1963), twice in *Il sistema periodico* (1975), and on three occasions in *Se non ora, quando?* (1982). His most frequent usages, in *I sommersi et i salvati* (1986), amount only to a dozen instances. Yet quantitative paucity does not diminish qualitative import.

While we ought not make too much of Levi's terror talk, we can make something of it. Insofar as *terrore* gestured to fear as an anti-foundational foundation, Levi also calls to mind another, seemingly radically different figure for whom terror also played a lynchpin role. The early eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinker, Giambattista Vico, writing at a time before the word terrorism existed, imagined terror at the origin of civilization itself, from the time the first peoples walked the trembling earth. It was terror that drove ancient humans to shelter in caves and led them, for instance, to imagine Jove's lightning bolts, giving rise to religion, duty, order; that is, to human culture and development. Levi's and Vico's discussions of *terrore* were in no way the same. And yet, the chasm between them operates as a chiasmus by which Levi's descent from civilization to terror is mirrored in reverse by Vico's climb from terror to civilization. Involving repetitions and dissymmetries, their treatments echoed one another across the historical expanse that divided them. At stake here is not a standard intellectual history in the sense of tracing lines of filiation whereby Vico influenced or infected [*influentia*] Levi. Evidence of Levi as a reader of Vico may exist or someday be unearthed, but it is not at hand.[3] Rather than an archeology that organizes difference according to excavated strata or a genealogy through which figures effect or contaminate one another, here is an indirect approach to the history of ideas. Placing Levi and Vico side by side involves, not disjunction or mutation, but a kind of adjacency and contrast, a strategy of staccato or montage-

like reading. The point is to expose a literary structure that emerges from bringing two very different thinkers together transtemporally via the hinge of a single word, *terrore*.

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Among the incidences of *terrore* in Levi's corpus, those in *Se questo è un uomo* and *I sommersi e i salvati* — his first and last major works — bear closer examination. Let us begin with a glance at what we will see in greater detail below. Because it was written in the 1980s toward the end of his life, Levi's most thorough reflection on the camps, *I sommersi e i salvati*, provided the fullest thematization of terror at the furthest remove from the war. In it, he foregrounded the word-concept on three levels: the Nazi state, the persecutory logic of the Lagers as such, and "life" in the camps. It was this third element that, with good reason, had prominently appeared four decades earlier in *Se questo è un uomo*, published two years after the war's end. The proximate immediacy of the Shoah had shaped that book's query — *if this is a man* — a desperate, plaintive interrogation that required no question mark. The text acted out the blunted capacity to communicate symptomatic of traumatic horror, and it raised metahistorical doubts about the inheritance of Western humanism. The title of the American translation — *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958) — suggesting perseverance in a place, lost much of the anti- and posthumanist despair intimated by the Italian original. *Se questo è un uomo* considered terror as intensified human fear *in extremis*; as collapsing the borders between sleeping and waking (and thus between nightmares/lived horror, self/world, etc.); as an alternate "frozen" world; and as an aspect of the camps that outlasted them. While Levi's influence unquestionably derived from his capacity to connect his own experience and memory to larger questions of savagery and breakdown, his meditations on the particular and universal — What indeed is a human? — could sometimes sidestep the distinctive singularity of Nazi Judeocide. As always, one should be careful that considerations of terror, genocide, and humanism/anti-humanism do not indulge the bad faith of trying to offer profane lessons.

Insofar as Levi presented the camps as an unearthly space reached by crossing a threshold, terror shaped both the means of

arrival and the terminus. One thinks of the infamous gate at Auschwitz but also of Auguste Rodin's personification of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* in his massive sculpture, *The Gates of Hell* (1880–1928), atop which stand three leaning figures — the Shades — who point their fingers downwards, commanding the abandonment of hope (Canto III, vv. 1-11). We might name these figures the human, anti-human, and posthuman. Subjectivity, experience, language, representation, and sociality are to be decimated, and human being is reduced to a terror that disassembles key attributes of humaneness. Those who remain, remainders, grapple with their inexplicable, often random prolongation and continued existence. The language of survival (from the Latin *super-vivere*, in addition to or beyond living) can be compared to that of the remnant [שְׁאָר], those left behind after a community experiences catastrophe and who, according to some traditions, are promised eventual return to the Promised Land. In both *I sommersi e i salvati* and *Se questo è un uomo*, the word *terrore* evoked the brutal reduction of human being to its constituent elements and impulses and, in a sense below them, to the abyss of inhumanity and post-civilizational torment. Such breakdown into an anti- or post-foundational abyss is a familiar leitmotif of Holocaust literature: the gray zone, a day in which all is night; Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956) and the "black milk" of Paul Celan's poem "Deathfugue" (1948) (Celan, *Selected Poems* 31). Terror all the way down.

In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi named propaganda, censorship, and terror as the three principal "weapons" of the "modern totalitarian state," which exercised "frightful […] pressure" over "the individual" (18/29). The language was consistent with anti-totalitarian discourse from the 1930s-1950s but had become somewhat dated by 1986 when the book was published, a year before Levi's death. Furthermore, in line with postwar assessments of Nazi violence was Levi's assertion that terror had been an aim and function of the camps as such. "In the early Lagers," he wrote, "work was purely persecutory." Starving bodies pointlessly working earth and stone "served only a terroristic purpose" ["scopo terroristico"] (97/121). This meaningless labor contributed to an economy of fear. So too, the idea that camps "functioned as centers of political terror" fit with older analyses that situated them within broader systems alongside propaganda, law, police, ideology, and so forth (5/14). From this perspective, Lagers were viewed as unique sites that intensified political terror that

coursed through Nazi society as a whole. In the context of mid-twentieth-century interpretations, the absence of anti-Semitism in Levi's specific account of terror is not necessarily surprising. That these were his views in the 1980s, however, is striking.

Anchoring Levi's two basic observations — terror as a weapon of the totalitarian state and as an aim and function of the camp system in general — was his voice as a survivor/witness. Not all generalizations speak from proximity, and each survivor memory stands out in its distinctiveness. For his part, Levi wrote of different moments in the camps' evolution, distinguishing initial persecutory labor from railroad platform selection "later on." As in other survivor literature, the effort to recall one's own experience of a situation involving the decimation of experience itself occasioned a turn to metaphor: "every new arrival truly felt on the threshold of the darkness and terror of an unearthly space" ["alla soglia del buio e del terrore di uno spazio non terrestre"] (37/51). More than a mere weapon or strategy, terror was a condition of what might be called the "worldless world" of the camps. The camp was a self-contained world with its own twisted physics, biologism, laws, etc. It lay on the far side of a threshold. Such a world was "worldless" in the sense that it was bereft of sustainable communication, recognition, succor, solidarity, and all the forms of intersubjective meaning that make life bearable and livable. And beyond the collapse of intersubjectivity lay the menace of arbitrary death and protracted dying.

The notion of worldlessness is a figure of post-Heideggerian philosophy (Végső). In a meditation on Jacques Derrida's reading of Paul Celan's line, "The world is far away, I must carry you" (Celan, *Breathturn* 251), Kelly Oliver writes,

> Like and unlike the animals, we are deprived of world. Like and unlike stones, we are worldless. Ultimately, what renders us worldless and deprived is death, but not Heidegger's being towards our own death. Rather what renders us worldless is being towards the death of the other […] When the stabilizing apparatuses that hold the world together break down and death renders them inoperative, there are no words, rules, morals, rituals or traditions that can support the weight of death. The survivor must fend for himself. And yet, in this worldless place, the nonplace of

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> facing the death of the other, the survivor must carry that weight himself. He is responsible for carrying the other forward in this worldless world. (126-27)

Here, terror *in* (and not only *of*) the camps lays outside or beyond, without in any way intimating transcendence. The image of the worldless world can be extended. David Rousset's 1946 book referred to "the concentration-ary universe" (*L'Univers concentrationnaire*, published in English as *A World Apart*). At the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, Ka-Tzentnik 135633, pseudonym of Yehiel De-Nur, described

> the Auschwitz planet […] The time there is not a concept as it is here on our planet. Every fraction of a second has a different wheel of time. And the inhabitants of that planet had no names […] They did not live according to the laws of this world of ours […]. (Brackney 124).

Both Rousset and Ka-Tzentnik were survivors. Here we have a simultaneous expansion and collapse of the camps: worldless expansion even beyond physical materiality, and worldless collapse in the foreclosure of meaning (no lessons, redemption, or return to the Promised Land). It is for this reason that the ethics of remembrance also outpace any tempting, irreverent gesture toward a transcending sublime or uncanny. In sum, the camps presented a paradoxical space that was simultaneously worldly (in its power, destruction, and death) and worldless (in its lack of human familiarity and the familiarly human, whether subjective or social). Oliver's reference to *stones* calls to mind the senseless "terroristic purpose" of camp labor, and her evocation of *animals* relates to another of Levi's references to terror, to which we now turn.

One of Levi's essential contributions was to have long reflected on the dilemmas of representation opened by the destruction of language in the Shoah: those who knew could no longer speak, while those who could speak could never fully know. Destruction of language and communication was tantamount to dehumanization and, troubling in specific ways, animalization. With cruel irony, the category of animalization evokes both the reduction of the human being to survival in extremis (arbitrary starvation, beatings, death) and also the Nazis' own perverse justificatory rationalization of *Untermenschen* [subhumans]. On terror and

animality, Levi reaches once again to metaphor. Describing the incomprehension of non-German prisoners faced with German guards barking menacing commands in an unfamiliar tongue, he wrote, "If anyone hesitated (everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrorized [*terrorizzati*]), the blows fell […] for those people we were no longer human. With us, as with cows or mules, there was no substantial difference between a scream and a punch" (70/91). Terror referred both to a victim's anticipation of violence (incomprehension, paralysis) and perpetrators' pretext for it (hesitation guaranteed the blows). The scream and the punch converged and became indistinguishable. Anything resembling intersubjectivity or even the distinction between life and dying/death collapsed. Such overwhelming breakdowns continue to challenge us today.

Collapse was also the condition of Levi's well-known discussion of the "gray zone." Insofar as terror linked his analysis of the camp system with his attempts to convey the unearthly abyss within wires and walls, the camps were ultimately both continuous with and apart from the Nazi regime. Levi referred, for instance, to "the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness" (43/57). And yet ambiguity also pointed toward one of his most difficult themes with which to contend: complicity and collaboration. Collusion had first of all involved the ways that "Hitlerian terror" had turned Germans into cowards who perpetrated the "crime" of failing "to divulge the truth about the Lagers" (6/15). More contentious, however, were claims that amounted to victim blaming. "German Jews" in the 1930s, he wrote, "were organically incapable of conceiving of a terrorism directed by the state, even when it was already all around them" (134/164). The cruel suggestion that Jews were complicit in their own destruction was inflamed by the perversely ironic invocation of biologistic language: *organicamente incapaci*. Still, the breakdown of the distinction between perpetrator and victim received its fullest and most troubling treatment in discussions of collaboration *within* the camps. One thinks of Levi's provocative depiction of the figure of the *Kapo*. Terror was the primary element in a continuum that included ideology, desire for power, cowardice, and calculation that sometimes led "the oppressed" to participate in their own oppression. The "harsher" the treatment in the camps, he wrote, the "more widespread" was "the willingness" for victims

themselves to become perpetrators (30/43). Here, appropriately, terrorization and not any supposed *organic incapacity* was the external cause of horrifying degradation. Generally speaking, Levi broached without fulling engaging key themes that have figured in wide-ranging debates on the Holocaust: German collusion, Jewish passivity, and oppressed oppressors.

      *I sommersi e i salvati* treated terror as a tactic of the Nazi state, as the persecutory purpose of the camp system in general, and as dehumanization in the Lager's "unearthly space." The last had been the principal concern of Levi's breakthrough text of 1947, *Se questo è un uomo*, where he had evoked terror in several ways. First, it was a comprehensible, even "normal" reaction to extremity. Fright, alarm, dread, and panic are common human experiences. Levi had panic particularly in mind when he noted that "terror is supremely contagious"; it circulated through the coercively assembled crowd and gave rise to the shared impulse to "try to run away" (*Se questo è un uomo* 151/*Survival in Auschwitz* 154). Initially, then, the situation of extreme duress elicited a recognizable response: the impulse of fright-inspired, life-preserving flight. The panicked instinct to flee still embodied the possibility of defense and escape.

      Levi went on, though, to contrast the panic of the fleeing crowd to the incalculable effects of prolonged, vigilant fear suffered by those who remained alive in the camps for days, weeks, months, or longer. Experiences in the camps were obviously varied, but at the limit of limit experience lay the decimated responsive capacities of the *Muselmann*. Levi wrote,

> 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 labor in silence, the divine spark dead in 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. (*Se questo è un uomo* 92-93/*Survival in Auschwitz* 90)

*They have no fear*. The *Muselmann* represented terror so extreme that the capacity to feel emotion, including the most primal self-preserving fear, had disappeared. Terror, as it were, beyond terror.

Giorgio Agamben cites the above passage in his own discussion of this "indefinite being" caught between life and death, the human and the nonhuman (*Quel che resta di Auschwitz* 43/*Remnants of Auschwitz* 48). The camps, he concluded, were "the site of the production of the *Muselmann*, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum. Beyond the *Muselmann* lies only the gas chamber" (79/85). Levi was not alone in weighing this emaciated figure; Agamben also cites Bruno Bettleheim's comparison of the *Muselmann*'s emotional capacity to that of autistic children, and Hermann Langbein on how the *Muselmänner*, incapable of terror themselves, nevertheless became "the great fear [*terrore*] of the prisoners," since the latter did not know if or when they would meet this "fate" (41/46, 46/51).

      This last sense of terror — that of interminable threat — collapsed the distinction between sleep and wakefulness, and led to glacialization, in the sense of a freezing up or immobility of thought and action. Ceaseless organized arbitrariness offered no respite. Sleep, so essential to organic restoration, was impossible. "But for the whole duration of the night," Levi wrote, "the expectancy and terror of the moment of the reveille/waking up keeps watch" (*Se questo è un uomo* 57/*Survival in Auschwitz* 63). Terror was a waking nightmare that made it impossible to lose consciousness and, so to speak, escape the camp within one's own interiority. Such anguish doubled over into paralysis. "One wakes up at every moment," he continued, "frozen with terror" ["gelidi di terrore"] (56/62). Glacialization was the condition of sleepless time: "when I saw [the SS's] hard faces I froze from terror and hatred" (156/159). The description calls to mind the scene of hesitancy/beatings discussed above — "everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrorized" [*terrorizzati*] — although the temporality diverged: uncomprehending, panicked uncertainty at arrival differed from immobility that came from a seemingly endless waking nightmare. This temporal logic — by which, for some, the shock of arrival became stretched and prolonged into interminable horror — intersected with the camps' spatial logic that joined together necessity and arbitrariness in ways that seemed paradoxical but were entirely consistent from the perpetrators point of view. What's more, the space and time of the camps exceeded any physical location circa 1933-1945.

We see this last point in the way that, beyond terror as a "normal" reaction to extremity and as glacialization from interminable threat, Levi mentioned the word in relation to the simultaneously closed and endless space of the camps at a very precise moment. As liberation approached, he said, ever "new terrors" continued to reveal themselves in "this world" (116/119). In a sense, the prospect of foreclosing the interminable, of waking from the nightmare, intensified the agonizing present, the same way that the thought of food increases the pangs of the starving. In other words, the very proximity of liberation absurdly increased distance from liberation, and in that distinctive time and space "new terrors" circulated. Of course, freedom when it came did not end terror, which outlasted the camps' existence, continuing to reverberate across the days and decades that followed. In a preface to *La tregua*, his account of his long journey home from Auschwitz, Levi described the "vortex of postwar Europe, drunk with freedom and at the same time restless in the terror of a new war" (10). Liberation brought a fragile peace, and displaced persons and refugees continued to struggle to survive. When collapse had been the only kind of experience, how could peace seem reliable and trustworthy? *Is it really over?* survivors asked. As Levi and his revolving cast of companions followed their route East and then West, terror came with them — the terror of bugs and of waiting, a pain that had been endured and yet was now contrasted to new emotions, such as the "fragile and tender anguish" of nostalgia. When Levi at last arrived home in Turin, the softness of the bed into which he fell caused him a brief, disorienting "moment of terror" (*La tregua* 122, 137, 175, 254/*The Reawakening* 105, 116, 114, 207). One imagines that in subsequent years he had many sleepless nights.

Altogether, while ultimately playing a small if revealing part in Levi's writings, the language of terror referred to regime, system, intensified fear, dehumanization, nightmarish liminality, and paralysis. As we have just read, terror also outlasted its originary scene. In his decades-long reflections, Levi joined other memorialists of the Shoah in emphasizing breakdowns of subjectivity and sociality. The camps had reduced them to the fundamental and foundational, through and beyond which lay an unworldly abyss. "And when you look long into an abyss," the not unproblematic Friedrich Nietzsche had written in 1886, "the abyss also looks into you" (279). Nazi terror continues to pose questions of subjectivity, society, and, to use a seemingly antiquated word,

civilization. In light of Oliver's view that the survivor is "responsible for carrying the other forward," we can recall that in ancient Rome the *corona civica*, a crown of oak leaves, was given to those who preserved the lives of fellow citizens. For even memory is preservation.

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Questions of foundations and what lays beneath or outside them have been religious, philosophical, and theoretical concerns for millennia. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) placed terror at the origin of human civilization. Notwithstanding their overwhelming differences, this eighteenth-century Neapolitan professor of rhetoric provides a suggestive counterpoint to the Torinese survivor of Auschwitz. Known for his influential constructivist view that truth is made [*verum esse ipsum factum*] and his cyclical view of history, positions paradoxically qualified by confidence in providential order and unidirectional civilizational development, Vico had responded to uncritical traditionalism, enthusiastic rationalism, and political contract theory. The final edition of his *New Science* (1744) proposed a philosophical anthropology through which early peoples' fears led to the creation of religion, culture, writing, politics, commerce, etc.; in other words, to history itself. Such fears had been primitive in the literal, etymological sense of *primitivus — first of their kind*. This aspect of Vico's vision qualifies his reputation as an optimistic or progressive thinker. For him, terror might be deeper and more intractable than we tend to think, laying at the very origin of civilization and, when seen in light of cyclical history [*corsi e recorsi*], always threatening to return. Like Levi, Vico did not often refer to *terrore* and its cognates. Yet here, too, a handful of mentions covered vast conceptual spaces: the terror of the first peoples, of the "giants" and their defeat by Jove, and of the earth itself. Two hundred years before the catastrophe of the 1940s, Vico had traced the inverted chiasmus of Levi's collapse. Just as Levi had demonstrated how terror exceeded the specific time and space of the camps, by the same token, reading these two authors together illustrates the longue durée of attempts to grapple with terror, from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, from ancient times until today.

Rejecting social contract theory that stepped too quickly from nature to politics and bypassed religion, Vico also eschewed positing God as a given source of awe. Instead, he located the origins of religion itself in emotional experience, above all fear. It was this religious anthropology that was later taken to have prefigured thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, who also made the divine a manifestation of social psychology and religion a pre-political social form. And yet, Vico, who was no secularist, also wanted to have it both ways. In the *New Science*, he distinguished idolatry from true religion based on "divine providence" that, always operating behind the scenes, ultimately pulled the strings of history. Narratively, Vico did not emphasize cyclicality from the get-go, an insight achieved only late in his analysis. Rather, he offered his own version of the initial emergence from the state of nature treated by social contract theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke before him and Jean-Jacques Rousseau afterwards. As we will shortly see, Vico explicitly differentiated his positions from Hobbes'. Early humans, he asserted, had been "shaken and aroused by a terrible fear" ["un terribile spavento"] (*La Scienza Nuova* 13/*The New Science* 9). Subjected to the lethal hazards of nature, fragile primitive peoples hid themselves, settled in families, and invented gods, religion, marriage, and funeral rites, setting in motion a developmental historical process that, according to Egyptian lore, passed through the three ages of gods, heroes, and humans. In short, civilization was the light against the night that was long and full of terrors.

Concluding an initial discussion of the origins of poetry, idolatry, divination, and sacrifices, Vico wrote that,

> All the things here discussed agree with that golden passage of Eusebius [d. 339] on the origins of idolatry: that the first people, simple and rough, invented the gods "from terror of present power" [*ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*]. Thus it was fear [*timore*] which created gods in the world; not fear awakened in men by other men, but fear awakened in men by themselves. (150/120)

This last point was explicitly anti-Hobbesian. While it was true that, as Hobbes had said, the feeling of fear set sociality in motion, for Vico, it was not the fear of menacing others in the infamous condition of war of all against all, but the more basic, even

primordial psychological interiority that preceded interactions with others. The experience of fear in itself, stirred first by nature, dark nights, and one's own imagination, was foundational. Such fright generated religion, which preceded culture, which in turn preceded politics. Even if in agreement with Hobbes that feeling trumped rationalism, against him, Vico elevated religion over natural war. He found a tidy formulation of his position in the poet Statius (d. 96): "Fear [*timor*] first created gods in the world" (88/72). Now, to say that fear created gods in the world — and not that God created human fear — was tantamount to idolatry. Vico admitted as much but found a crafty solution in advancing a version of Christian supersessionism: false religion was a developmental stage en route to true religion. Primitive or pagan religion as psychological-projective fear expressed the quality of awe necessary for eventual, proper apprehension of monotheistic divinity. In other words, idolatry served to indirectly fulfill the ultimate purposes of true religion and was thus a propaedeutic to social order and historical civilization. As Vico put it elsewhere, in the face of social chaos, "divine providence" had set about "awakening […] a confused idea of divinity" in order to subdue "fierce and violent" people; "through the fear [*spavento*] of this imagined divinity," he continued, "they began to put themselves in some order" (85/70). In contrast, say, to the Stoic and Epicurean traditions, which turned from anxious fear of wrathful gods toward science and even politics, Vico posited a form of political theology that, rooted in primal fear, generated the dual authority of gods/God and kings. Here, having it both ways meant that the telos at work involved both providential design as well as autochthonous, forward-moving development.

There remains the curious formulation referencing Eusebius cited above: that "the first people, simple and rough, invented the gods 'from terror of present power' [*ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*]. It is unclear in this context who or what is the cause of terror, other than the prevailing influence of the powers of the day themselves. But which powers? Nature makes sense but not proto-social conflict, which Vico immediately takes off the table. This ambiguity is clarified somewhat in an earlier section that reveals him to have likely both misattributed and misquoted the line *ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*. Commentators have long followed intratextual clues to conclude that Vico is invoking on this occasion not Eusebius but Lactantius Firmianus (d. 320), whose *Divine*

*Institutes* he does cite: "Rude men at first called [them, i.e., a king and his family], gods either for their wonderful excellence (wonderful it seemed to men still rude and simple), or, as commonly happens, in admiration of present power […]" ["in admirationem praesentis potentiae"] (87/71; Lactantius Firmianus 192). Here, present power is thoroughly terrestrial. Rulers are worthy of admiration, wonder, and awe due to the charism/charisma of their actual power, so much so that they are considered godlike. We are on the road to the divine rights of kings. So in the first citation not only does Vico apparently exchange Eusebius for Lactantius, but he also transforms "admiration of present power" ["in admirationem praesentis potentiae"] into "terror of present power" ["ob terrorem praesentis potentiae"]." Even if unconscious or accidental, the slippage between admiration and terror reinforces the overall design: the idolatrous invention of the gods as fearful projection coincides with, reflects, and reinforces rulers' awe-striking worldly power. Terror possesses transitive qualities. We are far, it seems, from Levi's conceptualization of terror, which, although involving worldly power and idolatry, did not turn on projection, at least not on the part of its victims.

If the road to the divine rights of kings had been joined, there was far to travel. The early religiosity of false idolatry contained the truth that "divine providence watches over the welfare of all mankind," and it generated or coincided with a form of authority rooted in notions of property (*La Scienza Nuova* 152/*The New Science* 121). Prior to its refinement by rational pagan philosophy, what Vico called poetic wisdom structured the ages of gods and heroes. The authority of Olympus was epitomized by a Latin phrase he cited on several occasions: *terrore defixus*. Both the giant Tityus and the Titan Prometheus had been indefinitely tied to rocks. Birds devoured their livers, which grew back each night. Physical restraint was accompanied by an emotional condition: "being rendered immobile by fear" ["resi immobili per lo spavento"], he wrote, "was expressed by the Latins in the heroic phrase *terrore defixi*" (153/121-22). *Defixi* from *defigo*, to thrust a weapon, fasten, curse, bewitch, astonish, or stupefy. Terror was what Tityus and Prometheus experienced but also that which constrained and tortured them, embodied by the metaphors of chains and birds. The giant and the Titan were the property of Olympus. A similar fate awaited the princess Andromeda. Repeating the above formulation, Vico described how she was "lashed to the rock and

petrified with terror (so Latin kept the phrase *terrore defixus*, rigid with fear)" ["incatenata alla rupa, per lo spavento divenuta di sasso (come restò a' latini '*terrore defixus*,' 'divenuto immobile per lo spavento')]" (305/238). These scenes are reminiscent of Levi's notions of stone's terroristic purpose [*scopo terroristico*] and of being frozen with fear [*gelidi di terrore*], violence inflicted in ceaseless cycles that collapsed the difference between day and night. Bound and fixed with terror meant embodiment on the precipice of annihilation; terror was an emotional state resulting from external causes, whether being chained to a rock or thrown into the gray zone. To Vico's initial image of early humans frightened by nature after sunset can be adjoined the incomparable horror of boots in a hallway taking a family away in the dead of the night.

The evocation of Levi, however, immediately encounters obvious limits. The catastrophe of the camps and Judeocide bears none of Vico's poetic wisdom. Destruction, in other words, is not sacrifice. Tityus, Prometheus, and Andromeda were wrapped up in, even captured by a mythic sacrificial logic, their torment folded into larger narrative significations. Indeed, Heracles ultimately freed Prometheus, and Perseus liberated Andromeda. Such "heroic politics" in which the fixed can sometimes be unfastened foreground an economy of authorities, victims, and intermittent liberators. Andromeda had been sacrificed by her father to mollify Poseidon, who had been wreaking havoc. The sea god's trident "made the lands of men tremble in terror of his raids. Later, already in Homer's day, he was believed to make the physical earth shake" (304/238). The etymological link between terror and earthquakes (here, *far tremare le terre*) points back to Proto-Indo-European prefixes *ters-* and *trem-*: terror and trembling.[4] Still, we can distinguish between earthquakes and the unearthly. To mythologize the Shoah is pure irreverence.

The terror felt by heroes (mythic giants, Titans, and princesses) is inflicted by the gods who, despite heroic stances against them, carry the day. And while Poseidon might make waves, it is Jove's kingdom. It is he who is ultimately responsible for the torment of Tityus and Prometheus. Poetic metaphysics leads to patriarchal, quasi-monotheistic poetic morals. The "poet giants, who had warred against heaven in their atheism" were defeated by "the terror of Jove, whom they feared as the wielder of the thunderbolt." Their bodies and minds were "humbled" by "this frightful

[*spaventosa*] idea of Jove" (217/170). With the figure of the single godhead, we are farther along the still long and winding road of the unfolding of "divine providence," enabling Vico to maintain both his historical anthropology of religious projection and a divine guarantor. With respect to *terrore*, the narrative is clear: the primal cry of the first peoples hiding away led to imagined "giants" fixed in fear to rocks, and then to the one god whose thunderbolt rules them all. Fear is a foundation, the origin of myth, including the myth of origins. Vico underscores how notions of "vulgar divinity" enabled the first hermeneutic: *to divine*, to interpret menacing, terror-inspiring natural circumstances. Of the earliest humanoids, he observed that,

> In their monstrous savagery and unbridled bestial freedom there was no means to tame the former or bridle the latter but the frightful thought [*ch'uno spaventoso pensiero*] of some divinity, the fear [*timore*] of whom is the only powerful means of reducing to duty a liberty gone wild. (123/100)

Among the earliest struggles to survive, it was fear of the end of the human that marked the beginning of humanity. Terror made civilization.

It is far from clear, however, how monstrous savagery and unbridled, bestial, and wild freedom that imagined gods in primordial times relates to the monstrous savagery and unbridled, bestial, and wild license that reduced people not to duty but to destruction, the magnitude of which posed the question of whether there could be any God at all.

<center>*     *     *</center>

Two very different thinkers, centuries, and circumstances. The terror of the Shoah, terror as the imagined origin of human history — these opposite framings form a chiasmus: from civilization to terror and from terror to civilization. The dual movement of a single structure, involving repetition and inversion, points in many directions. To take one example bearing more than an indirect relation to Nazi catastrophe, the title of Charles Darwin's 1871 treatise *The Descent of Man* referred simultaneously to descendance as lineage from an origin but also as degeneration. Simone Ghelli

has masterfully shown the ironic proximity of Levi's views to Darwin's on a specific point, writing that,

> the most blatant philosophical trace of Levi's reading of *The Descent of Man* is how he understands and employs the evolutionary notion of "civilization." […] Levi rejects the "obvious" — and, for him, naïve — pessimistic anthropology *à la* Hobbes, adopting instead an evolutionary perspective that replaces the strict dualism between human nature and civilization with a gradualist understanding of sociability. (118)

As with Vico, Hobbesian naturalism is rejected in favor of civilizational evolution. Civilization develops over time as a defense against life's tendency toward destruction, cruelty, etc.; it expresses the "corrective actions" (Levi) that, given its constitutive vulnerability, the species needs in order to survive and thrive. Levi's "ethological moralism," says Ghelli, holds two positions simultaneously: on the one hand, "history and life spontaneously tend to inequality, to establish disparities," and on the other hand, civilization is "an indicator of humanity, an egalitarian principle that tends to lessen […] extremities" (120, 134). Nazism reflected no simple unchaining of animal instincts or impossible return to a primordial state of nature; rather, it was an inverted civilization, an "uncivilization" (119). The "hyperpolitical situation" of the camps embodied terrifying "unnatural selection" (Levi) that violated the species we have become (118, 120). Many points emerge simultaneously: terror is opposed to civilization, but the camps are not mere unimpeded nature; at the same time, life *does* tend toward destruction, and history, too, inflicts devastation; civilization provides corrective humanization but is also the source of uncivilization, an accelerator of extremes. Such complexity can be seen to derive from and return to a chiasmatic structuring.

Any thought of nature already partakes of culture, and imaginings of immemorial pasts are infused with a given present. At the very moment that Levi was interned in Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer brought together, on the one hand, the vision of a primal scene in which early humans trembling in fright invented gods, with, on the other hand, anti-humanist Judeocide. They wrote of the primitive and primordial "cry of terror" [*Der Ruf*

*des Schreckens*] that had generated ancient civilization, including myth (*Dialektik der Aufklärung* 21/*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 10). Their vision of early humanity was strongly Vicean, and yet they also provided an account of Vico's own era. Insofar as fear-driven myth of the distant past sought to explain, manage, and control reality, it had embodied the earliest form of Enlightenment. Here, too, long-term historical processes had been set in motion, including *L'illuminismo in Italia* of which Vico had been an exemplar. Yet writing two centuries later in the midst of cataclysmic total war, Adorno and Horkheimer provided a grim assessment of the legacy of Enlightenment rationality: idolization of instrumental reason had pried open the door through which irrational projects of racist genocide were passing. As they famously argued, myth had been Enlightenment, and Enlightenment had become myth (a story, a mystification, the expression and conduit of unreason). In sum, the terror of the earliest peoples in the face of destructive nature had generated myth, which in affording them a modicum of explanation and control had pointed the way toward Enlightenment. And yet the civilizational project of explaining and controlling nature had culminated in the terrifying mythic destruction of post-Enlightenment humanity, not least in the form of National Socialist "naturalism." This chiastic pattern — the "cry of terror" generating myth and post-Enlightenment modernity engineering cries of terror — Adorno and Horkheimer reinforced with a devastating claim: "One cannot abolish terror and retain civilization" ["Man kann nicht den Schrecken abschaffen und Zivilisation übrigbehalten"]; the two terms were "inseparable" ["untrennbar"] (227/180). Our dilemma may be deeper than we realize. Terror generated civilization, and whether or not imagined as repressed, it nonetheless threatens to return. Within this structure, Vico's pre-humanistic terror and Levi's post-humanistic terror can be heard to echo one another: the unearthly waking nightmare of camp terror perpetrated by sometimes well-educated technicians, the repeated rise and fall of cyclical history [*corsi e recorsi*]. Vico's intimation that terror returns again and again draws our attention to the question of life and civilization after Auschwitz. For Levi, the camps existed until *his* death. It remains an open question the extent to which it can be said that he survived.

Inseparability, inversion, and cyclical history send us deeper into the logic of the chiasmus. In a late essay and notes, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty explicitly meditated on

"intertwining — chiasm" ["l'intrelacs — le chiasme"] (*The Visible and the Invisible* 130/*Le Visible et l'invisible* 170). Playing on the initial dual meaning of chiasmus as both a literary structure and a biological feature, for instance, the crossing of the optic nerves in the brain, he extrapolated a world of phenomenological relations intimated by the elegant metaphor of "the finger of the glove that is turned inside out" (311/260). Consciousness/body, perception/counter-perception, self/world, sign/signifier, particular/universal — all reality is related, intertwined, and reversible. The breadth of this chiasmatic vision enables us to grasp, as he would say, *the flesh* of the relation/non-relation of both (1) the figures of the "first men" and of the *Muselmann* and survivor, and (2) Levi and Vico themselves. "The past and present are *Ineinander* [intermingled, into each other]," Merleau-Ponty wrote, "each enveloping-enveloped — and that itself is the flesh" (315/268). Or again, "Like the natural man, we situate ourselves in ourselves and […] in the other, at the point where, by a sort of chiasm, we become others and we become world" (210/160). Great distance is the inversion of proximity, and vice versa.

Martina Mengoni is one of the few to have hit upon the essential connection: the "men after Auschwitz" described by Levi, she says, "can be in a certain way compared to the *first men* Vico is describing" ("The Gray Zone" 7n18). She invokes Vico's distinction between "physical" and "poetic" (or "metaphysical") truth in order to elucidate Levi's literary sensibility. To aestheticize a figure is to endow it with a standing and essence whose meaning exceeds any real or concrete veracity. Vico gives the example of Torquato Tasso's portrayal of Godfrey of Bouillon, an idealized standard against which all other captains of war could be compared and measured (*La Scienza Nuova* 70/*The New Science* 74). In other words, figuration outstrips actual biography. Vico locates this poetic capacity in "the first men" who,

> not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them. (71/74)

Mengoni observes that Levi had treated Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Jewish Council in the Łódź Ghetto, as such an ideal portrait when he described him as a "symbolic and compendiary figure" and as "a metaphor of our civilization" (*Variazioni Rumkowski* 60-61 and n39; "Rumkowski Variations"; citing Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* 49/*The Drowned and the Saved* 68, and "Itinerario d'uno scrittore ebreo" 230/"The Itinerary of a Jewish Writer" 165). She calls Levi a "master" at such fantastic universals through which fiction and non-fiction, the poetic and analytical combine in a distinctive "hybridism" (*I sommersi e i salvati di Primo Levi* 279-80). The implication is that Levi's poetic capacity itself evokes that of Vico's first men in the same way that the *Muselmänner* echo the first humans.

To be sure, the Levi/Vico chiasmus possesses dissymmetry in addition to mere repetition. Vico's climb from early humans' emotional capacity for fear to the civilizational accretion of gods, rituals, kings, etc. is not exactly mirrored by Levi's breakdown of sociability and individuality through which the very capacities of experience and intersubjectivity are pulverized. It is one thing to build an escape route from fear, and another to have what seems solid collapse into abyssal freefall. For Vico, terror operated as a kind of generative excess. In spite of their trials, in the end, Prometheus and Andromeda were freed. Thus for Vico, terror ultimately functions; that is, its dysfunction can be foundational or constructive. It leads not only to fleeing or fighting but also to interpretation, explanation, and meaning. Though extreme, it retains something of what might be called normal fear, which always passes, even if it always returns. Again, fear of the end of the human marked the beginning of humanity. Terror made civilization. For Levi, in contrast, terror was functional and dysfunctional in different ways. As an element of the Nazi rule and the camps system, it enforced compliance. And yet, within the camps, across a certain threshold, terror circulated outside any logic of functionality. It served no purpose or meaning. There is no *why* in a worldless world, and both meaning and the capacity to make it break down. Fear does not pass, the impulse to flee freezes, and the *Muselmann* escapes terror only because the capacity to feel has been pulverized. For others, terror persists, outlasting the physical space of the camps and the time when their gates and towers had been guarded. Despite their considerable differences, both Levi and Vico establish the continuity of terror, its physics, its unrelenting and cyclical return.

And both their treatments are shadowed by death: for Vico, the healthy fear of death that creates civilization; for Levi, planned arbitrary death. Death may be instantaneous, but dying can be endless. While it is always possible to consider fear of death abstractly — building rituals, rites, and philosophical histories around such apprehension — in contrast, fear of dying is always solitary in its animal, existential physicality. Devastating, paralyzing, animalizing terror is a possible human experience.

We were and are animals. Fear is hard-wired in our brains and bodies. And we are not only animals, not only fear. Civilization is one state of being more than fear, while also being a form and means (techne, rule, regime, system) by which terror can be enforced, visited, and suffered. The camps illustrated how civilization can decivilize. Beyond the classic opposition between civilization and barbarism lays the negative dialectics of civilized barbarism/barbaric civilization. A possible human experience, then, is being reduced to terror from our ordinary condition of being spared it, to fall from the state of being more than fear into quivering bare life. The human being is a vessel containing the ever-present potentialities of its primordial past. Before and below human being lays an abyss of terror. After and on top of such an abyss is built meaning, belief, reason, culture, and so forth. Such foundations can endure; Enlightenment and civilization did their work. And of course, foundations can tremble, worlds quake, social orders collapse, and abysses open. The terror wrought by the means of civilized barbarism differs from that of the primordial scene. Wires and tower searchlights are not the sounds of wild animals in a deep forest. Yet what does it mean to construct the foundations of social order again and again on top of terror that haunts them? As with primitive humans' founding cry of terror, so too, with the unearthly abyss of Auschwitz — the pre-humanism of Vico and the posthumanism of Levi are extremes that meet in the sleepless night.[5]

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NOTES

[2] Hereafter, non-English originals and English translations take the following form: "30/43," for instance, refers to "*I sommersi e i salvati* 30/*The Drowned and the Saved* 43."

[3] Conni-Kay Jørgensen's study of Vico's twentieth-century reception in Italy, *L'eredità vichiana nel Novecento letterario* (2008), considers Carlo but not Primo Levi. Nor does Vico receive distinctive treatment in a wide-ranging volume on Levi's interlocutors (Cinelli and Gordon, *Innesti*, 2020).

[4] Vico later points out that "Latin grammarians" had mistakenly believed that "territory" [*territorium*] derived from "the terror of the fasces used by the lictors to disperse crowds." In fact, he says, the word originated in the boundaries of cultivated fields "guarded by Vesta with bloody rites." The Greek counterpart, Cybele or Berecynthia, had worn a "crown of towers" ["coronata di torri"] that later generated the icon of the *orbis terrarium/orbis mundanus* (351/274).

[5] One is reminded of Stephen Dedalus's often-cited remark in James Joyce's *Ulysses* that "History […] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Less frequently invoked is the specific context in which he makes this comment. Garrett Deasy, headmaster of the Clifton School, where Stephen is teaching, goes on an anti-Semitic rant: "England is in the hands of the jews.[…] Old England is dying. […] Dying, he said, if not dead by now. […] They sinned against the light." "Who has not [sinned]?" Stephen sharply retorts. Deasy asks what he means, and Stephen delivers his line about history being a nightmare. At that moment, the sound of an ongoing soccer game outside drifts into the room. "What if that nightmare," Stephen/the narrator asks himself, "gave you a back kick?" The nightmare of history surpasses any distinction between sleep and wakefulness insofar as the border between dreamscape and embodied object world breaks down. At all hours, history kicks and throws punches that converge with shouts and screams. Deasy weakly invokes salvation history: "All history moves toward one great goal, the manifestation of God." "That is God," Stephen replies, gesturing to the continuing clamor of the unseen soccer match, "A shout in the street […]" (Joyce 33-34). Anti-Semitism, dying, history's nightmare and back kick, God as shouts in the street — *Ulysses* appeared twenty-two years and twenty days before Levi arrived in Auschwitz.

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