Writing after and about the Holocaust:
Primo Levi and Umberto Saba

Abstract:
This article examines the brief and intense relationship that Primo Levi established at the beginning of his literary career with another author of twentieth-century Italian literature: the poet Umberto Saba. The article analyzes two little-known and two hitherto unpublished letters that the writers exchanged in 1948-1949 concerning their most recent books: Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1947) and Saba's *Shortcuts and Short Stories* (1946). The article argues that, in spite of its limited duration, this brief private correspondence illuminates previously disregarded connections between Levi's output and Saba's poetics, as well as highlights one of the first meaningful receptions of Levi's work. In addition, the correspondence sheds a new light on one of the major literary issues of post-war Italy: writing after and about the Holocaust.

Keywords: Theodor Adorno, Sigmund Freud**,** Holocaust, Primo Levi, Majdanek, Friedrich Nietzsche, Umberto Saba, Shortcuts

Throughout his forty-year-long literary career, Primo Levi established connections, relationships, and exchanges — directly as well as indirectly — with a broad range of writers, scholars, and intellectuals from both Italian and international backgrounds. In the past few years, interpreters of Primo Levi have conducted extensive research into the diverse exchanges that the author of *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) had with twentieth-century transnational writers and intellectuals.[1] This innovative approach has not only enriched our knowledge of Levi's biography and intellectual development, but has also advanced Levi studies more generally, enabling scholars to better understand his output as well as to highlight previously overlooked aspects of his writing. As a matter of fact, certain features that are invisible, while focus lies solely on his works, emerge more clearly once Levi is placed in dialogue with other writers and intellectuals.

One of Levi's cultural relationships that has yet to be fully acknowledged is that with Umberto Saba, whose poetry is distinctive in twentieth-century Italian literature.[2] In my article, I will trace the relationship between the two authors by drawing on

four private letters that the writers exchanged in 1948-1949 (for the texts, see "Letters" in the Appendix of the volume, pp. 220-30). Two of the letters were found by Castellani and Fiori in the 1980s in the "Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi" in Turin and in the "Centro Manoscritti" in Pavia, and were later published in three occasions.[3] The other two I found in the "Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi" in Turin and have never been published until now.[4] By building on a close reading of those four important documents, I will provide insight into the main literary aspects and themes that in my opinion connect Levi to Saba, and show crucial commonalities — alongside nuanced differences — in the poetics of these two writers. Through my analysis, I will argue that the dialogue between the two authors is an asset in shedding a new light on fundamental features in both their output, such as the problems of writing "after the Holocaust," the stance on writing driven by authentic first-hand experiences, and the need for clarity.

Primo Levi and Umberto Saba were quite remote from each other in many ways: they belonged to different generations (Saba was born in 1883, and Levi in 1919); they received distinctive training (Levi graduated in chemistry, whereas Saba became a book-seller); and they had distant geographical backgrounds (Saba was born in Trieste, a port city under the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time, and Levi was born in Turin, the first capital city of the reunified Italy). In addition, by the time of this epistolary exchange in 1948-1949, they were at very different stages of their literary careers. Saba was an established writer who had just published an extended edition of his *Canzoniere* (*The Songbook*) with Einaudi (1945) and had just won the Viareggio Book Prize for poetry (1946); Levi had just returned to Turin from the nine-month-long arduous journey from his traumatic experience at Auschwitz that he later recounted in his 1963 book *La tregua* (*The Truce*). However, some relevant biographical experiences connected the two authors. Primarily, both Levi and Saba belonged to Jewish families and underwent persecution after the Fascist racial laws — passed by Benito Mussolini from 1938 to 1944 in order to enforce racial discrimination and segregation in Italy — as well as during the Second World War because of their Jewish and antifascist identities. More particularly, they were both non-practicing secular Jews and thought of their Judaism as a part of their multilayered cultural identities and not the predominant one. It is noteworthy that in two

separate pieces of writing, they recalled how they discovered their ethnicity only with the start of the Nazi-Fascist persecution:

> non mi era mai importato molto di essere ebreo: dentro di me, e nei contatti coi miei amici cristiani, avevo sempre considerato la mia origine come un fatto pressoché trascurabile ma curioso, una piccola anomalia allegra come chi abbia il naso storto o le lentiggini; un ebreo è uno che a Natale non fa l'albero, che non dovrebbe mangiare il salame ma lo mangia lo stesso, che ha imparato un po' di ebraico a tredici anni e poi lo ha dimenticato. (Levi, *Opere complete I* 886)
>
> [being Jewish hadn't much mattered to me: privately, and with my Christian friends, I had always considered my origin as a nearly negligible but curious fact, a small, a cheerful anomaly, like having a crooked nose or freckles; a Jew is someone who doesn't have a Christmas tree, who shouldn't eat salami but eats it anyway, who learned a little Hebrew at the age of thirteen and then forgot it. (Levi, *The Complete Works* 782)]
>
> non mi sono mai sentito che un italiano fra italiani [*sic*]. Il resto [i.e. l'ebraismo], prima che la pazzia e la disperazione degli uomini ne facessero una tragedia, era per me — lo ripeto volentieri — poco più che una "nota di colore." (Saba, *Tutte le prose* 365-66)
>
> [I never felt myself anything but an Italian among Italians. The rest [i.e. Judaism], before human madness and desperation made a tragedy of it, was to me — I repeat with pleasure — nothing but a "splash of color." (Saba, *The Stories and Recollections* 11)]

Already 60 years old by the time of the Nazi occupation, Saba did not actively join the resistance movement, and he did not experience deportation and internment in the Nazi *Lagers*, unlike Levi, who was imprisoned on December 13, 1943, and then sent to Auschwitz because of his activities as a partisan. Nevertheless, Saba, being a Jew, suffered a great deal during the war because of the fear of racial persecution and was forced to hide in order to

escape deportation by the Nazis.[5] The great distress endured during the Second World War resulted for him — as for Levi — in the development of a lifelong trauma fueled by the terror of persecution and by the complex of being an undeserving survivor. The trauma of racial discrimination and Nazi occupation had a major impact on Saba's mental condition — which had been precarious since he was 20 — and in those post-war years he experienced the most difficult depression of his entire life.[6]

Because of his worsening clinical condition, in his later period Saba lost his trust in the therapeutic possibilities of writing. Poetry ceases to be a form of daily treatment against illness for him; instead, he describes it as "a miracle," a surprise that can only be generated when medication attenuates the symptoms of depression. As a result, he reduced his poetic writing, although he did not stop writing completely. As Sergio Parussa noted, in this period Saba started an extensive production in prose, made up of letters, accounts, and short stories, which for the most part remained private and unintended for publication (57-58). It is my contention that the later Saba located the therapeutic functions he no longer found in poetry in his prose writing. For example, in the same years in which Primo Levi was composing *If This Is a Man*, Saba was designing his *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (*Shortcuts and Short Stories*), an experimental volume through which he significantly renovated his literary output. Although largely different in structure and content, the two books appear as two pivotal books of post-war Italy and were defined by the critic Domenico Scarpa as "due libri che sono altrettanti chiodi conficcati nel Novecento" ["two books that are two nails driven into the Italian twentieth century"] ("Presentazione").

The four letters that the writers wrote to each other in 1948-1949 revolve around an exchange of opinions on these two volumes, which eventually turns into an insightful process of exegesis and self-assessments of their respective writing. Primo Levi first published *If This Is a Man* in October 1947 through the local publisher De Silva,[7] whereas Saba published his first edition of *Shortcuts and Short Stories* in January 1946 with Mondadori.[8] In a way, both the authors were dealing with a debut, since *If This Is a Man* represented the first publication for Levi, whereas *Shortcuts* was the first book in prose for Saba. At this time, especially Levi was launching his career as a writer; for that reason, he was still consolidating his own literary apprenticeship — which had begun in childhood also thanks to his bibliophile father — and seeking

significant points of reference.[9] Primo Levi's initial reception was not fortunate and straightforward, and the writer struggled to find a publisher eager to print *If This Is a Man*.[10] The manuscript was surprisingly and notoriously refused by the Einaudi publishing house, since both Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg agreed that "non è il momento di pubblicare un libro come questo. Ne sono usciti troppi sull'argomento" ["is not the time to publish a book like this. Too many have come out on the subject"] (Anonymous) and feared that the book "sarebbe andato disperso fra i tanti libri di testimonianze sui lager che uscivano in quel tempo" ["would have been lost among the many testimonial books on the camps that were coming out at that time"] (Orengo). As a result, Levi was forced to come out with De Silva and in a limited run of only 2,500 copies, many of which remained unsold.[11]

Amidst this general indifference, it was Umberto Saba in 1948 who realized that Levi had the makings of a writer and that his book was a remarkable literary work. We do not know how Saba discovered *If This Is a Man.* Andrea Rondini states that it was Primo Levi himself who sent Saba the book ("Da Umberto Saba a Primo Levi" 45), but there is in fact no evidence of that exchange. Also, this hypothesis contradicts Saba's own statement in his letter that he had discovered Levi's book rather by accident ("il suo libro l'ho avuto per caso") ["it was even by accident that I got your book"] (LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 220-21). In my opinion, the most plausible hypothesis is that, being a bookshop owner in Trieste, Saba found *If This Is a Man* himself and decided to read it because of his own interest in Judaism and the Holocaust.

On October 26, 1948, after finishing the book, Saba sent a letter to the publisher Giulio Einaudi, with whom he had published an extended version of his *Canzoniere* in 1945. In a post-scriptum at the end of this letter,[12] Saba writes,

> Forse tu, o qualche tuo impiegato, saprà l'indirizzo di PRIMO LEVI,[13] che abita a Torino, dove fa il chimico. Egli ha scritto un bellissimo libro (Se questo è un uomo) che avrei voluto vedere fra le tue edizioni. Ma, come me, anche tu non puoi avere tutto. In una parola, vorrei scrivergli a proposito di quel suo libro, e, se puoi farmene[14] avere il recapito, mi farai cosa grata.

> [Perhaps you, or some of your employees, know the address of PRIMO LEVI, who lives in Turin, where he is a chemist. He has written a beautiful book (*If This Is a Man*) that I would have liked to see among your publications. But, like me, you cannot have everything. In short, I would like to write to him about his book: I will be grateful if you can get me the contact information.]

Saba's letter to Einaudi constitutes one of the first reviews of Levi's book and one of the few positive ones. Among the other encouraging feedback on *If This Is a Man* in those years was the very first review by Arrigo Cajumi, who 11 months before Saba, on November 26, 1947, had stated that Levi's novel "s'impernia, spontaneamente, sul problema capitale: quello dell'uomo che vive ad arbitrio d'uomo, nel mondo moderno" ["spontaneously hinges on the crucial problem: that of a man living at the will of other men, in the modern world"].[15] Only six months before Saba, on 6 May 1948, Italo Calvino had also praised Levi's book, calling *If This Is a Man*,

> un magnifico libro […] che non è solo una testimonianza efficacissima, ma ha delle pagine di autentica potenza narrativa, che rimarranno nella nostra memoria tra le più belle della letteratura sulla Seconda guerra mondiale. ("Un libro sui campi della morte")[16]

> [a magnificent book […] which is not only an extremely effective piece of testimony, but has passages of real narrative power, which will be remembered as some of the most beautiful of the literature on the Second World War.]

In July 1949 Calvino would expand this interpretation by this saying that, among the books on "La Resistenza" ["the Italian resistance movement"],

> il più bello di tutti [è]: *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino, De Silva, 1948 [*sic*, ma: 1947]) di Primo Levi: un libro che per sobrietà di linguaggio, potenza d'immagini e acutezza psicologica è davvero insuperabile.[17]

> [the most beautiful of all [is]: *If This Is a Man* (Torino, De Silva, 1948 [*sic*, in fact: 1947]) by Primo Levi: a book that,

for sobriety of language, power of images, and psychological acuity, is truly unsurpassed.]

The fact that both Saba and Calvino use the adjective "beautiful" to describe Levi's work shows that — unlike the Einaudi publishing house —, they were approaching it as literature, not as a testimony but as a form of testimonial-narrative literature. As a result, Saba and Calvino may be regarded as the first ones who recognized in Levi not only a survivor and an invaluable first-hand witness of the Shoah, but also a literary writer — and a remarkable one.[18]

In his letter to Giulio Einaudi, Saba not only lamented the fact that *If This Is a Man* had not been welcomed within one of the publisher's prestigious book series, but also asked him for Primo Levi's address to be able to write to him directly. Giulio Einaudi replied to Saba four days later, giving him Levi's address in Turin (Barberis 754). Subsequently, four days later, on November 3, 1948,[19] Umberto Saba wrote a letter to Primo Levi, which is the first important document that ties the two authors together (see LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 220-21).

Saba's words constitute one of the first reflections on the crucial issue of writing after and about the Holocaust. In 1948, awareness of the historical truth of the genocide and of its actual occurrence was not so present amongst the European intellectual classes. The experience of the Shoah, at that time, was mostly shared by voices linked to Jewish culture, and had not yet been absorbed and acknowledged by Italian society. As a result, Saba's letter can be considered as a small but important step on the way towards the acknowledgement in Italy of the Nazi genocide.[20]

Beyond Saba's awareness of the historical importance and sociological impact of Levi's work, there are further relevant features in this letter. As Rondini ("Da Umberto Saba a Primo Levi" 45) noted, the usage of the adjective "fatale" in relation to Levi's book is remarkable, as it is a central term in Saba's own writings. In his vocabulary, the expression means a work written out of inescapable necessity. For example, his *Canzoniere* in verse published in 1945 is also "fatale" (Ponti), as is *Shortcuts*, the short prose book that had appeared almost three years before this letter:

> le SCORCIATOIE rappresentavano nella mia vita *una fatalità*.[21] Prima o dopo, era "necessario" che dicessi le cose che in esse ho dette. (*Tutte le prose* 872)
>
> [the SHORTCUTS represented *an inevitability* in my life. Sooner or later, it was "necessary" for me to say the things I said in them.]

One week later, on November 10, 1948, Levi replied to Saba with a letter of thanks and of deep appreciation for his complimentary words, and he announced his eagerness to meet with Saba in person (see LETTER 2 in the Appendix pp. 221-23). In his response, Levi agrees with the definition "fatale" used by Saba for *If This Is a Man* and adds that in his view the book appears self-written and naturally stemmed from "l'indignazione, l'offesa e la vergogna" ["indignation, outrage, and shame"]. Levi also confesses the limited success that his book has found ("il libro non è andato molto bene") ["the book has not gone well"] and frankly conveys to Saba his frustration for such an ungenerous reception. He specifies that this disappointment combines for him with "un momento di stanchezza e di disgusto" ["a moment of weariness and disgust"], in which he is not convinced to have "il vigore di scrivere ancora cose buone ed utili a me ed agli altri" ["the vigour for writing things which are good and useful for myself and others"]. Nevertheless, he confirms his interest to follow the literary career inaugurated by *If This Is a Man* ("avrei quindi ancora molte cose da raccontare," ["So I still have many things to tell"] and informs Saba that he has already started a sequel. In a brief overview of the new book, Levi reveals that this second volume narrates the perilous voyage across Europe that followed his liberation from Auschwitz, a summary that coincides with what he later recounted in *La tregua* (*The Truce*), published in 1963. This passage proves that Levi conceived a sequel to his first book already in 1948, although he had to quit the project for his mental distress and because of his professional and parental duties. The letter also confirms that the publication of *If This Is a Man* was not a one-time endeavor for Levi and that in those years, he was considering himself primarily as a writer, alongside his work as chemist. In addition, this confirms the hypothesis that although he had been writing throughout his life, his decision to become a writer was driven by the post-war urgency to communicate his experience in the *Lager*. For this reason, Levi describes Saba's letter

as at the same time "gradita ed amara" ["welcome and bitter"] and his own feeling as "un piacere non privo di amarezza" ["a pleasure not without bitterness"], since he feels encouraged by his senior colleague to pursue his own urgency to write at a moment in which his writing is challenged by personal issues.

Saba wrote back to Levi again and with similar thoughtfulness on November 20, 1948 (see LETTER 3 in the Appendix, pp. 224-25). As Barberis (755) mentioned, in this letter Saba becomes even more cordial, as he confesses to "caro Primo" ["dear Primo"] that he has given his letter to another admirer of his book who was also a collector of autographs. He also replies that he would gladly visit him in Turin if he were not too "vecchio e stanco" ["old and tired"] to leave Trieste (as a matter of fact, the two authors never met). Then he reveals that he has written to Giulio Einaudi to get Levi's address and that he had shared with him his regret that *If This Is a Man* had come out with a different publisher. In addition, Saba suggests to Levi not to be concerned about the difficulties in writing the sequel, and to focus on it only once he feels the same sense of "necessity" that originated his first book. It is presumable that Saba's advice persuaded Levi, and that this authoritative opinion played a role in convincing him to publish *La tregua* (*The Truce*) only 15 years after his first book. Finally, along with his complimentary remarks, Saba sent Primo Levi a copy of his "libretto" ["little book"] *Shortcuts and Short Stories*. In establishing a clear connection between the two books, Saba — unlike other Italian intellectuals — was again identifying Levi as a fully accomplished writer and was implicitly connecting the poetics of *If This Is a Man* with his own. Saba urged Levi to tell what he thought of *Shortcuts and Short Stories*, a book Saba cared about but that had not been as well received as *The Songbook*.

Primo Levi read Umberto Saba's book and two months later, on January 10, 1949, respectfully replied to the poet (see LETTER 4 in the Appendix, pp. 225-27). In his letter, Levi showed a great appreciation for Saba's book and envisioned a keen literary affinity between Saba's work and his own production ("vi ho ritrovato molto del mio mondo") ["I found very much of my own world in it"]. In particular, Levi confessed to have resonated mostly with the first section of the book, entitled *Shortcuts*, than with the second one, *Short Stories*, a collection of short stories about the life of the Jewish community in Trieste before the war. As a matter of fact, Levi argued that the latter left him less impressed ("tutto

questo mi ha toccato meno") ["all this touched me less"], whereas in his opinion the former truly manifests the author's innovative poetics ("quel Suo coraggio, […] quella Sua avidità vigile […] di nulla lasciare inesplorato, di tutto sollevare dal buio del sottosuolo alla luce della consapevolezza") ["your courage, your alert longing […] to leave nothing unexplored to bring up everything from the darkness of the underground to the light of awareness"].

Why did these two quite different authors perceive such a profound rapport between their two works? What is the deep bond that connects Levi's *If This Is a Man* to Saba's *Shortcut*s?

Umberto Saba's *Shortcuts* is not a memorial of the Lager, since the author never experienced deportation and internment. *Shortcuts* is a hybrid experimental volume made up of 165 aphoristic and essential sentences on a diverse range of topics, from Italian history to European philosophy. Although it does not deal directly with the Holocaust, the book opens with a text (shortcut 5) which specifically recalls the name of a German prison and extermination camp — Majdanek (or "Maidaneck" in Saba's spelling):

> 5
> Dopo Napoleone ogni uomo è un po' di più, per il solo fatto che Napoleone è esistito. Dopo Maidaneck [sic]… (*Tutte le prose* 8)
>
> [5
> After Napoleon every man is a little more just because Napoleon existed. After Majdanek…]

Majdanek was a small Nazi Lager located in Lublin, in southern Poland. It was established in October 1941 and it was the first camp to be discovered by the Allies, on July 22, 1944.[22] In his shortcut, Saba establishes a comparison between the world before and "after" Majdanek, which in his terms stands for: humankind before and after the discovery of the horror of the concentration and extermination camps. Saba implies that, while after Napoleon every human being, regardless of their time and place, is "more" because they now have a supposedly superior model from which to take inspiration, after the discovery of mass extermination, everyone is "less": their humanity has been diminished. Furthermore, with his reference to "every man," Saba is already moving in the direction of

overcoming the uniqueness of the Shoah, which later became of one of the main issues in Holocaust studies.[23]

It is noteworthy that the same syntagma "dopo Maidaneck" ["after Majdanek"] also appears in shortcut 18, which closes the first section of the book:

> 18
> "Voi triestini" — mi diceva ieri Giacomo Debenedetti — "siete veramente *figli del vento*.[24] È per questo che amate tanto moralità e apologhi, favole e favolette. È perché sei nato nella città della bora che scrivi SCORCIATOIE."
> Quanto piacere mi avrebbe dato un giorno questa sua favoletta! Che buon augurio ne avrei tratto per il mio amico e per me! Ma oggi… [sic] Ma dopo Maidaneck… [sic]
> (*Tutte le prose* 18)

> [18
> "You from Trieste" — Giacomo Debenedetti said to me yesterday — "are truly *sons of the wind*.[25] That is why you love morality and fables so much, stories and fairy tales. You write SHORTCUTS because you were born in the city of the 'bora' wind."
> How much pleasure his tale would once have given me. What a good omen would I have taken from it for my friend and myself! But today… [sic] But after Majdanek…[sic]]

Through the recurrence of the same expression "dopo Maidaneck" ["after Majdanek"] in this shortcut, Saba again establishes a parallel between the world before and after the discovery of mass extermination; he implies that the change between the two conditions is definite and irreversible, not only in his personal biography but in the lives of everyone. However, by quoting Debenedetti's "tale," Saba switches his reflection also to another crucial theme in the world after Majdanek: the role of literature in this completely changed anthropological environment. Saba is implicitly and problematically asking: How can humankind still believe in "fables […] stories and fairy tales" after the undeniable abyss of the concentration camps?

A testament to the importance of this theme for Saba is that the name of the same Lager recurs for the third time as the closing word also of the second series of shortcuts. In this context, the

author addresses the readers and personifies his whole work as a "survivor of Majdanek":

> 49
> Lettore mio, non t'inganni l'apparenza, a volte paradossale, a volte perfino scherzosa (?) di (alcune) SCORCIATOIE. Nascono tutte da dieci e più esperienze di vita, d'arte e di dolore.
> Sono, oltre il resto, reduci, in qualche modo, da Maidaneck. (*Tutte le prose* 26-27)

> [49
> My reader, do not be fooled by the appearance, at times paradoxical, at times even playful (?) of (some) SHORTCUTS. They all stem from ten or more experiences of life, art, and pain.
> They are, apart from the rest, survivors of Majdanek in some way.]

An ever more problematic angle regarding the possibility and mode of discourse can be found in shortcut 87. This text is dedicated to the meeting between Saba and the writer Mario Spinella and hosts the fourth occurrence of the name of the Lager:[26]

> 87
> Aveva da dirmi che né lui, né i suoi compagni (giovani comunisti) sapevano che farsene di SCORCIATOIE. Sono — mi spiegò — piccole cose felici, nate dalla felicità. (Forse voleva dire dalla liberazione). CAMPO DI EBREI di Giacomo Debenedetti, quello sì che gli piaceva; in quello sì che si sentivano veramente *lacrime e sangue*.[27]
> Forse aveva ragione Spinella. Maidanek è inespiabile. (*Tutte le prose* 43)

> [87
> He told me that neither he nor his companions (young communists) knew what to do with my SHORTCUTS. They are — he explained to me — happy little things, born of happiness (perhaps he wanted to say of liberation). CAMPO DI EBREI by Giacomo Debenedetti, that he liked; in that you could really feel *tears and blood*.[28]

Perhaps Spinella was right. Majdanek is unatonable.]

In Saba's volume, the first shortcuts bear the information "Rome, February 1945,"[29] only seven months after the first discovery of that Nazi Lager. Philological evidence shows that Saba was designing his literary project of *Shortcuts* — already sketched out back in 1936 — in Rome in January 1945, during the last months of the war.[30] The volume was indeed a "survivor of Majdanek," and was conceived by Saba — like *If This Is a Man* was deemed by Levi — as a response to the horror of the concentration camps. Therefore, in those years both the writers were experimenting with a new form of writing to face the discovery of this previously unknown reality.

Based on what I have shown so far, my argument is that Primo Levi and Umberto Saba were intimately connected by the same problematic necessity of writing after and about the Nazi genocide, which as persecuted Jews they had both experienced firsthand, though in very different ways. As a result, Saba and Levi were among the first intellectuals to ask what place is left to culture and literature in the aftermath of the Holocaust,[31] thus anticipating Theodor Adorno's celebrated statement on the role of writing after Auschwitz, which appeared in 1949:

> To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (34)

One year before Adorno, Levi and Saba asked the same question that the philosopher would pose about the role of literature and poetry after the Shoah. Do Levi and Saba come to the same conclusion of Adorno's that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"? Do they believe that the condition of literature and culture "after Majdanek" is silence?

It seems to me that the two authors do not choose to give up the literary word, although they do perceive the dramatic change that has been imposed on language and literature by the overarching

tragedy of the Final Solution. Through their own identities as persecuted Jewish intellectuals, Levi and Saba are the first writers — one year before Adorno's philosophical inquiry — to come to the conclusion that it is no longer possible, *after* Auschwitz, to write poetry as it had been written before. The sub-human atrocity of the concentration camps confronted humanity with an experience so new and terrible that it was impossible to conceptualize and express using already-existing cognitive tools and frameworks.[32] To cite Levi's words in his letter, humans are not the same *after* the Holocaust, since "ne siamo usciti *mutati*, estremamente *differenziati*, spesso nemici del mondo e di noi stessi, altre volte *disgregati*, o in aperta ribellione o evasione" ["we came out of it *changed*, extremely *differentiated*, often enemies of the world and of ourselves, at other times *broken apart*, or in open rebellion, or flight"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-227). The genocide broke apart the unity of the subject, which was forced to experience another part of itself as deported and fugitive, thus transforming the matter of poetic creation itself. The Shoah thereby changed the meaning of words, revolutionized the relationship between language and experience, and compelled writers to forge new tools with which to rethink the modern world in light of the catastrophe that had disfigured it forever.

With the form of his *Shortcuts*, Saba aimed to address this new state of language; the author of *The Songbook* abandoned his earlier poetry and experimented with a new form of literature. Since canonical tools could no longer express the inescapable rupture brought about by the Lagers, Saba chose to pioneer a new literary genre (shortcuts) to literally find new pathways for literature. As he explains in his meta-poetic shortcut 2:

> SCORCIATOIE *sono* […] *vie più brevi per andare da un luogo ad un altro*.[33] Sono, a volte, difficili; […] Possono dare la nostalgia delle strade lunghe, piane, diritte, provinciali. (*Tutte le prose* 7)
>
> [SHORTCUTS *are* […] *shorter ways to get from one place to another*.[34] They are, at times, difficult […] they can make you nostalgic for long, flat, straight, provincial roads.]

In this sense, the new genre of the shortcut is a response to Majdanek for Saba, since it opens up a new literary mode in order,

simultaneously, to continue to create literature and to acknowledge the enormous cultural change brought about by the horrific awareness of the Holocaust. In my opinion, as a symbol of this change, he no doubt chose Majdanek and not more famous Lagers (like Auschwitz) because the discovery of that particular camp was the first time when humanity directly faced what had only been heard about the Nazi persecutions; it was the first time a new reality needed to be expressed. As Sergio Parussa noted, Saba's transition from poetry to prose and his choice of such a hybrid form of literary communication "can be interpreted as stylistic attempts to bridge the gap opened up by the war in personal and collective history" (58). For Saba personally, it was an "attempt to bridge his existential gap in order to reach a desirable, as well as impossible, integrity of the subject" (Parussa 58).

In reply to the same compelling question — how can one write after Auschwitz? — Levi too reacted to the enormity of this historical event by crafting an innovative and experimental form of literature. With his *Shortcuts*, Saba inaugurated a genre at the intersection of poetry and prose, which privileged memory over imagination and meditation over expression. Meanwhile, with *If This Is a Man,* Levi pioneered a new form of literature that was neither novel nor autobiography, neither testimony nor memoir, but rather a hybrid form of testimonial-narrative literature which was radically distinct from any other previous accounts narrated in the first person. In five later interviews, dated 1971, 1984, 1985, and two in October 1986, Levi actually responded to Adorno's assertion by saying,

> Sì, forse si tratta proprio dell'affermazione di Adorno, che "dopo" Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia o almeno non lo può chi ci è stato; mentre era possibile fare poesia "su" Auschwitz, una poesia pesante e densa, come metallo fuso, che scorre via e ti lascia svuotato.[35] (*Opere complete III* 36)
>
> [Yes, maybe it is a question of that assertion by Adorno, that "after" Auschwitz there can be no more poetry, at least for those who were there; whilst it was still possible to write poetry "on" Auschwitz — a heavy, dense poetry, like molten metal, that runs away and leaves you gutted. (*The Voice of Memory* 88)]

G. N. *Eppure Adorno aveva detto che "dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia."*
P. L. La mia esperienza è stata opposta. Allora mi sembrò che la poesia fosse più idonea della prosa per esprimere quello che mi pesava dentro […]. In quegli anni, semmai, avrei riformulato le parole di Adorno: dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia se non su Auschwitz.[36] (*Opere complete III* 469)

[G. N. *Yet Adorno had said that "after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry."*
P. L. My experience was the opposite. It seemed to me that poetry was more suitable than prose to express what weighed on me inside […]. In fact, regarding those years, I would rephrase Adorno's words: after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry except about Auschwitz.]

L. B. *Eppure Adorno aveva scritto che dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia.*
P. L. Ecco, io correggerei questo enunciato di Adorno. Direi che dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia se non su Auschwitz, o per lo meno tenendo conto di Auschwitz. Qualcosa con Auschwitz, qualcosa d'irreversibile è successo nel mondo.[37] (*Opere complete III* 532)

[L. B. *Yet Adorno had written that after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry.*
P. L. Look, I would correct this statement by Adorno. I would say that after Auschwitz one can no longer make poetry except about Auschwitz, or at least with Auschwitz in mind. Something with Auschwitz, something irreversible has happened in the world.]

R. M., B. S. *Che risposta darebbe alla domanda di Adorno (il filosofo della scuola di Francoforte): "è ancora possibile fare poesia dopo Auschwitz"?*
P. L. […] Direi che la frase di Adorno è molto severa ed anche motivata… però è inesatta. Io credo che si possa fare poesia dopo Auschwitz, ma non si possa fare poesia dimenticando Auschwitz.[38] (*Opere complete III* 622)

> [R. M., B. S. *What answer would you give to Adorno's (the Frankfurt School philosopher) question, "is it still possible to make poetry after Auschwitz"?*
> P. L. […] I would say that Adorno's statement is very severe and also motivated… however, it is inaccurate. I believe that one can make poetry after Auschwitz, but one cannot make poetry by forgetting Auschwitz.]

> la famosa affermazione di Adorno che scrivere poesia dopo Auschwitz è un atto barbarico. Lo [*sic*] cambierei con: dopo Auschwitz è barbarico scrivere poesia se non su Auschwitz.[39] (*Opere complete III* 630)

> [Adorno's famous statement that after Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric. I would change it to: after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry except about Auschwitz. (*The Voice of Memory* 28)]

In my opinion, the complex dynamic of "writing after" is thus one of the most profound bonds between Saba and Levi, and the one which made both envision an intense similarity between their two works — as Levi writes to Saba ("mi sento più vicino a Lei di prima") ["I feel closer to you than before"].

In addition to the difficulties of finding a new literary voice in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the two writers also experienced the pain and solitude as Shoah survivors of not being trusted and understood by their contemporaries. Nonetheless, they never ceased to write and to feel the necessity of writing, and in their post-war outputs they tried to respond to the dilemma of remaining writers both *in spite of* and *because of* the Shoah. For example, in the post-war years, Saba experienced a terrible feeling of detachment and loneliness to which his writings and his letters bear witness.[40] As I have demonstrated elsewhere ("'A lei scrivo volentieri'. Lettere," 96), in these years Saba considered the process of writing as a painful activity ("scrivere mi affatica o, meglio, mi angoscia") ["writing causes me fatigue or, rather, anguish"][41] but at the same time a cathartic one, which can lead both the author and his readers to the liberation from their inhibitions and psychic turmoil. The importance for Saba of having his voice heard even at the risk of being criticized and not understood is demonstrated in a letter to his friend Bruno Pincherle dated June 30, 1953:

> Oh Dio, se invece di quel discorsetto avessi potuto leggere Ernesto (chiudendo d'autorità gli ascoltatori nell'Aula Magna; in modo che avessero potuto dire a sé stessi e agli altri che ascoltavano solo perché obbligati dai cordoni della Celere) credo che sarebbero impazziti di gioia, compreso il Magnifico Rettore e Funaioli, che deve essere sugli ottanta. La gente, Bruno mio, ha un bisogno, un bisogno urgente di "mettersi in libertà," di essere insieme liberata dalle sue inibizioni. Questo sarebbe il mestiere della mia vecchiaia: disgraziatamente, se lo esercitassi, la Celere sarebbe contro di me e non contro il pubblico […]. (Coen 241)
>
> [Oh God, if instead of that little speech I had been able to read Ernesto (authoritatively locking the listeners in the Great Hall; so that they could have told themselves and others that they were listening only because they were obliged by the cordons of the Celere Units) I think they would have gone crazy with joy, including the Magnificent Rector and Funaioli, who must be in his eighties. People, my Bruno, have a need, an urgent need to "set themselves free," to be together freed from their inhibitions. This would be the profession of my old age: unfortunately, if I exercised it, the Celere Units would be against me and not against the public […]]

Saba fantasizes about a forced public reading of his novel *Ernesto* since he argues that his work would liberate his listeners from their inhibitions and neuroses, although he knows that society would not allow such a scandalous recitation. Seemingly, the same horror of not being listened to and of not being taken seriously recurs throughout Levi's production, interconnecting with a literary tradition that includes Homer, Dante, Coleridge (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), and Eduardo de Filippo (*Napoli milionaria*). For instance, Levi's last book *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), published in the Spring of 1986 only one year before his death, had its deep origins in his fear of not being heard or believed, at a time when revisionist theories on the Lagers and Holocaust denial were growing stronger. In his conclusion to this book, Levi affirms how passing their testimonies on to the newer generation is a moral duty as well as a risk for Shoah survivors:

> Per noi, parlare con i giovani è sempre più difficile. Lo percepiamo come un dovere, ed insieme come un rischio: il rischio di apparire anacronistici, di non essere ascoltati. Dobbiamo essere ascoltati: al di sopra delle nostre esperienze individuali, siamo stati collettivamente testimoni di un evento fondamentale ed inaspettato, fondamentale appunto perché inaspettato, non previsto da nessuno. […] È avvenuto, quindi può accadere di nuovo: questo è il nocciolo di quanto abbiamo da dire. (*Opere complete II* 1273-74)
>
> [For us it is becoming harder and harder to speak with young people. We see it as both a duty and a risk: the risk of appearing outdated, of not being listened to. We have to be listened to: apart from our individual experiences, we were collective witnesses to a fundamental and unexpected event, fundamental precisely because it was unexpected, unforeseen by anyone. […] It happened once and it can happen again. This is the heart of what we have to say. (*The Complete Works III* 2564)]

However, some nuances can be perceived in the ways in which Saba and Levi address the difficulty of writing after and about the Holocaust. Despite the great distress of his later years, Saba never ceased to believe in poetry and in its therapeutic potential. By contrast, the relationship between the painful need to write and its outcomes appears more problematic in Levi. The chemist and author often expressed the utopian ideal of literature as a rational tool which could bring scientific logic where there seemed to be none. In Levi's output, it is through the painful reliving in writing of the subjugation and the violence he suffered that the narrator could strive to understand universal grief. This is what he writes also in his letter to Saba, where he refers to "i problemi nuovi che attendono soluzione: e li attendono da noi, *noi che ci siamo passati attraverso, corpo ed anima*, chi in un modo e chi in un altro" ["the new problems which need solving: and those problems are awaiting solutions from us, *who went through it, body and soul*, some in one way and some in another"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-27). Nevertheless, along with this assumption, in Levi there is also a painful awareness of the innate insufficiency of words to

describe fully the trauma of the Lager. Literature is then for him a mix of effort and relief, and language a form of liberation and perpetual imprisonment. In his later years, this complex dilemma led him to develop an anguished concern regarding the very possibility of speech, as manifested in his powerful short story *La ragazza del libro* (*The Girl in the Book*), from *Lilìt e altri racconti* (*Lilith and Other Stories*, 1980), and in his last masterpiece, *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986).

In my opinion, the four letters also show some further points in common between the poetics of the two authors, which appear to be the motivation for the thoughtful comments upon their respective books. First of all, in his letter Saba praises Levi for writing "dall'interno" ["from the inside"] of the concentration camp, thus providing an invaluable point of view of that experience ("adesso è come se avessi fatto personalmente l'esperienza di Auschwitz") ["I feel as if I personally have experienced Auschwitz"] (LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 220-21). This resonates profoundly with Saba's own idea of literature, since he also aimed to write "from the inside" of the self and often stated that the main objective of his poetry was to convey his own experience of psychological grief and mental sorrow. In shortcut 113, he reveals that one of his favorite verses is the hendecasyllable from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Ernani* "Udite tutti del mio cor gli affanni" ["Hear, you all, the afflictions of my heart"], which demands a sharing of personal anguish (*Tutte le prose* 52). In the same vein, the title of the 1912 edition of what became later known as *Il Canzoniere* was *Coi miei occhi* (*With My Eyes*), a title which emphasized the personal and subjective position of the poet's unique gaze on the world.

Writing "from the inside" is also a fundamental aspect of Levi's *oeuvre*, and this is revealed in his letter by the expression "passare attraverso" ["to go through"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-27). In Levi's words, only those who have gone through and experienced the Holocaust "corpo ed anima, chi in un modo e chi in un altro" ["body and soul, in one way or another"] have both the right and the duty to express their experiences, since they are the ones who are most capable of facing "i problemi nuovi che attendono soluzione" ["the new problems which need a solution"]. As a matter fact — like Saba — a key point of Levi's poetics was to carefully anchor his texts in individual, real experiences, according to an aesthetic based on fidelity to the truth that he had inherited

from Manzoni and Dante, as well as from his training in chemistry. As Rondini ("Bello e falso" 58-71) has recalled, building on his poetics in 1979 Levi famously described Liliana Cavani's 1974 movie *Il portiere di notte* (*The Night Porter*) as "un film falso" ["a false movie,"] (*Opere complete III* 136)[42] and inspired by "un cumulo di bugie" ["a heap of lies,"] (*Conversazioni e interviste* 229).[43] He disliked the Shoah being recounted through a fictional portrayal rather than a faithful testimony and for this reason he found himself in disagreement with Cavani's intentions, including her among a group of "esteti" (*Opere complete III* 440)[44] ["aesthetes"] (*The Voice of Memory* 252) negatively opposed to the actual eyewitnesses of the Lager.

However — and unlike Saba — Levi's claim for writing "from the inside" was perceived by himself as a problematic position rather than an undisputed one. His being a writer not *in spite* but *because of* his experience in the concentration camp was not simply a pacific state for him. It was also responsible for some almost irresolvable knots in his writing, such as the dichotomy between the need for a truthful account and the use of an undeniable fiction that is by its very nature "false."[45] For Levi "la memoria umana è uno strumento meraviglioso ma fallace" (*Opere complete II* 1155) — ["human memory is a wonderful but fallible instrument"] (*The Complete Works III* 2420) — and the process of transferring personal memories into creative texts appears at the same necessary and highly problematic, since it inevitably simplifies and distorts the original experiences:

> un ricordo troppo spesso evocato, ed espresso in forma di racconto, tende a fissarsi in uno stereotipo, in una forma collaudata dall'esperienza, cristallizzata, perfezionata, adorna, che si installa al posto del ricordo greggio e cresce a sue spese. (*Opere complete II* 1155)
>
> [a memory that is recollected too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to harden into a stereotype, a tried-and-true formula, crystallized, perfected, adorned, that installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense. (*The Complete Works III* 2420-21)]

In the chapter "Stereotipi" ["Stereotypes"] from *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*) Levi argued that an

ineluctable gap exists between the true account of the Holocaust and the fictionalized versions which had been provided by the many creative works based on it,

> spaccatura che esiste, e che si va allargando di anno in anno, fra le cose com'erano «laggiù» e le cose quali vengono rappresentate dalla immaginazione corrente, alimentata da libri, film e miti approssimativi. Essa, fatalmente, slitta verso la semplificazione e lo stereotipo; vorrei porre qui un argine contro questa deriva. (*Opere complete II* 1246-47)

> [a gap, growing wider as the years pass, between the way things were "down there" and the way they are represented in today's imagination, fueled by inaccurate books, films, and myths. It drifts fatally toward simplification and stereotypes. Here I would like to build an embankment against this drifting. (*The Complete Works III* 2527-28)]

Therefore, more than Saba, Levi is aware of the tension existing between the actual truth to convey and the risks of creative writing. He challenges this gap by offering his own first-hand testimony as survivor and developing a literary style "from the inside," while remaining confident that "non c'è libro senza invenzione" ["there is no book without invention"] (Poli and Calcagno 264).

Among the other commonalities between Saba and Levi, it is possible to note that for both the need to proclaim the distinctiveness of one's own sorrowful experience is not conceived simplistically as a form of narcissistic egotism or self-voyeuristic impulse. By contrast, the retelling of their private deeds is conceived by both as a way to interpret the universal distress of all humankind. For instance, in his poetic collection *Mediterranee* Saba confesses that his poetic motto is "Pianse e *capì* per tutti" ["He wept and *understood* for everyone"] (*Tutte le prose* 532), a verse reshaped from Gabriele d'Annunzio's poem *Per la morte di Giuseppe Verdi*, in the collection *Elettra*.[46] This confession bears witness to Saba's belief that his sorrows could be paradigmatic of those of the whole of humankind.[47] Levi seems to think along the same lines. In his letter he says, "vi ho ritrovato molto del mio

mondo. Non del Lager, voglio dire; meglio *non solo del Lager*" ["I found much of my own world in it. Not of the Lager, I mean: or rather, *not only of the Lager*"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-27). His experience of grief in the camp provided him with an overarching knowledge that makes him more conscious of many other problems of his times. As Massimo Bucciantini has argued, for Levi Auschwitz was not only a unique terrible experience, but — scientifically speaking — "una gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale" ["a gigantic biological and social experiment"] (Bucciantini 6-7), a useful litmus test that enabled him to understand and conceptualize other issues of society and humankind. It is interesting to note that the syntagma "non solo del Lager" ["not only of the Lager"] used in the letter was repurposed by Levi in two passages from *I sommersi e i salvati*, published more than thirty-seven years after the letter:

> Il discorso sul privilegio (*non solo in Lager!*) è delicato. (*Opere complete II* 1151)
>
> [Privilege is a delicate subject (and *not only in the Lager*) (*The Complete Works III* 2416)]
>
> Gli scopi di vita sono la difesa ottima contro la morte: *non solo in Lager*. (*Opere complete II* 1240)
>
> [The business of living is the best defense against death, and *not only in the camps*. (*The Complete Works III* 2520)]

Another crucial point in common between the two writers is the need for clarity. This aspiration for clarity is recorded by Saba himself in his self-commentary *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (*History and Chronicle of the Songbook*):

> Parve […] troppo, per i suoi lettori, "oscura." Forse *era troppo chiara*. "*Chiarezza*" infatti avrebbe potuto essere il titolo del *Canzoniere.* (*Tutte le prose* 324)
>
> [[The poem] seemed […] too "obscure" for its readers. Perhaps *it was actually too clear*. "*Clarity*" could actually have been the title of the *Songbook*.]

> la sua complessità è stata ottenuta mediante un lavoro di *chiarezza intellettuale*. (*Tutte le prose* 328)
>
> [the complexity [of Saba's poetry] was attained through the workings of *intellectual clarity*.]

The need for clear and scientific writing is exactly what Levi meant in the powerful passage of his letter where he praised Saba's courageous longing "di nulla lasciare inesplorato, di tutto sollevare *dal buio del sottosuolo alla luce della consapevolezza*" ["to leave nothing unexplored, to bring up everything *from the darkness of the underground to the light of awareness*"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-27). In fact, Levi's argument seems to reference shortcut 116, where Saba says,

> 116
> Ma se tu, se io, potessimo portare quelli [*sic*] inconsci conflitti *alla luce della coscienza*, ne proveremmo un grande, un indicibile sollievo. (*Tutte le prose* 52)
>
> [116
> But if you, if I, could bring these unconscious conflicts *to the light of awareness*, we would feel a great, an inexpressible relief.]

This dialectic between the light and the underground also recalls another self-exegetic passage that can be found in Levi's 1983 essay on translating Kafka:

> Nel mio scrivere, nel bene o nel male, sapendolo o no, ho sempre teso a *un trapasso dall'oscuro al chiaro*, come […] potrebbe fare una pompa-filtro, che aspira acqua torbida e la espelle decantata: magari sterile. (*Opere complete II* 1096)
>
> [In my writing, for better or for worse, knowingly or not, I have always tended toward *a transition from obscurity to clarity*, rather like a filter pump, sucking in turbid water and turning it out purified, even sterile […]. (*The Complete Works III* 2348)]

As Saba had famously stated in 1911, "ai poeti resta da fare *la poesia onesta*" ["it remains to poets to write *honest poetry*"] (*Tutte le prose* 674), that is to say, the only way to write poetry in modern times is through poetry that is authentic in its content, clear in its style, and comprehensible to anyone. In his writing, Levi seems to go in the same direction, trying to act as a scientific writer who strives to rationalize even that which seems to escape human reason. The solitude of this difficult but inescapable rationalizing process seems to be confirmed by a passage from *I sommersi e i salvati*, where Levi says,

> la distinzione […] buona fede / mala fede […] presuppone una *chiarezza mentale* che è di pochi. (*Opere complete II* 1157)
>
> [the distinction […] between good and bad faith […] presumes a *clarity* that few have. (*The Complete Works III* 2423)]

In the midst of many similarities or nuanced affinities, at least one major difference can be established between the two authors. In his letter, Levi remembers the last shortcut by Saba and offers his interpretation of "la genealogia che Lei si è scelta nell'ultima scorciatoia" ["the genealogy that you chose in the last shortcut"] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-27). In that text, Saba's traces the lineage of his work back to two thinkers of the early twentieth century, Nietzsche and Freud,[48] whereas Levi manifests on many occasions his disagreement with their theories.

With regards to Nietzsche, Levi titles the eighth chapter of *If This Is a Man* "Al di qua del bene e del male," suggesting an implicit counterpoint to *Al di là del bene e del male*, the Italian translation of Nietzsche's 1886 book *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (*Beyond Good and Evil*). In this chapter the Lager prisoner is presented in his nullity and in stark contrast to the Nietzschean *Übermensch*; Levi aims to show the reader the other side of the "will to power" described by Nietzsche in his book, which portrays domination, appropriation and injury to the weak as not universally objectionable. In the chapter "Violenza inutile" ["Useless Violence"], written more than three decades after *If This Is a Man* and included in *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and The Saved*), Levi confirms his distance from Nietzsche's work:

Né Nietzsche né Hitler né Rosenberg erano pazzi quando ubriacavano se stessi e i loro seguaci con la loro predicazione del mito del superuomo, a cui tutto è concesso a riconoscimento della sua dogmatica e congenita superiorità; ma è degno di meditazione il fatto che tutti, il maestro e gli allievi, siano usciti progressivamente dalla realtà a mano a mano che la loro morale si andava scollando da quella morale, comune a tutti i tempi ed a tutte le civiltà, che è parte della nostra eredità umana, ed a cui da ultimo bisogna pur dare riconoscimento. La razionalità cessa, e i discepoli hanno ampiamente superato (e tradito!) il maestro, proprio nella pratica della crudeltà inutile. Il verbo di Nietzsche mi ripugna profondamente; stento a trovarvi un'affermazione che non coincida con il contrario di quanto mi piace pensare; mi infastidisce il suo tono oracolare; ma mi pare che non vi compaia mai il desiderio della sofferenza altrui. L'indifferenza sì, quasi in ogni pagina, ma mai la *Schadenfreude*, la gioia per il danno del prossimo, né tanto meno la gioia del far deliberatamente soffrire. Il dolore del volgo, degli *Ungestalten*, degli informi, dei non-nati-nobili, è un prezzo da pagare per l'avvento del regno degli eletti; è un male minore, comunque sempre un male; non è desiderabile in sé. Ben diversi erano il verbo e la prassi hitleriani. (*Opere complete II* 1212)

[Neither Nietzsche nor Hitler nor Rosenberg was mad when he intoxicated himself and his followers by preaching the myth of the superman, to whom all is conceded in recognition of his dogmatic congenital superiority. But it is worth considering the fact that all of them, master and pupils, gradually took leave of reality at the same pace as their morals became detached from the morals common to every time and every civilization, morals that belong to our heritage as human beings and must ultimately be recognized. Rationality ended and the disciples surpassed (and betrayed) their master by a broad measure in the practice of useless cruelty. Nietzsche's language repels me deeply; I struggle to find a statement that does not coincide with the opposite of my own preferred way of thinking. His oracular tone annoys me, but I do not think it ever expresses

> a desire for the suffering of others: indifference there is, on almost every page, but never s*chadenfreude*, joy in the hardships of his fellow man, or joy in deliberately causing pain. The suffering of the common people, the *Ungestalten*, the unformed, the not nobly born, is the price to pay for the coming of the kingdom of the elect. It is a lesser evil but evil nonetheless; it is not desirable in itself. Hitler's language and practices were another matter entirely. (*The Complete Works III* 2487-2488)]

While Saba found the roots of his *Shortcuts* in Nietzsche's work,[49] Levi opposed the philosopher both in his style and in his theories. In particular, he did not appreciate his "tono oracolare" ["oracular tone"] and considered him the master of Hitler's ideas. According to Levi, Nazism shaped his violent ideology by taking inspiration from Nietzsche's myth of the *Übermensch* detached from common morality, although the Nazis added a further sadistic desire for the suffering of others.

As for Freud, there seems to be a similar distancing between Levi and the psychoanalytic thinking; Levi refused this school of thought in the name of his rationalism, his "avidità vigile […] di nulla lasciare inesplorato" ["alert desire […] to leave nothing unexplored] (LETTER 4 in the Appendix, p. 225-27) that could not fully contemplate the possibility of unconscious impulses. In the chapter "La zona grigia" ["The Gray Zone"] from *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and The Saved*), Levi at the same time echoes and distances himself from Freudian terminology on the unconscious:

> Non mi intendo di inconscio e di profondo, ma so che pochi se ne intendono, e che questi pochi sono più cauti; non so, e mi interessa poco sapere, se nel mio profondo si annidi un assassino, ma so che vittima incolpevole sono stato ed assassino no. (*Opere complete II* 1172)
>
> [I am no expert on the unconscious or the inner depths, but I do know that there are few experts, and that those few are more cautious. I do not know, nor am I particularly interested in knowing, whether a murderer is lurking deep within me, but I do know that I was an innocent victim and not a murderer. (*The Complete Works III* 2439)]

Unlike Saba, Levi clearly states that he is more interested in true human actions than in the irrational drive that influences them. Again, in the chapter "La memoria dell'offesa" ["The memory of the offense"] he criticizes psychoanalytic interpretations of the social dynamics in the Lager by calling them "freudismi spiccioli" (*Opere complete II* 1156) — ["armchair psychoanalysis"] (*The Complete Works III* 2421). As Alberto Cavaglion noted, "l'assenza di Freud lascia incompiuto lo stesso dialogo di Levi con Saba" ["the absence of Freud leaves Levi's own dialogue with Saba incomplete"] (*Notizie su Argon*, 104). Saba implicitly acknowledges the importance of psychoanalysis also in his letter to Levi; his parenthetical sentence "se gli uomini possono essere responsabili di qualcosa" ["if men can be responsible for anything"] (LETTER 1 in the Appendix, pp. 220-21) seems to echo Freud's famous statement that the ego "is not even master in its own house" (Freud 16, 285) and that human unconscious inputs "seem to be more powerful than those which are at the ego's command" (Freud 17, 141-42). In addition, Saba refers to Freud as "il solo che ha ancora ragione" ["the only one who is still right"] (Zipoli, "'A lei scrivo volentieri'. Lettere" 64),[50] again in September 1950 — almost two years after his letter to Levi — arguing that he is the only thinker who enables to understand not only personal problems but also societal ones. By contrast — as Cevenini noted — Levi was never an enthusiast of Freud's theory and always viewed with skepticism any ideas of irrational impulses, never renouncing his rational thinking and his scientific approach.

In conclusion, the correspondence between Levi and Saba, although very limited in time, seems to be crucial in highlighting the similarities and differences in the poetics of these two authors. The epistolary exchange reveals that, in spite of their difference in age, geography, background, and experiences, the two authors are far more connected and far closer in their literary intentions than critics have reckoned thus far. As a matter of fact, their poetics share some peculiar features, such as writing "from the inside," writing built on one's own experience, the attempt to rationalize sorrow, and the need for clarity. Finally, the four letters also bear witness to the fact that, as Jewish writers and survivors of the Shoah, in their *oeuvres*

Saba and Levi anticipated the same literary issue of "writing after" and about the Holocaust which later became the object of philosophical speculation and historical debate.

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NOTES

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[1] For the contacts between Primo Levi and Italo Calvino, see Beer. On Primo Levi and Claude Lévi-Strauss, see Mengoni, "Epifania di un mestiere." On Primo Levi and the correspondence with his German readers, see the bilingual book by Mengoni, *Primo Levi e i tedeschi*. For the exchanges between Primo Levi and Philip Roth see Samarini. On the impact of the essays and book reviews written by anthropologists in the journal *Scientific American*, see Maiolani.

[2] An article which pioneered the work in this field was Rondini, "Da Umberto Saba a Primo Levi." Other works which touch briefly on this specific theme are: Janulardo; Cavaglion, *Notizie su Argon* 104; Cavaglion, *Dal buio del sottosuolo* 9; Bucciantini 56-59; Barberis.

[3] LETTER 1 is preserved within the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Umberto Saba a Primo Levi, 3 ottobre 1948. The letter was published for the first time — and partially — in Castellani 7, and then quoted in part in Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1386. It can also be read now, both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski, in Bucciantini 158-159. LETTER 4 is preserved within the "Umberto Saba" archival collection at the Centro Manoscritti of the University of Pavia; see Centro Manoscritti dell'Università di Pavia, *Fondo Umberto Saba*, shelf mark SAB-07-0040. The draft of this letter, written with a pencil, is preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999), Primo Levi a Umberto Saba, 10 gennaio 1949. The letter was published for the first time in Fiori 8. It can also be read, both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski, in Bucciantini 160-161.

[4] LETTER 2 and 3 are preserved in the "Primo Levi's Archive" collection at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin; see Archivio Primo Levi, Corrispondenza, 1941-1987 (1999). The content of those two letters was summarized and only partially cited by Barberis 755, so it remains for the most part unpublished. I thank Ruth Chester for providing the translations into English.

[5] Saba's dramatic mental condition in the postwar period is recorded in his letters to his friends and physicians. On this point, see Zipoli, "'A lei scrivo volentieri'. Lettere," and Zipoli, "Amos Chiabov e la poesia."

[6] On the porous boundaries between sanity and mental issues, and the consequences that this had on Saba's later years, see Zipoli, "'Strinsi col dolore un patto'."

[7] Levi's masterpiece was republished by Einaudi in 1958, and interestingly not in a narrative collection but within the book series "Saggi" (The Essays).

[8] For an analysis of the publishing process of Saba's *Shortcuts*, see Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1191-97.

[9] For example, it was in this period that Levi read *Uomini e no* (*Men or Not Men*) by Elio Vittorini, published in 1945.

[10] On the difficulties encountered by Levi in publishing his first volume, see Marco Belpoliti's "Note ai testi" in Levi, *Opere I* 1375-1413 and in *Opere complete I* 1449-86. On the reception of Levi in those first years, see Ferrero 1997.

[11] On the controversial refusal of Primo Levi by Einaudi see Belpoliti 25-27, and Scarpa, *Storie avventurose* 165-202; 425-34.

[12] The original of this letter is preserved in the "Achivio Einaudi" at the State Archive in Turin; see Segreteria Editoriale, Corrispondenza (1931-1996), no. 3475, box 184, folder 2679, page 83r.: *Saba Umberto; Carteggio in ordine alla pubblicazione del "Canzoniere" (1948)*. The letter was briefly discussed but not transcribed in Barberis 754. I wish to thank Dr. Luisa Gentile from the State Archive in Turin and Prof. Walter Barberis from the Einaudi publishing house for allowing me to consult and cite this hitherto unpublished document.

[13] Saba capitalizes Primo Levi's name in the original document, and I keep the same format both in my Italian quotation and within my self-translated English version. From this point onwards, all the capitalizations in the quotations are to be considered as present in the original text written by Saba.

[14] In the original, Saba writes "framene" instead of "farmene," and I correct the typo in my edition of the letter.

[15] Cajumi, Arrigo. "Immagini indimenticabili." On the early reception of Primo Levi in Italy, also see Ferrero 2005.

[16] This review can also be found in Ferrero 1997 306-7. More recently, the review was published both in Italian and in an English translation by Nicoletta Simborowski in Bucciantini 154-57.

[17] Italo Calvino, "La letteratura italiana sulla Resistenza," *Saggi* 2: 1499.

[18] On this, see Gordon, "Primo Levi and Holocaust Memory" and Gordon, "Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-war Italy."

[19] The date written on the letter ("October 3, 1948") is probably an error made by Saba because of the proximity of the date with the end of the previous month.

[20] It was not until the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s that this acknowledgement occurred in Italy, with regards both to the genocide and to the appreciation of Jewish culture in its relation to the Catholic tradition.

[21] The emphasis is mine. From this point onwards, all the emphases in the quotations are to be considered as mine, unless an endnote reports otherwise.

[22] Historical data show that around 300,000 deportees passed through Majdanek, 40 percent of them Jews of various nationalities. It was a site of death by many means, through gas chambers, shootings, and hangings, and about 80,000 people died there. The first Russian patrols arrived there on July 22, 1944 and found only a few thousand survivors. At that time, Mauthausen, Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz were still unknown.

[23] An overview of this complex debate is provided by Stone.

[24] The italics are in the original text.

[25] The italics are in the original text.

[26] Mario Spinella was a writer and journalist who had joined the Italian Resistance movement in Tuscany after his experience on the Russian Front. He gave Umberto Saba refuge and protection in his house in via Della Robbia in Florence during the period of the Nazi occupation.

[27] The italics are in the original text.

[28] The italics are in the original text.

[29] Saba, *Tutte le prose* 18.

[30] The complete series of 'shortcuts' first appeared in six episodes in the printed journal *Nuova Europa* between March and July 1945. For information on the genetic process of this book, see Stara's essay entitled "Storia del testo, pubblicazioni precedenti alla stampa," in Saba, *Tutte le prose* 1191-94.

[31] On the importance of Majdanek for Umberto Saba, also see Baldasso.

[32] On the reactions of European writers to the Holocaust, see Traverso; Marshall.

[33] The italics are in the original text.

[34] The italics are in the original text.

[35] Levi's interview with Luca Lamberti first appeared in *L'Adige* on May 11, 1984. The quotation can also be read in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 111.

[36] Levi's interview with Giulio Nascimbeni was published in *Corriere della Sera* on October 28, 1984. This quotation can also be read in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 137.

[37] Levi's interview with Lúcia Borgia was broadcast in Rai television on February 3, 1985.

[38] Levi's interview with Raffaella Manzini and Brunetto Salvarani first appeared in *Qol* on Sept.-Oct. 1986.

[39] Levi's interview with Anthony Rudolf was first published in English in *London Magazine* vol. 26, no. 7, Oct. 1986, pp. 28-37. The cited translation into Italian is by Diana Osti.

[40] On Saba's later production, see Galavotti and Zipoli, "'Strinsi col dolore un patto'" 9-13.

[41] The quotation is from a letter that Umberto Saba wrote to Amos Chiabov on September 19, 1950.

[42] Levi's interview with Silvia Giacomoni appeared on *Repubblica* on January 24, 1979. The quotation can be read also in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 121.

[43] Levi's interview with Rita Sodi is dated June 19, 1986 and appeared posthumously in English in *Partisan Review* 54:3, 1987. The cited translation into Italian is by Erminio Corti. The interview was later republished by Marco Belpoliti using the interviewer's original materials in Italian, and this passage can be read in a slightly different version in Levi, *Opere complete* 3: 701.

[44] Levi's interview with Marco Vigevani was first published in *Bollettino della Comunità Israelitica di Milano* 40:5, 1984. The quotation can be read also in Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* 216.

[45] On the role of fiction in Levi's production see Mariani 69-80.

[46] On the strong bonds between Saba and d'Annunzio see Đurić 2008.

[47] As a testimony to the significance of this phrase for Umberto Saba, his daughter Linuccia wanted it to be engraved on the poet's tombstone in the Sant'Anna cemetery in Trieste.

[48] For this shortcut, see Saba, *Tutte le prose* 79.

[49] On the major impacts of Nietzsche's thinking in Saba see at least Palumbo; and Milanini.

[50] The quotation is from a letter that Umberto Saba wrote to Amos Chiabov on September 4. 1950.

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