

PRIMO LEVI'S LOVE

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Focusing in particular on the “Vanadium” chapter of ›The Periodic Table‹, the author reads this collection of short stories by Primo Levi as “a book whose center is about love.” The author argues that while love might not overtly occupy the center of Levi’s “narrated worlds,” it should be considered as one of the main “motors” of his writing.

I.

Love, as Wittgenstein observed, is “[l]ess an irrecoverable, private inner state than it is a response deeply implicated in the social world [...] in the weave of life.”¹⁾ Love and its stories are not the apparent center of Levi’s narrated worlds, yet they are at the core of Levi’s social being. Stories of love hold an obscure place within the narrative of Auschwitz, whose dark center is almost devoid of it. Levi is extremely reticent about his own experiences and often what remains in the text of love are but traces of erased narratives. As always when dealing with traces, some interpretative risk is to be run if one is to heed a submerged discourse. In this essay I follow the bread-crumbs trail of love in Levi’s work up to and including ›The Periodic Table‹. I read the book as one whose center is about love and offer a defiant interpretation of the correspondence between Levi and Dr. Müller, who works as a civilian in the Buna Lab in the chapter “Vanadium.”²⁾ This chapter and the correspondence have received much attention, which focuses on the story’s relation to Levi’s actual correspondence with the real Ferdinand Meyer. This reading is well aware that this story has a background, but is more concerned with the meaning of the artwork itself.³⁾

¹⁾ This idea of love has been explored predominantly in theatre studies and is historicized especially in Shakespeare, see: DAVID SCHALKWYK, *Shakespeare, Love and Service*, Cambridge 2008; THEODORE LEINWAND, *Theatre, Finance and Society in Early Modern England*, Cambridge 1999.

²⁾ PRIMO LEVI, *The Complete Works*, ed. by ANN GOLDSTEIN, 3 vols, New York 2015, vol. 2, pp. 567–573.

³⁾ MARCO BELPOLITI, *Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo*, Milan 2015, pp. 261–273; MARTINA MENGONI, *Primo Levi e i tedeschi*, Turin 2017.

›The Periodic Table‹ has been read in many ways, though not as a book about love, which is actually almost self-evident.⁴⁾ Love is the force driving many of the stories and in no other book does Levi offer such a complete review of his experiences in love. In fact it has gone somewhat unnoticed that in the book, Levi tells all the love stories he has experienced in his life up to and including meeting his wife and the tender story of how their love grew while attempting to turn manure into life in “Nitrogen.”⁵⁾ The biographies have traced and confirmed these stories, giving faces and names to the female characters in the book, blurring the zone between fiction and biography. In the stories about attempts at love, Levi tries out different possibilities that transgress established limits of race and class under Fascism. He tells of his attempt to woo Rita (Clara Moschino), a working class Christian, in very tender terms in “Zinc,” and of his inaction when faced with the possibility of a relationship with another Christian, Giulia Vineis (Gabriella Garda), in “Phosphorus.” One must keep in mind that these meetings took place under racial laws forbidding such relations and that they are stories of a heart shaped by Fascism.⁶⁾ Uneasily following the racial order dictated by Fascism, Levi mentions his love by name in “Gold,” the chapter that tells of his capture and of Vanda Maestro, who was with him at the time. Though of course the apparent reason for the chapter’s name is different, Vanda is that Gold found and lost. The irony of having found love and imprisonment at the same time is not lost on Levi and if Levi could love again after this loss, he refuses to love those responsible.

By now the story of Vanda Maestro and the fact that she was certainly the most important woman in Levi’s life until he met his wife, is a well-known fact.⁷⁾ The biography is clear but the literary significance much less so. Vanda is hardly mentioned by name in Levi’s writing, indeed she is only mentioned once in ›If This Is a Man‹ and once in ›The Truce‹; it is a veritable crumb trail that Levi leaves of her. Following the traces leads to the connection between her name and the choice of the rare element vanadium to name the chapter of ›The Periodic Table‹ that confronts Levi with the demand to love his past enemies. Contained within a chapter on Vanda, Levi’s answer to Müller’s demand for love is in his love for Vanda, for the drowned; the perpetrator is dead to him, unlike his love. Loving one’s enemy is the privilege of the perpetrator and, in Levi’s words, finding such love is reserved for those who cannot decipher.

4) See: RAYMOND MALEWITZ, Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table: Chemistry as Posthumanist Science*, in: *Configurations* 24, no. 4 (2016), pp. 417–440, 566.

5) LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 547–551.

6) Cf. IAN THOMSON, *Primo Levi: A Life*, New York 2003, pp. 84–90.

7) This has of course been noted by the biographers, but the full significance of her person for Levi and his work can be seen in Levi’s early poetry. See: “Sunset at Fòssoli”, LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 3, p. 1125.

2.

Love is a social emotion, a human bond whose strength can defy social and legal norms. In Levi's work love in its many forms is often present but rarely discussed openly; the famous biographical aversion Levi felt towards sharing intimate details of his life is coupled with an aversion to abstract discussions of love. Still, for Levi, as for postwar Italy in general, love in its many indecipherable manifestations is also related to the concept of Christian love.⁸⁾ There is little need to look beyond general ideas about Christ's love for the world and the Catholic idea of *Misericordia* in order to get a general sense of its failure in World War Two. For Levi and his generation schooled under Fascism, Dante and Manzoni were the major literary mediators of Italianità and both are important to his work.⁹⁾

There is little new in the observation that Dante offered Levi the primary means of understanding the infernal world in which he had arrived at Buna. Love in its theological form is already present as Levi enters the camp and sees the inscription. It is uncannily reminiscent of the gates of hell described by Dante, and love and justice are its makers:

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore; 4	JUSTICE MOVVED MY MAKER ON HIGH
fecemi la divina podestate, 5	DIVINE POWER MADE ME,
la somma sapiëenza e 'l primo amore. 6	WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE.

As complex as the subject may be, the obscure poet that inscribed the gates of Auschwitz with the inscription ARBEIT MACHT FREI was not beyond inspiring a sense of loving justice meted out.¹⁰⁾ As Levi later wrote: "The harshness of prison was perceived as a punishment and guilt (if there is a punishment there must have been guilt)."¹¹⁾ Something remains then, an awkward relation between prison and punishment and love and justice, though its reason is lost or unavailable.¹²⁾

Levi wrote an acute observation about the cruel irony of such writing, such language, in a place where work is a machine that produces death. Even if the

⁸⁾ For Levi as for this writer the issue is not truly theological, see: GILES WALLER and T. KEVIN TAYLOR, *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory* (= Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination, and the Arts), Farnham 2011, pp. 53–74.

⁹⁾ PIERANTONIO FRARE, *Il Potere Della Parola: Dante, Manzoni, Primo Levi*, Novara 2010.

¹⁰⁾ See: *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem 1990, vol. 4, p. 1751.

¹¹⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 3, p. 1504.

¹²⁾ We learn about the importance of ARBEIT MACHT FREI for Levi from the 1957 essay concentrating on the degrading irony of it, "Arbeit Macht Frei", published in 1959. LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 687–688.

connection between the inscriptions on the gates of these hells is ambiguous, abandoning hope is the thing to do, but it is precisely what the survivor does not do.¹³) Hope is what drives the camp just as sin drives the Inferno; the love that moved the (eugenic) maker of this Inferno is the origin of punishment. The damned will never be free, but the mechanism is clear and love is somehow implied when torture poses as justice.

3.

In Levi's earlier works, love appeared in slivers, in fugitive moments, deeply encoded in the text in prose or in poetry. *The Periodic Table* is the book where the question of Levi's love is addressed and its stories are told. At the epicenter of these stories is Vanda Maestro. Though hardly mentioned, she is present and her name appears in such a way that we must acknowledge that "Vanadium" is somehow about her.¹⁴) She is there as a meaning of love, one that cannot be lost, standing against what remains of the perpetrators and their idea of love and the forgiveness they demand.

Two of the love plots are attempts at crossing the divide between Jews and Christians; they stand in symmetry to two tales of Jewish love(s). The story of love ends in the chapter "Vanadium" with a demand for Christian love made by Levi's German counterpart in business after the war and in the Buna lab at Auschwitz. Recognizing Vanda in "Vanadium" operates as a cipher: for readers who recognize it, "Vanadium" contains a chilling condemnation of the passive collaborators; for those who do not, it is a tepid story of unaccomplished resolution.

The Periodic Table offers panoramic views of these attempts at relations across the divide. From the oddly beguiling beginning in "Argon," love for Levi is a capricious force coinciding with the willfully ironic oddities of a Jewish Italian past. Always present, love is the force that bridges the divide between Jews and gentiles, defying the norms of separation:

As always happens, the rejection was mutual: the minority erected a symmetrical barrier against all Christianity (gôjím, ñarelím: "the peoples," "the uncircumcised"), reproducing, on a provincial scale and against a peacefully bucolic background, the epic and Biblical situation of the chosen people. On this fundamental displacement the good-humored wit of our uncles (barba) and aunts (magne) was nourished – wise patriarchs smelling of tobacco and domestic queens of the house, who still proudly called themselves 'l pòpòl d'Israél.¹⁵)

¹³) *Lagersprache: Primo Levi and the Language of Survival*, in: ARCADE <<http://arcade.stanford.edu/dibur/lagersprache-primo-levi-and-language-survival>> [17.01.2018].

¹⁴) See for example: ELIZABETH SCHEIBER, "The Failure of Memory and Literature in Primo Levi's *Il Sistema Periodico*," in: *MLN* 121, no. 1 (2006), pp. 225–239.

¹⁵) LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 462–463.

I strongly suspect that there is a large amount of irony involved in this description, almost as if Levi was wryly answering a cultural demand for a kind of Jewish past represented by Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico Familiare*, mythical and pungent, but more like an alchemist's den. The clear marker of this irony is related to the question of Christian love by way of a word. "Argon" is woven from two major threads, family and tribal memory and linguistic recollection, the latter being the more important. Levi is capable of picking up the finest traces of Jewish Italian jargon and yet he stumbles in only one place: "The Church (Catholic) was called *tònevà*, a word whose origin I have not managed to reconstruct, and which probably only sounds like Hebrew."¹⁶) Considering the linguistic difficulties overcome by Levi in the chapter, this is a conceit and as any Hebrew speaker immediately hears, the word is a corruption of *to'e'va* – abomination – the forbidden yet tempting. Levi chooses an inexplicit manner that allows for an insider-outsider dynamic in the reading, reenacting the separation between the Jewish and goy, avoiding their wrath by encoding his tacit argument against his own Christian (Catholic) society for all its love of the survivor.

4.

After the oddness of "Argon," the book changes abruptly and it is little wonder that Calvino thought "Argon" should not be part of the book at all.¹⁷) The chapters named after various elements of the periodic table then follow a loosely biographical trajectory, with special emphasis on the periods preceding and following the war. Levi's years at the university coincide with the enactment of the racial laws in Italy and his studies are heavily marked by them. Almost with a feeble attempt at rebellion, Levi is drawn to Rita in the chapter "Zinc," whose chemical discourse is about purity and impurity. As always the chemical description is a smokescreen, its accuracy always creates another narrative that alternately reinforces and subverts the human story that is being told. In the case of "Zinc" the considerations all lead to Rita:

For some time I had been hovering around Rita. In my mind I prepared brilliant conversational openings, and then at the decisive moment didn't dare speak, putting it off till the next day. I didn't dare because of a deep timidity and distrust, and also because Rita discouraged contact, I don't know why. She was very thin, pale, sad, and self-assured; she passed the exams with good grades but without a genuine appetite – such as I felt – for the things she studied. She wasn't friendly with anyone, no one knew anything about her, she said little,

¹⁶) *Ibid.*, pp. 465–466.

¹⁷) Letter from Calvino to Primo Levi, Paris October 12, 1974, in: ITALO CALVINO, *Lettere 1940–1985*, ed. by LUCA BARANELLI, Milan 2000, p. 1256.

and for all these reasons she attracted me. I tried to sit next to her in class, but she wasn't very welcoming, and I felt frustrated and challenged. Rather, I felt desperate, and certainly not for the first time; during that period, in fact, I believed I was condemned to a perpetual male solitude, denied forever a woman's smile, something I needed as I needed air.¹⁸⁾

This confessional moment has been noticed by the biographers and attests to part of the psychological profile of the shy young Levi.¹⁹⁾ Moving the focus away from biography turns it into a discussion of purity and impurity and their relation to attraction. Levi is drawn to Rita because she seems so inaccessible, because she is unfriendly; in literary terms he discovers in Rita the very same characteristics his forefathers found in gentiles. The internal code clashes with the outside codes of religion and race and they extend to literature itself. They are reading the same text, much like Jews and Christians, but in a very different way. The ›Magic Mountain‹ is this text, but Rita reads it for romance and Levi for the discussion between the Jew turned Jesuit and the Italian Humanist:

She was interested in knowing how far Hans would go with Madame Chauchat, and she skipped relentlessly the fascinating (to me) political, theological, and metaphysical discussions of the humanist Settembrini and the Jewish Jesuit Naphta. It doesn't matter: better, there's room for debate. It could even become an essential and fundamental debate, because I, too, am a Jew and she isn't: I am the impurity that makes the zinc react, I am the grain of salt, the mustard seed. Impurity, certainly: since *La Difesa della Razza* had just begun publication in those months, and there was a lot of talk about purity, and I was starting to be proud of being impure. The truth is that until then 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, 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. According to the periodical cited above, a Jew is miserly and clever: but I was not especially miserly or clever, nor was my father.²⁰⁾

As in many other chapters in the book, the chemical element is a figure of the human content, to which the chemical story is a parallel. Their diverse reading of Mann is also a difference in perception of the world. An image is thrust upon him, completely concealing a self that becomes defined by this alien image. Rita is another form of foreign material that Levi tries to interact with and to some extent he succeeds. His efforts culminate in walking her home:

I soon realized that Rita was different from me; she wasn't a mustard seed. She was the daughter of a poor, invalid shopkeeper. The university, for her, was not the temple of

¹⁸⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 477.

¹⁹⁾ See: CAROLE ANGIERS, *The Double Bond: Primo Levi, a Biography*, New York 2002, pp. 121–125, Angier identifies Rita with Carla Moschino.

²⁰⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 478.

Knowledge: it was a thorny and laborious path that led to a degree, a job, and an income. She had worked since childhood: she had helped her father, had been a clerk in a village shop, and even now bicycled through Turin to make deliveries and collect payments. All this did not distance me from her; on the contrary, I found it admirable, like everything about her – her uncared-for hands, her shabby clothes, her firm gaze, her concrete sadness, the reserve with which she accepted my conversation. So my zinc sulfate ended badly. It became a concentrate and was reduced to a white powder that gave off in suffocating clouds all or almost all of its sulfuric acid. I abandoned it to its fate and offered to accompany Rita home. It was dark, and her home wasn't near. The goal I had proposed to myself was objectively modest, but to me it seemed of an unparalleled audacity: I hesitated for half the way, and felt I was on burning coals, and intoxicated myself and her with breathless, rambling conversation. Finally, trembling with emotion, I inserted my arm under hers. Rita didn't withdraw, and yet she didn't return the grip; but I adjusted my pace to hers and felt happy and victorious. It seemed to me that I had won a small yet decisive battle against the darkness, the emptiness, and the hostile years that were coming on.²¹⁾

One can wonder about this victory as the text entwines the New Testament (the grain of mustard) with the episode of Paolo and Francesca in the fifth Canto of the *Inferno*. The book that is the vehicle of love for Paolo and Francesca in the *Inferno* is replaced with a book that conducts nothing. The trembling of Levi is not the trembling of Paolo, words do not lead to action. The faint reference to Dante explains why Levi feels he has achieved a victory of sorts, something against the years to come. It is a reflection of relations that are dominated by class, not religion or race, almost an allegory of the socialist bond. In a way it is also a reflection of the years after the war, the arm being his first book, written in the face of indifference; indifferently received, it is now loved.²²⁾

5.

The second attempt to bridge the divide appears in "Phosphorus" as Levi graduates into a precarious world of unemployability and a more complex and possibly life altering relationship with Giulia Vineis.²³⁾ Levi's account in "Phosphorus" is not without a bitter, dark irony and is the tale of a meaningless job performed in a secluded lab managed by Giulia. The thought of what might have been avoided through Giulia's love is further poisoned by the abject position of the "inhibited"²⁴⁾ Jewish male. Immediately one can individuate in Levi's words the thick layers of the anti-Semitic discourses that systematically

²¹⁾ Ibid.

²²⁾ ALBERT CAVAGLION, *Presentazione a Se questo é un uomo*, Turin 2012, pp. VIII-IX.

²³⁾ Identified as Gabriella Garda Aliverti, see: MYRIAM ANISSIMOV, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, Woodstock and New York 1999, p. 72.

²⁴⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 521.

emasculated the Jews as Italian men. What kind of men they could be as Jews is left unsaid, but the weight of “fascist virilities”²⁵⁾ is crushing.

The story takes place in 1942, when he was employed in a futile search for an oral cure for diabetes. Beatrice and Virgil in one, Giulia Vineis was responsible for the job offer and became his guide, in the factory as well as in life and love. They knew each other from school and she was strong, passionate, Catholic and, above all, engaged to be married. “Phosphorus,” the luminous burning noxious element, is all about life under Fascism and the racial rules, about the way a regime insinuates itself into human intimacy and its language.

Brave and honest, Giulia thinks that “[r]acial laws are a bunch of stories, what importance could they have anyway?”²⁶⁾ And one night during a storm, life for Levi almost becomes wholly other:

There was a fierce storm; Giulia endured two thunderclaps and at the third sought refuge with me. I felt the heat of her body against mine, dizzying and new, known in dreams, but I did not return her embrace; if I had, perhaps her destiny and mine would have gone crashing off the rails, toward a common, completely unpredictable future.²⁷⁾

Faced with opportunity Levi reacts as Rita did. He does not reciprocate for a reason that taunts him, just as it determines his *fortuna* as a survivor.²⁸⁾ Almost any outcome to returning the embrace would have been different but the reason remains obscure. The tale introduces an alternate universe, a counterfactual of the camp and the rails off which they would have crashed are literally those that lead to Auschwitz. It is one of a few places where Levi explicitly discusses a counterfactual that is different from the constant opposition between death and the very possibility of the survivor. The tale of survival is one whose fate could have been different at almost every turn and the narrative is always overshadowed by the inevitable common alternative of death. This is a shadow of what might have not been, if he had not resisted.

It is clear that Levi is interested and it seems the first opportunity is missed out of a sense of decency, because she was engaged. The first embrace is missed for lack of reaction, the second for lack of action. But also just as much because of the intervention on the proper body, the insecure Jew frozen by law into the impossibility of masculinity. One day Giulia asks him to drive her on his bicycle to do battle with the parents of her fiancé who do not approve of her:

²⁵⁾ BARBARA SPACKMAN, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy*, Minneapolis 1996.

²⁶⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 516. Cf. PRIMO LEVI, *Opere*, ed. by MARCO BÉLPOLITI, 2 vols, Turin 1997, vol. 1, p. 533 (translation modified).

²⁷⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 518. Cf. *Opere* (cit. fn. 26), vol. 1, p. 538.

²⁸⁾ Levi employs *fortuna* frequently and seriously to consider his own luck in ethical terms, see: ROBERT GORDON, *Sfacciata fortuna, La Shoa e il caso*, Turin 2010.

Giulia was arguing with me like I was her Don Rodrigo, I was overcome by an absurd hatred for my unknown rival. A *gòì* and she a *gòia*, according to the atavistic terminology: and they would be able to marry. I felt, perhaps for the first time, a nauseating sensation of emptiness growing inside of me: this, then, meant being other; this was the price for being the salt of the earth. To carry on the crossbar of your bicycle the girl you desire, and to be so distant from her that you can't even fall in love: to carry her on the crossbar to Viale Gorizia to help her become another's, and disappear from my life.²⁹⁾

Levi desires but does not react or act because of outer and inner laws. He is being a gentleman; he is abiding by a certain code of masculinity, while he is being excluded from it by men who would betray him and have betrayed him, in an instant. The possibility of love is fragile and it turns out rules and regulations have a hold on the heart. The weight of such considerations is held lightly by the form of the telenovela and the allusion to Alessandro Manzoni's novel, *Il Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*). The allusion is comically inverted with Levi cast in the role of Don Rodrigo, the maleficent nobleman who separates Renzo from Lucia. Marco Belpoliti and Giovanni Tesio have already shown that *The Betrothed* is of great importance to Levi, one of those books he did not include in his personal anthology *La ricerca delle radici* because its presence is so obvious "it would have been like describing under 'particular signs' a person as having two eyes."³⁰⁾

According to Belpoliti, Manzoni is central to Levi regarding physical gestures and the theme of the oppressed³¹⁾ but the role of *The Betrothed* in figuring love, especially in its particular Italian sense, is certainly missing. In the novel, Renzo and Lucia are betrayed by the priest and separated by the will of Don Rodrigo, who has Lucia abducted to a land of perverted justice.³²⁾ Only at the end, through the destruction brought on by the plague, is Renzo miraculously reunited with Lucia, his love.

The irony of Levi cast in the role of Don Rodrigo, the perpetrator, should not occlude the way in which the allusion engages a concept of love that brings together survivor and perpetrator. Renzo, the survivor of the plague, arrives in death stricken Milan, where he heads to the *Lazzaretto*, a space much like the infirmary at Buna to which the sick and dying are confined. The images are eerily reminiscent of the last part of *If This Is a Man*. In the *Lazzaretto*, Renzo meets Fra Cristoforo, who tried to help the couple in the first part of the tale, and when Renzo vows to avenge himself on Don Rodrigo if he cannot find Lucia, Fra Cristoforo responds with a vehement reproach:

²⁹⁾ Opere (cit. fn. 26), vol. 1, pp. 544. The Complete Works (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, pp. 520–521.

³⁰⁾ PRIMO LEVI, *Conversazioni e Interviste: 1963–1987*, ed. by MARCO BELPOLITI, Turin 1997, p. 154.

³¹⁾ MARCO BELPOLITI, *Primo Levi*, Milan 1998, pp. 111–114.

³²⁾ See: "Renzo's Fist" in *Other People's Trades*, in: LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 3, pp. 1266–1268.

“You have dared to meditate revenge; but He (God) has power and mercy enough to prevent you [...] You know, and [...] He can arrest the hand of the oppressor: but, remember. He can also arrest that of the revengeful [...] You may hate and be lost forever; you may... rest assured that all will be punishment until you have forgiven – forgiven in such a way, that you may never again be able to say, I forgive him.”

“Yes, yes,” said Renzo, with deep shame and emotion: “I see now that I have never before really forgiven him I see that I have spoken like a beast, and not like a Christian: and now, by the grace of God, I will forgive him; yes, I’ll forgive him from my very heart.”

“And supposing you were to see him?”

“I would pray the Lord to give me patience, and to touch his heart.”

“Would you remember that the Lord has not only commanded us to forgive our enemies, but also to love them?

“Yes, by His help, I would.”³³⁾

As the book reaches “Vanadium,” the importance of this episode becomes clear as Dr. Müller makes the same demand. Müller represents a cultural, and not even tacit, demand of repentant Nazis and Fascists for forgiveness, indeed for love. Levi, who was separated from the Vanda he loved at Auschwitz by the Don Rodrigo of Salò, finds the demand for love perverse. Through Manzoni, the discussion with Müller that appears in “Vanadium” is brought into Italy and “Phosphorus” ends beyond the war:

Giulia was married a few months later, and she said goodbye to me sniffing, and giving Signorina Varisco detailed instructions about meals. She had many travails and many children; we remained friends and we see each other in Milan every so often and talk about chemistry and sensible things. We are not discontent with our choices or with what life has given us, but when we meet we both feel the curious and not unpleasant sensation (we have many times described it to each other) that a veil, a puff of wind, a roll of the dice turned us off onto two divergent paths that were not ours.³⁴⁾

The description of these meetings through the years are very tender and loving, whatever was there was true. “Phosphorus” is the story of the burning light that could not defy the years of darkness for reasons that in retrospect seem foolish.

6.

The tale of two gentiles stands in symmetrical relation to the tale of the two Jewesses. Of the first, what is known has largely been uncovered by Levi’s biographers and was recently discussed exhaustively by Sergio Luzzato in *Partigia*, a book that examines Levi’s brief experience as a partisan in minute detail.³⁵⁾

³³⁾ ALESSANDRO MANZONI, *I promessi sposi*, Turin 1971, pp. 535–536.

³⁴⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 518; cf. *Opere* (cit. fn. 26), vol. 1, pp. 521–522.

³⁵⁾ SERGIO LUZZATTO, *Partigia: Una Storia Della Resistenza*, Milan 2013, p. 127.

Vanda Maestro – Mesto Xanda in the Fascist police files – was a Jewish girl from Turin who was also a chemist. Levi had been friends with her brother, Aldo, and together they were part of a group of Turin Jews forced together by the racial laws of 1938. With Luciana Nissim they went into the mountains to fight as partisans and soon were captured by Fascist militias. They arrived at the Fossoli camp in January 1944 before being sent to Auschwitz.³⁶⁾

Luciana Nissim, having survived Auschwitz, confirmed that Levi loved Vanda and there are also good reasons to believe that Levi wrote a loving and tender portrait of Vanda in *Donne piemontesi nella lotta di liberazione*.³⁷⁾

No one who saw her in those days, climbing up the snow-covered paths, can ever forget the tiny, gentle face, marked by the physical effort, and also by a deeper tension: because for her, as for the best of that time, and in that position the choice had not been easy, or joyous, or free from doubt [...].³⁸⁾

The use of no one – *nessuno* – is tied in Levi to the figure of Ulysses telling Polyphemos that he is nobody. It also reflects the reality of the group's brief days of being partisans in which literally no one who saw her survived besides Levi himself and Luciana Nissim.³⁹⁾ Luciana may talk about love but Levi has a very difficult time doing so.

The first place in Levi's writing where Vanda is mentioned is implicit and comes when Levi describes their last night before deportation: "Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that no memory remain."⁴⁰⁾ Vanda was one of those things and for a work of testimony this remains enigmatic. How is it better that no memory remains of the things said and done, and isn't he leaving a trace of memory just by saying so? Levi describes the night and we are forced to believe that he is talking here of some part of the experience that cannot be touched. A sliver of life that escapes discourse and has no place in the tale of the survivor – a piece of life that has been forced upon the survivor by the perpetrator but in which he has no part and which cannot be contained within the narrative of "that which had happened." It is almost the case of the purloined letter – it is there and yet cannot and should not be seen. The impossibility persists in the account of the transport to Auschwitz:

³⁶⁾ The story of Vanda Maestro and the resistance episode has been told by all three biographers, Mansardi and Luzzatto and others. I have nothing to add beside interpretation. See: PHILIPPE MESNARD, *Primo Levi: Una Vita per Immagini*, Venice 2008.

³⁷⁾ Carole Angier's reasons for that identification seem correct and the style certainly is very different from the other entries, see: ANGIER, *The Double Bond* (cit. fn. 19), p. 64; ALESSANDRA CHIAPPANO, *Luciana Nissim Momigliano: una vita*, Florence 2010, p. 144.

³⁸⁾ ANGIER, *The Double Bond* (cit. fn. 19), p. 248.

³⁹⁾ URI S. COHEN, *Consider If This Is a Man: Primo Levi and the Figure of Ulysses*, in: *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 2 (2012), pp. 40–69.

⁴⁰⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 1, p. 33.

Next to me, crushed, like me, body against body for the whole journey, there had been a woman. We had been acquainted for many years, and the misfortune had struck us together, but we knew little of one another. Now, in the decisive hour, we said to each other things that are never said among the living. We said farewell and it was short; everybody said farewell to life through his neighbor. We had no more fear.⁴¹⁾

There is a curious mistranslation here, and the translation errs precisely where Levi would like us not to read. The minor mistranslation is that misfortune “struck” where the Italian uses “la sventura ci aveva colti insieme.” *Colti* – which means that it collected us, took us, it is a soft enveloping verb – indicates a shared intimacy and points to their capture in the mountains, thus naming Vanda. Another crucial misinterpretation is in the translation of “ciascuno salutò nell’altro la vita.” In English *ciascuno* becomes everybody instead of each other, turning the heartbreaking intimacy into a collective ceremony. The short, wrenching sentence “Ci Salutammo, e fu breve” is lost and with it the memory of the moment of love shared between the two. “Serrata” *accanto a me* – literally “locked” next to me – also indicates intimacy with a reference to the historical “Serrata veneziana” of 1297 and to *Inferno* Canto X, 10–12. Excluded from the polity, Levi and his neighbor reach into each other, sharing a moment of intimacy within the packed railway car and the brevity of this salutation speaks for itself.⁴²⁾ One hesitates when confronted with the literal and figurative closing of the heart and throat and how it aligns with being locked out of society, love and, in the end, life itself. Levi locks us out of that which is most intimate and the most public; he locks us out of love.⁴³⁾

Further evidence of the particularity of this bond can be found at the end of the second chapter of *The Truce* when Levi meets Olga in the Big Camp, a Croatian Jew who befriended Vanda and reports:

They had all died. All the children and the old people, immediately. Of the five hundred and fifty people I had lost track of when I entered the Lager, only twenty-nine women were admitted to Birkenau: of these, only five had survived. Vanda had been gassed, fully conscious, in the month of October; she herself, Olga, had obtained two sleeping pills for her, but they were not enough.⁴⁴⁾

⁴¹⁾ Ibid.

⁴²⁾ Elie Wiesel describes a similar scene in an early version of *Night* that was removed from the final version, see: ADERET OFER, *Newly Unearthed Evidence*, in: *Haaretz*, 5/1/2016; see also NAOMI SEIDMAN’S illuminating discussion of the Yiddish and French versions: Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage, in: *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996), pp. 1–19.

⁴³⁾ It is the one place in Levi’s work that consistently figures as a black hole: not the camp, not death, but love forever locked inside. Just like Dan Pagis describes in *Gilgul*, see: SIDRA DEKOVEN EZRAHI, *Dan Pagis – Out of Line: A Poetics of Decomposition*, in: *Prooftexts* 10, no. 2 (1990), pp. 335–363.

⁴⁴⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 1, p. 159.

The reader of the passage can hardly know who she is since she is only mentioned by name once in the chapter "A Good Day" in *If This Is a Man*. In it, Levi is hungry and thinks about the food he had not eaten while he could:

How weak is our flesh! I am perfectly aware of how vain these fantasies of hunger are, but I cannot exclude myself from the general law, and dancing before my eyes I see the pasta we had just cooked, Vanda, Luciana, Franco, and I, at the transit camp in Italy, when we suddenly heard the news that we would leave the following day to come here; and we were eating (it was so good, yellow, filling), and we stopped, idiots, fools – if we had only known! And if it should happen again . . . Absurd. If one thing is sure in this world, it is certainly this: that it will not happen to us a second time.⁴⁵⁾

Though Vanda can be found it is almost impossible to know why. This very incongruity is a clear command to the attentive reader to inquire further. It is the kind of slip that is always meaningful in Levi's work. We understand that Vanda is someone he cares about, someone whose presence is so continuous that her name appears in all naturalness next to the nameless. It requires extra-textual knowledge and a reconstruction across various texts to know that she is a figure of love, the woman who was present in the camp, next to him in the mountains, the jail, and on the transport. It is a sign of love, a point in which he buried the true story. The story than can never be told is revealed, allowing us a glimpse of the otherwise cagey heart of the survivor.

Something of this textual dynamic involving Vanda returns in *The Periodic Table*. At first she is mentioned by name in passing among a list of his friends, with no more detail given than for the others. In the chapter "Gold" that ends in their capture in the mountains, he begins by introducing the group of Jews from Turin living together in Milan: "Vanda was a chemist, like me, but she couldn't find a job and was permanently irritated by this fact, because she was a feminist."⁴⁶⁾ The words give away very little but she is the gold. One can only know that by recognizing in her the woman Levi mentions in "Chromium."

"Chromium," the substance that covers metals with a fake precious shine, tells the story of a chemical investigation conducted by Levi, the returned survivor working in a factory on the shores of a lake like the fallen Republic of Salò. The recently employed Levi is presented with a coagulated batch of varnish left over from the war and he is charged with finding a way to melt it, indeed to resurrect it:⁴⁷⁾

⁴⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁶⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 523.

⁴⁷⁾ It is well known that Levi was employed at the time by Duca-Montecatini in Avigliana. The vagueness of the description makes it very clear that the literary construct is not intended as a representation of current employment but rather of something of general significance.

But I had been back from prison for three months, and I found life hard. The things I had seen and suffered burned inside me; I felt closer to the dead than the living, and guilty for being a man, because men had built Auschwitz, and Auschwitz had swallowed up millions of human beings, and many of my friends, and a woman who was dear to me (*che me stava a cuore*). It seemed to me that I would be purified by telling the story, and I felt like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who grabs the wedding guest on the way to the wedding, to inflict on him his story of evil.⁴⁸⁾

So Levi is this man who feels guilty for what man has done to man. Returning from the Lager, he is man once again, and as such he is already betraying the woman who drowned, who shared a moment of love sealed in a railway car forever.⁴⁹⁾ Yet Levi's writing cannot and does not try to resurrect; writing can only return, just ruining the party for those bound for a wedding. In the same chapter there is a turn in love that corresponds perfectly to the chemical story. It is one of the moments when ›The Periodic Table‹ attains a perfect resonance between the language of chemistry and the language of the heart and the fullness of life and comes in the first meeting with his wife Lucia:

Now it happened that the following day destiny had reserved for me a different and unique gift: a meeting with a young woman, of flesh and blood, warm against my side through our coats... Within a few hours we knew that we belonged to each other, not for a meeting but for a lifetime, as in fact it had been... likewise, the world around me was cured, and the name and face of the woman who had descended to hell with me and had not returned were exorcised. My writing itself became a different adventure, no longer the dolorous itinerary of a convalescent, no longer a beggar seeking compassion and friendly faces, but a lucid construction and no longer solitary: the work of a chemist.⁵⁰⁾

The passage gives us a very candid account of the composition of ›If This Is a Man‹. It is a book that does not ask for compassion, unlike Coleridge's ›Ancient Mariner‹. Irony is at play, since the quote from the ›Ancient Mariner‹ eventually became the motto of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. Love is not mentioned and it is not a love story nor even a simple story of a world restored to health, of desperate writing turned to pleasure. Vanda is replaced with a real woman and writing becomes an adventure – the work of a chemist, one who measures and weighs. It would seem as though everything has been resolved and the survivor has returned to life.

⁴⁸⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 535.

⁴⁹⁾ This is not very different from the love Auerbach is trying to resurrect in *Mimesis*, "to reunite those who have not lost it, a love for the west as a literary vision of humanity is shared by the two." See: ERICH AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton 2003, p. 518.

⁵⁰⁾ LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 535.

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Levi proceeds to solve the mystery of the livered paint, discovering the solution in the “poison exuded by companies”: paperwork. Adding ammonium and love are both part of restoring color, of finding a way to write. “Ammonium Chloride, the twin to a happy love and liberating book,” melted that which was coagulated. But Vanda persists; something is not fully restored nor fully disappears. She returns in the name “Vanadium,” and in that chapter, which has Levi facing a minor perpetrator, Vanda is a figure of love against which the story of Dr. Müller unfolds.

Telling the tale of survival can be liberating but also poisonous. Postwar society accepts the stories of the victim and confines him to telling it, reliving the hell, as many go on with their lives unpunished. “Vanadium” is the penultimate chapter in *The Periodic Table*. It tells of a defective resin which has arrived at Levi's factory from a former I.G. Farben subsidiary in Germany. The varnish just will not dry. In the course of a terse and courteous correspondence with his German counterpart, he discovers that it is Dr. Müller, one of the men in charge of the laboratory in Buna where Levi was employed as a slave. A private communication between the two accompanies the commercial one. Müller, it turns out, had read Levi's book in German – *Is das ein Mensch?* As the commercial issue is resolved, a private letter arrives at Levi's home. In the letter Müller “attributed the facts of Auschwitz to Man, without differentiating.”⁵¹⁾ In his opinion he had friendly relations with the prisoners and I.G. Farben employed those prisoners only in order to protect them:

He perceived in my book an overcoming of Judaism, a fulfillment of the Christian precept to love one's enemies, and a testimony to faith in Man, and he concluded by insisting on the necessity of our meeting, in Germany or Italy, where he was ready to come when and where I pleased: preferably the Riviera –⁵²⁾

As Carole Angier has noted, this episode has a counterpart in Levi's correspondence with one Ferdinand Meyer, who was introduced to him by Hety Schmitt-Maass. Marco Belpoliti and Martina Mengoni have reconstructed the affair in detail, while believing that fiction does little more than “round” the biographical story.⁵³⁾ There is little need to argue that the truth of a poet lies in poetry and not in biography. The events as they happened are never the truth of fiction, only its circumstance. Meyer's incomprehension is of little consequence, but Müller's incomprehension is fatal since it is also a demand for love, a demand for Christian love from the Jew. This proximity between loves

⁵¹⁾ Ibid., p. 570.

⁵²⁾ Ibid., p. 571.

⁵³⁾ MARCO BELPOLITI, *Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo*, Milan 2016, pp. 261–273.

is the reason why Müller's story appears in reference to Vanda / Vanadium; it is the resonance that pits love against love.⁵⁴) Those readers who do not hold the cipher, the Shibboleth, cannot access it.

One can always argue that the name relates not to Vanda but to the element. That would become, at this point, a reading that does not have access to the cipher. Levi may write very clearly but he also inserts many codes and ciphers within such clarity. To not hear the resonance leaves art poorer than fact and it turns to biography, resurrecting pieces of meaning as sacred meaning; it is very much an enterprise of relics. Indeed there is something tribal about the cipher. Just as Levi's Piedmontese ancestors hid their rejection and *disprezzo* for the Christians in their Hebrew, Levi hides his in a Jewish love. Without Vanda in "Vanadium," one cannot access the horror, the sheer monstrosity, of Müller's talk about love.

The letter would be comic if it did not express a truth about the world. Müller, a collaborator at least, makes, like many others, demands of the Jew to overcome his Jewish system of revenge and to literally embrace him, the enemy. This would have been possible in the theologically unified world of Dante's love, but not after this inferno and Levi refuses. It is openly a rebuttal and its emotional depth is charged with a true love sealed in a railway car:

He gave me undeserved credit in attributing to me the virtue of loving my enemies: no, despite the distant privileges he had secured for me, and although he wasn't an enemy in the strict sense of the term, I did not feel like loving him. I didn't love him, and didn't want to see him, and yet I felt a certain measure of respect for him: it is not easy to be one-eyed.⁵⁵)

Müller is one of the gray people, "a typically gray human specimen, one of the not few one-eyed men in the kingdom of the blind."⁵⁶) The one-eyed (*mono-coli*) are partially sighted but this is also a dense reference that underscores the acid irony. Müller is a Cyclops and the Cyclops are Nazis of sorts, since they have no god or rule and eat their guests; Ulysses is literally rendered nobody by the encounter with Polyphemus. The camp and all those who made it possible, including the Müllers of the world, offer the survivor the same sordid favor

⁵⁴) [I]m Sinne der Bewältigung der so furchtbaren Vergangenheit" – the phrase used by Müller, literally meaning to overcome the past, to rape it, if you will, as Levi points out. Levi has written another story about the lab and a Doctor Mertens this time. It is indeed a different story with a different meaning, even though it stems from the same exchange. Levi, perhaps foreshadowing the futility of future research, includes the following observation about the "essential inadequacy of the documentary page: it hardly ever has the power to restore the essence of a human being. The playwright or the poet is more suited to this purpose than the historian or the psychologist", PRIMO LEVI, *The Quiet Town of Auschwitz*, in: Id., *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 3, p. 1386.

⁵⁵) LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 2), vol. 2, p. 572.

⁵⁶) *Ibid.*, p. 571.

offered to Ulysses: to be eaten last. Struggling to respond, Levi drafts a letter in which he claims that perhaps one could love but the enemy must cease to be such, which means an acceptance of responsibility for Auschwitz by people like Müller. Levi does not send the letter and eventually he receives one from Müller's wife informing him of his death at the age of sixty.

The close of the story is direct: Levi the author and survivor would rather kill Müller than meet him. This is one ending, perhaps the major ending of *The Periodic Table* – the acid refusal of love in the absence of justice. Levi is troubled by this correspondence and by the malleability of words and he refuses to accept. Something of love does not survive Auschwitz and an original meaning is lost beyond time. Literature is also where scores are settled and Müller is left dead and unforgiven. Dante gets his revenge, his enemies punished in grueling ways forever. Levi does not have the privilege of a unified system and even Christ cannot redeem the world after this crime. He cannot forgive and cannot love his enemies if what he felt for Vanda is to be named love. His love is for the victims, lost and burnt, his people, sealed in the railway car, they are dead but love for them survives; for the enemy, dead or alive, he has none.

