Survivor Testimony and the Hegelian Subject

Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the name “Auschwitz” to signify just how impoverished recent Western History seems from the point of view of the “modern” project of the emancipation of humanity. What kind of thought is capable of “relieving” Auschwitz—relieving (relever) in the sense of aufheben [i.e., overcoming]—capable of situating it in a general, empirical, or even speculative process directed towards universal emancipation?

—Jean-François Lyotard, “Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’”

This chapter deploys Lyotard’s concept, “the differend,” to explore the unexpected intersection in Survival in Auschwitz between Primo Levi’s humanism and Hegelian modes of discourse like those of Nazism and Italian Fascism. While Levi’s moving descriptions of the mute, dehumanized prisoners confirm Lyotard’s claim that “in the concentration camp there is no plural subject,” that no unified voice that can overcome the camp’s atomization of the victims, the imperative to distill knowledge from his tragic experience nevertheless compels Levi to narrate in the first-person plural. I argue that Levi’s “we” is, at times, positioned within an imagined community of scientists who look into the camp from the outside, objectifying the victims and leaving them without an authentic voice that can testify to the injustice they have suffered. The characteristics of this “we” reveal the tension between Levi’s embrace of the scientific method, as an expression of human dignity, and his encounter with the social Darwinism used by the Nazis to justify the creation of Auschwitz. The dilemma for the rational humanist is that Darwin’s potent theory, a credit to the acuity of the human mind, actually dethrones humans, transforming them into animals subject to exploitation and even natural selection.
For the Nazis, evolutionary theory not only promised mastery over nature but also over humanity. Germany’s early successes in warfare and in applying harsh racial policies offered apparent moral justification for the commission of further crimes. These actions, the Nazis contended, merely accelerated the inevitable dominance of a superior people. In this simplistic way of thinking, natural selection and Hegelian synthesis are essentially the same thing: each process creates winners and losers as history moves humanity forward. What emerges in my reading of Levi’s testimony is that he took the concentration camps to be a microcosm of Nazi-occupied Europe: both used the same Darwinian rationale to establish hierarchy. As such, to be a Holocaust survivor is to have been forced to confirm the validity of the “survival of the fittest” concept in a fashion that mirrors the role the Nazis cast for themselves. The prisoner who outlasts his peers is conscious of having been an object of domination but also a dominator who instrumentalized fellow prisoners. (He has become an unwilling participant in the morally ambiguous world that Levi calls “The Gray Zone,” which I discuss further in Chapter 7.) Although Levi attempts to reconstruct, out of the ruins of Auschwitz, a new collectivity to mediate “the differend,” I argue that he instead lays bare the irreconcilable differences between two standards virtue that hold sway in Western culture: the self-preservationist and the Judeo-Christian (or, as we shall see in Chapter 4, what Emmanuel Levinas calls the “Greek” and the “Hebrew”).

Before continuing, I should note that this present discussion refers to Auschwitz, the actual place, but just as often refers to “Auschwitz,” the trope or constellation of meanings associated with the very essence of the Holocaust—the abyss at its center. Posthumanist thinkers, including Lyotard, deem a reckoning with the legacy of this latter Auschwitz absolutely indispensable to any coherent narrative of modernity. The Holocaust shifted the ground beneath our feet, putting into question what we can know and understand about the world, and it even undermined our confidence in the words we try to use to talk about what has happened.

“*We*”

Observations made by Andrew McCann serve as a preface to my discussion of Levi’s pressured syntax in *Survival in Auschwitz*, and of his struggle to discover what, after Auschwitz, the expression “we humans” means in either political or philosophical terms. “The Holocaust . . . forces us to ask the most fundamental of questions regarding the human subject supposedly cognizant of an altered sense of possible enactments. What was once an intuitive understanding of the performative ‘we’ (we rational, compassionate