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Primo Levi's Journey Home from Auschwitz in the Light of Ancient Civic Pilgrimage: Levi's *The Truce* as a Form of *Theōria*

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Primo Levi, a Jewish-Italian chemist captured with other members of a partisan band in German-occupied northern Italy and deported to Auschwitz, survived his ordeal to write one of the more acclaimed testimonies of Nazi inhumanity, *Se questo è un uomo* (*Survival in Auschwitz*). Taking as a starting point a parallel Levi explicitly draws between the aims of postwar pilgrimages to Auschwitz commemorations and the effect he hoped his books would have on his readers, this article shows how his second book, *La tregua* (*The Reawakening*), which relates his roundabout and oft-delayed journey home to Turin after the Red Army's liberation of Auschwitz, offers insights and calls forth responses akin to the insights and responses associated with a particular form of pilgrimage, the ancient polis practice of civic-religious pilgrimage, *theōria*. The connection is made through consideration of Andrea Nightingale's analysis of how Plato sought to legitimise his mode of philosophical practice by casting it as a form of *theōria*.

Key Words: Primo Levi, *The Truce*, civic pilgrimage, *Theōria*, Plato

I know many ex-prisoners who understand very well what a terrible lesson their experience contains and who return every year to 'their camp,' guiding pilgrimages of young people. I would do it myself, gladly, if time permitted, and if I did not know that I reached the same goal by writing books and by agreeing to talk about them to my readers (Levi 2001:194).

Primo Levi, a Jewish-Italian chemist captured with other members of a partisan band in German-occupied Italy and deported to Auschwitz, survived his ordeal to write one of the more acclaimed testimonies of Nazi inhumanity, *Se questo è un uomo* (literally translated, 'If this is a man,' first published in 1947 and issued in the U.S. in 1959 under the title, *Survival in Auschwitz*). His second book, *La tregua* (literally translated 'The Truce' and so titled in the British edition but issued in the U.S. under the title, *The Reawakening*), published in 1963, relates his roundabout and oft-delayed journey home to Turin after the Red Army's January 1945 liberation of Auschwitz. His later literary output ranged widely in genre and subject and included short works of science fiction and fantasy, a volume of poetry, creative non-fiction reflections on his life and career as an industrial chemist, essays on contemporary trends and current events, a novel of World War Two partisan struggle, and a book of sober reflections on the nature and contaminating effects of Nazi evil. Despite the variety of forms Levi's writing took and the diverse topics he addressed, his writerly efforts have conventionally been interpreted as either witnessing to

his experiences at Auschwitz or refracting the trauma of those experiences in narratives ostensibly focused on other topics.

While Levi never denied the importance of his experience as a deportee to the Auschwitz complex of camps and witness to the workings of the Nazi mass murder system, he did not want to be known exclusively as a Holocaust writer. In an interview he gave in 1979 in the wake of the publication of *The Wrench*, his lightly comical account of the exotic work adventures of a fictionalised contract crane rigger, he noted:

I haven't stopped being an ex-deportee or a witness, I still feel that also, and deeply so. But I have no wish to be only that ... I see myself as free to write on any theme (Levi 2001:121).

Several years later, in the introduction to a volume of essays, *Other People's Trades*, culled from columns he regularly published in Turin's daily newspaper, *La Stampa*, Levi characterised the freedoms he took as an author as taking the form of 'invasions,' 'incursions,' and 'forays' across disciplinary and vocational boundaries (Levi 1989b:9). In the very first chapter of that same volume, he went on to offer as an explanation for his wide-ranging interests the fact that he was born and had since lived (with 'involuntary interruptions' during the war) in the same Turin apartment.

Perhaps I owe to this static destiny the never satisfied love I harbor for travel, and the frequency that a journey appears as a topos in many of my books (1989b:11).

Levi's identification of journeying as a prevalent theme in his writings invites reconsideration of remarks he made concerning a 1965 journey to an Auschwitz commemoration (see the epigraph above), in which he drew a parallel between pilgrimages of young people to Auschwitz and the effect he intended his writings to have on readers. Taken together, these comments suggest a multi-leveled appreciation of the affinities he saw between his writings and the act of journeying. Not only did he note that journeys were a common thematic element of his writings but he also felt that his readers' encounters with his texts could afford them rewards of the kind experienced by travelers on pilgrimages to Auschwitz. The reward he particularly had in mind for that sort of journey was an insight that he felt it was especially urgent for young people to gain:

In every part of the world, wherever you begin by denying the fundamental liberties of mankind, and equality among people, you move towards the concentration camp system, and it is a road on which it is difficult to halt (Levi 2001:194).

On the face of it, Levi's reference to Auschwitz as a site of pilgrimage is highly plausible. In a recent overview of pilgrimage scholarship, George Greenia includes, in a catalogue of modern forms of pilgrimage, 'dark' pilgrimages to sites of communal remembrance (concentration camps in Eastern Europe; Ground Zero in New York)' (2018:9). And one can easily imagine a pilgrimage to Auschwitz as meeting several of the general characteristics of the pilgrimage experience as listed by Greenia, including 'celebrating a physical location as a site of symbolic or real access to powers beyond the human realm' and 'being present at a site that others have designated as significant for non-material reasons' (p. 10). Another of the general characteristics of pilgrimage for which the postwar journeys to Auschwitz alluded to by Levi might qualify is the expectation of 'a major payoff in terms of cure, expiation of guilt or sin, inducement of a special divine favor like fertility or a bountiful harvest, protection from danger, salvation, or simply enlightenment' (p. 10). For his part, Levi hoped that youth pilgrimages to Auschwitz would result in one indispensable form of enlightenment, a recognition 'that the camps were not an accident, an unforeseen happening' but the foreseeable outcome of Fascist programs of

authoritarian rule and racist persecution taken to 'monstrous' extremes (Levi 2001:194). The lesson that Levi would have Auschwitz pilgrims (and his readers) draw from this recognition is that responsible citizens must take care to nurture a political culture of public rationality and pluralistic tolerance that (to the extent possible) immunises citizens against the appeals of authoritarianism and racism.

While Levi's claim about the promise of wisdom to be gained from pilgrimage to Auschwitz as well as his claim about resemblances between the enlightenment that might result from pilgrimage and the insights he hoped to propagate through his writings are plausible, in and of themselves, these claims do not promise much in the way of new insights about either pilgrimage or his work. The direct references to pilgrimage are too few and offhanded to derive new insights about his work through its purported kinship with the phenomenon of pilgrimage, conventionally understood. Levi's oeuvre does, however, afford an opportunity to reflect more deeply about his aims as a writer through considering it in relation to the phenomenon of a specific sort of pilgrimage. In particular, previously unnoticed aspects of the didactic promise of Levi's second book, *La Tregua*, can best be revealed through consideration of a particular (and contested) notion of pilgrimage derived from the ancient polis practice of *theōria*, the dispatch by a city-state of official delegates or *theōroi*

to sanctuaries on the occasion of festivals there, liaising with the local authorities and with representatives from other cities (Rutherford 2013:12).

Drawing from accounts of how Plato sought to insinuate a kinship between the prestigious polis practice of *theōria* (which term 'literally means 'watching' or 'spectacle'' and has been translated as 'civic pilgrimage' (Elsner & Rutherford 2005:12)) and the *theōria* of philosophical inquiry, this article will reveal some important lessons for citizens of self-governing republics, which Levi makes available in his account of certain episodes in his journey home from Auschwitz.

As a necessary preliminary to engaging with Levi's text, which, for reasons that will become clear, will henceforth be referred to as *The Truce*, the literal translation of its original Italian title, a caveat about equating *theōria* with pilgrimage is in order. For some classicists, the parallels between *theōria* and behaviours that have traditionally been considered under the rubric of the English term, pilgrimage, are

compelling. Those designated *theōroi* by polis authorities made journeys to and from festivals, many of which, if not expressively religious, were invested with some religious meaning or status; during parts of their service,

they wore crowns to indicate their sacralized status (Elsner & Rutherford 2005:12-13);

and

[their] their journey abroad [was] for the sake of witnessing sacred spectacles or events in a 'space' that transcended the social and ideological practices of any single participant (Nightingale 2013:152).

An additional feature of this polis practice (that will be particularly relevant to our discussion of *The Truce*) was its role in establishing truces;

one of the earliest and best-attested roles of theōroi was to announce imminent enactments of established festivals, and, where appropriate, to proclaim the associated sacred truces (Rutherford 2013:71).

Skeptics argue that a crucial dimension of spiritual seeking and development—'In all the great living religions, pilgrims ... are both literal and spiritual journeymen' (Scullian 2005:122)—was largely lacking in the *theōria* of ancient city-states. And while the truces called by *theōroi* were 'always called 'sacred truces' ... there was nothing markedly sacred about the terminology employed to distinguish them from other Greek truces' (Scullian 2005:122). Generally-speaking, on this view, *theōria* was a practice that was chiefly political rather than religious in its motivation and largely symbolic rather than personally transformative in its effect. *Theōroi* were 'sent to festivals to show the flag and enjoy the show' (Scullian 2005:124).

Rather than attempt to intervene in the debate over the extent to which ancient Greek *theōria* resembles modern pilgrimage by delving further into the scholarship of that debate, this article will take a different approach by considering Levi's book of homecoming against the backdrop of Nightingale's analysis of the Platonic assimilation of civic pilgrimage or *theōria* to philosophy. While such an approach will not provide direct evidence of a strong kinship between ancient *theōria* and modern pilgrimage, it will provide greater insight into the parallel ways in which both Levi's story of return and *theōria* do important political theoretical work.

The Truce and Pilgrimage

For Levi, who wrote both his Auschwitz memoir and his follow-up book of return during the time he worked as an industrial chemist, his second book had a strong affinity with his first:

With The Truce I felt as though I had finished something, as though I'd plumbed the depths of a group of experiences that were unique, tragic, and yet (for me) paradoxically precious. I felt as though I had completely burned myself out as a witness ... (Levi 2001:88).

However, despite encompassing *The Truce* with a mournful introductory section and a foreboding final passage, Levi gave emphasis in the body of this work to 'strange, exotic, cheerful episodes' (Levi 2001:20). What stood out for Levi in the period between his liberation from Auschwitz and his arrival back home in Turin, were the many adventures he experienced (and, in some cases, made up). 'Destiny decided that I should find adventure in the awful mess of a Europe swept by war' (19).

The adventures to which Levi alludes find expression in *The Truce* in his trials and (sometimes comic) tribulations as he and his fellow deportees are forced to wait long months in the vicinity of Auschwitz after their January 1945 liberation, for the Soviet authorities to arrange their return home. Shortly after Germany is finally defeated in early May, the Italian deportees, for no apparent rhyme or reason, are transported east and north, rather than south and west, to a remote outpost in Soviet Belarus, Starye Dorogi, where they endure further months of uncertain waiting. Finally, as summer turns to fall, a train arrives and, with numerous stops and delays, transports them slowly through Soviet Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Austria again, and, finally, across the border into Italy on October 15, 1945. For much of the period narrated in *The Truce*, Levi serves as an unofficial medical assistant and record-keeper, working with a cast of colourful minor Soviet officials. He also acts on occasion as the sometime reluctant junior partner of, first, the Greek, then Cesare, two street smart characters whose various plots and ruses he recounts with bemusement.

Partly, one imagines, with the plots and escapades of the Greek and Cesare in mind, some readers have characterized *The Truce* as a 'picaresque adventure' (Angier 2002:375, 516, 530) or, in Italian reviews, 'avventura picaresca' (Insana, Cannon, and Mangaldo, as cited by Ferrero 1997:269). Following

Levi's own lead (Levi 1985:263), readers have also plausibly located Levi's memoir of return within the Odyssean tradition of long and circuitous journeys home (Antonicelli as cited by Ferrero 1997:265; Di Florio Gula 2009:91; Thomson 2002:270; Valabrega 1997:266). The text's links to the themes of Jewish exilic literature are also discernible (Valabrega 1997:266-7). In comparison with the many assimilations of *The Truce* to picaresque adventures or Odyssean journeys, references to the book in terms of the notion of pilgrimage are few. Besides Ferrero's reference to Lorenzo Gigli's newspaper review, in which Levi is characterized as a 'pellegrino [pilgrim] di Auschwitz' (Ferrero 1997:265), only one English language reference could be found that explicitly characterizes Levi's book of homecoming under that rubric. Referring to the kinship between *The Truce* and Levi's later novel of Jewish partisan warfare, *If Not Now, When?*, Nicholas Patruno, one of the first U.S. academics to take up Levi's work, asserts that the later book, 'too recounts the pilgrimage through Central Europe of a group of pilgrims' (quoted by Klein 2011:115; for original passage, see Patruno 1995:91).

On the face of it, Patruno's characterisation of Levi as pilgrim from the time of his release from Auschwitz to his return home seems somewhat inapt. In the first place, pilgrimages are typically characterised as journeys *away* from home toward places and experiences that transcend the mundane routines of ordinary life. By contrast, it was precisely home with its mundane routines to which Levi, after being liberated from the Auschwitz complex of slave labour and death camps, endeavoured to return. In this important respect, during his homeward journey, he seemed to be emulating Odysseus rather than, say, a pilgrim on one of the routes of the Camino de Santiago.

In *The Truce*, Levi employs the conventional meaning of the term, odyssey, when, after relating his relief that the long anticipated train had finally arrived at the refugee camp in Starye Dorogi to take him and his fellow Italian refugees home—'we were rising once more, travelling upwards, on the journey home'—he notes how the delays and adventures were still not over and that 'a small railroad Odyssey, within our greater Odyssey' was in store (Levi 1985:262 -3). A different reading of the meaning of Odysseus's journey is on offer from Levi in an oft-analysed chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz* entitled 'The Canto of Ulysses,' in which he recounts his attempt to teach Italian to a fellow camp inmate, Pikolo, by reciting verses of Dante's *Inferno*. The relevant verses relate to the Greek hero's

'foolhardy journey beyond the pillars of Hercules,' which Dante's poem casts as a reckless adventure. Interestingly, while Dante condemns Odysseus for his sinful pride, Levi seems more intent on highlighting him as a commendable icon of the unquenchable human quest for knowledge. As he and Pikolo make their way across the camp to get the midday soup ration for the work squad, Levi quotes the *Inferno*'s Ulysses rousing his crew to make the final effort:

*Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.*
(1996:113)

Remembering these lines and reciting them as a physically depleted and mentally beleaguered inmate of Auschwitz, Levi notes their extraordinary impact:

*As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like
the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God.
For a moment I forget who I am and where I
am* (1996:113).

In the deadly crucible of Auschwitz, these seemingly useless shreds of literary memory 'had great value,' he later wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved*.

*They made it possible for me to reestablish a
link with the past, saving it from oblivion and
reinforcing my identity* (1989a:139)

Levi's counter reading of Odysseus (as trail blazing seeker rather than exclusively as a homeward bound journeyer) in his Holocaust memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, invites us to be alert to the multiple resonances of the Odysseus motif, encompassing notions both of journeying in pursuit of transformative knowledge and encounters, and of returning home. The multiple Odyssean resonances of Levi's early works invite consideration of how some aims and select features of those early works (and, particularly, *The Truce*), conform to aspects of ancient Greek *theōria*, the practice of ancient Greek city-states 'of sending *theōroi* as official ambassadors to attend and witness religious festivals' (Nightingale 2005:157). According to Nightingale:

*in all journeys of theōria, the pilgrim or theōros
travelled away from home to see some sort of
spectacle or learn something about the outside
world, thus confronting unfamiliar modes of
social, civic, and natural life' (Nightingale
2005:155).*

The fact that the term for civic pilgrimage, was independently applied to philosophical speculation about politics, opened up an opportunity for Plato to

assimilate his method of conceptualising polis life to civic *theōria*. Plato gestures to this move in the first pages of his *Republic*. There, we encounter Socrates, on his way back from Peiraeus, the port city of Athens, after witnessing a festival dedicated to the Thracian goddess Bendis whose cult was new to Athens. Encountering a friend, Socrates begins to describe the sights he had encountered at the festival. The acquaintance then conscripts Socrates to come to his house and engage in discussion with his guests (Nightingale 2005:155-6). What follows is a second journey to witness foreign sights after the earlier journey to the Bendis festivities, a journey in thought or imagination to behold a just city.

Plato's assimilation of philosophical *theōria* to civic *theōria* was savvy because it affiliated philosophy, a contested and suspect activity in the polis, with a long established and broadly accepted civic practice. It was also apt because the analogy was grounded in real parallels between the two activities. In both cases, a journey and new sights, whether physical or imaginative, enable one to stand apart from the norms and practices of one's own polis.

During the period of the journey, the theōros encounters what is foreign and different. This encounter with the unfamiliar invites the traveler to look at his own city with different eyes (Nightingale 2005:162).

Standing apart from one's polis facilitates, in turn, an evaluation of one's native norms and practices that is less emotionally invested in traditional identifications and therefore less restricted by love of home and country. For the philosopher engaged in contemplation this was equivalent to 'enter[ing] a sphere that [was] impersonal, disinterested, and objective' (Nightingale, 2005:164). Finally, both practices were nested in a context of cosmopolitan encounter;

theōria at religious festivals also offered the philosophers the model of a panhellenic 'space' which (at least in principle) transcended political differences and encouraged a sense of identity which was more universal than that defined by the polis (Nightingale 2005:164).

There are many examples of new sights described by Levi in *The Truce* that can plausibly be affiliated both with the foreign spectacles reported by ancient Greek *theōroi* and the imagined city of Platonic philosophising. This article considers a series of spectacles reported by Levi to have occurred during the months the Italian refugees were marooned—'no one demanded anything of us, no one importuned us, no pressure was placed on us, we did not have to defend

ourselves against anything; we felt as inert and settled as an alluvial sediment' (Levi 1985:249)—at their camp in Starye Dorogi in Soviet Belarus. The uneventful stasis of refugee life is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of a Soviet military film projection crew presumably on its way home from the front. It stops at Starye Dorogi for three days and nights, projecting one movie each evening for the viewing pleasure of both the Italian refugees and Soviet troops stationed in the area.

From a perspective informed by Nightingale's account of Plato's appropriation of *theōria*, the activity of the film projection unit in Levi's account is worth singling out because the spectacular nature of the events Levi describes operates on multiple levels. He is not only presenting to his readers a novel spectacle—Italian refugees and Soviet troops gathered for impromptu movie viewings—but he is also recounting the effects of spectatorship on Italian and Soviet moviegoers. There are three spectacles, in fact: an old German film dramatising the villainous actions of an Italian spy during the World War One conflict between Austria and Italy, a Soviet film featuring a heroic Russian military pilot ably flying over magnificent mountain landscapes while repeatedly foiling the attempts of his only passenger, a turbaned sheikh, from hijacking their two-seater plane, and a Hollywood film presenting the story of a resilient and determined Polynesian sailor, who escapes unjust imprisonment by a racist criminal justice system just in time to save his girlfriend and fellow villagers from a hurricane's wrath.

Levi's report on the movie nights at Starye Dorogi also invites consideration from a perspective informed by ancient political theory's affinity with the classical polis practice of pilgrimage because of the obvious political themes broached in these movie spectacles, including patriotic sacrifice, justice, and liberty. The first movie, Levi tells us, deploys the sorts of patriotic tropes and stereotypes that appear in the national cinema of any country at war:

military honor, sacred frontiers, soldiers of great heroism who nevertheless burst into tears as easily as virgins, bayonet attacks carried out with improbable enthusiasm (Levi 1985:250).

The second movie introduces a villain, who, despite initially appearing in the role of a stranger in need, is 'a dangerous rogue, probably a smuggler, a dissident leader or a foreign agent' (Levi 1985:251) and whose plot is foiled by a member of the patriotic armed forces. The protagonist of the Hollywood movie breaks out of prison,

not only because of an almost animal-like need of liberty and intolerance of bondage, but above all because he feels, he knows, that not he but the whites have violated justice; if this is the law of the whites, then the law is unjust (Levi 1985:252).

The effects postulated by Nightingale for ancient Greek pilgrimage, whether of the civic or philosophic variety—the achievement of an emotional distance from the norms and practices of one's homeland which might enable a disinterested, not to say, critical viewpoint on those norms and practices—are most obvious in Levi's description of the aftereffects of the first night's movie. Noting how the World War One German spy thriller cast the Italians as stereotypical villains, physically ugly and morally repugnant, Levi concludes by describing the effect that this spectacle had on the Italian moviegoers at Starye Dorogi:

We Italians, so little accustomed to seeing ourselves cast as the 'enemy', odious by definition, and so dismayed at being hated by anybody, derived a complex pleasure from watching the film—a pleasure not without disquiet, a source of salutary meditations [salutari meditazioni] (Levi 1985:250 [Levi 1997, 200]).

As described by Levi, the overall effect of movie spectatorship on the Italians at Starye Dorogi is positive. Not only do they get pleasure (even if this pleasure is somehow unsettled or unsettling), they engage in a process of thinking ('salutary meditations') that leaves them better off than before. Could it be that in cinematically making a journey across a historical line of conflict to assume the standpoint of one's erstwhile enemies, the Italians have been led to question the distinction between friends and strangers that tends to harden into the friend-enemy distinction in times of war? In this regard, one might think back to Levi's thoughts about a similar polarity—kin and strangers—expressed in the preface to his most famous work, *Survival in Auschwitz*. There, expressly disavowing accusation as a motive for his testimony to Nazi inhumanity, Levi identifies his memoir's aim as being sober and theoretical rather than accusatory: 'to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind' (Levi 1996:9). In particular, his book seeks to counteract a pernicious human tendency:

Many people—many nations—can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'. For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random,

disconnected acts, and does not lie at the base of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then at the end of the chain, there is the Lager (Levi 1996:9).

Levi's testimonial work, his account of what happened to him as a Jewish deportee, makes available, second-hand, that awful experience to his readers. He invites his readers, in other words, to make an imaginative journey. And that journey's primary aim is not to stir up accusatory emotions; it is rather to get people to think about what happened.

In *The Truce's* story of movie-going experience, readers are given an example of a cinematic journey rather than a literary invitation to an imaginative journey. To be sure, the former kind of journey is furnished with props—moving images and sound—that can have powerful emotional effects. For the Italian refugees, their cinematic journey on the first movie night at Starye Dorogi has a somewhat complex emotional effect but it is the intellectual effect of that journey that Levi emphasises. With Levi's observation in the preface of *Survival in Auschwitz* in mind, one might say that their cinematic journey spurs reflection on the irrationalities of the friend-enemy distinction, especially when it becomes a national dogma (as it did when Nazi racial theory biologized the distinction and cast people of Jewish background as parasitic enemies of the German-Aryan body politic).

Levi's description of the Soviet audience's response to the second night's film about the Soviet military pilot's foiling of the sheik's plot suggests how, in contrast with the Italian audience's experience on the first night, a cinematic journey can result in the hyping up of passions at the expense of sober thought:

The Russian soldiers in the audience followed the clumsy plot with noisy passion, applauding the hero and insulting the traitor (Levi 1985:251).

This cinematic experience fails, one might say, to invite the Soviet spectators to take the perspective of the foreigner. The reasons for this failure are not hard to discern. It is, after all, a Soviet-made film, screened in Soviet territory, and its 'clumsy' plot invites identification with the Soviet hero. Of further relevance is the fact that the viewers are Soviet troops who have just finished successfully fighting a very costly war of survival against a pitiless invader. In all these particulars, the chances of taking a journey to an imaginary foreign land by which one might come to

question the norms and practices of one's homeland and, in particular, any tendencies toward adopting the friend-enemy distinction, are decidedly slim.

The lesson Levi might have us draw from the audience reaction to the showing of the third movie is similar to the lesson of the second showing. He notes that the attendance and passion of the Soviet attendees that night was especially heightened by the fact that the poster advertising the movie 'portrayed a magnificent Polynesian girl scantily dressed' (Levi 1985:252). The central action of the film, which pitted the Polynesian protagonist against a corrupt and biased criminal justice system, generated a level of sympathetic identification that became dangerous:

It seemed as if the people in the film were not shadows to them, but flesh and blood friends, near at hand. The sailor was acclaimed at every exploit, greeted by noisy cheers and sten-guns brandished perilously over their heads. The policemen and jailers were insulted with bloodthirsty cries, greeted with shouts of 'leave him alone', 'go away', 'I'll get you', 'kill them all' (Levi 1985:252).

One wonders whether Levi is deliberately drawing a parallel in this scene with Plato's story of the cave in Book Seven of *Republic*, in which spectators (who stand in for conventional society) mistake shadow play on the back wall of the cave for real world objects and events. (It is highly likely that Levi was assigned Plato's works at Ginnasio Liceo Massimo D'Azeglio, the elite humanistic middle-through-high school in Turin that he attended (Angier, 2002:68)). In any case, the imaginative journey enabled by the Hollywood drama does not facilitate the objectivity and self-reflection of the sort that had occurred among Italian spectators on the first movie night. In fact, that journey ramps up some Soviet spectators' righteous anger:

The audience stood up shouting, in generous defence of the innocent man; a wave of avengers moved threateningly towards the screen, but were cursed at and checked in turn by less heated elements or by those who wanted to see the end (Levi 1985:252-3).

The audience reactions to the third movie seem to bear out the lessons previously drawn about the contrasting audience reactions to the first two movies. Movies can take people on imaginative journeys but the effect of those journeys on audience intellect and emotion varies according to the nature of the filmic material, the identity of the audience, and the social context of the viewing.

A Truce as Theoretical Journey

If we limit our consideration to the Italian audience response on the first movie night and read that cinematic vignette from a perspective informed by ancient Greek notions of civic or philosophic journeys to foreign lands or spaces, we might detect a hitherto unnoticed layer of meaning in Levi's choice of title for his homecoming story, *The Truce*. Generally speaking, truces are called between combatants who wish for a cessation of hostilities. It may be that the sides to a conflict have exhausted themselves and wish to find a way out of a conflict that neither side any longer finds in its interest. A cessation of hostilities opens up the possibility of stepping out of the role of active combat and stepping back from the Manichean value judgments typically generated in combatants by wartime loss and suffering.

To be sure, truces can be fragile or temporary. It may be that one or the other side to a conflict wants a respite from combat merely in order to reorganise for future combat on more advantageous terms. Levi alludes to this possibility when he recounts an exchange he had with Mordo Nahum, the Greek, during which the Greek reproaches him for not taking care of necessities during war. When Levi objects, 'the war is over,' the Greek replies, 'There is always war' (Levi 1985:163).

Levi strategically evokes the term, truce, at the conclusion of his book. After the train full of Italian refugees has crossed the Brenner into Italian territory, Levi and others are lost in various thoughts. There is first of all, the thought of the terrible scale of loss; only three deportees out of 650 from Levi's transport to Auschwitz have ended up on this homeward journey. There is also the thought of the challenge of restarting normal life after experiencing the brutalities of Auschwitz:

We felt in our veins the poison of Auschwitz, flowing together with our thin blood; where should we find the strength to begin our lives again, to break down the barriers, the brushwood which grows up spontaneously in all absences, around every deserted house, every empty refuge? Soon, tomorrow, we should have to give battle, against enemies still unknown, outside ourselves and inside; with what weapons, what energies, what willpower? (Levi 1985:281)

So, despite (because of?) all they have suffered, the refugees will soon have to take up arms, so to speak, in

a new, figurative state of conflict. And the thought of the difficult conflict ahead leads Levi to think of the time just ending, from the day of liberation to the day of homecoming, as a truce.

We felt the weight of centuries on our shoulders, we felt oppressed by a year of ferocious memories; we felt emptied and defenceless. The months just past, although hard, of wandering on the margins of civilization now seemed to us like a truce, a parenthesis of unlimited availability, a providential but unrepeatably gift of fate (Levi 1985:281-2).

Levi's association of his soon-to-be-ended truce with the condition of movement in a remote geographical space ('wandering on the margins of civilization') is noteworthy in that it evokes the condition of being away from or removed from the norms and practices of one's homeland and culture. Recalling the image of the ancient Greek *theōros* proclaiming a sacred truce in preparation for attendance at a foreign festival, one might consider Levi's framing of his foreign journey under the rubric of a providentially-endowed (sacred?) truce to be an instructive coincidence. Might he not be seen as inviting his readers to engage in a *theōria* of their own, an imaginative journey to the foreign spectacles he recounts, made under a flag of mental truce (or release from prior ideological commitments), by which they could engage in 'salutary meditation' on issues such as war, justice, and liberty of the sort engaged in by Italian spectators at the Starye Dorogi cinema?

Truces and Republican Civic Values

In drawing analogies between episodes of Levi's homecoming journey and ancient Greek practices of civic and philosophic *theōria*, this article has revealed an aspect of the civic teaching made available in Levi's account of his adventures in *The Truce*. Levi's text both invites and occasions embarkation on imaginative journeys to foreign spectacles of the sort that might enable readers to achieve 'salutary' or critical distance on the norms and practices of their homeland. In bringing this salutary perspective to their native cultures, both Levi as Odyssean knowledge seeker-returned-home and his readers as travellers of the imagination might help build a culture of resistance to malevolent political appeals which seek to exploit the ever-present human tendency of treating strangers as enemies.

Recalling Levi's recognition of the importance of the journey as a motif in his writings and his characterisation of his writing activity as analogous in its effects to the youth pilgrimages to Auschwitz commemorations led by fellow ex-inmates, we can reframe his endeavour to inoculate fellow citizens from the tendency to treat strangers as enemies as a general feature of pilgrimage. After all, in embarking on a pilgrimage and going to places where he or she is a stranger, the pilgrim trusts that the people native to those places will not assume that he or she is an enemy. Pilgrims are, one might say, living exemplars of the non-threatening other (traveling under a flag of truce, one might say) who is open to friendly contact with strangers. Greenia may be encompassing this dimension of the pilgrimage experience when he refers to the 'humility that common pilgrims value and for which they are often praised: self-effacement, modesty and forbearance' (Greenia, 2018:12).

Of course, Levi's concern in *The Truce* to promote reflection about how fear of the stranger can lead to national dogmas of racism does not exhaust the content of civic values to be learned from that work or from his larger oeuvre. In their widest extent, these values encompass, besides pluralistic tolerance, fraternal solidarity, public-minded participation, dedication to the common good, and commitment to deliberative modes of public decision-making. Students of political history and theory trace this cluster of orientations to republicanism, a tradition whose interlocutors have held up the active citizens of the self-governing polities of ancient Greece and Rome as a preeminent standard. Levi's affirming, if somewhat indirect, evocations of citizenship in the ancient Greek polis in another of his travel narratives, *If Not Now, When?*, a novel recounting the embattled journey of a Jewish partisan band fighting for its survival across Eastern and Central Europe, is highly suggestive of his attachment to republican values (Pirro, 2017:59-62).

While there is even less direct evidence of Levi's republican political sensibilities to be found in *The Truce*, than in *If Not Now, When?*, the indirect evidence is best accessed through recognition of the way in which both Levi's book and ancient civic and philosophic variants of *theōria* relied for their operation on truces. Particularly striking, in this regard, is Levi's second use of the term, truce (*tregua*), in his book of homecoming. It occurs as the homebound train stops at Brasov, a Romanian station. As is their practice whenever the train makes a stop and the departure time is unknown, the Italian refugees

hurriedly disembark from their cars to light cooking fires for a quick meal. Only this time, their plans are foiled by ‘two robust female soldiers ... of indefinable age and of gnarled, unprepossessing appearance’ (Levi, 1985:272) who are guarding a nearby Soviet military convoy. Noting the danger posed by the proximity of the cooking fires to the convoy’s fuel tankers, they demand that the fires be extinguished. ‘Everybody obeyed, cursing ... except,’ Levi writes, ‘a handful from the Alpine Brigade, hardboiled types, veterans of the Russian campaign, who had rustled up a goose and were roasting it’ (Levi 1985:272).

Given that the orders of the Soviet guards are being defied by veterans of Mussolini’s ill-fated military contribution to Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union, the situation would seem to be rife with the danger of escalation. Instead, the battle-hardened ex-POWs

held council with sober words, while the two women fulminated at their backs; then two of them, nominated by the majority, got up, with the severe and resolute faces of men about to sacrifice themselves for the common good [bene commune] (Levi 1985:272 [Levi 1997:236]).

In his description of the actions of the Alpini, Levi emphasises the sorts of practices—communal deliberation, majority election—and values—personal sacrifice for the common good—that are characteristic of the republican tradition of political self-rule. The two men who are selected by their comrades:

advanced on the women soldiers face to face and spoke to them in a low voice. The negotiations were surprisingly short; the women put down their helmets and arms; then the four, serious and composed, left the station, took a narrow path and disappeared from our view. They returned a quarter of an hour later, the women in front, a little less gnarled and with slightly congested faces, the men behind, dignified and calm (Levi, 1985:272).

If Levi unfolds the scene as a light-hearted comedy of love, he nevertheless endows it with a political significance, not only in his description of the norms and practices of the citizen-soldiers but also in the political relationship (a truce) they manage to forge with their erstwhile enemies:

The goose was nearly ready; the four squatted on the ground with the others, the goose was carved up and divided in pieces, then, after the brief truce [tregua], the Russian women resumed their weapons and their duties (Levi 1985:272 [Levi 1997:236]).

As with his other use of ‘truce,’ Levi associates the term in the case of the female Soviet soldiers with a relaxation of the hold of one’s native norms and practices and a degree of openness to foreign ways that allows one to break bread (and, in this case, share intimacy) with strangers.

Levi’s account of how a republican culture in miniature (the Alpini veterans), practicing the civic values of fraternal solidarity, public-minded participation, dedication to the common good, and commitment to deliberative modes of public decision-making, can transform initial suspicion between strangers into forms of romantic intimacy and civic sociability further highlights *The Truce’s* significance in understanding the importance of the journey as a *topos* in his writing and his consideration of pilgrimage as an analogy for his writerly aims. While the home for which Levi so powerfully yearns during his oft-diverted, oft-delayed journey as recounted in *The Truce* cannot strictly be considered a conventional pilgrimage destination, his many encounters with strangers on that journey afforded him opportunities to achieve a salutary distance on the practices and norms of his own culture. In bringing the story of those encounters to his readers, he transformed *his* journey home into *their* opportunity to engage in a *theōria*. Just as the ancient *theōros*, in reporting on his attendance at foreign spectacles, invited his fellow polis members to achieve reflective distance on their native ways, Levi hoped for a theoretical effect on his readership—a greater openness to, and tolerance of, the stranger—consistent with a republican culture of public rationality and pluralistic tolerance.

For readers of Levi interested in the political lessons his oeuvre teaches, *The Truce* is a crucial text because it is more self-aware about the political theoretical implications of Levi’s employment of the *topos* of journeying in his writings. In *The Truce*, we, as readers, are not only taken on a journey and exposed to foreign spectacles, we are tutored, so to speak, in how exposure to foreign spectacles (say, the Soviet movie nights at Starye Dorogi or the goose roast at Brasov) can affect the disposition of spectators in politically-relevant ways. For pilgrimage scholars, consideration of Levi’s book of homecoming against the backdrop of ancient *theōria* may occasion fresh understanding of dimensions of pilgrimage previously thought a- or un-political. Even if the home, for which Levi so powerfully yearns during his oft-diverted, oft-delayed journey as recounted in *The Truce*, cannot strictly be considered a conventional pilgrimage destination in the

sense that his reaching Turin will be 'transformative and enriching [and] connect [him] to values beyond the normal reach of the individual' (Greenia 2018:10), one might well argue that the text itself can function in precisely these ways for Levi's readers. His narrative becomes their pilgrimage destination and his insight into how travels to foreign spectacles might foster reflective distance on native practices and norms and thereby lessen the chance of demonizing otherness might become their wisdom.

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