Anyone who has read Se questo è un uomo, Primo Levi's account of his months in a Nazi concentration camp, knows that he has told his "ghastly tale" by evoking comparison with parts of Dante's Inferno, and that these textual borrowings, though few in number, make a significant contribution in setting a context of imagery and resonance for the writing. Nearly four decades later, in 1986, after establishing himself as a writer of considerable power and clarity, Levi returned to write about the Lager in I sommersi e i salvati, and once again he drew on the Inferno, in this case for confirmation of his own perception of the fallibility of memory and its attempts to hide the most horrific episodes of past experience:

È psicologicamente credibile il comportamento del Conte Ugolino, che prova ritegno nel raccontare a Dante la sua morte tremenda, e si induce a farlo non per accondiscendenza, ma solo per vendetta postuma contro il suo eterno nemico. (p. 21)

The continuing urgency of Levi's desire to wrestle with memory and to bear witness to what he calls in his introduction to the 1986 text "il massimo crimine nella storia dell'umanità" is indicated by his quotation, preceding that text, from Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner:

... till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns. (vv. 582-85)

Readers of Se questo è un uomo will also have in mind the chapter entitled "Il canto di Ulisse" which recounts Levi-prisoner's feat of memory in recalling parts of Inferno XXVI for his non Italian-speaking companion Jean. As his recital draws to a close, the penultimate line of the canto elicits a flash of intuition in Levi that it is:

... assolutamente necessario e urgente che [Jean] ascolti, che comprenda questo "come altrui piacque", prima che sia troppo tardi ... devo dirgli, spiegargli del Medioevo, del così umano e necessario e pure inaspettato.
anacronismo, e altro ancora, qualcosa di gigantesco che io stesso ho visto ora soltanto, nell’intuizione di un attimo, forse il perché del nostro destino, del nostro essere oggi qui ... (p. 145)

This episode attests to the fact that the influence of the Commedia on Levi’s story as prisoner is not confined to his written account post factum, and that he carried in his cultural persona a core reference to Dante’s poem that rose unexpectedly to the surface when most appropriate; in fact, a page or so earlier in the chapter mentioned, he wrote “Il canto di Ulisse. Chissà come e perché mi è venuto in mente” (p. 142). Levi’s recognition of his own link with Dante’s universe is further exemplified by his written comment to Lynn Gunzberg: “Dante, and the constant comparison between his hell and ours, were for me a necessary tool for survival”. In reading Levi, therefore, we are dealing with a double relationship between his experience and that expressed through the Commedia: on one level we have the influence on this Italian prisoner in a twentieth-century concentration camp of Dante’s representation of the essence of good and evil, and the guidance that his poem provides in Levi’s efforts to resist succumbing to dehumanising oppression; at the other level, that of the written structuring of lived experience, we have a more conscious, deliberate use of the fields of reference provided by the earlier text. My purpose here is to look at this latter relationship for what it has to say as a reflector of a section of Dante’s text.

As happens with literary borrowings, homage to the earlier work can serve to quicken our perceptions towards both the ancient and the modern text: through the relationship they bear to aspects of Danté’s Circle IX, Se questo è un uomo and I sommersi e i salvati gain depth for their portrayal of the misery and degradation that they record and also serve to strengthen our reading of Inferno XXI-XXXIV. Levi’s readers, with (mercifully) no other relevant experience, begin to apprehend the hellish reality of Auschwitz through his description of a descent into near-inhumanity that finds parallels in the system designed for the Inferno, that is, a system of segregation under the charge of guards who constrain their prisoners through brutality, forced labour and deprivation, and oppress them under the notion of culpability for a “sin” that brands them and instils hopelessness. Although these similarities relate solely to the conditions of confinement and not to the very different issues of morality and justice to be read into each literary text, Levi’s references to the Inferno draw our attention to the inclusiveness of Danté’s imagery which can now be seen to encompass the Holocaust, that extreme modern example of the misuse of human faculties such as we find represented in the ninth circle.

Some similarity exists also in the broad narrative outline used by each author: each protagonist, Dante and Levi, is portrayed as returning from an experience beyond the human norm, which, as he later recounts it, gives him the status of extraordinary messenger to his time. In order to reach those who are outside that experience, and who are uncomprehending in the face of its abnormality, Levi, like Dante, has to draw on imagery and apostrophe to the reader, calling for our response through imagination. However, such similarity in framework is accompanied by a marked difference in
authorial intent: whereas Levi is concerned primarily with the specific conditions of violence engendered by the injustice that bore the face of Nazi ideology, Dante sets forth a world vision couched in universal terms and founded in the Christian belief in a divinely ordained plan based on Divine justice. In so doing he represents the range of human behaviour, exercised in freedom of will, and the effects of that behaviour on those who enact it. Despite the abundance of literary and historical events that are recontextualised in the Commedia, as part of its dramatic representation of human history, Dante is writing essentially from a perspective outside History: Levi, who writes with the purpose of understanding what produced the Holocaust, sets out to give as accurate a picture as possible of an historical event within his own experience. The fact that the Commedia was designed with a spiritually redemptive purpose in mind, comparable with that of biblical literature, sets it apart from almost any other text, and certainly from one that records human injustice at work, and yet the physical and psychological suffering induced by Levi's experience of such injustice gave him a feeling of kinship with Dante's vision in the Inferno. Suffering resulting from evil is the subject matter of Levi's texts as it is of the Inferno, but whereas Levi's characters are solely the subject of racial persecution, the souls in Dante's Inferno are victims of their own obdurate will, and their situation offers an image that reflects the essence of their wrong-doing. Our reaction to the sufferers in the Inferno, unlike our attitude to the fate of Levi's prisoners, has gradually been prepared so as to lead us beyond compassion for their present physical situation to an interest in the effects of their choice of misdirected will. In responding to Dante's didactic aim, readers of the Commedia are faced with interpreting such links between the abstraction (the spiritual meaning underlying the representation) and the drama being enacted at the surface level of the poem; it is in an attempt to recognise, through the prism of modern sensibility, the wider aspects of one point in this complex surface level, that this paper turns to Levi's comments on the relationship between injustice and social deprivation.

Levi presents his story of Auschwitz in sober and measured prose; the imagery used is designed to denote and quickly communicate the intensity and the extraordinary nature of that experience. The Commedia, on the other hand, involves a more extensive frame of imagery that draws attention to the authority of its sources in Christian and classical antecedents and that works often at levels of allusion where connotative clusters suggest rather than state. The presentation in the Inferno is made more complex by the degree of involvement, and variation in involvement, of the character-narrator. Readers of the Inferno have been alerted in its first canto to the fact that the writer knows his character has found good in his otherworld experience and, in the course of reading further, they have learned to follow the shifts in significance that flow from the character's observation or interaction. Dante-character responds to cognitive change, and readers soon become aware that Dante-narrator is working with a finely-tuned value system, though, for modern readers, its literary face is sometimes confounding at first sight. Whereas in Dante's work his allegorical purpose induces a variety of narratorial stances between immediate participation and distance from his

characters, Levi sets a uniform level of narration where identification with the experience of being a prisoner is total and the narratorial stance is unwavering.

In *Se questo è un uomo*, the following borrowings from the *Inferno* give an indication of how Levi creates a well-defined situation. The first example relates to the German soldier who, early in Levi's text, accosts the deportees stacked in their train waggons on their long passage to the concentration camps. Of this soldier Levi writes:

Accende una pila tascabile, e invece di gridare "Guai a voi, anime prave" ci domanda cortesemente ad uno ad uno, in tedesco e in lingua franca, se abbiamo danaro od orologi da cedergli: tanto dopo non ci servono più. Non è un comando, non è regolamento questo: si vede bene che è una piccola iniziativa privata del nostro caronte. (p. 22)

Our most immediate response to this reference is probably to note the absence of dramatic impact: in contrast to the direct speech that Dante puts into the mouth of Charon, Levi reports the soldier's questions indirectly in summary form, which has a reductive effect. However, the quotation from *Inferno* III, 84, draws attention to itself as an encoded metaphor, inducing reflection in the reader, if not immediate participation. This modern Charon, and the guard mentioned in a later chapter who, unlike the prisoners, is properly shod and is "leggero sui piedi come i diavoli di Malebolge" (p. 136), are examples of how such references can introduce into otherwise unmarked prosaic language a startling semantic change. Through the allusiveness of quotation or reference taken from a text with universal coinage (at least among his Italian readers), Levi characterises the persecutors and alludes to the entrapment of the victims. The direct quotation in the longer, first reference adds a more sinister interpretation to the otherwise unremarkable indirect questions. Although the presence of this coded image adds little immediate complexity to the situation — the deportees are still deportees, undeserving of the shocking conditions of their transportation — the metaphor forewarns the reader (that is, the reader knowledgeable about both the *Commedia* and the Holocaust) of the greater suffering to come, and thus charges Levi's colloquial language with a deeper current of emotional intensity. Dante, equally, achieves conciseness of expression through intertextual borrowings from well-known literary clusters, but once in contact with his layered meaning their connotations multiply in response to other structurally-placed reflectors. Let us look at examples of this in the first part of *Inferno* XXXI.

Nimrod, the introductory figure in Canto XXXI, is not the "mighty hunter" of Genesis but a giant, bound and impotent in a group of terrifyingly large figures that Dante places around the edge of the pit of Lower Hell. Nimrod himself has both visual and aural impact on Dante-character, both aspects being important in the representation of the sin of treachery punished from here on, since deceit works by inducing misconception at either visual or aural levels. In his visual impact, there are terms of such fearful disproportion as to allocate him to the role of semi-monster who
disorients the viewer and also foreshadows the grotesqueness to be met further on. Just before Nimrod's form appears out of the gloom, there are brief references to some of the heroes of epic literature, in Achilles (4-6) and in the paladins of the eleventh-century *Chanson de Roland* (12-18). The more recent of these heroes, Roland and the Emperor Charlemagne, are models of chivalric virtue and prowess who are imbued with the moral qualities befitting leadership. The giants that ring Lower Hell, however, are only heroic in their physical size and strength, since they represent uncontrolled forces of turbulence, passion and revolt; their presence prepares the way for the total negation of any heroic stature in Lucifer, former Archangel, once dazzlingly bright, powerful and persuasive in leadership, but now silent, bestial and a frightening parody of the God-image he had aspired to become.

It is on Nimrod's aural impact that most emphasis is laid, however, and this will lead back to what Levi has to tell us. The first sound in Canto XXXI, the "alto corno" heard in line 12, recalls Roland's horn-blast "dopo la dolorosa rota" (16) at Roncevaux, which was a failed attempt to elicit help and which brings with it the memory of Ganelon's treachery in relation to it. Though Ganelon is not named specifically in this canto, his role in that story would have been so well known as not to need mention. Just as Roland's sounding call to Charlemagne was to no avail, so Nimrod's call now to the Emperor of Hell is equally fruitless because Lucifer is no Stinger a free agent. The opening horn-blast in Circle IX thus perpetuates a reminder of human effort wasted, and at worst betrayed. Dante, we remember, has just been the recipient of healing words from Virgil, which have functioned as did Achilles' lame, first to wound and then to heal. The contrast here between speech used to educate and to restore trust, as Virgil's words have done, and the examples of treachery about to be recorded in these canti — that is, treachery purveyed by words that abuse trust — is typical of the dichotomies used in Dante's *Inferno*, which are paralleled in Levi's exposition.

In *I sommersi e i salvati* Levi had occasion to raise again a point from the earlier book concerning the deliberate degradation of prisoners by their Nazi guards to a condition of bestiality. In 1947 Levi had written: "il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie" (p. 48); he later elaborated on this to the following extent:

L'ingresso in Lager era invece un urto per la sorpresa che portava con se. Il mondo in cui ci si sentiva precipitati era si terribile, ma anche *indecifrabile*: non era conforme ad alcun modello, il nemico era intorno ma anche dentro, il "noi" perdeva i suoi confini ... Si entrava sperando almeno nella solidarietà dei compagni di sventura, ma gli alleati sperati, salvo casi speciali, non c'erano; c'erano invece mille monadi sigillate, e fra queste una lotta disperata, nascosta e continua. Questa rivelazione brusca, ... era talmente dura da far crollare subito la capacità di resistere. Per molti è stata mortale, indirettamente o anche direttamente: è difficile difendersi da un colpo a cui non si è preparati. (p. 25)
Although aspects of bestiality are not confined solely to the final section of the *Inferno*, there is a strong parallel between the starvation-induced state of selfishness in the concentration camps and the total lack of human interchange at the bottom of the *Inferno*, as symbolised by the frozen immobility of the souls. However, I want to concentrate on Levi's use of the word "indecifrabile" because of its relation to Nimrod. Dante-character's initial perception in Canto XXXI, 10-21, is one of disorientation, in reaction to the frightening noise and the inordinate size of the figures before him. When in line 67 Nimrod begins to shout, his words, if such they are, are indecipherable; we have confirmation of this from Virgil, whose explanation (80-81) emphasises not only the incomprehensibility of the sounds but also the fact that for Nimrod the speech of all others is equally unintelligible. Although Virgil by-passes him (79) because it is useless to attempt to interrogate him, Nimrod's inarticulate state is an appropriate introduction to the lack of communication in the icy region below him: he is the symbol of a world that is indecipherable in human terms, since it is uncommunicating and thus the antithesis of human society. Levi's point in the above quotation about the prisoners' shock at realising the extent of their total isolation as human beings in a "mondo ... indecifrabile", even in the midst of their crowded camp, adds a new dimension to Lower Hell and to Nimrod its first representative. As the instigator of confusion and of the breakdown of concerted human effort, resulting from his pride, audacity and presumption in attempting to build the tower of Babel, he introduces some of the main elements in Dante's scheme of punishment in Lower Hell which find their culmination in the figure of Lucifer bound.

Verbally initiated and verbally controlled treachery as recorded in the ninth circle is a gross distortion of the human faculty of speech, deliberately undermining, as it does, the natural expectation of reciprocal understanding and trust in social interaction. There is a situation of great poignancy in Levi's tale that underlines the further dehumanising effect induced by linguistic disconnection aimed at the deliberate destruction of human identity:

Ci siamo accorti subito, fin dai primi contatti con gli uomini sprezzanti dalle mostrine nere, che il sapere o no il tedesco era uno spartiacque. Con chi li capiva, e rispondeva in modo articolato, si instaurava una parvenza di rapporto umano. Con chi non li capiva, i neri reagivano in un modo che ci stupì e spaventò: l'ordine, che era stato pronunciato con la voce tranquilla di chi sa che verrà obbedito, veniva ripetuto identico con voce alta e rabbiosa, poi urlato a squarciagola, come si farebbe con un sordo, o meglio con un animale domestico, più sensibile al tono che al contenuto del messaggio.

Se qualcuno esitava ... arrivavano i colpi, ed era evidente che si trattava di una variante dello stesso linguaggio: l'uso della parola per comunicare il pensiero, questo meccanismo necessario e sufficiente affinché l'uomo sia l'uomo, era caduto in disuso. Era un segnale: per
quegli altri, uomini non eravamo più: con noi, come con le vacche o i muli, non c'era una differenza sostanziale tra l'urlo o il pugno. Perché un cavallo corra o si fermi, svolti, tiri o smetta di tirare, non occorre venire a patti con lui o dargli spiegazioni dettagliate ... Parlargli sarebbe un'azione sciocca, come parlare da soli, o un patetismo ridicolo: tanto che cosa capirebbe? (I sommersi e i salvati, pp. 70-71)

Levi continues by listing the consequences of this subverted relationship: once the exchange at verbal level that is so peculiar to human beings has been set aside in circumstances of enmity, the world is no longer readable for the inferior member of the relationship. He writes:

Questo "non essere parlati a" aveva effetti rapidi e devastanti. A chi non ti parla, o ti si indirizza con urli che ti sembrano inarticolati, non osi rivolgere la parola. Se hai la fortuna di trovare accanto a te qualcuno con cui hai una lingua comune, buon per te ... se non trovi nessuno, la lingua ti si secca in pochi giorni, e con la lingua il pensiero. (ibid., p. 72)

Levi's reflections on the disempowerment and loss of identity that result from extreme forms of linguistic chaos are fruitful for an understanding of the condition of human deprivation that Dante brings together in the figure of Nimrod. The deafening din created by his present attempts at speech is an example of language disjointed and rendered inimical, which leads to the representations of the web of deceit that the Poet presents in these canti. Nimrod is also a reminder of human vulnerability in the face of distorting desires, but we have to remember that within the context of the ninth circle the absence of his linguistic effectiveness is the outcome of his attempt to organise, through language, an act of overweening pride, which, since it foreshadows the greater pride of Lucifer, allows us to consider them in narrative terms as a set of narrative brackets for the lower region of Hell. As much as by their pride, they are linked by their function of representing the deterioration of language, which is the essential bond of human concourse. The last canti of the Inferno present variations of linguistic abuse or deprivation: the souls who follow Nimrod are frequently violent in speech, and in Dante's final exchange, that with Frate Alberigo, he is left in doubt about the veracity of the statement made to him (XXXIII, 118-47). Ugolino's language to Dante is not violent but neither is his account entirely frank since he does not reveal the cause of his own presence there. In Canto XXXII, 35-36, "l'ombre dolenti" communicate through the non-human "nota di cicogna", and then at the base of Hell there is silence.

The Commedia, as we know, is built on such chains of imagery and significance: in XXXI, 77, Virgil has attributed Nimrod's punishment to his "mal coto" and further on in XXXIII, 16, Ugolino links language and "mai pensieri" to Ruggieri's treachery. In his account of this, Ugolino displays his perpetually vengeful state by giving his reason for agreeing to recount his story (or part of it) to Dante:
"Ma se le mie parole esser dien seme
che frutti infamia al traditor ch'i' rodo,
parlare e lagrimar vedrai insieme". (XXXIII, 7-9)

The force of this underlines the eternal state of Ugolino's vendetta, in which, as the image conveys, words can be used as seeds that produce a trail of evil. Another reflection from Levi puts the irreversibility of Ugolino's present state into focus. When finally Levi is given a job in the camp laboratory, the temporary cessation of the torments of life outside the laboratory bring "il vecchio feroce struggimento di sentirsi uomo, the [gli] assalta come un cane all'istante in cui la coscienza esce dal buio" (I sommersi, p. 178). Levi, of course, was able to leave his physical hell, but the souls in Dante's Inferno had chosen not to respond to their conscience-call and thus they remain damned.

Dante's references in these canti to language misapplied are meant to lead us back to the opposite idea of language as a good, and the tenor of his theoretical discussion of language in De vulgari eloquentia is that it represents a basic human need. As poet, he regretted the limitations of our (his, volgare) linguistic instrument, which in the case of Inferno XXXII would have needed the expressive power of "rime aspre e chiocce":

ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo. (Inf. XXXII, 7-9)

This topos of inexpressibility finds modern confirmation in Levi's very similar concern: to communicate fully an experience of dehumanisation to one's fellow human beings, who have not experienced it, is almost impossible when all we have at our disposal are words that express our humanity. (And, as the Paradiso proclaims, the same can be said for the experience outside human terms at the other end of the scale.) What is outside the norm of experience, needs language that is outside the norm. Levi puts it this way in Se questo è un uomo:

Noi diciamo "fame", diciamo "stanchezza", "paura", e "dolore", diciamo "inverno", e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. Se i Lager fossero durati più a lungo un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato; e di questo si sente il bisogno per spiegare cosa è faticare l'intera giornata nel vento, sotto zero, con solo indosso camicia, mutande, giacca e brache di tela, e in corpo debolezza e fame e consapevolezza della fine che viene. (p. 156)

Speech as a communicative tool is a particularly modern concern, and yet the affinities between Levi's text and aspects of Dante's ninth circle highlight the same perceptions in both about the centrality of the proper use of human attributes,
especially of language, in maintaining both a well-knit society and a sense of individual identity. The reflections cast on the Inferno by Levi's work in relation to this human faculty of language have the power to renew our appreciation of the semantic and structural richness of this area of Dante's text and to affirm its modern relevance in offering literary prototypes for human experience.

This article is a slightly modified version of a paper of the same name given on 20th April, 1995 at Dante Colloquium VII.

1 Primo Levi was held in a section of Auschwitz for almost a year until January 1945, and was one of its few survivors. Se questo è un uomo, his account of this experience, was first published in 1947 by De Silva, Turin. All quotations are taken from the republished text (Turin: Einaudi, 1958, repr. 1965).

2 I sommersi e i salvati (Turin: Einaudi, 1986).


4 Dante himself suggests such a link between Nimrod and Lucifer in De vulgari eloquentia I.vii.4: "Presumpsit ergo in corde suo incurabilis homo, sub persuasione gigantis Nembroth, arte sua non solum superare naturam, sed etiam ipsum naturantem, qui Deus est, et cepit edificare turrim in Sennaar ... intendens inscius non equare, sed suum superare Factorem." ("Così l'uomo, inguaribile, presunse in cuor suo, sotto l'istigazione del gigante Nembròt, di superare con la sua tecnica non solo la natura ma lo stesso naturante, che è Dio, e cominciò a costruire una torre nella zona di Sennaar ... nell'incosciente intenzione non di eguagliare, ma di superare il suo Fattore" [my italics]).

5 The success of the strategies to diminish the prisoners' sense of humanity is recorded at various points of Se questo è un uomo; one of the most striking references to this is in Levi's recognition of the reverse process that he records in the closing passages of the book when he identifies, in the offer of a gift of bread made to him by a fellow-prisoner, the beginning of the conversion from bestiality back to humanity (p. 201).

6 DVE I.iii.2: "Oportuit ergo genus humanum ad communicandas inter se conceptiones suas aliquod rationale signum et sensuale habere: quia, cum de ratione accipere habeat et in rationem portare, rationale esse oportuit; cumque de una ratione in aliam nichil deferri possit nisi per medium sensuale, sensuale esse oportuit." ("Èstato perciò necessario che il genere umano disponesse, per la mutua comunicazione dei pensieri, di un qualche segno insieme razionale e sensibile: perché, dato il suo compito di ricevere i propri contenuti della ragione e a questa recarli, doveva essere razionale; e doveva essere sensibile data l'impossibilità che si trasmetta alcunchè da ragione a ragione se non attraverso una mediazione dei sensi.”

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7 The awareness in Dante and Levi of this crucial human need to find linguistic expression that can communicate the impact of traumatic experience has an interesting parallel in the recent focus given to the experience of being a survivor. In speaking with the journalist Jill Margo about the problems faced by those who have had cancer, Professor Mike Little, Director of the Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, of Sydney University, is quoted (in "Survivorship of the fittest", The Weekend Australian, May 6-7, 2000, Review 31) as saying: "People imagine survivorship is a pretty good state to be in, but for the majority of survivors it is taxing and distressing ... An inability to communicate the nature of the extreme experience they have been through is another hardship. They can only talk about it to people who have had a similar experience and this can create a rift between intimates ... We call this state 'liminality'. It's a threshold state between the end of the old life and the indelible marking of being a cancer patient, the sensing of bodily fallibility and the inability to communicate". The article continues by referring to a former patient of Professor Little's who, having been a survivor of both cancer and (earlier) of a prisoner-of-war extermination camp, had equated the two survival experiences.