

PRIMO LEVI AND JEWISH KAFKA IN ITALY

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“Kafka è un autore che ammiro, non lo amo e lo ammiro, lo temo, come una grande macchina che ti viene addosso, come il profeta che ti dirà il giorno della tua morte.” — Primo Levi (*Conversazioni e interviste* 189)

“Kafka is an author I admire — I do not love him, I admire him, I fear him, like a great machine that crashes in on you, like the prophet who tells you the day you will die.” — Primo Levi (*The Voice of Memory* 156)

Primo Levi, the famous Shoah survivor from Turin, was invited to translate Franz Kafka's *The Trial* into Italian for Einaudi's "Writers translated by writers" series. The publisher's decision to ask Levi is part of a long and underexplored tradition of associating Italian Jewish authors with Kafka. This article surveys the history of Kafka's reception as a Jewish author in order to shed light on Kafka's significance in Italy, as well as point to some of the tensions of being Jewish in early twentieth-century Italy. I first outline the relationship between Kafka and Levi, paying particular attention to how Levi's reaction to the German-language author is relevant to the idea of Kafka as a Holocaust prophet.¹ After addressing the resonances between Levi's comments on Kafka and the critical discourse on Kafka as prophet, the balance of the article investigates the importance of Kafka's Jewish background to his Italian reception and compares Levi's short story "Gladiators" and Kafka's "In the Penal Colony." In keeping with the recent work of scholars such as Robertson and Samolsky who have shifted the terms of the debate from whether or not Kafka was a prophet (a question whose answer relies primarily on discovering whether anyone can predict the future) to an investigation of the literary, historical, and cultural bases for this belief, this essay does not search for clues about history in literature, but uses historical knowledge to analyze reactions to literature.

Primo Levi and Franz Kafka

In his chapter "Kafka as a Holocaust Prophet: A Dissenting View," Lawrence Langer takes issue with several critics, like Theodor Adorno and George Steiner, who partially read Kafka as a Holocaust prophet. One of his points is that the horror of the Shoah is comparable neither to Kafka's literary portrayals nor to his life experiences: "Those who lived under the [Third Reich's] sway would have considered the frustrating, often dreamlike atmospheres of *The Trial* and *The Castle* paradise on earth" (125). While many of Langer's arguments are persuasive and remain points of critical debate (see Samolsky 35-38), Auschwitz-survivor Levi did not necessarily see Kafka's world as a potential "paradise on earth" compared to what he had undergone. Since Levi had both survived Auschwitz and translated *The Trial*, his remarks about the potential similarities between life in a concentration camp and Kafka's literary representations are more than surmises or provocative comments. Reflecting on the causes that made Kafka a lonely writer, Langer ends his article "Kafka never knew how fortunate he was to have suffered such a manageable challenge" (140), but Levi has a different view. In an interview, Levi reflects on his relatively happy life as compared to Kafka's:

Kafka è cresciuto in un gravissimo conflitto col padre, è stato frutto di tre culture frammiste — quella ebraica, quella praghese e quella tedesca —, infelice nei suoi rapporti sentimentali, frustrato nel lavoro, infine gravemente malato. È morto giovane. Io, malgrado l'episodio del Lager, che mi ha segnato profondamente, ho avuto una vita diversa, meno infelice. Il lieto fine mio personale, il fatto di essere riuscito a sopravvivere al Lager, mi ha reso stupidamente ottimista. (*Conversazioni e interviste* 191)

Kafka grew up in very serious conflict with his father; he was the product of three intermingled cultures, Jewish, German and the culture of Prague. He was unhappy in his emotional life, frustrated in his work, and in the end seriously ill. He died young, I, on the other hand, despite the episode of the *Lager*, which marked me deeply, have had a different life, a less unhappy life. My own personal happy ending, that fact of having survived the camps, made me stupidly optimistic. (*The Voice of Memory* 158)

Levi here, as in other places, distances himself from Kafka and depicts Kafka as more pessimistic, more depressing as a writer and more depressed as a person than himself. It should be noted that Levi is referring to his life after the war, since his debated death (a potential suicide) makes the idea of a "happy ending" to his life ambiguous, at the very least.

Although it may seem strange that Levi would contrast his happiness to Kafka's, after the publication of Levi's translation of *The Trial* in 1983, interviewers often asked "the most clear-eyed chronicler of the twentieth century's darkest inferno" (Franklin 45) to compare his experience in the camps to the world represented in Kafka's works and Levi frequently complied. In particular, he drew direct parallels, as critics continue to do (see Miller), between Kafka's second novel and Jewish persecution during World War II: "*Il processo si apre con un arresto non previsto e non giustificato, la mia carriera si apre con un arresto non previsto e non giustificato*" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 189) [*"The Trial opens with a surprise and unjustified arrest and my career, too, opened with a surprise and unjustified arrest"* (*The Voice of Memory* 156)]. Moreover, the theme of Levi as witness to the horrors Kafka imagined recurs in writings on Levi and interviews of him. Cesare Cases, for instance, describes Levi as living the "darkest imaginings of Kafka" during his months in Auschwitz (Ferrero 308). Levi himself speaks of the "Kafkaesque" distortions of life in the Lager (*Conversazioni e interviste* 193; *The Voice of Memory* 159) and agrees that Kafka's work resonates in many ways with what he had undergone. Levi responds affirmatively to the question of whether or not Kafka's work prefigured the barbarity Levi himself experienced: "Qualche dote al di là della ragione corrente bisogna pure concederla a Kafka. Aveva certamente una sensibilità quasi animalesca, come si dice dei serpenti che prevedono i terremoti. Scrivendo nei primi decenni di questo secolo, a cavallo della prima Guerra mondiale, aveva previsto molte cose" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 192) [*"We have to concede that Kafka had some gift that went beyond everyday reason. He certainly had an almost animalesque sensitivity, like snakes that know when earthquakes are coming. Writing in the first few decades of this century, either side of the First World War, he foresaw many things."* (*The Voice of Memory* 158)]. Levi points to how Kafka's acute awareness of his historical context could lead to sensing "like a snake" the tragedies to come.

Levi's perception of Kafka corresponds to several critics' analyses of why Kafka has been considered a Holocaust prophet. Anderson has examined in more detail the contemporary factors that contributed to Kafka's sensitivity to Levi's vaguer "many things" that have caused people to view Kafka as prescient, noting that, "the basis of the Nazi criminal justice system had already been established at the end of the nineteenth century by men like Lombroso, Morel, Chamberlain, Nordau, and Hans Gross with the notions of biological or racial 'types' and an inherently 'criminal man'" (*Kafka's Clothes* 170). Samolsky traces this reading of Kafka's sensitivity to his own time and the idea of his prophecy back to Walter Benjamin (33-34). Levi also emphasizes Kafka's perceptive portrayal of the power of institutions; the idea that "la violenza viene dalla burocrazia" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 192) [*"violence comes from bureaucracy"* (*The Voice of Memory* 158)] is reinforced by Robertson's recent analysis of why Kafka's literary works seem to foreshadow the Shoah: "And yet 'prophetic' readings of Kafka can hardly be accepted as they stand. [. . .] He had an extraordinary insight into the mechanisms of power, authority, and violence, mechanisms that are in some measure common to a wide variety of social systems. These mechanisms reside above all in institutions" (137). Many of Levi's comments on Kafka are substantiated, expanded, and refined by Robertson's, Samolsky's, and Anderson's nuanced interpretations of the Kafka-Holocaust association.

Interviewers and critics relate Levi's experiences in Auschwitz not only to Kafka's literary depictions, but also to his language. In the camps Levi learned some German, a fact that Levi shared when asked about his linguistic training. Levi commented that his openness regarding the origins of his spoken German made some people uncomfortable; the link between Levi's German and his camp experience brought the Shoah unexpectedly into conversations and made it hard to separate Levi's language from what he had undergone in the camps.² Even though Kafka died before Hitler took power, Levi's linguistic experience in Auschwitz and Kafka's writing have been directly connected: "Nel Lager Levi ha usato passabilmente la lingua di Kafka" (Marabini 230) [*"In the Lager Levi used passably Kafka's language"* (trans. mine)]. This characterization of German ("Kafka's language") reveals another potential reason for the attraction to the idea of Kafka as prescient. The fact that Kafka's works are produced in German, the language of power and abuse of the camps, is most likely another contributing factor to why Kafka has been considered a Holocaust prophet. In other words, this association — German language, concentration camp — raises the question, had Kafka written in French or Czech would people still be as likely to label him a prophet of the Holocaust?

While Levi gave the connection between Kafka and the camps a good deal of consideration, his response was not just intellectual.³ Levi makes clear that he has ambivalent feelings about Kafka and even regretted the fact that he had agreed to translate *The Trial*, since he was miserable for months as a result: "Looking back, I wish I hadn't: the undertaking disturbed me badly. I went into a deep, deep depression . . . And so I haven't read any Kafka since, he involves me too much" (*The Voice of Memory* 42-43).⁴ Levi saw parallels between Kafka's work and his own experiences, but the associations were not made on his initiative. To the question, "Perché il binomio Franz Kafka-Primo Levi?" ["Why bring together Franz Kafka and Primo Levi?"], Levi responded, "La scelta non è stata mia, è stata fatta in sede editoriale, mi è stata proposta, e io ho accettato. A dire la verità un po' leggermente" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 189) ["It was not my choice: the publishers made the choice, proposed it to me and I accepted. To tell the truth I was rather hasty" (*The Voice of Memory* 156)]. When asked about affinities between his writing and Kafka's, Levi generally concentrated instead on their differences, explaining that he always tried to make the inexplicable more understandable, whereas in his opinion Kafka's aims were the opposite. Levi's clear and carefully considered statements about life in the Lager, a topic that reduces many to speaking abstractly or in generalities, are part of the reason for his fame (see Gordon, *Holocaust in Italian Culture* 141). Levi's remarks regarding the "Gray Zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved* and the problems of passing judgment on the ambiguous choices made by *Sonderkommandos* have been anthologized (see Niewyk), as well as being the source of a great deal of critical debate. His treatment of difficult issues in this well-known chapter from *The Drowned and the Saved* emblemizes what Levi means in terms of his style as opposed to Kafka's: for Levi writing was a means to clarify what seems beyond comprehension, while Kafka is known for his resistance to interpretation.

Because Levi translated Kafka, critics and interviewers often searched for commonalities between the two authors (see summaries by Belpoliti 91 and Farrell 126). One of the reasons that the publishers chose Kafka for Levi is due to the idea of Kafka as a Shoah prophet; connected to this, but more general, is the fact that both writers are Jewish. As described in Miller (42) and commented on by Levi himself (*Conversazioni e interviste* 192, *The Voice of Memory* 169), the idea of Kafka as a prophet has partially taken hold not just because of Kafka's particular literary qualities, but also because he is a Jewish author who, had he lived, may have been killed in a concentration camp, as his sisters and some of his friends, like Yitzhak Löwy, were. Levi also highlights his and Kafka's common religious background: "Ora, devo dire che traducendo *Il processo* ho capito il perché di questa mia ostilità verso Kafka, essa è una difesa dovuta a paura. Forse anche per una ragione precisa, Kafka era ebreo, io sono ebreo" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 189) ["Translating *The Trial*, I have understood the reason for my hostility towards Kafka. It is a form of defence born of fear. Perhaps for the very particular reason that Kafka was a Jew and I am a Jew" (*The Voice of Memory* 156)]. At the same time, Levi seems aware of potential dangers of this easily-made but at times unsophisticated association, pointing to the numerous differences between authors who can be included in the broad category of "Jewish authors:" "Ritiene che esista una letteratura moderna ebraica? 'Credo che ce ne sia non una ma cinquecento.' 'Le chiedo perché c'è un racconto di Kafka che mi ricorda molto la sua sensibilità e il suo stile. . .'" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 75) ["Do you believe that a modern Jewish literature exists? 'I think that there isn't one but five hundred' 'I ask you this because there is a story by Kafka that really reminded me of your sensibility and style. . .'" (trans. mine)]. Levi interrupts the interviewer, leaving the sentence unfinished, but several of Kafka's works have been briefly connected with Levi's, often on the basis of a shared religious background. Belpoliti (90-94), Brombert (121), Gordon, *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues* (177), and Farrell (118) offer some intriguing mentions of potential similarities between Levi's and Kafka's work. "The Animal in the Synagogue," Kafka's "only story with specifically Jewish subject matter" (Bruce 158), could also certainly be compared with Levi's "La bestia nel tempio," beginning with an exploration of the nature of their eponymous Temple dwelling creatures.

Jewish Kafka in Italy: An Overview

The association critics, interviewers, and the author of *If This is a Man* himself make between Levi and Kafka is part of a tradition of Italian authors and critics being particularly aware of Kafka's *ebraismo* (Jewishness). Although Kafka's rise to fame is usually attributed to the French, English, and American interest in him after World War II, Kafka had a notable Italian presence before the war. Carlo Emilio Gadda, Natalia Ginzburg, Tommaso Landolfi, Eugenio Montale, Elsa Morante, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Italo Svevo, and Elio Vittorini all mention Kafka's importance before 1945, a period in which Kafka's international fame was not unquestionably established.⁵ The precociousness of Kafka's Italian reception is

meaningful because it differs somewhat from that of many other countries and continued to distinguish the Italian understanding of Kafka for decades. After World War II German-language criticism tended to avoid talking about Kafka's Jewishness, focusing on him instead as a German author with international appeal. As he was becoming indisputably famous after the war, French and English criticism often concentrated on Kafka as a writer of the absurd or prefiguring Fascist and totalitarian governments. In contrast, authors and critics in Italy were drawn to Kafka's Jewishness from the beginning.⁶

In the 1920s and 1930s, Italo Svevo and Natalia Ginzburg remark on the importance of Kafka's Jewishness. Debenedetti recalls a conversation with Svevo about Kafka in which he referred to the difficulty of being Jewish at that time: "[Svevo] accenò a Franz Kafka. Voleva scrivere di lui: un profilo, un saggio. Fece una pausa 'Sì, era ebreo. Certo quella dell'ebreo non è una posizione comoda . . .'" (Debenedetti 68) ["Svevo mentioned Franz Kafka. He wanted to write about him, a biographical profile, an article. He paused, 'Yes, he was Jewish. Certainly the position of the Jew is not a comfortable one'" (trans. mine)]. According to Debenedetti, Kafka offers Svevo a way to reflect on the difficulty of being Jewish, as Kafka also does for Levi. Ginzburg also focuses on Kafka's Jewishness, offering him as the most notable example of a Jewish author that she knew of as a younger author in a discussion of her development as a writer:

E per giunta, eravamo ebrei: cosa che mi sembrava anche questa mi relegasse lontanissimo dal mondo della poesia, perché non sapevo di nessun scrittore che insieme e ebreo, e di famiglia borghese, e figlio di un professore, e cresciuto in Piemonte: sapevo sì che Kafka era ebreo, ma lui comunque non era cresciuto in Piemonte: tutto l'insieme delle circostanze che s'intrecciavano sulla mia persona, mi sembrava costituire un impedimento al fatto che io diventassi mai un vero scrittore. (Ginzburg, *Romanzi Brevi* 7)

And anyway, we were Jews: this was another thing which seemed to alienate me from the world of poetry, for I didn't know of a single writer who was *both* Jewish *and* from a middle-class family *and* the child of a professor *and* a native of Piedmont; I knew of course that Kafka was a Jew: but all the same, he wasn't a native of Piedmont. (trans. Romano 34)⁷

While her categories may seem prohibitively specific — bourgeois, Jewish, daughter of a professor, and from Piedmont — they reveal that Kafka was the best model for Ginzburg's category of "Jewish author." In other words, for Ginzburg Kafka belonged in the world of poetry and was clearly Jewish, a rare combination in her mind.⁸ The conversation with Debenedetti would have had to precede Svevo's death in 1928 and the period Ginzburg refers to is the early to mid 30s.

Some have argued that for most there was no difference between being Jewish and Italian or not Jewish and Italian before the racial laws of 1938. In an oft-cited quote, Levi claims that the racial laws were what made him Jewish: "Mi hanno fatto diventare ebreo [. . .] Prima di Hitler io ero un ragazzo borghese italiano. L'esperienza delle leggi razziali mi ha aiutato a riconoscere, tra i molti filoni della tradizione ebraica, alcuni che mi piacevano" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 269) ["I was turned into a Jew by others. [. . .] Before Hitler I was a middle-class Italian boy. The experience of the Race Laws helped me to recognize, amongst the many threads that made up the Jewish tradition, a number that I could accept" (*The Voice of Memory* 262)]. Ginzburg and Svevo's comments about Kafka's Jewishness demonstrate that for many, however, there was a sense of difference before 1938, and that Kafka somehow helped the writers to define certain elements of being Jewish. In addition, critics sometimes characterize Italian authors as Kafkan because they represent a Jewish milieu, even though their work portrays Jewish themes more evidently than Kafka's. Morante's "Il ladro dei lumi" (1935) is one such example. The fact that the short story is set in a Jewish area is what has drawn critics' attention to the potential similarities to Kafka, although it ultimately has more in common with Kafka because of its exploration of guilt and punishment. (See Pupino.) Morante does not emphasize Kafka's Jewishness, but, similar to Ginzburg, he was a central figure in her development as a writer. Morante claimed that Kafka was the first and last author to influence her and her husband Moravia called Kafka Morante's "religion."⁹ Morante's admittedly Kafkan story "L'uomo dagli occhiali" was published in 1936 and she records a dream about Kafka in her *Diario 1938*.

In certain areas of Italy, interest in Kafka and his Jewishness really grew after the racial laws of 1938. The racial laws forced people of Jewish background out of the main Italian school system, causing

them to run their own middle and high schools, often with instructors of Jewish background who had been professors at universities. This separation promoted an interest in Judaism and in the meaning of being Jewish. Describing the tumultuous period between 1938 and 1944, Fabio Della Seta records the deep impact that Kafka had among his classmates in Rome. Their interest in Kafka was partially due to their self-designed program of Jewish discovery. Della Seta comments that Kafka's own involvement with Jewish life remained unclear since it was difficult to learn more about Kafka due to restrictions during the war. Franz, or "Francesco," Kafka was placed on the list of authors who were not welcome in Italy (see Fabre 477).¹⁰ In Della Seta's description, young couples in love talk about "the inevitable Kafka, of course" and for students of literature "everything boiled down to a correct interpretation of Dostoevsky or Kafka" (*Tiber Afire* 90-2; *L'incendio del Tevere* 85-7). Hungarian novelist Giorgio Pressburger, who lives in Italy, writes in Italian, and has been compared to Kafka, remarks that there is no trace of Jewishness, religion or God in Kafka's work and questions if it is still possible after the Shoah to be a Jewish writer without showing signs of his or her Jewishness or even to read a Jewish writer without seeing signs of his or her Jewishness.¹¹ While many may understandably take issue with the first part of Pressburger's statement about Jewishness in Kafka's work, the influence of one's historical and cultural knowledge on a reading of Kafka is more difficult to deny. Despite not knowing Kafka's exact history, Della Seta's group in Rome related Kafka to Hasidism, which they had recently begun exploring: "Kafka was a Jew, and his Judaism, to those fresh from the experience of Hasidism was beyond question" (*Tiber Afire* 67; *L'incendio del Tevere* 68).

Reflections on the Jewishness of the German-language writer reveal the difficulty in making generalizations about being a Jewish author, or being Jewish, in the first half of the twentieth century in Italy. Attraction to his Jewish heritage, negative feelings related to his Jewish background, and ignorance of Kafka's Jewishness occurred simultaneously and reflect the various responses of Italians more generally to Italians of Jewish background before, during, and soon after World War II. In 1944 Vittorini recalled that the authors of *Solaria* were called a series of unflattering names, including "dirty Jews," because of their interest in Jewish and international authors, notably Kafka: "Ci chiamavano anche sporchi giudei per l'ospitalità che si dava a scrittore di religione ebraica e per il bene che si diceva di Kafka o di Joyce" (174) ["They also called us dirty Jews for the welcome that we gave to writers of Jewish faith and for the good that was said about Kafka and Joyce" (trans. mine)]. Although Vittorini underscores Kafka's significance in the reasons for the disparagement of the Solarians, there is only one review of Kafka's work in the magazine, a 1934 article by Renato Poggioli that is both a discussion of Kafka's work and a narration of Poggioli's conversation with Max Brod in Prague. The same year this article was published in *Solaria*, a Fascist journal, *L'italiano. Rivista settimanale della gente fascista*, printed a translation of Kafka's "An Imperial Message." Kafka's early reception illustrates the difficulty of trying to define the existence and character of Italian Jewishness, as well as Italian anti-Semitism.

From the 1920s to today, Italian critics often use Kafka as emblematic of someone who had a complex relationship to his Jewishness in discussions on Jewish Italian authors. An early example is the previously quoted comment by De Benedetti and a more recent example is De Angelis' *Qualcosa di più intimo* (2006), which repeatedly refers to Kafka in discussing Italian authors' Jewishness, beginning with the first page of his first chapter in which he refers to Kafka as an author "anebraico" (27). In Caputo-Mayr and Herz's *Franz Kafka: International Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Literature*, the monograph *Kafka: Romanzo e parabola* (1962) by Italian critic Giuliano Baioni is the earliest mentioned in the English summary of works dedicated to Kafka's Jewishness and "affinity to Eastern European culture" (xxxvii). Because Kafka's Jewishness has become a major focus of critical interest outside Italy in the last few decades and Italian writers have been at the forefront of studies on Kafka as a Jewish author. Anderson called attention to the importance of Baioni's work *Kafka: Letteratura ed ebraismo* (1984): "It is disturbing to think that one of the most important recent contributions to Kafka research will pass unnoticed by the majority of Kafka scholars working today. Yet this is inevitably the fate of works written in a 'minority' language such as Italian, Czech, or Japanese" ("Review" 626).¹² Anderson's comment suggests why Kafka's intriguing Italian reception has generally received less attention than it would have were it written in French or English, a lack of circulation and critical interest outside of Italy in Italian scholarship. Many broader analyses of Western literature and culture continue to overlook modern Italian works. As Gordon remarks in *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, "the relative neglect of Italy in accounts of the spectrum of Holocaust culture is surprising" (6).

Kafka's Jewishness plays a significant role not only in Italian criticism, but also in more popular narratives, like Claudio Magris' *Danube*, in which the narrator quotes Baioni: "Ciò che gli accade nel suo

estremo lembo di vita, quando l'amore per Dora lo riaccosta al giudaismo e all'avventura dell'esistenza condivisa, non fa più parte della storia di Kafka scrittore, dice Giuliano Baioni, 'ma riguarda soltanto l'uomo il cui nome ebraico è Amshel'" (*Danubio* 191) ["What happened to him in the last extremity of his life, when his love for Dora reconciled him to Judaism and the adventure of a shared life, is not part of the story of Kafka the writer, but as Giuliano Baioni says, 'concerns only the man whose Hebrew name is Amshel'" (Magris, *Danube* 163-4)]. In both his narrative and scholarly work, Magris concentrates primarily on Austria-Hungary and his place of birth, Trieste. When discussing the origins of his dissertation, which became his book on the Habsburg myth in modern Austrian literature, *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, Magris groups Kafka, Svevo, the Triestine author Umberto Saba, and others together as "Austro-Hungarian" writers, the majority of whom he discovered while studying in Turin. For Magris journeying to another part of Italy was necessary to realize the Austro-Hungarian nature of his Italian home. In fact, Kafka is the only Austro-Hungarian author Magris had read as a youth: "Io non avevo letto un solo verso di Saba, l'ho letto soltanto dopo la maturità, con grande passione. Ho letto Svevo dopo la maturità. L'unico autore che avessi letto di quel mondo era Kafka" ("Genesi di un 'mito'" 14) ["I hadn't read a single verse of Saba's, I only read him after graduating. I read Svevo after graduating. The only author I had read of that world was Kafka" (trans. mine)]. Other Italian critics also consider Kafka emblematic of all Austro-Hungarian culture, including the Triestine. For instance, in the Triestine author Susanna Tamaro's novel *Anima mundi* the protagonist Walter mentions Kafka as one of his favorite authors and Speelman interprets this reference as a sign of Tamaro acknowledging not only her Austrian, but also her Triestine heritage (185).

The similarities between Trieste and other Austro-Hungarian cities have been characterized as surpassing linguistic and other divides: "in fondo fra la Trieste di Svevo, la Zugabria di Krleža, la Vienna di Musil, la Praga di Kafka, la Budapest di Lukács esiste un sotterraneo occulto, una specie di fatale complicità mentale più vincolante delle appariscenti divisioni per lingua, nazionalità e ideologia" (Bettiza 44) ["ultimately between Svevo's Trieste, Krleža's Zagreb, Musil's Vienna, Kafka's Prague, and Lukács' Budapest, there exists, hidden underground, a sort of inevitable mental complicity more binding than the notable divisions of language, nationality, ideology" (trans. mine)]. The early twentieth century German-language authors of Prague and Vienna have a great deal in common with the Italian ones of Trieste and a culturally significant element the cities share is the prominence of Jewish or part-Jewish authors: Trieste had a large Jewish population by Italian standards, though it was smaller than many other major Austro-Hungarian cities.¹³ Literature as a form of cultural participation has been given as a reason both for the large number of Austrian writers at the fin de siècle, as well as the large percentage of Jewish writers among these Austrian writers.¹⁴ A similar theory for the prominence of Jewish Italian authors, and Italian authors more generally, of Trieste can be proposed. The early Italian emphasis on Kafka's Jewish heritage is in part due to Trieste's culture, since the port city played a major role in Kafka's Italian reception.

Because Triestines had a great deal in common culturally with other Austro-Hungarian citizens (and then, after 1918, former citizens of Austria-Hungary) and because Triestines were often able to read German, many German-language authors had an earlier and more notable reception in Trieste than in the rest of Italy (Freud is a significant example: see Trieste's prominence in David's *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*, as well as in Barrotta and Lepschy's *Freud and Italian Culture*). The part-Jewish, Triestine intellectual Roberto "Bobi" Bazlen recommended Kafka to people who wanted to practice their German as early as 1919. Montale remembers Bazlen showing up with pages of Kafka in 1923-1924 and was so enchanted with the literary world Bazlen revealed to him, that he almost "became" Triestine (Montale 178). Since his friends and acquaintances read like a who's who of twentieth century Italian literature, Bazlen's recommendations spread beyond his hometown: his interlocutors include the already mentioned figures Debenedetti, Gadda, Ginzburg, Landolfi, Montale, Morante, Moravia, Saba, Svevo, Vittorini, as well as Luigi Einaudi, Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini, Carlo Levi, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Aldo Palazzeschi, Enrico Pea, Sandro Penna, Alberto Savinio, Sergio Solmi, and Giani Stuparich. Kafka's Italian reception as a Jewish author reveals not only the complexity of Italian Jewishness, remarked upon earlier, but also the various, and often unidentified, ways German-language works entered the Italian literary landscape.

Levi's "Gladiators" and Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

Despite Kafka's notable Italian reception, the works of Italian authors are rarely discussed in detail alongside Kafka, or German-language literature more generally. Meanwhile, modern Italian authors are often compared, frequently to their disadvantage, to French ones. This emphasis, while important, has kept certain aspects of Italian literature from being studied. Harrison, for example, draws attention to a specific

instance of this problem in terms of understanding Dino Campana's work: "Some elements of Campana's style are familiar to us from French symbolist poetry, so much so that scholarly emphasis on this lineage has obscured a proper view of the more raw, 'Teutonic,' expressionistic dimensions of his verse" (36). Whereas critics often emphasize the debt Italian authors owe to French literature, connections between Italian and German literature are less explored. For instance, while numerous articles and a monograph have been dedicated to studying Svevo and Proust, though Svevo himself questioned the affinities between their works, less work has been done on Svevo and his "last literary love," Kafka (Veneziani Svevo 158).¹⁵ Historical tensions and disciplinary boundaries have partially hidden the connections between Italian and German-language literatures: even Italian Triestine and Austrian authors tend to be viewed as either part of the broader picture of international modernism or as belonging to distinct groups, divided more or less linguistically. Critics often briefly relate an Italian author to Kafka without exploring further the meaning of the connection. The interesting reception of Kafka as Jewish author in Italy can serve as a beginning for explorations of Kafka and other Italian authors, including the many authors already mentioned, such as Ginzburg, Morante, and Svevo (see Ziolkowski). Not only does Kafka's reception as a Jewish author highlight a great deal about being Jewish in early twentieth-century Italy, but reading Kafka and Italian authors together also reveals the suggestive nature of their shared literary qualities.

Because Levi has been a major focal point of this article, I am going to offer a brief comparison of his short work "Gladiators" and Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" to examine Levi's idea of shame in relationship to Kafka's work and to reconsider the idea of Kafka as a Holocaust prophet. A large portion of Levi's short article in *La Stampa* about his Italian translation of *The Trial* is dedicated to discussing the final line of the novel. It begins, "La famosa e commentatissima frase che chiude il libro come una pietra tombale (. . . e fu come se la vergogna gli dovesse sopravvivere) non mi pare affatto enigmatica." ("Tradurre Kafka" 922) ["The famous and much commented on sentence that ends the book like a tombstone (. . . and it was as if the shame would outlive him') does not seem quite enigmatic to me" (trans. mine)]. His discussion of the behaviors, inconsistencies, and situations that Josef K. could feel ashamed of ends with Levi pointing to a more general basis for shame, the shame of being human: "È finalmente un tribunale umano, non divino: è fatto di uomini e dagli uomini, e Josef, col coltello già piantato nel cuore, prova vergogna di essere un uomo" ("Tradurre Kafka" 922) ["It is in the end a human tribunal, not a divine one: it is made up of men and by men, and Josef, with the knife already planted in his heart is ashamed of being a man" (trans. mine)]. This shame is one that Levi "had also experienced" (Magavern 144) and can be related to the characterization of *The Trial* he gave in the note to his translation: "Dunque è così, è questo il destino umano, si può essere perseguiti e puniti per una colpa non commessa, ignota, che 'il tribunale' non ci rivelerà mai; e tuttavia, di questa colpa si può portar vergogna, fino alla morte e forse anche oltre" ("Nota del traduttore" 253) ["So this is it, this is human destiny: we can be persecuted and punished for a crime which has not even been committed, which is obscure and which will never be revealed to us by the 'court'. And yet we can feel shame for that crime, up to and perhaps even beyond the moment of our death" (*The Black Hole* 140)]. One can feel shame just for witnessing and being involved in, though not through any fault of one's own, the horrors mankind creates.

Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" and Levi's "Gladiators" both present situations about which the observers feel a sense of shame, though they are not directly involved in and certainly did not create the events they observe. Levi's short futuristic story discusses the discomfort Nicola experiences as a spectator at a gladiatorial show that involves men battling cars. The traveler in "In the Penal Colony" similarly feels a sense of discomfort at his role as observer of the penal colony's machine and the officer's explanations of how it works. Although the traveler has clear objections to the proceedings, he is unsure of how to proceed: "Der Reisende überlegte: Es ist immer bedenklich, in fremde Verhältnisse entscheidend einzugreifen. Er war weder Bürger der Strafkolonie, noch Bürger des Staates, dem sie angehörte. Wenn er diese Exekution verurteilen oder gar hintertreiben wollte, konnte man ihm sagen: Du bist ein Fremder, sei still" ("In der Strafkolonie" 178; "In the Penal Colony" 46). At the beginning of "Gladiators," Nicola mentally places "silly humanitarian excuses" last in a list of excuses, which includes the rain, to avoid the gladiatorial games. He finally succumbs to his girlfriend's insistence that he should attend, but is unhappy about having to go. When the accepted behavior appears to be cruelty or ignorance, Kafka's researcher-traveler and Levi's Nicola are unsure of how to react and question themselves, grappling with the idea of the humane treatment of humans. While the traveler ponders to himself, "Die Ungerechtigkeit des Verfahrens und die Unmenschlichkeit der Exekution war zweifellos" ("In der Strafkolonie" 178; "In the Penal Colony" 46), he

expresses his views more tentatively aloud. Nicola, meanwhile, does not even voice his qualms about the gladiatorial show.

Both the apparatus of the penal colony and the automobile gladiatorial games are posed as “solutions” humans found to problems in their society: “[‘Gladiators’] gradually reveals that society has solved at the same time the problems of unemployment, vehicle obsolescence, and mass entertainment by re-inventing circuses where unemployed men and criminals are made to fight motor vehicles” (Cicioni, “Moral Snares” 80). The solutions result in spectacles and forms of entertainment, games that people flock to in Levi’s story, and a twelve-hour show during which a man is covered in writing and ornamental details in Kafka’s. Although both stories have been categorized as “science fiction” at times, using human bodies as entertainment, even when these bodies suffer, is hardly unfamiliar or unworldly. In both works absurd statements would perhaps seem mundane if the context were slightly altered. If talking about soccer players rather than men battling cars, the older spectator’s comment about Blitz would not necessarily be shocking: “Il vicino di Nicola era indignato, diceva che quel Blitz, che poi si chiamava Craveri, era un simulatore, che si faceva ferire apposta” (“I gladiatori” 454) [“He said that Blitz, whose real name, by the way, was Craveri, was an impostor, that he got himself injured on purpose” (“Gladiators” 86)].

In “In the Penal Colony” and “Gladiators” there is the sense from people dedicated to the system — the apparatus or the gladiatorial games — that it was better in the past, and by better they mean more brutal. The officer describes how the executions were more frequent and better attended in the past: “Wie war die Exekution anders in früherer Zeit! Schon einen Tag vor der Hinrichtung war das ganze Tal von Menschen überfüllt; alle kamen nur um zu sehen; früh am Morgen erschien der Kommandant mit seinen Damen; Fanfaren weckten den ganzen Lagerplatz [. . .]” (“In der Strafkolonie” 181; “In the Penal Colony” 48). Children were given front row seats from which to view the torture. In Levi, the car fights used to be even bloodier: “Ai miei tempi era diverso, sa. Invece dei paraurti di gommapiuma c’erano i rostri, mica storie. Era difficile farla franca” (“I gladiatori” 453) [“In my time it was different. Instead of foam-rubber bumpers there were beaks—no nonsense. It was hard to escape without injury” (“Gladiators” 85)]. For both proponents of the systems, the entertainment value of the spectacle takes precedence over the rights or treatment of the human participants. The fact that the older model appears to have been even worse, from the point of view of the listener and twenty-first century readers of the stories, does not make the terrible nature of the spectacle described any better. The works raise questions about the idea of moral progress, especially as the spectacles in both relate to human advancements in other areas. The designer of the apparatus appears to have been a twisted Renaissance man: “War er Soldat, Richter, Konstrukteur, Chemiker, Zeichner?” (“In der Strafkolonie” 169; “In the Penal Colony” 39). Technology and human ingenuity are used to cause humans unspeakable pain in both stories.

The discomfort one may experience reading both stories relates to how familiar the issues they raise are. Kafka’s work is set in the titular penal colony and revolves around a machine constructed so as to enact an instructive form of death penalty. Many of the gladiators in Levi’s story are criminals or former criminals. Questions about how we should treat inmates and what rights they deserve continue to be relevant, as does the quandary of what to do when something seems morally repugnant but is accepted, whether by our own culture or by someone else’s. The traveler leaves the colony, Nicola leaves the gladiatorial stadium, and the reader finishes the stories, but the issues linger. Kafka wrestled with the end of “In the Penal Colony” and the concluding sentences are strange, with the traveler threatening the soldier and formerly condemned man with a rope as he rides off in a boat. Nicola, on the other hand, drinks some alcohol and goes to bed. The ends of the works leave unanswered questions that reveals how engaged the works are with problems of modern society.

Scholars have noted numerous contemporary inspirations for Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony.” Corngold and Wagner provide an impressive list (“a” through “j”) of apparatuses that have been said to inspire Kafka’s machine, from sugar presses to torture machines (78). Levi’s futuristic story also draws from a series of contemporary realities: from actual bullfights, to circuses (Cicioni, “Moral Snares” 80), and to car culture (Levi, “Testo del dibattito tra Primo Levi e gli studenti di Pesaro” 7). Indeed, the story was originally published in a magazine dedicated to cars, *L’automobile*. Finally, Brombert has called attention to the fact that Levi’s “science-fiction inventions were not unrelated to the trauma of the Lager. Their Kafkalike humor indeed points to monstrous transgressions, like systematic genocide, engendered by the

nightmare of rational planning" (136).¹⁶ Brombert's remark highlights another quality that perhaps leads people to call Kafka a prophet of the Holocaust. As noted, Levi's "Kafkalike humor" often relates to the problem of rational, or rather seemingly rational, planning pushed to an absurd extreme, like Josef K.'s reaction to most situations and Gregor who worries about getting to work when he is an insect. In other words, much of Kafka's work exposes how ridiculous and subjective apparent rationality can be. Although strange, it is maybe easier to attribute the darkness in Kafka as a sign of Kafka's ability to foresee the terrors of the future, instead of an ability to see the horrors in humans more generally. As Anderson, Robertson, and Samolsky have demonstrated, much of Kafka's prophetic qualities may be the result of his understanding his own world extremely well. An analysis of Kafka and Levi points to another reason why Kafka has been seen as a Holocaust prophet: the absurdity of so-called rational planning.

Elements of the "final solution" can also be described as ludicrous, the result of putatively rational planning. The solutions of "In the Penal Colony" and "Gladiators" may resolve some societal problems, but primarily they raise the question of human beings' ability to do awful things, including establishing a society based on punishing others. Tied to the problems of inhumane, seemingly rational planning is the issue of how the societies in both works use technology. The integration of technology and people in Levi and Kafka's stories reveal the problems that can arise when individual human experiences are subordinated. The strangeness of pitting cars against people, or treating a death contraption with more concern than a person, underscores the problems of forgetting the humanity of others. "Gladiators" is of course not the first work of Levi's to reflect upon this problem, since he experienced the hell of being treated like a machine, without humanity, himself: "In *If This is a Man*, Dr. Pannwitz does not try to understand Levi; he uses him like a machine part, as Alex the Kapo uses him for a rag" (Magavern 179-80).

Levi refers directly to the "Lager" as a machine several times. For instance, in the chapter following the "The Gray Zone," entitled "Shame," Levi discusses the relative power of different prisoners, distinguishing those who were not helpless to rebel against the machine of the "Lager" from those that were: "Chi aveva il modo e la volontà di agire così, di contrastare così o in altri modi la macchina del Lager, era al riparo dalla 'vergogna'" (*I sommersi e i salvati*, *Opere* 708) ["Anyone who had the ability and will to act in this way, to oppose in this or other ways the machine of the Lager, was beyond the reach of 'shame'" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 74)]. As quoted in the epigraph to this article, Levi also draws on the horror of machines, which operate without any attention to human beings, in an attempt to describe why the writing of Kafka troubles him: "lo temo, come una grande macchina che ti viene addosso, come il profeta che ti dirà il giorno della tua morte" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 189) ["I fear him, like a great machine that crashes in on you, like the prophet who tells you the day you will die" (*The Voice of Memory* 156)]. Both machines and prophets seem to disregard human beings and their free will. Levi's characterization of Kafka as a machine almost suggests an allegorical reading of "Gladiators," in which the terrifying, inhuman cars of the story could be read as representative of Kafka's work. Just as Nicola leaves the games with no desire to see them again, alarmed with what they express about mankind, Levi finished his translation with no desire to read Kafka again, unsettled by what he expresses about mankind. Although Levi and Kafka were quite different authors, both personally and stylistically, as Levi noted, this comparison reveals their shared interest in examining the least pleasant parts of human society.

Notes

¹ This article stems from work originally presented at MLA roundtable "Kafka and the Holocaust," organized by Marie Luise Caputo-Mayr for the Kafka Society of America.

² Levi later studied at the *Goethe-Institut* in Turin, wanting to improve upon his German.

³ The similarities of the horror of reading Kafka and the horror of the camps are even suggested by the use of the word "assault" in the translation of Levi's longest interview about Kafka entitled "An Assault Called Franz Kafka" (*The Voice of Memory* 155) and the American translation of Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* as *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*.

⁴ The major English-language edition (*The Voice of Memory*) of Levi's interviews is not an exact translation of all the material in the Italian (*Conversazioni e interviste*). This quote is from an English-language interview.

⁵ See for instance Tommaso Landolfi's darkly humorous "Il babbo di Kafka," published in 1942.

⁶ See Caputo-Mayr ("Kafka and Romance Languages. A Preliminary Survey"), Caputo-Mayr and Herz (*Franz Kafka: International Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Literature*), Cusatelli, Hösle, and Ziolkowski for broader examinations of Kafka's Italian reception.

⁷ Romano translates this quote in an article on Jewish Italian novels.

⁸ By the end of Ginzburg's life this association between being Jewish and an author and even from Piedmont would be natural since, in addition to Ginzburg herself, Carlo Levi and Primo Levi are also noted Jewish authors who lived in Turin.

⁹ 1977 interview with Moravia (Paris 50). Morante claims that her "L'uomo dagli occhiali" (1936) is Kafkaesque (213).

¹⁰ The issue of censorship in Fascist Italy is a complicated one, see Bonsaver and Fabre.

¹¹ "Perciò nelle opere narrative di Kafka non c'è traccia di ebraismo, né di religione, né di Dio" (Pressburger 141).

¹² Baioni's study was translated into German a decade later (1994).

¹³ The freedom of Triestine Jews often contrasted with those of other Italian Jews in the 18th and 19th century (Jones and Duvernoy 48). For more on the history of Jews in Trieste see Dubin.

¹⁴ For example, Spector provides examples of the expectation that a German inhabitant of Prague would also be a writer (5).

¹⁵ A notable exception is Bondanella's article. For a list of other works comparing Kafka and Svevo see Ziolkowski 249. Kafka and Svevo are often briefly linked in discussions of their Jewishness: see for instance Schächter 53, Benussi 329, and Calimani's title.

¹⁶ Brombert is referencing Levi's own quote on the back of an earlier collection of science fiction stories, *Storie naturali*.

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