Etty Hillesum and Primo Levi among the *Drowned* and the *Saved*: Experiences of Inner Freedom

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...we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last—the power to refuse our consent.

*Primo Levi*

...We must accept everything as it comes and be prepared for the worst. [...] When the crucial moment comes, you will surely know what you have to do.

*Etty Hillesum*

In many regards, the broad gulf that separates the life-stories of Primo Levi and Etty Hillesum should discourage a critical attempt to establish connections between them. However, they both shared a fundamental concern for mankind, and it is that perspective which I wish to examine in linking these authors. In their works, both sought to define the kind of existence that could rightfully be called ‘human,’ and showed how such existence may be sheltered from even the harshest conditions. I thus propose to examine their texts and highlight the passages in which the words of one appear to call out to the other, and which open up a field of questions it falls upon us to attempt to answer.

1 Primo Levi on what Happened to Man at Auschwitz

The yearning to account for what happened to Man at *Auschwitz* echoes throughout the works of Primo Levi. The poem that prefaces *If This is a Man*[^1]

[^1]: The lines with which *If this is a man* opens are: You who live safe / In your warm houses, / You who find, returning in the evening, / Hot food and friendly faces: / Consider if this is a man / Who works in the mud, / Who does not know peace, / Who fights for a scrap of bread, / Who
addresses readers directly, demanding that they consider the limits beyond which no one can be pushed without losing their defining traits, and demanding that the questions raised by the Shoah not be ignored. The question I wish to address, is broader still, and is at once raised and answered in the writings of Primo Levi: given that what occurred at Auschwitz and the other camps was enough to make the human almost indistinguishable from the inhuman, what is it that defines ‘the human’ in men and women, and cannot be relinquished? For critical speculation to recommence along new lines after the Shoah, I believe it is essential that we face these issues, however unspeakable the issues and possible answers may appear to be.

The questions that were raised by the reality of the camps demanded answers, but in the opening pages of The drowned and the saved, Primo Levi warned against the temptation of a ‘desire for simplification.’² Aware that his own narrative was in danger of falling into what he describes as the ‘Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexity’,³ Primo Levi tried to overcome the kind of simplification which narrows the margins of what is intelligible for the sake of an artificial, and ultimately misleading understanding. In this connection, he elaborated the famous notion of the gray zone.

From many signs it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand, and with a less turbid spirit […]. Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is, it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously) whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us […].⁴

By pointing to the existence of this cognitive and existential gray zone, Levi asks us to broaden our gaze, and follow him into the deepest recesses of human

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² Primo Levi argued that “this desire for simplification is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself, which is a working hypothesis, useful as long as it is recognised as such and not mistaken for reality.” Primo Levi, The drowned and the saved, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 37.
⁴ Ibidem, 40.