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an excerpt of

*Questions of Transport: Reading  
Primo Levi Reading Dante*

Dedicated readers recognize that language transports them without regard to time or place. Still, it seems strange that while we can call up thousands of volumes on our computer screens with a few seconds' effort, Dante lived almost bereft of books. Walking through a bookstore aisle, I stand within arm's length of perhaps a trillion letters—an unholy replication that seems to have little to do with the careful copies made by fourteenth-century monks.

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II

A Jew first led me to the gates of Dante's Hell. When I was thirty years old I surveyed the poet's "città dolente" through the eyes of Primo Levi, a man who had returned fifteen years before my 1960 birth from another city of the dead. In its blasted landscape Levi had toiled as ceaselessly as the anguished shades who strain and struggle in the *Inferno*. After escaping that place at the close of World War II, Levi chronicled his habituation to suffering in *Se questo è un uomo / If This Is a Man* (1947), a book U.S. readers know as *Survival in Auschwitz*, but whose Italian title and first English translation capture its philosophical character more fully. In this work, Levi's first venture as a writer, the career chemist leads readers forward with a composed purpose and calmly dispassionate voice akin to that of Dante's Virgil—but when Levi recounts his reading of canto twenty-six in the dead air of Auschwitz, the memoir becomes strangely if quietly exultant. I usually turn away from the too-ready evocation

of concentration camps in film and story, but I cannot forget this prisoner's recitation of the words of Ulysses while souls rise to the sky. "So on the open sea I set forth," Levi pronounces, as sure of his purpose as is the heroic seafarer whose shade speaks to Dante the way a "wavering flame / Wrestles against the wind."



## VIII

What absorbed reader has not sometimes hoped for the shock of transcendence, the bolt of lightning that seizes? I search for words brilliant enough to weld "now" to "then," and I look for a language that will bind my imagination to a writer's understanding, making us twin witnesses to one scene. In Levi and Dante I find this transport, though it is no kin to rapture. In their pages I meet spirits so bereft they could have been torn away from the warm tissue of the lungs and the heart's comforting murmur. Harder to witness but more deliberate, their twin conveyance of souls is neither a delusional effort to slip the skin nor the romance of easy union with another.