nal phrases containing a musical gesture that Thomas Mann's Kretschmar calls, in Doctor Faustus, a "farewell" to sonata form, "the most conciliatory, pathetically reconciling thing in the world."

"Thinking about Beethoven in such a manner is somewhat risky; it goes against the contemporary grain. It was more properly the vocation of such earlier figures as Romain Rolland and J.W.N. Sullivan ("Beethoven was a man who experienced all that we can experience, who suffered all that we can suffer. If, at the end, he seems to reach a state 'above the battle,' we also know that no man ever knew more bitterly what the battle is"). But reason and faith are close to the heart of Beethoven's music. This is what binds him to Berlioz, to Liszt, to Wagner, and later to Mahler and to Schoenberg.

Beethoven defined what reason was to accomplish in music and to what transcendent levels it was to lead; and he knew that nothing could be accomplished without struggle. If we can no longer quite believe in the struggle, at least his music reminds us of what it could once achieve.

The Suicide Note

The Drowned and the Saved
by Primo Levi
translated by Raymond Rosenthal

(Summit Books, 203 pp., $17.95)

Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish chemist from Turin, was liberated from Auschwitz by a Soviet military unit in January 1945; when he was 25, and from that moment of reprieve (Moments of Reprieve was one of his titles) until shortly before his death in April 1987, he went on recalling, examining, reasoning, recording—telling the ghastly tale—in book after book. That he saw himself as a possessed scribe of the German hell we know from the epigraph to his final volume, The Drowned and the Saved—familiar lines taken from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and newly startling to a merely literary reader, for whom the words of Coleridge's poem have never before rung out with such an anti-metaphorical contemporary demand, or seemed so cruel:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns,
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.

Seized by the survivor's heart, this stanza no longer answers to the status of Lyrical Ballad, and still less to the English department's quintessential Romantic text redolent of the supernatural; it is all deadly self-portrait. In the haven of an Italian spring—40 years after setting down the somber narrative called in Italian "If This Be A Man" and published in English as Survival in Auschwitz—Levi hurled himself into the well of a spiral staircase four stories deep, just outside the door of the flat he was born in, where he had been living with his wife and aged ailing mother. Suicide. The composition of the last Lager manuscript was complete, the heart burned out; there was no more to tell.

There was no more to tell. That, of course, is an assumption nobody can justify, and nobody perhaps ought to dare to make. Suicide is one of the mysteries of the human will, with or without a farewell note to explain it. And it remains to be seen whether The Drowned and the Saved is, after all, a sort of suicide note.

Levi, to be sure, is not the first writer of high distinction to survive hell and to suggest, by a self-willed death, that hell in fact did not end when the chimneys closed down, but was simply freshening for a second run—Auschwitz being the first hell, and post-Auschwitz the second; and if "survival" is the thing in question, then it isn't the "survivor" whose powers of continuation are worth marveling at, but hell itself. The victim who has escaped being murdered will sometimes contrive to finish the job, not because he is attached to death—never this—but because death is under the governance of hell, and it is in the nature of hell to go on and on: inescapability is its rule, No Exit its sign. "The injury cannot be healed," Levi writes in The Drowned and the Saved; "it extends through time, and the Furies, in whose existence we are forced to believe ... perpetuate the tormentor's work by denying peace to the tormented."

Tadeusz Borowski, for instance, author of This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, eluded the gas at both Auschwitz and Dachau from 1944 to 1945; in Warsaw, in 1951, not yet 30, three days before the birth of his daughter, he turned on the household gas. Suicide. The poet Paul Celan: a suicide. The Austrian-born philosopher Hans Mayer—another suicide—who later became Jean Améry by scrambling his name into a French anagram, was in Auschwitz together with Levi, though the two never chanced on one another. Before his capture and deporta-
tion, Améry had been in the Belgian re-infant and was subjected to Gestapo torture. After the war, Améry and Levi corresponded about their experiences. Levi esteemed Améry, appeared to understand him, but evidently could not like him—because, he says, Améry was a man who "traded blows." "A gigantic Polish criminal," Levi recounts, "punches [Améry] in the face over some trifle; he, not because of an animal-like reaction but because of a reasoned revolt against the perverted world of the Lager, returns the blow as best he can." "Hurling all over from the blows, I was satisfied with myself," Levi quotes Améry; but for himself, Levi asserts,

"trading punches" is an experience I do not have, as far back as I can go in memory; nor can I say I regret not having it. ... Going down onto the battlefield was and is beyond my reach. I admire it; but I must point out that the choice protracted throughout his post-Auschwitz existence, led [Améry] to such severity and intransigence as to make him incapable of finding joy in life, indeed of living. Those who "trade blows" with the entire world achieve dignity but pay a very high price for it because they are sure to be defeated.

Remarkably, Levi concludes: "Améry's suicide, which took place in Salzburg in 1978 [nine years before Levi's leap into the stairwell], like other suicides allows for a nebula of explanations, but in hindsight, that episode of defying the Pole offers one interpretation of it."

This observation—that the rage of resentment is somehow linked to self-destruction—is, in the perplexing shadow of Levi's own suicide, enigmatic enough and bears returning to. For the moment, it may be useful to consider that Levi's reputation—rather, the grave and noble voice that sounds and sum-
mons through his pages—has been con-
sumately free of rage, resentment, vio-
lation feeling, or any overt drive to “trade
blows.” The voice has been one of pris-
tine sanity and discernment. Levi has
been unwilling to serve either as preach-
er or elegist. He has avoided polemics; he
has shrunk from being counted as one of
those message-bearers “whom I view
with distrust: the prophet, the bard, the
soothsayer. That I am not.”

INSTEAD, he has offered himself as a
singular witness—singular because he
was “privileged” to survive as a labo-
rary slave, meaning that German conve-
nience, at least temporarily, was met
more through the exploitation of his
training as a chemist than it would have
been through his immediate annihilation
as a Jew; and, from our own point of
view, because of his clarity and selfless-
ness as a writer. It is selfless to eschew
freely-running emotion, sermonizing,
the catharsis of anger, when these so
plainly plead their case before an uncon-
precedentedly loathsome record of crim-
inals and their crimes. Levi has kept his
distance from blaming, scolding, insist-
vifying, lamenting, crying out. His
method has been to describe—meticu-
iously, analytically, clarifyingly. He has
been a Darwin of the death camps; not
Levi’s “unruffled dignity” and “purity of
equanimity.” Rita Levi-Montalcini, a re-
cipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize in medi-
cine and a fellow Turinese, devotes an
epilogue in her memoir, In Praise of Im-
perfection, to Levi’s “detachment and ab-
se of hatred.” You, she addresses
Levi, have “come out of the most atro-
cious of all experiences with an upright
forehead and a spirit pure.”

A temperament so transparent, so un-
tainted, so unpolemical (indeed, so anti-
polemical)—so like clear water—has,
however, also provided a kind of relief, or
respite, for those who hope finally to
evade the gravamen of Levi’s chronicle.
The novelist Johanna Kaplan sets it out
for us: “Oh, that? Oh, that again? . . . Be-
cause by now, after all the powerful, an-
guished novels . . . after all the simple,
heart-rending documentary accounts, the
stringent, haunting historians’ texts, the
pained and arduous movies—that shock-
ing newsreel footage . . . after all the nec-
essary, nightmare lists of involuntary:
T HIS MAY BE one reason—it is not
the only one—it has been possible to
read Levi with soul’s pain (how could this
be otherwise?), but without guilt. It is not
that Levi absolves; rather, he mutes the
question of absolution—a question al-
ways in the forefront for messengers as
radically different from each other as,
say, Elie Wiesel and Raul Hilberg. Hil-
berg’s investigations in particular, coolly
data-obsessed as they are, have erased
the notion of “bystander” status in Nazi
Germany. Levi has devoted himself less
to social history and psychological moti-
vation than to the microscope, with its
exactingly circumscribed field of vision.
 Society—as-organism is not the area under
his scrutiny, as it is for Hilberg; neither is
suffering as metaphor, as with Wiesel’s
emblematic mourning madmen.

The advantage, for many of Levi’s
readers, has been—dare one say this?—a
curious peacefulness: the consequence of
the famous “detachment.” Levi is far
from being a peaceful witness, but be-
cause he has not been harassed or harangued
or dramatized or poetized or shaken a
fist at or shrieked or politicized (a little of
the last, but only a little), because he has
restricted himself to observation, nota-
tion, and restraint, it becomes alarmingly
easy to force him into a false position. If
it was futil for him to plead, as he once
did, “I beg the reader not to go looking
for messages,” it is nevertheless discon-
certing that all of the various “lessons”
that might have been drawn from Levi’s
penetra tions, the one most prevalent is
also the coarsest and the most mislead-
ing: uplift.

Rarely will you come on a publisher’s

MARCH 21, 1988
THE Fuse is ignited almost instantly, in the preface.

No one will ever be able to establish with precision how many, in the Nazi apparatus, could not know about the frightful atrocities being committed, how many knew something but were in a position to pretend they did not know, and, further, how many had the possibility of knowing everything but chose the more prudent path of keeping their eyes and ears (and above all their mouths) well shut.

Here is the heralding of the indictment that will emerge: it is the German people whom Levi subjects to judgment, which may account for his rarely shrinking from the use of "German," where, nowadays, "Nazi" is usually the polite, because narrower, term. In the preface also may be found the single most terrible sentence ever offered on the issue of what is variously called "restitution," "changed attitudes," "the new generation," and all the rest: "The crematoria ovens themselves were designed, built, assembled, and tested by a German company, Topf of Wiesbaden (it was still in operation in 1975, building crematoria for civilian use, and had not considered the advisability of changing its name)."

Had not considered the advisability of changing its name: this applies equally to Krupp, notorious for slave labor, and, in its most celebrated incarnation, to Hitler's "people's car," the ubiquitous Volkswagen. Driven unself-consciously by half the world. (An unself-conscious irony, by the way, that Levi, or his admirable translator, should fall into the phrase "civilian use," meaning, one supposes, the opposite of official government policy—that is, ordinary funerals employing cremation. But who else other than "civilians" were annihilated in the Lager?)

When Levi comes to speak of shame, it is nevertheless not the absence of shame among Germans he invokes, though he condemns the "complicity and connivance" of the "majority of Germans" just before and during the Hitler years; rather, it is the loss of shame in the victims of the Lager, possessed of any civilizing vestige, reduced to the animal. The Lager "anus mundi," dominated "from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear," "ultimate drainage site of the German universe," was a condition without reciprocity, where you sought to succor and relieve only yourself, to take care of yourself alone.

Shame returned with the return of freedom, retrospectively. In the "gray zone" of Lager oppression, contaminated victims collaborated with contaminating persecutors. Arrival at Auschwitz meant "kicks and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true or simulated rage; complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one's hair; the outfitting in rags," and some of these depredations were conducted by fellow-victims appointed as functionaries.

Again and again Levi emphasizes the diminishment of every human trait, the violated modesty, the public evacuation, the satanically inventive brutality, the disorientation and desperation. He describes the absolute rule of "small s-traps"—the common criminals who became Kapos; the wretched Befehlnachzieher, whose sole job was to measure the orderliness of straw pillows with a maniacal string and who had the power to punish "publicly and savagely"; the overseers of the "work that was purely persecutory"; the "Special Squads" that operated the crematoria for the sake of a few weeks more of life, only to be replaced and thrown into the fire in turn.

These squads, Levi explains, "were made up largely of Jews. In a certain sense this is not surprising, since the La
ger's main purpose was to destroy Jews, and, beginning in 1943, the Auschwitz population was 90-95 percent Jews."

(Here I interrupt to remind the reader of William Styron's choice in Sophie's Choice, wherein we are given, as the central genocidal emblem of Lager policy in those years, a victim who is not a Jew. Let no one misconstrue this remark. The point is not that Jews suffered more than anyone else in the camps, or even that they suffered in greater numbers; concerning suffering there can be no competition or hierarchy. To suggest otherwise would be monstrous. Those who suffered at Auschwitz suffered with an absolute equality, and the suffering of no one victimized group or individual weighs more in human anguish than that of any other victimized group or individual. But note: Catholic Poland, for instance—language, culture, land—continues, while European Jewish civilization—language, culture, institutions—was wiped out utterly; and that, for Jewish history, is the different and still more terrible central meaning of Auschwitz. It is, in fact, what defines the Holocaust, and distinguishes it from the multiple other large-scale victimizations of the Nazi period.)

"From another point of view," Levi continues, "one is stunned by this paradox of perfidy and hatred: it must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens; it must be shown that the Jews, the subrace, the submen, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves." Levi admits that merely by virtue of his having stayed alive, he never "fathomed [the Lager] to the bottom." The others, the "drowned," he maintains, those who went down to the lees of suffering and annihilation, were the only true fathomers of that perfidy and hatred.

LEVI'S reflections appear to be fathomings enough. The Drowned and the Saved is much less a book of narrative and incident than it is of sittings of the most sordid deposits of the criminal imagination—the inescapable struggle of a civilized mind to bore through to the essence and consequence of degradation and atrocity. Levi is not the first to observe that "where violence is inflicted on man it is also inflicted on language," though he may be among the first to inform us of the life-or-death role of language in the Lager. Simply, not to understand German was to go under at once: "the rubber truncheon was called der Dolmetscher, the interpreter: the one who made himself understood to everybody."

Levi had studied some German at the university to prepare himself as a chemist. He learned more in Auschwitz— grotesquely distorted barbarisms which he deliberately held onto years later, "for the same reason I have never had the tattoo removed from my left arm." As for the tattoo itself—"an autochthonous Auschwitzian invention," "gratuitous, an end in itself, pure offense," "a return to barbarism"—Levi, a secular Jew, is careful to note that Leviitus 19:28 forbids tattooing "precisely in order to distinguish Jews from the barbarians." Even newborn babies, he reports, were tattooed on arrival in Auschwitz.

ALL THIS, and considerably more, Levi gathers up under the chilling heading of "Useless Violence," which he defines as "a deliberate creation of pain that was an end in itself." What else was the purpose of the vindictive halt of a boxcar of Jews at an Austrian railroad station, where, while the guards laughed, "the German passengers openly expressed their disgust" at "men and women squatting wherever they could, on the platforms and in the middle of the tracks"? What else was the purpose of emptying out nursing homes filled with elderly sick people already near death and hauling them off to Auschwitz to be gassed? Or forcing grown men to lap up soup like dogs by depriving them of spoons (of which there were tens of thousands at Auschwitz)? Or using human ash from the crematoria to make "gravel" paths for the SS village that ruled the camp? Or selling human hair to the German textile industry for mattress ticking? Or locking human beings into decompression chambers "to establish at what altitude human blood begins to boil: a datum that can be obtained in any laboratory at minimum expense and without victims, or even can be deduced from common tables"?

A spare sampling from Levi's meditation on the German abominations, some familiar, some not. Cardinal John O'Connor's theologizing not long ago—which led him to identify the torments of Auschwitz as a Jewish gift to the world—is no doubt indisputably valid Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the remunerative nature of suffering: but, much as the observation was intended to confer grace on the victims, it strikes me as impossible, even for a committed Christian, even for an angel of God, to speak of re-
demption and Auschwitz in the same breath. What we learn overwhelmingly from Levi is this: if there is redemption in it, it cannot be Auschwitz; and if it is Auschwitz, it is nothing if not unholy. Let no one mistake Primo Levi. If an upright forehead and a spirit pure mean foregoing outrage for the sake of one lofty idea or another—including the renunciation of hatred for the designers of the crematoria—then Primo Levi is as suffused as anybody else who declines to be morally neutered in the name of superior views. He is in fact not morally neutered, and never was. He is not a "forgiver" (only someone with a clouded conscience would presume to claim that right on behalf of the murdered), and he is not dedicated, as so many believe, to an absence of rancor toward the strategists of atrocity and their followers. He is, as he asserts, a scientist and a logician: nowhere in Levi's pages will you find anything even remotely akin to the notion of "hate the sin, not the sinner." He is not an absurdist or a surrealist; nowhere does he engage in such severance. On the contrary, his preeminent theme is responsibility: "The true crime, the collective, general crime of almost all Germans of that time was that of lacking the courage to speak."
Consider now an image drawn from Levi’s calling. Into a vessel of clear water—tranquil, innocuous—drop an unaccustomed ingredient: a lump of potassium, say, an alkali metal that reacts with water so violently that the hydrogen gas given off by the process will erupt into instant combustion. One moment, a beaker of unperturbed transparency. The next moment, a convulsion: self-destruction.

The unaccustomed ingredient, for Levi, was rage. “Suicide,” he reflects in The Drowned and the Saved—which may be seen, perhaps and after all, as the bitterest of suicide notes—“is an act of man and not of the animal. It is a mediated act, a noninstinctive, unnatural choice.” In the Lager, where human beings were driven to become animals, there were almost no suicides. Améry, Borowski, Celan, and ultimately Levi did not destroy themselves until some time after they were released. Levi waited more than 40 years; and he did not become a suicide until he let passion in, and returned the blows. If he is right about Améry—that Améry’s willingness to

trade punches is the key to his suicide—then he has deciphered for us his own suicide as well.

What we know now—we did not know it before The Drowned and the Saved—is that at bottom Levi could not believe in himself as a vessel of clear water standing serenely apart. It was not detachment. It was dormancy, it was latency, it was potentiality; it was inoperativeness. He was always conscious of how near to hand the potassium was. I grieve that he equated rage—the rage that speaks for mercifulness—with self-destruction. A flawed formula. It seems to me it would not have been a mistake—and could not have been misinterpreted—if all of Primo Levi’s books touching on the German hell had been as vehement, and as pointed, as the last, the most remarkable.

CYNTHIA OZICK

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WHAT THE NOVELIST KNOWS

The Art of the Novel by Milan Kundera translated by Linda Asher

(Grove Press, 165 pp., $16.95)

There exists nowadays a literary genre that promises to perpetuate itself, yet is made up of books doomed to instant oblivion—namely, academic works in the humanities and social sciences. The built-in obsolescence has a specific cause: the authors seem to feel that the precision of the observations they relate is everything and the manner in which those observations are presented is nothing. Thus the proliferation, in such books, of statistics, graphs, and diagrams, as though it were necessary to prop up ad infinitum a thesis that shocks no one. In fact, the genre’s perpetuation stems from a different source: publication is a prerequisite for tenure in universities and for the promotion of researchers.

Such melancholy thoughts came to me several years ago when I first read an essay by Milan Kundera on Kafka. Kundera “knew” as much as any Kafka specialist, but he didn’t write like those other authors. He could be at the same time new and simple, could study in detail and yet generalize, could speak of the book and of the world. Who knows, perhaps he, too, had counted Kafka’s words, and traced clever little drawings and diagrams. But if so, he kept them to himself. In short, Kundera had written an essay: that is, a text of knowledge and reflection which does not forget that it is also literature.

Kundera has gathered together some of his essays, including the one on Kafka, and two interviews, in The Art of the Novel. (It is his first book written originally in French.) And in reading it, I had a surprise: I discovered that he develops a thesis completely different from the flattering one that I have just formulated. Kundera’s essay asserts the powerlessness of the essay. I should be more