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**"La scienza ha una morale:" The Importance of Impurity****Margaret O'Brien****Publication Date**

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“La scienza ha una morale:” The Importance of Impurity

In Primo Levi's short story “Zinco,” Levi cites “La Difesa della Razza” as he considers his Jewishness, and consequently his impurity, noting: “l'impurezza, certo: poiché proprio in quei mesi iniziava la pubblicazione di “La Difesa della Razza,” e di purezza si faceva un gran parlare, ed io cominciavo ad essere fiero di essere impuro” (34). This discussion of impurity fits into the larger theme of “Zinco,” intersecting with reflections about the necessity of impurity in zinc reactions. His mention of “La Difesa della Razza” makes sense thematically; as he mentions, the supposed purity of the Italian race, which excludes Jews and many other groups, is one of the grounding propositions of Fascist Italy's racial manifesto. This alone is a strong enough connection to explain Levi's choice of Fascist publication to cite, but further analysis of the story reveals further connections between “La Difesa della Razza” and “Zinco.” Levi uses “Zinco” to counter the condemnation of diversity and praise of purity found in “La Difesa della Razza;” instead Levi celebrates diversity, or impurity, of thought and experience through his appreciation of other people's different points of view.

The story “Zinco” takes place in a university chemistry class, in which Levi's project is to prepare zinc sulfate. This project inspires Levi to reflect on the popular discourse about “purity” because as Levi explains, Zinc has one particularly interesting property. Zinc only reacts when not in a pure state. From this, Levi comes up with two different philosophical lessons. The first aligns with Fascist ideology; it asserts that purity acts as a protection against evil, which aligns

with the Fascist dedication to preserving the “pura razza italiana” and its warnings about the consequences of defiling the pure race (Pisanty 2007: 41). However, Levi prefers the second interpretation of this property, describing the first as “digustosamente moralistica” (32). Levi sees impurity as a necessity for the continuance of life: “perché la ruota giri, perché la vita viva, ci vogliono le impurezze” (32). He continues this thought by directly taking note of the Fascist opposition to diversity. It is this discussion of purity, and its relationship with Fascism and Levi’s later citation of “La Difesa della Razza,” that has inspired much of the scholarship on this story, and rightfully so. Zinc is the titular element of this story, so how Levi uses its properties to come to a more positive interpretation of impurity than Italian Fascism did is important to the story.

However, Levi’s celebration of impurity goes beyond its relationship to Zinc; Levi uses his characters to show the practical application of this. This paper will analyze Levi’s characterization of Professor P. and Rita, highlighting what Levi focuses on in each characterization and how that differs from him. This analysis demonstrates how Levi uses these characters to draw a contrast to the Fascist message of “La Difesa della Razza.” While “La Difesa della Razza” celebrates purity and homogeneity, Levi uses “Zinco” and its characters to demonstrate his commitment to the importance of “impurity,” or in other words, difference of background or perspective.

Levi begins the story with a lengthy exposition on the professor of his class, Professor P. In Professor P. 's characterization, he focuses on Professor P.’s antifascism, and in doing so, demonstrates how Professor P.’s approach is different from his own. He begins his characterization with the following line:

*“No, la chimica di P. non era il motore dell’Universo né la chiave del Vero: P. era un vecchio scettico ed ironico, nemico di tutte le retoriche (per questo, e solo per*

*questo, era anche antifascista), intelligente, ostinato, ed arguto di una sua arguzia trista” (28).*

From this line, we understand two main things about Professor P. First, he is antifascist; that much is stated explicitly. However, we also understand that Professor P. is somehow impurely antifascist. The description of Professor P. as antifascist *only* because he is anti-rhetoric implies that there are some ways that he is susceptible to Fascist behavior, even if he is specifically opposed to Fascist rhetoric.

This line and the contradictory dynamic it sets up provides a framework through which to understand the rest of Professor P.’s characterization by giving rise to a number of key questions. How is Professor P. antifascist? Second, what does it mean that he is *only* antifascist, and how is this demonstrated through the rest of the story? In other words, how does Levi characterize Professor P. as susceptible to Fascism?

Throughout the rest of the story, several lines demonstrate the antifascism that is described in Professor P.’s opening characterization. For example, Levi describes Professor P. as having a dislike for “tutti quelli che gli si presentavano ‘vestiti da soldato’” (28). Given that the Italian Fascist regime was highly militaristic and known for its uniforms – the “camicie nere” – this line begins to show us some of the antifascism that was mentioned previously. Another example comes later on in the story, when Levi tells us that with regards to who finds success in the class, “chi vale vince” (30). Apparently, not many people in the class were worthy, given that 50 of the original 80 students switched out of the program, but even so, the idea that one can find success if they earn it could be described as antifascist; the fact that the Italian Fascist’s regime actively discriminated against certain racial and ethnic groups (including and especially Jews,

Levi's own group) and also suppressed any political opposition indicates that Fascism didn't align well with meritocracy.

Later, Levi states that "a me P. era simpatico" (29). Levi likes Professor P. because of "il rigore sobrio delle sue lezioni," the "buffo bavaglino nero" that he wore in place of the "camicia fascista" and "i suoi testi, chiari fino all'ossessione." In other words, Levi appreciates Professor P. actually teaches chemistry, in a clear and solemn way, and that he disparages Fascism by refusing to fully adhere to the "dress code." This second point, about the "buffo bavaglino nero" can clearly be read as antifascism, given that he makes fun of the required black shirt and does so with a "sdegnosa ostentazione" (29).

Professor P.'s solemn and rigorous teaching style and his obsessively clear textbooks connect less clearly to an antifascist attitude. However, with greater context about the Fascist regime and its use of science, these quotes become far more significant; Professor P.'s clear and solemn style contrasts with the Fascist regime's lack of clarity and misuse of science.

This Fascist regime's misuse of science can be seen in the very publication that will be cited later in "Zinco," "La Difesa della Razza." It was divided into three sections (scienza, documentazione, polemica); in "scienza," contributors discussed the scientific support of racial theory. This so-called scientific support was legitimated by the scientific authority of the university professors who signed the original manifesto. However, any ethos that these professors had is complicated by the fact that, despite all signing the same manifesto, there was considerable disagreement among contributors. To begin with, there wasn't even one consistent Italian racist ideology. There were three types of racism: razzismo biologico, nazional-razzismo, and razzismo esoterico (Pisanty 2007: 102). Contributors, like editor Guido Landra, even pushed back on the idea of biological racism (Pisanty 2007: 55). Each type of racism was still racism,

and asserted the existence of a hierarchy of races, but there were conflicting accounts about what this hierarchy was based on. In other words, the publication that was intended to promote Fascist Italy's racial theory didn't have clear underlying principles<sup>1</sup>.

Relatedly, while all three types of racism denigrated Jews, there was no clear-cut answer on what actually defined Jews or what made them so inferior. In fact, “gli autori della “Difesa della Razza” incappino in innumerevoli contraddizioni” (Pisanty 2004: 82). Jews were both capitalists and communists, fanatics and atheists, revolutionary and traditional - the list goes on (Pisanty 2004: 82). This wasn't even seen as a problem, just confirmation of the double-faced nature of Jews (Pisanty 2004: 83). Again, the magazine exhibits a considerable lack of clarity.

If we read Levi's statement about the clarity of Professor P.'s textbooks and his class's sober rigor as remarks on the notable lack of clarity in Fascist publications, then these traits can also be read as antifascist. It is not an explicit connection to Fascism but mentioned alongside a comment on Professor P.'s unwillingness to conform to Fascist requirements, and with the appropriate background knowledge, these comments seem pointed. This is particularly true if we recall that Professor P. was particularly opposed to Fascism's rhetoric. The fact that the cohesiveness of the publications is so at odds with his own publications might give us an insight into why – namely, that Professor P. disagrees with the manipulation of science prevalent in Fascist rhetoric, such as “La Difesa della Razza.”

To summarize, as is stated in Professor P.'s initial description, he is antifascist because he is anti-rhetoric, both in that he rejects the outward signs of Fascist rhetoric like the uniforms and in that he rejects the manner in which Fascist ideology manipulated science in its propaganda. However, the story is not so simple. After all, Professor P. is *only* antifascist because he hates the

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, there were the ten founding principles that were established in the manifesto, but the rest of the magazine consisted of contributions that were rife with contradictions about the nature of Italian racism.

rhetoric. While Professor P. exhibits antifascist behavior, he also acts in ways that resemble Fascism as well.

To begin, as mentioned above, Professor P demonstrates a prejudice against anyone dressed like a soldier, and because of the prevalence of uniforms and rigidity in the Fascist regime, this can be understood as an antifascist statement. However, in this discussion of the professor's prejudice, Levi says that "sue vittime predilette erano le donne in genere" (28). In other words, Professor P. is prejudiced against women, which is obviously different than judging people dressed like soldiers; prejudice against women is not an ideological statement but baseless discrimination. This conflicts with his previously mentioned dedication to a clear and cohesive use of science in that prejudice against women is an insupportable claim; if it were to be supported with science, it would likely look a lot like the racist science in *La Difesa della Razza* – biased and unconvincing. This statement also calls into question the validity of statements that were previously identified as "antifascist." For example, "che vale vince" can hardly be a legitimate claim if women had less of a chance from the beginning.

Along similar lines, Levi also describes Professor P. as having a "vocazione per le distanze gerarchiche e per il vilipendio di noi suo gregge" (30). Having a vocation to hierarchical distances isn't necessarily a bad thing – it could simply reflect his preferred teaching style. However, Italian Fascism's also devoted itself to hierarchies; its three grounding principles were "order, discipline, hierarchy" (Payne 133). "La Difesa della Razza" also reflects this commitment with its references to a hierarchy of races. In other words, in the context in which Levi writes, hierarchies could easily be associated with Fascism, so Professor P.'s commitment to them seems to clash with his aforementioned antifascist actions.

Levi also describes how Professor P. “avesse speso l’intera sua carriera accademica per demolire una certa teoria di stereochimica, non con esperimenti, ma con pubblicazioni” (29). In the context of a conversation about Fascist publications and their flaws, the fact that Professor P. spent his entire career destroying a theory with publications and *not* experiments seems odd. More than odd, it seems very much like the use of rhetoric that Professor P. is the so-called enemy of. Replace “demolire” and “stereochimica” with “promuovere” and “racismo” and you’ve got an apt description of “La Difesa della Razza.” Again, Professor P. falls victim to Fascist-like behavior.

In other words, Levi creates a complex character in Professor P. He is both openly against Fascist rhetoric and also susceptible to the type of behavior that it promotes. The reason why Levi does so can be found in an examination of the difference between the different antifascist approaches that are presented: Levi doesn’t only criticize Fascism through Professor P.; he also does so through his own meditations on the Fascist conception of purity. Levi uses Professor P. to demonstrate the flaws in the Fascist use of propaganda – namely, that it is a lot of rhetoric with little cohesive, scientific basis – but he also uses Professor P. to prove another point. Antifascism doesn’t mean just one thing; the adoption of an antifascist attitude is subjective in that the basis of said antifascism and its consequent expression depends on how much power fascist ideology holds over that person, or in simpler terms, where that person is coming from. This means that while Levi supports Professor P.’s disdain for Fascism, he also recognizes that Professor P.’s antifascism is different from his own because they are coming from different places.

In “Zinco,” Professor P. comes from a position of relative strength. Throughout the story, Levi highlights Professor P.’s position in society, particularly highlighting how Professor P. has authority as a professor and scientist.



This authority is emphasized by his authority over his students. I have already noted his adherence to hierarchical differences, but there are also several other examples. For example, in his descriptions of Professor P. 's “laboratorio di Preparazioni,” Levi depicts the class as a “una versione moderna e tecnica dei rituali selvaggi di iniziazione” and Professor P. as “un selvaggio, un cacciatore” (29-30). Professor P. presides over this ritual - in fact Levi describes it as his invention - not taking part, but ultimately deciding who wins, or in other words, who finds success in the classroom, and consequently, as a scientist.

Professor P.'s power is also emphasized by the subsequent introduction of Caselli “che rappresentano l'Autorità senza possederla in proprio” (31). The authority that Caselli supposedly represents is Professor P., who is also described as the owner of “il pane della scienza” (30). Through these descriptions, we understand Professor P. as not only authoritative because of his position as professor but also in terms of science in general.

Overwhelmingly, Professor P. is seen as separate and above from his students in some regard. He is above them hierarchically, and while he has the power to invent initiation rituals, he doesn't even really take part in them, handing off the actual work to Caselli. “Il pane della scienza” is “pane di P.,” but ultimately it is administered by Caselli. It is with this separation in mind that we can understand Professor P.'s approach to antifascism, as this separation is indicative of the fact that he possesses authority both over students and in the world of intellectuals.

Because Professor P. is in a position of relative power, he is able to distance himself from the actual realities of Fascism; while he critiques them, it is a surface-level critique — pretentious more than impassioned. In fact, many of his critiques of Fascism are just that: surface-level. This can be seen in his prejudice for people who wear uniforms and his subsequent

refusal to wear the mandated black shirt. Based on this, Professor P. takes an issue with the (literal) style of the Fascist regime. Even this stylistic criticism isn't complete; Professor P. still wears the prescribed black, if not in the intended way<sup>2</sup>.

Professor P.'s criticism of Fascism does extend beyond their black shirts, but even so, the rebuke is still stylistic, focusing on their rhetoric, or more specifically, the way that they conduct science. The contrast between the science in "La Difesa della Razza" and Professor P.'s classes and books demonstrates that he has a markedly different rhetorical style, and values rigorous, clear science. Professor P.'s issue with Fascists is their rhetoric and the way it abuses science, not necessarily what their science promotes. Fascists are bad scientists that promote a frustrating uniformity, and because of this, Professor P. dislikes them; however, he does not have much personal stake in the actual prejudice promoted because he is not subject to it. His intellectual authority and university position give him some degree of authority<sup>3</sup> and power, and because of this, his antifascism is able to be inconsistent, complete with his own prejudices.

Even so, Levi appreciates his effort. As previously mentioned, Levi likes him. This indicates that he doesn't discount this kind of antifascism, and that opposition to the rhetoric is also important, even if Levi does not have the same approach.

Levi's approach is remarkably different. Levi's critiques are both more philosophical and more personal<sup>4</sup>. While Professor P. opposed Fascism because of the rhetoric, and only for that, Levi, in an address to himself, states the following as his reason:

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<sup>2</sup> Here some sympathy for Professor P. might be appropriate. His power is not complete, of course – the Fascist regime did not take kindly to opposition. This certainly would've limited the extent of his opposition.

<sup>3</sup> This point is emphasized by the aforementioned reliance on intellectual authority in the formation of Fascist propaganda.

<sup>4</sup> Levi's approach is also different in that he is the narrator of the story; by nature, it is more personal because he tells the story. Even so, in the story, it provides a contrast to Professor P.'s approach.

*“Ci vuole il dissenso, il diverso, il grano di sale e di senape: il facismo non li vuole, li vieta, e per questo, tu non sei fascista; vuole tutti uguali e tu non sei uguale” (33).*

In this statement, Levi gives two related reasons for his antifacism. First, he opposes the principle upon which Fascist ideology rests; he believes in the importance of diversity while Fascism forbids it. Secondly, by nature of his identity, he would not *be able* to be. Fascist rhetoric specifically denigrates his identity as a Jew. Even if he wanted to conform to Fascist beliefs, he would not be accepted because he is different from them.

Of course, Levi doesn't accept their beliefs, and spends his meditations on Fascism proposing an alternative interpretation. In doing so, he goes beyond Professor P.'s surface-level opposition to Fascism, rejecting not only the way they are doing things but also what they are doing. However, even while he does this, he also accepts that he is subject to the Fascist interpretation when he states that “sono io l'impurezza che fa reagire lo zinco, sono io il granello di sale e di senape” (34). He accepts his impurity and recognizes the difficulties that come with it.

With this, we return to the discussion of societal position and authority, as Levi differs from Professor P. in this regard. Put simply, Levi doesn't have much power. This is illustrated by his specific choice of words. Levi identifies himself with the zinc, the object of the experiment that the story centers around. He might be studying chemistry, but he does not reign above it as Professor P. does; instead of owning “il pane” as Professor P. does, Levi *is* “il pane<sup>5</sup>.” He exists within the experiment, an element to be controlled. This statement calls upon the very real

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<sup>5</sup> Or, at least, he is one part of “il pane.” “Il pane” referred to the necessary ingredients for the experiment; Levi is the impurity, if not the element zinc itself.

experimentation done on Jews and other outcasted groups in concentration camps, but it also highlights the role of Levi as a Jew in Fascist society in general: the experiment, not the scientist.

However, even as the subject of the experiment, he still has some kind of control. He may not be able to dispute the popular rhetoric espoused by “*La Difesa della Razza*,” but he can take his own impurity and “*essere fiero*” (34). He may have to operate within the realm of an ideology he disagrees with, but he can find ways to act against it, at least on a personal level.

A personal response makes sense, and not just because it is all that is left for a person removed from power. By attacking his ethnicity and religion, and reducing him to a subject of an experiment, Fascists made the issue personal. For Levi, the bad science of Fascist rhetoric is not something he can escape because he is subjected to it.<sup>6</sup> He doesn’t have the luxury of Professor P.’s relative position of authority, which allows Professor P. to disapprove of the rhetoric while participating in the prejudice. Therefore, his disapproval of Fascist ideology is deeper than that of Professor P. Thus, the two versions of antifascism presented in the text vary greatly, depending on how much was at stake for the character. However, Levi doesn’t fault Professor P. for his surface-level approach. Instead, he appreciates Professor P.’s antifascism for what it is – a response in accordance with the effect that Fascist ideology has on Professor P.’s position in society. The Fascist regime misuses Professor P.’s career field and exerts control over the classroom that he should dominate; Professor P.’s criticisms address these points. Levi, on the other hand, has his identity assaulted and his position in society degraded, prompting a more reflective and personal response.

Beyond his own identity, this is also a personal issue for Levi in that it involves how he is able to relate to others. In his description of Rita and his relationship with her, he elaborates further on what is at stake for him with the proliferation of the kind of racist rhetoric that is

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<sup>6</sup> This statement is especially true when considering that Levi spent time at Auschwitz.

found in “La Difesa della Razza.” Not only is he stripped of power and made into an experiment, but also *because* of that, he has to question his worthiness in relation to others. Levi discusses his worth by highlighting the differences between him and Rita, focusing on their backgrounds and how that affects their relationship and their worldview. He then finishes with a demonstration that those differences can be overcome. In doing so, he makes practical his previous discussion of purity and also continues his discussion of the importance of diverse worldviews.

His discussion of Rita begins with Levi afraid to make a move, though not because of his impurity, but because of his “timidezza e sfiducia” (33). However, he ultimately decides to talk to her, spurred on by two fortunate coincidences: she is doing the same experiment as him, and he notices that she is reading a book he likes, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann. In other words, he feels emboldened to talk to her because he notices similarities between the two of them, which he describes as a “un ponticello di zinco” (34).

Ostensibly, he describes these connections as a little bridge of zinc because one of the connections is the fact that they are working with zinc. However, this description becomes even more fitting for Rita and Levi’s relationship when put into the context of zinc’s meaning in the story. Zinc needs impurity to function properly; in this sense, this connection between Rita and Levi needs to be composed of impurities, of differences, to work.

Fortunately, then, the discussion that follows this metaphor is a discussion of differences rather than similarities. It is following this statement that Levi identifies the obstacle to their relationship that is not his shyness, but that he is “l’impurezza” (35). He also goes into further detail about what his Jewishness means to him, which he describes as “un fatto pressoché trascurabile ma curioso, una piccola anomalia allegra, come chi abbia il naso storto o le

lentigini” (34). In other words, he recognizes that there is a difference between him and those around him, but far from it being an unsurpassable impurity, he sees it as relatively unimportant.

This is also how he sees the other differences between them as well. After discussing his own heritage, he turns to Rita, saying that “Rita era diversa da me, non era un grano di senape. Era figlia di un negoziante povero e malato” (35). After openly acknowledging their differences, he states that “tutto questo non allontanava da lei, anzi, lo trovavo ammirevole” (35). In other words, these differences make their bridge of zinc passable. Levi takes this bridge and uses it to walk her home. Through Rita, Levi demonstrates the usefulness of impurity that he already described, even while recognizing that his designation as impure could be “un terreno di dibattito” (34).

Levi also uses Rita to reiterate his previous points about subjectivity based on one’s position in society. With Rita, he doesn’t do this through a discussion of whether she aligns with Fascist ideology or not, but he still uses the idea that different experiences will lead to different interpretations and different outlooks. For Rita, this is demonstrated through her interpretation of *The Magic Mountain*. When Levi sees that she has the book, he wants to discuss what he found more interesting, which were the “discussioni politiche, teologiche, e metafisiche” (34). However, when he brings this up, he finds that Rita was more interested in the relationship between two of the characters. At first glance, this seemed to me like a typical, sexist remark about women’s interest in literature, but this doesn’t really make sense in the context of the story as a whole. After all, earlier in the story, Levi specifically describes how Professor P. was prejudiced against women and notes how few women made it through Professor P. 's trials. Thus, Levi must recognize that Rita is not a vapid girl. Her indifference to the deeper themes of the text must come from elsewhere.

In fact, Levi makes it quite clear where the difference comes from. The discussions that interested Levi occurred between a humanist character and a Jesuit Jewish character, a fact which allows him to segue into the aforementioned discussion of his own Jewishness. In other words, Levi's interest in these discussions stems directly from the fact that his identity is directly connected to them, just as his identity was directly connected to the racism of "La Difesa della Razza" that Professor P. only stylistically opposed. "Il discorso a cui io tendevo non si innecesava" not because Rita is stupid, but because "Rita era diversa da me" (35). In terms of the discourse on Jewish purity, Rita would be far less affected by this racism, given that she is not Jewish; thus, she takes less interest in it. Through Rita, Levi again highlights the subjectivity of the experience under a Fascist regime, and the subjectivity that comes with different life experiences more generally.

Levi demonstrates this subjectivity further in his discussion of Rita's motivations for studying science. For Levi, school was "il tempio del Sapere," while for Rita, it was "un sentiero spinoso e faticoso, che portava al titolo, al lavoro e al guadagno" (35). Levi's approach demonstrates how personal science has become for Levi in the wake of Fascism's use of it. As mentioned before, Levi is subject to science, so for him, it carries greater importance. He does not learn about it just to become a chemist; after all, it is not possible for him to really do so, for as long as the Fascists ruled, he was irrevocably part of the experiment. He learns about it in order to understand the place that he holds in society, what being part of the experiment means for him. In the context of this story, this means using the science that Fascism abuses to assert that his so-called impurity is actually necessary – his place in society is not as a defect but as a necessity.

In contrast, Rita doesn't experience her study of science as profoundly as Levi does; for her, it is a practical expense. In his descriptions of the various jobs she has worked, Levi demonstrates how, for Rita, education creates an opportunity for financial security that she has not previously had. This might be a different reasoning than his, but just as he likes Professor P. despite his different approach to antifascism, he appreciates why Rita sees things differently. Even though Rita has a different approach to the book and to education, he understands that this is largely because of her different background. In fact, Levi doesn't just understand this; he actually *admires* their differences. In doing so, Levi shows his commitment to the diversity of people and experience, even if diversity means people not understanding how deeply he is impacted by Fascist rhetoric.

This diversity was not recognized by Telesio Interlandi, director of "La Difesa della Razza," when he wrote in a statement about the magazine that "la scienza ha una morale, ed è una morale umana" (Pisanty 2004: 15). Interlandi wrote this as a justification for the political use of science in "La Difesa della Razza," which featured an insistence on the importance of purity. In other words, Interlandi's so-called moral was that purity, or lack of diversity, "protegge del male come un usbergo," as Levi puts it (32). In "Zinco," Levi shows that he takes issue with this moral by proposing an alternative perspective that emphasizes the importance of impurity instead. He also demonstrates his disapproval of this moral by showing an understanding of the effect of different life experiences and his consequent appreciation for the differences between himself and his characters.

However, he doesn't necessarily use "Zinco" to deny the idea that science has a moral, or even that it is a human moral. In fact, Levi uses "scientific morals" throughout *Il sistema periodico*. It is basically the concept of the whole book -- in each of his stories, he connects an



element to life experiences, using it to “impara a capire le cose e gli uomini” (Levi Back Cover). At first glance, this may seem hypocritical, but Levi’s morals look much different than those of “La Difesa della Razza,” not just in content, but also for the degree to which they claim to be true. Levi uses the elements to illustrate lessons, but he does so in a way that recognizes differences of interpretation. In other words, he doesn’t claim that his interpretations show *the* moral of the story— they are just one moral, or perhaps more accurately, *his* moral. This is demonstrated in “Zinco” when he presents two different morals that could be derived from the element Zinc and simply notes the one which he prefers. He clearly disapproves of the first (and Fascist) interpretation, but he doesn’t necessarily say it’s a wrong interpretation; he just has a different point of view. If anything, with “Zinco,” the only overarching moral that Levi insists upon is that these differences are honored. However, this moral should not be interpreted as Levi accepting Fascist racist ideology as just a different point of view because this ideology was built upon the erasure of differences, so it is by nature incompatible with an approach that honors them. To summarize, in “Zinco,” Levi uses morals derived from science, but he does so in a way that contradicts Interlandi’s approach. He doesn’t claim to hold “la chiave del Vero” (28). He just sees the way that science interacts with humanity, and in the case of “Zinco,” uses science to show the importance of impurity, both for chemical reactions and in his interactions with other characters.

Interpreting “Zinco” in this manner – not just as a story with a metaphor but as a story that *is* a metaphor – adds depth to an already important story and also generates more questions about Levi’s work. Il sistema periodico has been relatively understudied and deserves a more thorough analysis in order to explore its depth of meaning. This paper explores the possibilities within just one story, but what about the 20 other stories? Do other stories continue these

messages, or do they relate to Levi's cultural context in other ways? For example, in the next story "Ferro," Levi discusses how they had to "riferire per iscritto, sotto forma di verbale, di sí o di no, perché non erano ammessi i dubbi né le esitazioni: era ogni volta una scelta, un deliberare; un'impresa matura e responsabile, a cui il fascismo non ci aveva preparati, e che emanava un buon odore asciutto e pulito" (37). Here Levi directly discusses Fascism, admonishing its clarity and precision just as he does with Professor P. in "Zinco." Further research is needed to answer this question and to more fully grasp the purpose of this collection of autobiographical stories.

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