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Primo Levi, the Signifier/d: an analysis of the *Muselmann* in the works of Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben

Throughout Primo Levi's works that center on his experience in the Lager, namely *If This Is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, the struggle to clearly demarcate the 'sign,' the 'signified,' and the 'signifier' is ubiquitous: Levi provides accounts of the human that has been reduced to such an extent, the *Muselmann*, and in doing so conveys the truth of the Lager experience that is not only that of Levi's fellow prisoners but also of himself. Levi muses on the role of the 'witness' and hypothesizes a "complete witness" (*il testimone integrale*) and in doing so not only muses on that very semiotic relation of the 'sign' and 'signified' but provides the crucial additional concept of 'signifier.' And it is on this tripartite relation that Giorgio Agamben misinterprets Levi in his own biopolitical theorizations on the *Muselmann*, most notably in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. There is inherent tension between both Levi and Agamben regarding Levi's role as 'signifier,' that is the literary mediator between the 'sign' and its 'signified.' In this paper I argue firstly against Agamben's reduction of Levi to "the perfect example of the witness," an ideal which to Levi is simply that, an ideal that is unreal; and secondly that Agamben's biopolitical meditation on bare life evidenced by the *Muselmann* is an amputation of Levi's 'signified', that is his experience and reflection on the Lager.