

PRIMO LEVI IN MEMORIAM

Introductory Note

No reader [of the Hebrew version] of this book will find it easy to put himself in the emotional position of an author who is ignorant of the language of Holy Writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers – as well as from every other religion – and who cannot take a share in nationalist ideals, but who has yet never repudiated his people, who feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature. If the questions were put to him: “Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your compatriots, what is left to you that is Jewish?” he would reply: “A very great deal, and probably its very essence.” (SIGMUND FREUD, Preface to the Hebrew Edition of *’Totem und Tabu*, 1939)¹⁾

In October 1986, in the preface to a collection of his articles published in the daily newspaper *’La Stampa* over the span of twenty-plus years, Primo Levi wrote: “I beg the reader not to look for a sign, for a message. They are words that I hate, these words, because they put on me clothes that are not mine, rather they belong to a human type which I distrust: the prophet, the bard, the seer. I am a normal man with a good memory who stumbled into a vortex from which he emerged more by luck than by virtue, and who, since then, preserves a certain curiosity for vortices large and small, metaphorical and material.”²⁾

The analysis of Levi’s work developed according to different perspectives and lines, along which Levi’s personal literary evolution has been read and contextualized. Both his meeting points and his semantic divergences reflect a permanent tension in his literary writing, already cultivated before but mostly after deportation to Auschwitz, which is guided by the strong critical thinking that brought him to his last book, *’I sommersi e I salvati*, published one year before his death. The camp experience introduced to Levi’s work an ethical necessity and a moral quest that sustained his entire oeuvre, framing the space

¹⁾ In: YOSEF HAYIM YERUSHALMI, *Freud’s Moses*, New Haven, London 1991, p. 14, fn. 51.

²⁾ PRIMO LEVI, *Racconti e Saggi*, Turin 1986, “Premessa” (our translation).

of the writing and giving meanings to words and to thoughts without which his memory would be lost.

In the theory of twentieth-century literature, the term “literary space” has often been used in different ways and several meanings have been attached to it. In order to define the work of Primo Levi while keeping in mind the different perspectives on it within literary criticism, the definition of a Levian literary space must include the polyphonic character of readings of his work. Applying the concept of literary modernity to Levi’s work, placing it in the context of a poetics, of a literary *longue durée*, we maintain that his mode of writing and description has a “telescopic character” through which the temporal duration of a linear reading is destabilized by the network of references and intertextual relationships established between the different moments of writing.

Auschwitz certainly represents a primary spatiality, tied to, as Gérard Genette claims, the linguistic nature of the text.³⁾ A book is in fact primarily a subject, a set of signs that follow each other on the page according to a timeless and material disposition. According to Genette, language not only expresses predominantly spatial relationships, thanks to a large collection of metaphors, but also includes within itself a spatiality for expression, a “semantics” so to speak, which is revealed when a figure of speech breaks the signifiers’ unilinear succession, introducing a duality between the sign and the signifier.

Every discourse on the Lager is built on this duality, and the observation can be extended to a literary panorama – that of writing on the Lager – which has disjointed every classical form of literary genre. Someone, reflecting on this intertextuality, proposed the introduction of the category of the discursive field that is usually configured as participation in a two-party conversation within a dynamic perspective. In other words, in each national context the Lagerdiscurs legitimates a dialogue within the author who founded it. It has happened not only with Primo Levi in Italy but with Bruno Apitz in Germany, Tadeusz Borowicz in Poland, and Robert Antelme in France.

In Primo Levi the dual structure of the discourse on the Lager results, on the one hand, in a peculiar narrative strategy; on the other in a discourse on the legitimacy of the testimony, its status, and on the possibility of getting closer to the truth, of certifying the real thing *per se*.

Levi’s experience and work has often seemed all too clear-cut. A young Italian Jew from an upper–middle class family with a degree in chemistry is deported to Auschwitz following a brief experience as a partisan. He miraculously survives, returns to Turin (his hometown), and begins writing about his experiences in unusual, terribly authentic tones. There is not the slightest hint

³⁾ Cf. GÉRARD GENETTE, *La littérature et l’espace*, in: *Figures II*, Paris 1969, pp. 43–48.

of rhetoric or victimhood in the words he uses, no emphasis on his personal suffering, and no attempt at emotional blackmail in order to impress the reader, no resorting to the kind of rhetorical artifice that targets emotion and feeling. What is striking about his work – even many years after his concentration camp experience at Auschwitz, and long after his death – is its tone of objective scientific analysis. It almost reads as an anthropological report penned by a narrator who describes everything with absolute detachment and equanimity, and whose fierce desire for knowledge drives him to depict the grievances he experienced and attack the human species that he witnessed first-hand.

He had the eye of a writer, capable of sifting through the infinitesimal details and the debris of everyday experience to select unfailingly the objects and materials that served to organize and construct his later writing. Certainly, his background in chemistry also helped him to refine, focus, and win the battle against chaos, against the malignant nature of matter: “stupid matter, slothfully hostile as human stupidity is hostile.” Daniele Del Giudice raises the hypothesis that in Levi’s work, the narrative voice that speaks is not only that of the former deportee and chemist, it is also the voice of the anthropologist narrator. As Del Giudice states in the preface to Levi’s works, this is a characteristic he shares with other Italian authors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Leonardo Sciascia, and Italo Calvino, a generational feature that remained central throughout twentieth-century Italian literature.

We accept Del Giudice’s hypothesis that Levi writes as an anthropologist when he speaks of the camps as the largest biological experiment ever, “set up to establish what is essential and what advantageous to the conduct of the human animal.”⁴⁾ Yet Levi’s anthropological gaze originated in a place with well-established boundaries: a Nazi Lager, an extermination camp that is not only a geographical location – Oświęcim, in southern Poland – but also a historic location, a place that played a crucial role in twentieth-century history. It is a geographical location that reflects a literary spatiality. The population it was set up to examine was mostly Jewish but also had a plurality of national belongings: its inhabitants came from different places and backgrounds, and spoke different languages, a veritable *Babelturm* where languages as diverse as Polish, French, Romanian, Italian, Yiddish, Russian, Dutch, German, and Hungarian came together and often clashed. The intricate universe of mysterious languages that floated on the air at Buna was viewed by Levi as an ancient curse, a myth that allowed the author from Turin to emphasize its parallels to another equally significant myth: the expulsion from Earthly Paradise.

⁴⁾ Cf. DANIELE DEL GIUDICE, Introduzione, in: LEVI, Opere, ed. by MARCO BÉLPOLITI, 2 vols, Turin 1997, vol. 1, pp. LXII–LXIV.

After entering Auschwitz-Birkenau on February 26, Primo Levi received his new name 174517: “We have been baptized; we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die.”⁵⁾ Deprived of his home, reduced to suffering and mindless of his dignity, Levi, at the threshold of death, discovered his Jewish quality, becoming a Jew in Auschwitz:

The consciousness of feeling different was enforced upon me. Someone without any reason at all, decided that I was different and inferior: thus, as a natural reaction, I felt in those years different and superior...In this sense Auschwitz gave me something that has remained. Making me feel a Jew, it urged me to recover, after the war, a cultural heritage that I had not previously possessed.⁶⁾

Primo Levi’s voice not only played a pivotal role in survivors’ attempts to reconstruct their individual memories on a social foundation; by conveying the memories of the deportations and exterminations, Levi also translated Auschwitz into words on behalf of others, becoming the founder of a new literary genre.

This special issue on Levi, which is the result of an intense and fruitful workshop held in November 2015 at the University of Innsbruck, *Primo Levi: Tradition, Translation, Transmission*, in cooperation with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is being published thirty years after Primo Levi’s death. Delving into the complex relationship that exists between testimony, storytelling, and being-towards-death, the following articles investigate three main aspects of Levi’s work: the role of testimony within the complex framework of post-WWII Italian literary culture, the existential and philological problems involving being translated into another culture and language, and Levi’s achievement as a writer *tout court*. Precisely because of the great diversity in how and when Levi’s work has been received, the choice on what to include was not an easy one. We decided to focus mainly on the essays that we believe will have a significant influence and leave an impact on Levi critics, representing an important contribution, each on its own, to the ongoing discussion on the author from Turin, on his literary quality, and on his deontology of witnessing.

In the opening essay, ›Historical Translatability. Primo Levi Amongst the Snares of European History, 1938–1987‹, Domenico Scarpa takes his cue from the groundbreaking English translation of ›The Complete Works of Primo Levi‹, recently published in America by Liveright, and argues for the necessity of re-reading Primo Levi today, pleading for a new historical and chronological approach to his work. Focusing on Levi’s early writing, the works that preceded the Lager, and the works he completed between 1945 and 1950, Scarpa reveals

⁵⁾ PRIMO LEVI, *Survival in Auschwitz*, New York 1986, p. 27.

⁶⁾ GIORGIO DE RIENZO, In un alambiccio quanta poesia, in: *Famiglia Cristiana*, 20 luglio, 29 (1975), pp. 40–43.

a possible path for charting, in philological terms, not only the complexity of Levi's writing but also his deeply felt intention and his desire, ultimately fulfilled, to be considered as a writer among the writers of his time.

Along a similar path, Martina Mengoni proposes a new reading of Levi's last and probably most complex book, *›I sommersi e I salvati‹*. Published by Einaudi in spring 1986, this book soon came to be connected with Levi's state of depression – the author committed suicide just one year later in April 1987. In reality, as Mengoni argues, the story of its development is much older, going back some twenty years before the date of its publication. By reading *›I sommersi e i salvati‹* backwards, Mengoni reconsiders the conception of the book, stating that it should not be seen as a sort of “last will” but rather as the result of a twenty-year exercise in questioning power, memory, and the experience of the Lager. More generally, it represents Levi's never-ending reflection on the ambiguous relationship between history and witnessing, between truth and its conditions of possibility.

In his essay on *›Primo Levi's Love‹*, Uri Cohen offers us an intriguing and to some extent refreshingly controversial reading of Levi's *›Il sistema periodico‹* (*›The Periodic Table‹*) that investigates the spaces between letter and life, those interstices between what has been written and the darker, almost impenetrable core of lived experiences that inspired it. In particular, Cohen argues that while love might not overtly occupy the center of Levi's “narrated worlds,” it is crucial to “Levi's social being” and should be considered as one of the main “motors” of his writing. Focusing in particular on “Vanadium,” one of the last chapters of *›The Periodic Table‹*, he reads the collection of short stories as “a book whose center is about love.”

Following Jorge Semprun's retrospective reflection on his own writing, which was triggered by Levi's portrait of the survivor as an eternal captive, Iris Milner proposes a re-reading of *›The Truce‹* as Levi's “retroactive contemplation” of his own “path to art as means of testimony.” According to this rewarding and innovative perspective, which animates her whole essay *›A Wandering Vaudeville‹*, Milner argues that the nostos narrative of *›The Truce‹* should be read as both Levi's account of his homecoming as a parallel journey into the realm of art, and as Levi's recognition that the artistic representation of the Holocaust is not only practicable, viable, but also – in the Lacanian sense of “traumatic awakening” – an ethical duty.

The special issue also includes two reviews of important recent publications within Levi studies by two renowned Italian literary scholars. In his review, Mario Barenghi discusses Marco Belpoliti's latest works on Levi, his new edition of Levi's *›Opere complete‹* (Einaudi, 2016) and his comprehensive critical monograph, *›Primo Levi di fronte e di profile‹* (Guanda, 2015). Camilla Miglio

gives a positive review to an innovative, interdisciplinary essay collection on Levi's oeuvre: ›Interpreting Primo Levi. Interdisciplinary Perspectives‹, edited by Minna Vuohelainen and Arthur Chapman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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