

## HISTORICAL TRANSLATABILITY

Primo Levi Amongst the Snares of European History  
1938–1987

By Domenico Scarpa (Turin)

Taking his cue from the groundbreaking English translation of 'The Complete Works' of Primo Levi (recently published in America by Liveright) and focusing on Levi's early writing, the author argues for the necessity of re-reading Primo Levi today, pleading for a new historical and chronological approach to his work.

### I.

I would like to begin with an explanation of the two dates in my subtitle, 1938 and 1987. 1938 is the year when the Fascist regime led by Mussolini passed racist laws against Jews. This event not only put on Italian Jews the burden of an increasing self-consciousness, but it also marked the beginning of their "search for roots," the construction of a cultural identity for the many of them who were not particularly religious or aware of their heritage or tradition. Primo Levi was himself such a secular Jew.

More importantly, the racist laws of 1938 made Italian Jews aware of an impending catastrophe. 1938 brought about the recognition of a further dimension in national and European history. Metaphorically speaking, 1938 broke the back of Italian historical continuity. Shattering Italian identity, it was the first of many fractures that were to occur in the decade to follow. There was the entry of Italy into World War II on June 10, 1940, the fall of the Fascist regime on July 25, 1943, the complete collapse and dissolution of the Italian state after the armistice with the Allies on September 8, 1943, the liberation and the victory of the Italian Resistance on April 25, 1945, the institution of the republic in 1946 and, finally, the writing and promulgation of the new constitution of the *Repubblica Italiana* in 1948. In the spring of 1948, the general election gave an absolute majority of the seats in the Italian parliament to the Christian Democrats – and it gave the political climate of the country

a distinctive anti-Communist tone that was to mark the entire period of the Cold War in Italy.

Going back to 1938, this date stands for the deeper, multifaceted perception of history that I ascribe to Primo Levi. Here I mean *history* in the absolute sense of the word. In fact, I would like to point out that Levi observed history (and acted in it) from a perspective that was not only an Italian one – which, on its own, could potentially be short-sighted – but an international one.

1987, the date of Levi's death, is only two years before 1989, a year that has been labeled "the end of history" (a blatant error, as can be witnessed on a daily basis). More reasonably, 1989 is the year when history opened up again in Europe and in the world as a whole. And not just history, but all discourse concerning history opened up, leading to a complete reassessment of the post-war era. Tony Judt's *Postwar: A Story of Europe since 1945* will serve as my first guide here:

Since 1989 – with the overcoming of long-established inhibitions – it has proven possible to acknowledge (sometimes in the teeth of virulent opposition and denial) the moral price that was paid for Europe's rebirth. Poles, French, Swiss, Italians, Romanians and others are now better placed to know – if they wish to know – what really happened in their country just a few short decades ago.<sup>1)</sup>

I will come in a moment to Italian inhibitions and the Italian will to know what had really happened. First I return to Judt and his concise statement about European memories of its *real* history: "Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket."<sup>2)</sup> The process that led to the validity of such a statement went through its crucial phase in 1989. The role of Primo Levi in that process can be examined by starting from an important achievement in publishing that took place in 2015 in the United States.

## 2.

The American publishing house Liveright has just published *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* in three volumes. For the first time ever, an Italian author has been translated into English in full and has been published by a single publisher and printed in a single edition. Liveright's achievement is unprecedented. This had never happened before – not with Dante, Machiavelli, Montale, or Calvino. For the first time, a work of these dimensions is available as a piece to anyone who can read the most widespread language in the world. This is

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<sup>1)</sup> TONY JUDT, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, London 2005, pp. 9–10.

<sup>2)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 803.

certainly a conspicuous case of successful translatability. It remains to be seen why we can speak about *historical* translatability, i.e. the capacity of Primo Levi to write texts in 1947 that are significant for us here and now, and a closer look at those books will help.

The three volumes of the ›Complete Works‹ gather together all of Levi's *œuvre* from ›If This Is a Man‹ to ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ in the order in which they appeared in Italy, translated in their entirety and conserving their original features. In addition to this, there are also more than 250 pages of miscellaneous writings taken from the Italian Einaudi edition of 1997, the ›Opere‹ edited by Marco Belpoliti.

This is cause for celebration, but it is more useful to take a closer look at the operation itself in order to trace out its meaning. If we have arrived at ›The Complete Works‹ today, a harmoniously arranged compact edition, we owe this to the name on the binding in small print, Liveright, the American publisher whose rebirth has been fostered by editor Robert Weil under the aegis of W.W. Norton & Company publishers. Liveright is the affiliate publisher to which he entrusted this collection, the fruit of fifteen years of labor acquiring the publication rights to all of Levi's writing in a uniform edition.

However, we also owe the concrete existence and exemplary quality of ›The Complete Works‹ to another name that appears in bold print on the binding of each of the three volumes – Ann Goldstein. A copy editor at ›The New Yorker‹, Goldstein has been translating Italian writings for more than twenty years: from Calasso to Pasolini (›Petrolio‹), from Bilenchi (›Il gelo‹/›The Chill‹) to Baricco, and from Aldo Buzzi to Elena Ferrante (all of Ferrante's novels, which have found enthusiastic readers in the United States.) She also contributed to the first complete English translation of Leopardi's ›Zibaldone‹, an achievement completed in 2013. For six years, from 2009 through 2015, she worked full time on Levi, guiding and harmonizing a team of ten translators. She completed new translations of ›The Truce‹, ›The Periodic Table‹, and many of the short stories and miscellaneous writings. She worked with Stuart Woolf on a revision of his 1959 translation of ›If This Is a Man‹. Finally, she translated the critical and scholarly framework provided in ›The Complete Works‹, a tool created in cooperation with the ›Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin.<sup>3)</sup>

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<sup>3)</sup> The ›Centro Internazionale‹ also provided scholarly assistance on the translations, a detailed chronology written by ERNESTO FERRERO (a renowned writer and editor of Primo Levi's books at Einaudi for many years and president of the ›Centro Internazionale Primo Levi‹), an essay on ›The Publication of Primo Levi's Works in the World‹ by MONICA QUIRICO, and my own ›Notes on the Text‹ and ›Select Bibliography‹.

## 3.

In Auschwitz, Levi endured a preliminary act of violence before any other offense took place – the denial of communication. Now his words have been translated in their entirety, down to the last uncollected page, into a language that everyone wants to understand, into the language that is indispensable to communication today in every part of the world. This is a positive retaliation: a shift from suspicion towards the stranger to the present-day opportunity to be understood everywhere and by everyone, thanks to translation into English. ›The Complete Works‹ present a European author to a worldwide audience, an author who made his *début* soon after the war in 1947 with an unforgettable book, ›If This Is a Man‹, the report on the eleven months that Levi spent in Auschwitz as a Jewish prisoner. Such a description may seem banal, but it is not so in any way. One could begin with the periodization, which states “soon after the war,” not “immediately after the war.” I will return later to the adverb “immediately” but here the point is that ›If This Is a Man‹ came out almost three years after the liberation of Auschwitz. During this historical period – from January 27, 1945, to October 11, 1947, when the book was printed – numerous critical events, visible and invisible, had taken place.

Here again I turn to Judt: in the three years from 1945 to 1948, the real “myth of the postwar period” took shape. With the fighting over, peoples and nations – whether winners or losers – were driven by a “desire, common to both sides of the division, to forget the recent past and forge a *new* continent.”<sup>4)</sup> To appreciate the relevant play on words, *forget-forge*, with its clear allusion to *forgery*, we should bear in mind that in the new Europe of the immediate post-war period, a combination of contrived decisions, determined by a broad range of political exigencies, produced a shared memory. The official image of the recent past was therefore forged and eventually confirmed on the basis of what could be called a “forgery.”

A work such as ›If This Is a Man‹, published in the autumn of 1947, went against the desire, widespread in every region of Europe, to overcome the past by forgetting it, even by joining, ideally, the side of the winners and erasing a reality that was very close to hand and not very honorable. Levi’s implicit rejection of the mythologies of the post-war period – a rejection that became fully visible only with the passing of decades and the collapse, in 1989, of a Europe divided between the Western bloc and the Communist bloc – makes

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<sup>4)</sup> TONY JUDT, *The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe*, in: *Daedalus*, no. 121 (Fall 1992), pp. 83–118, again in: *Memory and Power in Postwar Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. by JAN-WERNER MÜLLER, Cambridge 2002, pp. 157–183. Quotation here from *Daedalus*, p. 83.

him a writer-witness who is both free and isolated, and explains in part why his reputation continues to grow as time goes by.

4.

If this retrospective evaluation of Levi's increasing *historical translatability* is important, the date of the work's publication, 1947, is equally crucial because Levi was expressing doubts about the myth of the new Europe while it was still being shaped. A synchronic look – on a European scale – at the literary panorama of that year will provide some guidance.

In 1947 two other pivotal works of what might be termed “concentration-camp literature” were published: ›L'Espèce humaine‹ by Robert Antelme and ›LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen‹ by Victor Klemperer. The first was a memoir by a non-Jewish political prisoner, the French Communist Antelme, who was deported first to Buchenwald, then to Gandersheim, and was put on the forced march to Dachau ordered by the SS on April 4, 1945, under pressure from the Red Army, which was then near Berlin. ›LTI‹ is the diary of a Jewish philologist on the language of the Third Reich who escaped deportation and death because he was married to a German woman who did not renounce him as her husband in spite of the harassment she endured – the diary of someone who was compelled to live in a homeland that had been transformed into an enormous prison. Like ›If This Is a Man‹, the two works were brought out by publishing houses that had recently been founded with the aim of contributing to the political and cultural reconstruction of their countries. In Paris, ›Éditions de la Cité Universelle‹ had brought out the works of Saint-Just shortly before the Antelme and, in 1947, it also printed a volume by Edgar Morin entitled ›L'An zéro de l'Allemagne‹. In Berlin, alongside Klemperer, the Aufbau-Verlag published works by writers who had been outlawed by Nazism, writers such as Hans Fallada, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Anna Seghers.

The Turin publishing house De Silva, founded by Franco Antonicelli in 1942, was not very active until after the war. ›If This Is a Man‹ was part of a new series, ›Biblioteca Leone Ginzburg‹, named after a close friend of Antonicelli. Ginzburg, a Jew born in Russia, had been a translator, a teacher of Russian literature, a publisher (he had co-founded Einaudi together with Giulio Einaudi), and a leader of the anti-Fascist movement “Giustizia e Libertà”. Ginzburg died in the Roman Regina Coeli prison on February 5, 1944, after being tortured by Nazi jailers. Levi's first work was number three in the ›Biblioteca‹ bearing Ginzburg's name, a series whose subtitle was “Documents and Studies for Contemporary History.” It was not obvious that a document produced by a deported Jew could provide, as early as 1947, a contribution to the *study* of

contemporary history. That double label – “Biblioteca Leone Ginzburg (Documenti e studi per la storia contemporanea)” – was clever, especially since in 1947 works by the two most authoritative German writers not compromised by the Nazis came out in Italy: ›Die Schuldfrage‹ (›The Question of German Guilt‹) by Karl Jaspers, translated into Italian under the title ›La colpa della Germania‹ (›Germany’s Guilt‹),<sup>5</sup> and Thomas Mann’s ›Deutschland und die Deutschen‹ (›Germany and the Germans‹).<sup>6</sup> Finally, 1947 was the year in which Einaudi published Antonio Gramsci’s ›Prison Letters‹.

Having set Levi’s début within the relevant international context, let me stress here that its title is ›If This Is a Man‹. Not, ›If This Is a Jew‹ or even – a title even farther away from Levi’s intention – ›If This Is an Italian Jew‹. A Jew himself, Levi was obviously fully aware that over 90% of the victims of the Nazi camps were Jews. He could also sense that in 1947 (and for a long time afterwards), awareness of the specificity of Jewish deportation and extermination was limited in Italy, as it was in Europe. Nevertheless, the goal of his discourse was broader. Seeing things from a Jewish point of view, from the status of a non-privileged Jewish *Häftling* at Auschwitz, he wanted to take up the issue of human nature as such.

Levi’s main preoccupation was not the condition of the Jews or of his fellow countrymen, but the human condition and the behavior of men within a framework of a history that was neither national nor (even worse) particular or parochial. Even when he faced the returning threat of Fascism and attempts at historical negationism, you can find this same vision in him, this same openness of mind on a wide horizon of history and geography.

Here I introduce my second guide, the Italian historian Anna Bravo, who gave the ›Centro Studi Primo Levi’s‹ fifth Primo Levi Lecture in 2014, entitled ›Narratives for History‹:

A temptation one could easily fall into apropos of Primo Levi is to think of him as an icon of the Great Witness. That would be doing him an injustice. An icon is by definition never-changing, crystallized around a single meaning, whereas Levi, though indeed a great witness, was also a poet, non-fiction writer and novelist who dealt with themes other than the Shoah. [...]

Primo Levi did not regard history as the universal heir to the past, of which memory was an ingredient or a rough draft. But he knew the importance of historical research in forming the public memory, and he hoped for the emergence of a kind of history that could handle extreme events, and offered it analytical tools and concepts that might help to bring

<sup>5</sup>) Heidelberg 1946. Translation: New York 2001.

<sup>6</sup>) Mann delivered the paper in English at the Library of Congress in Washington, on May 29, 1945, just before his seventieth birthday. The original text is now collected in THOMAS MANN, *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden*, XI, *Reden und Aufsätze* 3, Frankfurt/M. 1960.

about such a change. It was a complex endeavor, in which he did not always find support, but into which he put a lot of his energy: not one of the lessons we owe to him would have been formulated without his radical independence of judgment, his refusal to treat truth to experience as something subservient to ideological imperatives or group solidarity, and his courage in exposing himself to criticism, disavowals and misunderstandings.<sup>7)</sup>

Above I evoked a category that I termed “historical translatability.” These texts may be even more significant now than they were when they were written or they may be significant in a different way. Things have not always been like that. Levi has not always been historically translatable. In fact, in Italy he was scarcely audible for a long time, and even less so outside Italy. This brings me back to the publication of *If This Is a Man* that took place *soon after* the war but not *immediately* after the war.

### 5.

“If This Is a Man [is a book that] was written immediately.”<sup>8)</sup> This statement was uttered by Primo Levi himself in September 1975 and it needs interpretation. Levi’s first book appeared in the autumn of 1947, almost three years – this is a key detail – after the liberation of Auschwitz. By that time, dozens of memoirs about deportation had already appeared in Italy. Among these, however, only seven had to do with the deportation of the Jews.<sup>9)</sup>

The *man* in Primo Levi’s first book was *not only* a Jew. The doubt about “if this is a man” concerns both the victims and the perpetrators. This is the most important point in that title. Both the so-called *Muselmann* in Auschwitz, the slave prisoner exhausted to death, and his torturer, be he an SS officer or a Kapo, are no longer human beings and no longer deserve to be called “man.” Once reduced to a tattooed registration number or to a bureaucrat of mass murder, such an individual is no longer a man.

The *man* in Levi’s first book was *not necessarily* a political prisoner either. Levi participated briefly in the Italian Resistance but his personal history is not one of heroism or struggle. This accounts for part of the book’s initial misfortune and the misunderstandings it ran into. Bravo makes this point:

<sup>7)</sup> ANNA BRAVO, *Raccontare per la storia/Narratives for History*, English trans. by JONATHAN HUNT (= *Lezioni Primo Levi* 5), Turin 2014, pp. 2–4.

<sup>8)</sup> “Cuneo: Incontro con Primo Levi”, Leo Club, 14 Sept. 1975, transcription by GABRIELLA POLI. Partially published in: GABRIELLA POLI and GIORGIO CALCAGNO, *Echi di una voce perduta. Incontri, interviste e conversazioni con Primo Levi*, Milan 1992. The passage cited here (“*Se questo è un uomo* [...] è un libro scritto subito”), is in Poli’s Transcript, p. 10.

<sup>9)</sup> Cf. ANNA BALDINI, *La memoria italiana della Shoah (1944–2009)*, in: *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, ed. by DOMENICO SCARPA (= *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, dir. by SERGIO LUZZATTO and GABRIELE PEDULLÀ; vol. 3), Turin 2012, pp. 758–763.

Today the term deportation instantly calls to mind Auschwitz, a place and word which are symbols of the persecution and extermination of Jews. It was not always thus. In the immediate post-war period, and for many years afterwards, the deportee was essentially a political activist – a partisan and an anti-Fascist militant. To understand what Primo Levi gave to history, we have to start from that period. [...] when Levi wrote *If This Is a Man*, the Jews' voice was still mixed up with those of other prisoners.<sup>10)</sup>

Let us place into this historical framework a profound and well-intentioned remark made by Italo Calvino in his 1955 essay 'The Lion's Marrow'. It is the passage where Calvino points out that "[t]his awareness of living at the most tragic and lowest moment in human history, of living between Buchenwald and the H bomb, is the starting point of our every fantasy, of our every thought."<sup>11)</sup>

In 1955 Calvino was a militant member of the Italian Communist Party, having fought as a partisan during the twenty months of the Resistance from September 1943 to April 1945. He mentions Buchenwald, the camp of the political prisoners, Communists and Socialists, the camp of the fighters. Buchenwald stands for deportation because of political – and not racist – reasons. Calvino does not mention Auschwitz or the Soviet Gulags. His vision of history is generous and partial – a vision then shared by many intellectuals all around Europe, not only Communists. Why that neglect of Auschwitz and the genocide? Once more, Judt helps to shed some light on the matter:

In retrospect it is the universal character of the neglect that is most striking. [...] The rapid onset of the Cold War contributed, of course. But there were other reasons too. For most Europeans, World War Two had not been about the Jews. ... The Holocaust was only one of the many things that people wanted to forget.<sup>12)</sup>

*Forgetting* is the key concept in this passage. Calvino was writing in 1955. In that same year, the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the camps and of the end of World War II (in my opinion two extremely, if not utterly different events), Levi wrote a brief text on deportation. Its title was 'Anniversary'. It was published in a small-circulation municipal review at a time when the memory of the Shoah had faded, in Italy as in Europe.

Today it is unseemly to speak of the camps. One is at risk of being accused, in the best hypothesis, of self-pity or a gratuitous love for the macabre; in the worst, of pure and simple dishonesty, or maybe indecent behavior.

Is this silence justified? Must we tolerate it, we survivors? [...] There is only one answer. We must not forget, we must not be silent. If we are silent, who will speak? Certainly not the guilty and their accomplices. If our testimony is missing, in a not distant future the

<sup>10)</sup> BRAVO, *Narratives for History* (cit. fn. 7), pp. 6, 10.

<sup>11)</sup> ITALO CALVINO, *Il midollo del leone* (Paragone Letteratura VI, no. 66 (June 1955), in: Id., *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società*, Turin 1980; now: Id., *Saggi 1945–1985*, ed. by MARIO BARENGHI, Milan 1995, vol. 1, pp. 9–27, here: p. 22.

<sup>12)</sup> JUDT, *Postwar* (cit. fn. 1), p. 808.



deeds of Nazi bestiality, because of their very enormity, will be relegated to legend. And so we must speak.<sup>13)</sup>

Such statements were not commonplace in 1955. But there is more than that. In ›Anniversary‹, Levi courageously points to the deepest roots of the survivors' silence:

It is shame. We are men, we belong to the same human family that our executioners belong to. Before the enormity of their crime, we feel that we, too, are citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and cannot be exempted from the charge that an otherworldly judge, on the basis of our own testimony, would bring against all humanity.

We are children of that Europe where Auschwitz is: we lived in the century in which science was bent, and gave birth to the racial laws and the gas chambers. Who can say for sure that he is immune to the infection?<sup>14)</sup>

Shame was a new subject for reflection. These were difficult and daring things to utter, not only in 1955, even if we consider that the universal shame sketched by Levi in these few solemn lines is utterly different from the irrational "shame in hindsight" felt by the survivor who is afraid of being "alive in the place of someone else,"<sup>15)</sup> or from "shame" as implacably explored in the third essay of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹, the final reflection on the camps published by Levi in 1986, less than a year before his death.

## 6.

More vision and breadth of mind is to be found in Levi than in Calvino, apparently, but this is not the real point. It should be remembered that for the former deportees, the first ten or fifteen years after the war were a desert. In Italy, public memory of the war was fading, political life was slipping into a moral morass in which the former Fascists swam confidently due to the heavy anti-Communist atmosphere, and the specific horror of the extermination of the Jews held no interest for historians or for society. Thus, in the 1950s, a tone of grim disappointment dominates, as in the essay ›Anniversary‹. Yet we unfailingly find two enduring qualities of Levi the witness: the persistence of his commitment and the precision of his gaze, his moral judgment. Moving forward five years, Levi wrote the essay ›The Time of the Swastikas‹ in 1960 as

<sup>13)</sup> PRIMO LEVI, *The Deported. Anniversary* (Torino XXXI, no. 4, (April 1955), special issue devoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation), English trans. by ALESSANDRA BASTAGLI and FRANCESCO BASTAGLI, in: PRIMO LEVI, *The Complete Works*, ed. by ANN GOLDSTEIN, 3 vols, New York 2015, vol. 3, pp. 1127–1129, 1127–1128.

<sup>14)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1128.

<sup>15)</sup> PRIMO LEVI, *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e I salvati*, 1986), English trans. by MICHAEL WOOD, in: *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 13), vol. 3, p. 2466.

a commission from an educational magazine run by Ada Gobetti, the widow of Piero Gobetti, a political writer and publisher who was one of the prominent Italian anti-Fascist heroes to die in Paris at the age of 25, following a beating by Fascist gangs.

In ›The Time of the Swastikas‹, Levi questions the labeling of the Italian Resistance a *Second Risorgimento*, the Risorgimento being the nineteenth-century social and political movement that led to Italian unification in 1861.

To describe and convey the events of yesterday we too often adopted a rhetorical, hagiographic, and therefore vague language. Excellent arguments can be made for and against the appropriateness of calling the Resistance the Secondo Risorgimento, but I ask myself if it is right to underline this aspect of it, or if it is not preferable to insist on the fact that the Resistance continues, or at least should continue, because its objectives have been achieved only in part. By linking the Resistance with the Risorgimento we end up asserting an ideal continuity between the events of 1848, 1860, 1918, and 1945, to the detriment of the far more critical and obvious continuity from 1945 to today. The break of the Fascist decades loses its prominence.

In conclusion, I believe that if we wish our children to feel these concerns, and therefore feel that they are our children, we should speak to them a little less of glory and victory, of heroism and sacred ground, and a little more of that hard, dangerous, and thankless life, the daily strain, the days of hope and of despair, of our comrades who died doing their duty in silence, of the participation of the populace (but not all of it), of the errors made and those avoided, of the conspiratorial and military experience painfully acquired, through mistakes that were paid in human lives, of the hard-won (and not spontaneous, not always perfect) agreement among the supporters of different parties. Only in this way will the young feel our most recent history as a fabric of human events and not as a “pensum” [school homework] to add to the many others of the ministry’s programs.<sup>16)</sup>

What was required was the work of the historian and the storyteller, of a historian who could write like a storyteller without losing scientific exactitude.

Levi’s discourse arises from the awareness of what I have called a multiple break in Italian history right in the middle of the twentieth century, and it arises from the historical translatability of his thoughts and writings.

## 7.

In 1963 Levi published his second book ›The Truce‹. It is the narrative of his very slow journey back from Auschwitz – eight months of traveling through a shattered Europe from Poland to Turin. ›The Truce‹ belongs to the so-called era of détente, the era of Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Pope John XXIII, which

<sup>16)</sup> PRIMO LEVI, *The Time of the Swastikas* (Il Giornale dei Genitori II, no. 1 (15 Jan. 1960), English trans. by ALESSANDRA BASTAGLI and FRANCESCO BASTAGLI, in: Id., *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 13), vol. 3, pp. 1136–1138, 1137–1138.

marked a truce in the Cold War. Levi explained to Philip Roth (who came to Turin in September 1986 to interview him) that “in Italy, for the first time, you could speak of the USSR in objective terms without being called a philo-Communist by the right wing and a disruptive reactionary by the powerful Italian Communist Party.”<sup>17)</sup>

The book contains a vivid example of one of the principal themes of *The Drowned and the Saved*: the “gray zone.” In *The Truce* Levi presents himself as a spectator-actor who lives in an in-between state: he is no longer a prisoner who has been stripped even of his name, but he is not yet a man fully reintegrated into his own life and the life of his country. In the first chapters of the story he is still in the “Big Camp” (the main Auschwitz camp), waiting to be repatriated and this state is called “limbo” or “purgatory.” In these same pages, Levi tells the story of Hurbinek, a child aged three, born in Auschwitz, “who had never seen a tree”<sup>18)</sup> and had never learned to speak. The only person in the entire Big Camp who is capable of communicating with Hurbinek, of offering him concrete help, is Henek, the fifteen-year-old Hungarian boy who “spent half his days beside Hurbinek’s bed” and knew how to be “maternal rather than paternal.”<sup>19)</sup> Hurbinek will finally die, “free but not redeemed.”<sup>20)</sup>

Right after the conclusion of Hurbinek’s story, we learn that Henek, Hurbinek’s sensitive helper, was the Kapo of the children’s Lager during his months in Auschwitz. “When there were selections in the children’s Block, it was he who chose. Did he not feel remorse? No: why should he? Was there another way to survive?”<sup>21)</sup> Henek, the only person in the entire limbo of the Big Camp who could have taught Hurbinek to speak, is a perfect representative of the “gray zone,” though in 1963 it did not yet have a name. The thing was already there and was duly described but the category did not exist yet and was not envisaged then. Only in the mid-1970s did Levi start to speak about a “gray zone” in the Lager and outside.<sup>22)</sup> We do not know how, or how deeply, episodes like Henek’s had an impact over the course of time on the birth of the concept of the gray zone.

<sup>17)</sup> PHILIP ROTH, *Primo Levi*, in: Id., *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*, New York 2002 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2001), pp. 1–17, here: p. 12.

<sup>18)</sup> PRIMO LEVI, *The Truce* (*La tregua*, 1963), English trans. by ANN GOLDSTEIN, in: Id., *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 13), vol. 1, p. 226.

<sup>19)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>20)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>21)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>22)</sup> Cf. DOMENICO SCARPA, *Notes on the Texts*, in: LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 13), vol. 3, pp. 2872–2877; – MARTINA MENGONI, *The Rumkowski Variations: Up and Down the Trails of the Gray Zone*, <[http://www.primolevi.it/@api/deki/files/1202/=MAUSC\\_E00003.pdf](http://www.primolevi.it/@api/deki/files/1202/=MAUSC_E00003.pdf)> [12.01.2018].

## 8.

The name for the “gray zone” came some 15 years after *‘The Truce’* and the expression has become so popular, so widespread in every intellectual discipline, that it has now become detached from Levi’s text and – above all – from its original meaning. In some of the interviews in which Levi spoke of his future book of 1986, *‘The Drowned and the Saved’*, there are two elements that help define the “gray zone” more precisely. In one of them Levi explains:

There is a theme, having to do with the Lager, that appeals to me and also seems relevant, and that is to look again at the experience after thirty-five years: to see it through my eyes, through the eyes of the indifferent, through the eyes of the young people who don’t know these things, and also through the eyes of the adversary. It seems to me that it could produce a sociological analysis about which I think I have something personal to say. That is, taking a stand in the face of ambiguity.<sup>23)</sup>

In 1979 *‘The Drowned and the Saved’* was still under construction. In the book that he was thinking about, Levi therefore intended to confront and develop very different, even irreconcilable points of view toward the Lager. Certainly he did not mean to declare that they were all equally legitimate; they were, rather, to be carefully distinguished in such a way that one would arrive at “*taking a stand in the face of ambiguity*” (italics added). His reasoning continued:

Above all, the most simplistic interpretation should be rejected; that is, on one side the pure oppressor, without doubts, without hesitations, and on the other side the victim sanctified by his role as victim. It’s not like that. The human machine, the human animal is more complicated. There are intermediate stages. Those who have been called torturers were not torturers in a pure state: they were men like us, who took on the role of torturers for some reason. I intend to explain these reasons in a future book.<sup>24)</sup>

Analyzing the “intermediate stages” (an illuminating definition, which was not taken up in *‘The Drowned and the Saved’*) does not mean accepting or absolving everything, or pardoning everyone for their crimes; it means, on the contrary, understanding and making distinctions with the most acute moral attention.

Levi sent a first draft of the essay on the gray zone to his friend Bianca Guidetti Serra on March 19, 1980: “Dear Bianca, this would be the first chapter of the book I am supposed to be writing.”<sup>25)</sup> The structure of the book

<sup>23)</sup> GIORGINA ARIAN LEVI, *L’antieroe di Primo Levi*, in: *Ha Keillah* IV, no. 3 (Feb. 1979), p. 6. Some passages are included in PRIMO LEVI, *Conversazioni e interviste, 1963–1987*, ed. by MARCO BELPOLITI, Turin 1997, p. 158.

<sup>24)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25)</sup> BIANCA GUIDETTI SERRA with SANTINA MOBIGLIA, *Bianca la rossa*, Turin 2009, p. 247.

was therefore different, at the time, from what it ultimately became. The first chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved* has the title “The Memory of the Offense.” The chapter “The Gray Zone” is the second. It is telling that, in the end, Levi decided to place the chapter on memory first – on memory, which is, in his words, “a wonderful but fallible instrument.”<sup>26)</sup> The witness of Auschwitz – who, forty years later, returns to discuss the events with the tools of the essayist and (in some passages) the historian – first subjects his principal tool, memory itself, to a rigorous analysis. Only after completing this operation does he go on to examine the theme of “ambiguity.”

And here it must be stressed that ambiguity does not mean vagueness. The historical translatability of Primo Levi *here and now* lies in his moral talent applied to events that happened *there and then*: a moral talent in describing, pondering, and distinguishing. Once again I quote from Bravo:

The fascination of Levi’s thought lies in the fact that is presented as a pointer to problems, not as a watershed between right and wrong ... Levi wishes to suggest to former deportees ways of making optimum use of what each of them saw, or glimpsed, through their spyholes. He urges them to distinguish between what they experienced and what they heard about, at that time or later; he stresses the need to subject the memory to the delicate (and apparently implacable) scrutiny that the certification of truth, however circumscribed, imposes on the witness. He urges them, in short, to take care of their memory, as he himself has scrupulously done. *The Drowned and the Saved* is, among other things, an attempt to construct an ethics and grammar of testimony.<sup>27)</sup>

The question is not, “How can we act so that it doesn’t happen again?” Primo Levi’s question is, “How did the mechanism that permitted all that to happen work in the past, and how does it continue to operate in the present?” You cannot ask him to prevent it from happening. It would be the same as treating him as a ruler, a politician. It would be beside the point. Levi belongs to a different species. He is a writer who observes the world, who ponders over it, who writes about it with the insight of a scientific researcher or of a historian. His talent lies not in prescription but in description. Offering no remedies, he is nevertheless an acute observer and studier of signs, perhaps the first to note circumstances that are multifaceted and contradictory, situations structured on conspicuous, striking, and even grotesque contrasts. Levi is able to describe them vividly with humor. Grasping contradictions in the fabric of reality is the talent of the true writer. As a writer, Levi was able to remain lucid in circumstances of serious deprivation and humiliation and was even able to observe what was happening

<sup>26)</sup> LEVI, *The Drowned and the Saved* (cit. fn. 15), in: Id., *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 13), vol. 3, p. 2420.

<sup>27)</sup> BRAVO, *Narratives for History* (cit. fn. 7), pp. 42, 46–48.

in a clear-sighted, impassionate, and almost amused way as if from the outside, as if he were not involved.

Levi was able to occupy a vantage point corresponding to one of the most disadvantaged conditions in human history. Levi's point of view, Levi's cognitive posture will not offer any ready-made solutions but will provide elements for reflection for any person of goodwill. He gives us a reasonable, responsible, faithful, and witty description of the events. This is a lot to give us.

### 9.

What do we look for when we prepare to read Primo Levi? We look for truth: the truth of the facts. Yet there is a second truth: the truth of style, the presence of literature. Levi's is not literature *of* the Shoah or *on* the Shoah. It is literature *in* the Shoah. Levi's first book speaks physically and mentally from within the Shoah, with the body, the voice, and the intellect of a witness, of a witness who discovers – as the reader, too, discovers – that he is a writer.

Does this truth rely on memory, or rather, mainly on memory? We already know that Levi defines memory “a wonderful but fallible instrument.”<sup>28)</sup> This is the reason why he adopted a critical approach to his own memory. Every time he had to make a deposition in a trial against a Nazi officer or bureaucrat, Levi was very careful to say only things he was totally sure about and which could be confirmed by other witnesses, documents, or evidence.<sup>29)</sup> Only when memory is tested with rigor can it become an essential source regarding the past, individual and collective.

Autobiography has a great number of forms and possibilities. Levi practiced it in different ways that demand careful study. In any case, his fundamental choice to deliver his tale in the first person was not at all obvious and it is significant in itself. It is consistent with his way of looking at the world and relating to his interlocutors. Making reference to his own experience gives his audience an opportunity to understand more easily – and absorb more confidently – a set of truths that are difficult to cope with for anyone. Putting himself in the center of a net of personal relationships helps Levi describe human beings one by one and, accordingly, allows him to offer concrete features and actions (and their consequences) instead of abstract ideas. Reducing to a minimum the distance

<sup>28)</sup> LEVI, *The Memory of the Offense*, in: Id., *The Drowned and the Saved* (cit. fn. 15), in: Id., *The Complete Works* (cit. fn 13), vol. 3, p. 2420.

<sup>29)</sup> Cf. LEVI, *Dichiarazioni per il processo Bosshammer* (5 Dec. 1965) and *Questionario per il processo Bosshammer* (5 Aug. 1970), in: PRIMO LEVI and LEONARDO DE BENEDETTI, *Così fu Auschwitz. Testimonianze 1945–1986*, ed. by FABIO LEVI and DOMENICO SCARPA, Turin 2015, pp. 83f., 89–95.

between Levi-the-actor in his narratives and Levi-the-writer (and the public figure) helps reduce the distance with the readership too.

The definition of Levi's texts as "memory tales" appears to be a misleading simplification and even qualifying Levi, the storyteller of the Lager, as a "witness" may lead to underrate the complexity of his approach to experience, to memory, to history, and to writing. Two routes can be detected in Levi's works and they are different and should be scrupulously distinguished. In the first route, Levi aims to grasp a truth, or at least, to discover fragments of a truth about one of the most inscrutable spots in human history. The second route urges him to find a form for those truths that is accessible and acceptable to a public often reluctant to listen to them. The first route is the path of a man endowed with a good memory but who treats it with the instruments of a scientist, of a researcher (specifically, of a researcher of history), of a man who knows himself and the intricacies of the human soul very well. The second route is that of the craftsmanship of a writer who is emerging as one the most significant writers of the twentieth century.

#### 10.

Levi was already such a writer in 1947. If measured according to the dimensions of international literature, ›If This Is a Man‹ was really a book written *immediately*. However, 1947 is seventy years ago. As early as 1986, when ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ first appeared in Italy, Oreste del Buono – a fellow writer who belonged to the same generation as Levi and also a former prisoner of the Gerlospass Arbeitslager for POWs in eastern Tirol<sup>30</sup>) – signaled the danger of considering ›If This Is a Man‹ as a book that speaks about an experience belonging to the past,<sup>31</sup>) in other words an old-fashioned episode with no relationship whatsoever to the present.

What is the most profitable use that we can make of the fading memory of momentous events? Levi knew that there is always one further oppression, one further genocide (either attempted or implemented), and that there will always be one further denial of that genocide. In the last decade of his life, Primo Levi wrote ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. Among the preoccupations that prompted this final achievement were historical Holocaust denial and a wave of neo-Fascism and neo-Nazism spreading across Europe. In his conclusion to ›Postwar‹, Judt wrote:

<sup>30</sup>) NICOLETTA DEL BUONO, Testimonianza, in: ORESTE DEL BUONO, *L'antimeridiano*. Romanzi e racconti, ed. by SILVIA SARTORIO, Milan 2010, p. xxxvii.

<sup>31</sup>) ORESTE DEL BUONO, Il Lager dei nonni, in: *Corriere della Sera*, 31 May 1986, p. 3.

Memory is inherently contentious and partisan: one man's acknowledgment is another's omission. And it is a poor guide to the past. The first post-war Europe was built over deliberate mis-memory – upon forgetting as a way of life. Since 1989, Europe has been constructed instead upon a compensatory surplus of memory: institutionalized public remembering as the very foundation of collective identity. The first could not endure – but nor will the second. Some measure of neglect and even forgetting is the necessary condition for civic health.

To say this is not to advocate amnesia. A nation has first to have remembered something before it can begin to forget it.<sup>32)</sup>

On these grounds it can be argued that Levi's texts on Auschwitz are not mere memory tales. Accordingly, Levi is to be considered not only as a witness. Even praising him as the witness *par excellence* would miss the moral and material essence of his work (both literary and non-literary). I would like to argue that Levi has been a material and moral seeker of truths, ambiguous and hard truths to explore, scrutinize, and clarify: the shame and silence of the survivors, the notorious "gray zone," the violence of the just (of the partisans during the Resistance), and the useless violence of the Nazis.

His historical translatability lies in all that – and it is never a *direct* or obvious translatability. In fact, his discourse is deeply rooted in the critical examination of memory (and memories) as a method, and in keeping memory active and effective as a faculty and not as a ready-made package of things-to-be-remembered (and obediently commemorated). As witness, writer, technician, and researcher, Levi converted individual memory into well-rooted and shared *history*. This was Primo Levi's great lifelong achievement.

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<sup>32)</sup> JUDT, *Postwar* (cit. fn. 1), p. 829.