Misunderstanding Primo Levi

Ernesto Ferrero* (October 22, 2009)

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*Ernesto Ferrero, editor and biographer of Primo Levi, will speak at the International Symposium "New Voices on Primo Levi" on October 26th (Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, NYU, 6:00 pm)

I would like to start by sharing a memory: I first met Primo Levi in February 1963, a month before the release of his book The Truce. I had just walked into the press office, knowing nothing about him. I had not yet read If This Is a Man, which at first had been turned down by Einaudi in 1946, but was

released in 1958 in a new edition with 30 additional pages. I knew absolutely nothing about Levi, but the first three pages were enough proof that I was reading a great book.

We became friends, in the way many Torinese are friends: with discretion, reserve; doing together the things that needed to be done without too much talking. I tried to convey to the reviewers our enthusiasm every time another one of his books was published. But really, Primo's books could have found their way without my help. More than the reviews, what mattered were the readers, their word of mouth.

We would usually run into each other at the publishing house. Only once did my wife and I succeed in having him over for dinner, as he did not want to leave his elderly mother alone: she lived in his house, and had been bedridden for several years. On that occasion he brought a stuffed animal as a gift to our daughter. It was a guinea pig, he explained, when I couldn't name the fluffy brown-and-white toy. We were moved (but not surprised) by the fact that instead of choosing a typical teddy bear or bunny, Primo had gone to the trouble of looking for this unusual animal. The guinea pig, though, was not meant as a symbolic self-representation. Primo was not a self-promoter, like his friend and fellow writer Italo Calvino (and like Calvino's fictional Baron, who looks at the world from the tall branches of a tree). Primo always preferred a background position and tried to hide his traces, presenting himself as a dilettante writer—a chemist who writes in his spare time.

He feared the aggressiveness of the literary world; he was afraid of being considered an outsider because he ran a factory that made insulating paints. That is why he presented If This Is a Man as a book born almost organically out of the necessity of telling, and bearing witness to the facts. On the contrary, If This Is a Man is a carefully constructed, masterly, meditated piece of work, projected and executed with absolute professional rigor, although the author was only 27.

And back to the stuffed guinea-pig—when I first saw it, I thought of a quote from a Hiroshima survivor that Elsa Morante had used as an epigraph to her novel La Storia: "There is no word, in any human language, to comfort the guinea pigs, who do not know the reason why they die." Primo agreed with Huxley: a novelist should be a zoologist, or at least have many animals in his or her home. There is much to be learned from them.

Primo was an acute observer of animal behaviors, and some of his writings are dialogues with animals: a seagull, a giraffe, a she-spider. He himself had been treated like an animal, one of the lab rats on which the Nazis had carried out their lurid experiments, destroying personalities before they destroyed bodies. He had managed to resist and to avoid being annihilated; he had not been passive or resigned or an accomplice.

The newly minted graduate sent to Auschwitz had used all his intellectual energies—all his solid and broad learning, built on science and technology but mostly on Dante, and all his powers of observation—to imprint into his mind every significant detail of his atrocious experience, so as to be able later to transfer it to paper.

With his gift of a guinea pig, Primo wanted to draw our attention to the destiny of the many innocent living beings tortured without a reason. He also wanted to highlight the fact that animals and things, even the humblest objects, can be an infinite source of wonder and pleasure for those who can see through them with their eyes and mind. The city byways are worthy of our attention, and they can reveal countless details about their inhabitants' behaviors. Even the repellent tapeworm, a poor blind creature forced to devise its laborious survival niche in the human intestine, is admirable for the creativity it puts into performing the great Darwinian drama.

Such curiosity, which is actually a special ability to SEE (another trait Levi shared with Calvino), is explicity reaffirmed in an unpublished short story written a few months before his death. In it Primo explains, in the style of a scientific letter of the 18th century, why, via boiling, an egg becomes solid instead of liquid.

Says Levi: For as long as I live, I will continue to marvel not only at eggs, but also at flies, mosques, polyhedrons, specks of dust, and river stones. . . . There is no object that fails to elicit marvel or curiosity when observed by a focused eye in sufficient proximity.

Primo Levi's work has been seriously misunderstood, both in Italy and abroad. In the United States, If This Is a Man was published in 1961 by Collier Books with a different, and misleading, title: Survival in Auschwitz. It makes the book sound like a war report, emphasizing the protagonist's trials and tribulations, and concluding with a happy ending. Besides the fact that the actual work ends with a scene of death and desolation (the abandoned infirmary), the new title avoids the question posed in the original title: Is this man? Is it the German, the good family man who belongs to the most civilized country in Europe, the country that produced Bach and Goethe, and that plans an extermination with bureaucratic rigor? Is it the Jewish prisoner who becomes a Kapo, collaborating to gain a few more days of life? Was Auschwitz an accident in history, and as such it cannot be replicated? But in fact it has been replicated (in Soviet gulags, Cambodia, Chile, Argentina, Bosnia, Congo-Zaire, and Sudan). Or is Auschwitz the rule rather than an exception? Is it imprinted in the human DNA, a deviant gene ready to unleash a metastasis and the sadism described by Sigmund Freud?

These are the questions that Levi tried to answer for 40 years, and this is the burden he carried on his shoulders; who could have shared his anguish? Not the nihilists, such as Cioran, who would just shrug and say that they already knew all of this. Not the Marxists, who were already tormented by the doubt that between social project and human biology there might be some gap that could never be filled. Not the postwar philosophers, who were elegant, subtle, and fastidious, but not likely to test themselves with such fundamental questions.

The second American misunderstanding: in 1965 the translation into English of The Truce was released, and once again the publisher decided to change the title. But the new title,The Reawakening, conveyed a sort of peaceful return to life. "Truce" literally means a moment of pause between two moments of the same tragic conflict. It is not a coincidence that the book ends with the nightmare of the siren in Auschwitz returning to haunt the protagonist. Levi has not come to reassure us and tell us that the nightmare is over. On the contrary, he wants to disturb us and invite us to double our guard, because, as he puts it, "it happened, therefore it can happen again."

And his prophecy came true. It keeps happening, every day. Levi wants us to sharpen our interpretive tools. Nothing is less appropriate than a simplistic, optimistic reading of his work. Levi is not a secular saint trying to impress us with his classical balance of justice and knowledge. He is a scientist and a writer, and he acts as such. He is not trying to move us. He does not complain or play the victim. He does not care for the compassionate tears of readers who can enjoy the luxury of well-being in the cozy shelter of their comfortable homes.

Within the catastrophe of the Shoah, humanity was fortunate that the train leaving Italy for Auschwitz in February 1944 was transporting a special envoy: an anthropologist not yet aware of his talent; a young chemist who would later become a writer and who had already written short stories and poems. One of them, set in a Milanese suburb among factories, describes a morning siren, announcing the start of the workday, that seems to prefigure the chilling sirens of the camps. Levi is capable of elaborating an articulate interpretation of the facts because his approach is rational (not impressionistic, not rhetorical) and comprises a wide range of disciplines, from the sciences to linguistics and ethology. Of course, knowledge in and of itself is not enough: it needs to be transmitted, as Galileo, Darwin, and Freud, all excellent writers, transmitted it.

Long described as a mere witness, Levi the scientist is a great writer. Witnessing is not enough. It is necessary to be able to see, understand, and tell. A writer has the ability to choose among the thousand details that compose an instant, a situation, or an event—those very details that explain, interpret, and reveal it. Writing is the place where everything becomes true and necessary. Precisely because he is a scientist and writer, Levi is not satisfied with his initial results but repeats his tests multiple times. Till the very end, he keeps checking experimentally all the data gathered. This expert in vortexes, as he described himself, the calm rationalist, the presumed positivist, never hid his fascination with the opposite: chaos and impurity. As he used to say, "Life is born out of impurity."

Links
[1] http://test.casaitaliananyu.org/files/ernesto-ferrero-primo-levi