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The Complete Works of Primo Levi

edited by Ann Goldstein, with
an introduction by Toni Morrison.

Liveright, three volumes,
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✓ Primo Levi was born in 1919 on the fourth floor of an "undistinguished" apartment block in Turin and aside from "involuntary interruptions" continued to live there in the company of his mother until in 1987 he threw himself down the stairwell to his death. The longest interruption was from September 1943 to October 1945 and would provide Levi with the core material for his writing career: it involved three months on the fringe of the partisan resistance to the German occupation, two months in a Fascist internment camp, eleven months in Auschwitz, and a further nine in various Russian refugee camps.

✓ In 1946, aged twenty-seven, despite working full-time as a chemist, Levi completed his account of his time in a concentration camp. Now widely considered a masterpiece, *If This Is a Man* was turned down by Turin's main publishing house, Einaudi, in the person of Natalia Ginzburg, herself a Jew whose husband had died in a Fascist prison. It was also rejected by five other publishers. Why?

Even before his return, Levi had been overwhelmed by the need to tell what had happened. Prior to Auschwitz he had not felt that Jewishness was central to his identity. Like most Italian Jews, the Levis had long been assimilated with little to distinguish them from other Italians. The introduction of the Race Laws in 1938, which discriminated against Jews in public education and excluded them from regular employment, thus created a predicament for Levi that went far beyond the problem of completing his degree in chemistry and finding a job. It was a threat to his identity. Who was he if not an ordinary Italian like his fellow students? The question "what is a man?" that would echo throughout his work was never an abstract consideration but a matter of personal urgency.

Until September 1943 it had been possible for Levi to live in "willful blindness," to get around the rules, graduate, and find work unofficially; but with the Italian capitulation to the Allies and the German occupation of Italy this was no longer an option. Jews were being rounded up. Many were fleeing to the Americas. Levi's insecurity at this time was compounded by the death of his father in 1942, making Primo, at twenty-three, responsible for the well-being of his mother and younger sister. His father had been something of a womanizer whose betrayals of their mother were common knowledge.

Here too there was a question of manhood: Levi himself had yet to have

anything more than "bloodless female friendships," was believed by his companions to be terrified of women, and feared that he was "condemned to a perpetual male solitude." He nursed his self-esteem with adventurous chemistry experiments and arduous mountain climbing in the Alps above Turin, and it was to the mountains that he fled in September 1943, taking his mother and sister with him and renting rooms in a small resort hotel near the Swiss border.

Was he a Jew on the run or a partisan? The Swiss border was closed. German forces were approaching. The would-be rebels with whom Levi eventually associated were poorly organized and quickly infiltrated by a Fascist spy; the only shots fired in anger were those that served to execute two younger members of the band who had gone on a drinking and looting spree that put the safety of the others at risk. How far Levi was involved in this killing is largely the subject of Sergio Luzzatto's mistitled new book, *Primo Levi's Resistance*. There was no resistance. To Levi's dismay his sister had taken his mother from the hotel on December 1 to find refuge back in Piedmont. On December 9 the two undisciplined band members were dispatched with shots to the back. By the time Levi was arrested on December 13 he was utterly demoralized and disoriented. Warned that to confess to being a partisan would mean certain death, he opted for the lesser evil of admitting his Jewishness.

The reader coming to *If This Is a Man* today brings with him a great deal of knowledge about the Holocaust and in most cases is free of any direct personal involvement in the war. Readers in Turin in 1947 were not so well informed and their own intense war experiences were very much on their minds. The book opens, in first person, with a curious mixture of coolness and portentousness. "I cultivated a moderate and abstract sense of rebellion," Levi remarks, and declares that given his half-heartedness as a partisan the "sequence of events" leading to his arrest were "justified." The tone changes abruptly when he talks about the collective experience, in the internment camp, of being told that all Jews were to be dispatched to Germany the following day:

Night came, and it was such a night one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive. . . . Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that no memory remain.

Today it is easy to imagine the young Levi searching for a voice, a manner, that would allow him to tell his tale without being overwhelmed by it and at the same time compel the reader's attention. Prior to studying chemistry he had been educated at a prestigious *liceo Classico* in Turin; he knew his

capital ✓ *liceo Classico* in Turin; he knew his ; (?)

Dante and Manzoni and brought frequent references from them to his text, to enrich it, to get across a sense of extremity and profundity. But having lived through twenty years of fascism the literary establishment in postwar Turin were sworn enemies of all grandiloquence, which they tended to associate with inauthenticity; in their defense it has to be said that *If This Is a Man* is most powerful when it is most straightforward.

The difficulty in finding a voice for what had happened was intimately linked to the experience itself and the question of what it means to be human. Many inmates of Auschwitz, Levi tells us, experienced the same dream: they would be back home trying to tell their story—the hunger, the cold, the beatings, the selections—but all too soon they would realize that their loved ones were not listening. “They are completely indifferent... as if I were not there.”

Why this refusal to listen? The worst aspect of the camp, Levi tells us, was that it “was a great machine to reduce us to beasts.” The victim was systematically brought down morally to the level of his torturers. Prisoners were encouraged to fight each other, for the possession of a spoon, for sufficient space to sleep, to get the easier jobs, to avoid emptying the slop cans:

One had to...strangle all dignity and kill all conscience, to enter the arena as a beast against other beasts... Many were the ways devised and put into practice by us in order not to die... All implied a grueling struggle of one against all...

To give up this struggle was to become an obvious candidate for the gas chamber, one of

an anonymous mass... of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death...

In her introduction to this three-volume collection of Levi's works, Toni Morrison remarks how “the triumph of human identity and worth over the pathology of human destruction glows virtually everywhere in Levi's writing.” These are heartening words but they are not true. Rather Levi tells us about human identity crushed and corrupted by unspeakable evil; his work is powerful because it squares up to that reality. “The personages in these pages are not men,” he tells us; everybody in the camp, torturers and tortured alike, was “paradoxically united in a common inner desolation.”

To tell this harrowing story was to confess to one's own degradation. It wasn't attractive. This anguish explains the strange shifts of tone throughout *If This Is a Man*, in particular the mo-

ments when Levi addresses us defensively with the didactic “we”:

We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words “good” and “evil,” “just” and “unjust”; let each judge,...how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.

The rejections of his book must have come to Levi as confirmation of his recurrent nightmares. Fortunately in the meantime there was love. Levi had started dating Lucia Morpurgo in early 1946. She was a year younger than he; both were virgins. Crucially, Lucia was happy to listen to Levi's story in all its terrible detail. “I felt myself become a man again,” he later wrote. Eventually his memoir was published by a tiny publishing house in October 1947, a month after Levi and Lucia had married.

Levi had been cautious, diligent, and prone to depression before his deportation and continued to be so after his return. Anxious about money, he quickly found a job as a chemist, briefly allowed himself to be seduced away from it into a freelance enterprise with a fearless friend, then in 1948, with his wife pregnant, he knuckled down to serious long-term employment with SIVA, a paint and chemical factory. Whether out of genuine financial difficulties or because he was in thrall to his mother, he did not move out of the family home but brought his wife to live there, against her will. Arguments, incomprehension, and resentments ensued.

On the other hand, Levi was quite changed. Auschwitz had humiliated and degraded him, but it had taught him a great deal; he was “more mature and stronger.” After the Germans had abandoned the camp he and other inmates had behaved with great resourcefulness to stay alive until the Russians arrived. During the long return through various refugee camps he had practiced all his newly learned survival skills. So if the experience had initially stripped him of his manhood, it eventually led to a new confidence.

Writing about Auschwitz he had published a book; talking about Auschwitz he had found a wife. His identity was now inextricably bound up with Auschwitz and for the remainder of his life Levi would spend a great deal of time tracking down people he had known there and corresponding at length with survivors. His children Lisa Lorenza and Renzo were both named after the Italian worker Lorenzo Perrone, who had regularly brought Levi food at Auschwitz and thus helped to save his life. It was “our finest hour,” he would say of the last days at the camp. He referred to Auschwitz as his “university,” “an adventure,” “a rite of passage.”

It was in this more positive mood in 1961, with recognition now growing for his first book, that Levi at last began to write a sequel. *The Truce* thus

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opens with the last days in Auschwitz, then tells of the confusion and vitality of refugee camps in Poland and the Ukraine, followed by an interminably roundabout return to Italy by train. The tone is immediately more literary than *If This Is a Man*:

In those days and in those places... a high wind blew over the face of the Earth: the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, defective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion, anxiously searching for his own place, his own sphere, as the cosmogonies of the ancients say, poetically, of the particles of the four elements.

The pleasure of *The Truce* lies in Levi's account of his returning health and the dramatis personae of idiosyncratic companions and extravagant Russian soldiers involved in every kind of ruse, scam, and jam. In particular there is Cesare,

a child of the sun, a friend of the whole world. He didn't know hatred or scorn, he was as varying as the sky, joyful, sly, and ingenuous, reckless and cautious, very ignorant, very innocent, and very civilized.

Supremely shrewd, Cesare will buy, "fix," and resell absolutely anything—broken pens, ragged shirts, fish bloated with injections of water—always at a profit, and make love to any woman who crosses his path. However, the tone of *The Truce* is so charmingly literary and some of the stories so far-fetched that the reader begins to wonder how much is documentary and how much fiction. In fact, though recognizably based on a certain Lello Perugia, Cesare's antics are largely invented and Perugia was furious with the way he had been presented. It would have been "a much more important" book, Perugia protested, if Levi "had got [his] facts right."

Why did Levi do this? There had already been some curious fact-twisting in *If This Is a Man*. Here a close friend, Alberto Dalla Volta, is described as having no German, a crucial factor in the struggle for survival at Auschwitz, when in fact his German was excellent, far better than Levi's. In his meticulously researched biography Ian Thomson glosses this with the remark that "Levi, like most writers in their books made life more interesting than it is."² Leaving aside whether we agree with this, it's hard to see how describing Alberto as less well educated than he was or, in a later book, speaking of another dead friend as coming from a "peasant" family when he didn't could enhance our interest in works that command our attention above all for their documentary status.

Two impulses seem to be at work.

Thomson notes Levi's tendency to form friendships with men less intellectual than himself, but also less fearful, more energetic, and extrovert. There was a tradeoff: the timid Levi could enjoy mountaineering adventures and female company beside his lively companions while they benefited from his superior knowledge. Many of the "changes" in these books shift the relationships described toward this preferred model, Levi's close associates becoming at once more animated and less cultured than perhaps they were. Throughout *The Truce*, Levi seems to be the only sober figure hanging back from a wild postwar promiscuity, at one point declining an invitation to indulge himself with "twenty large girls... blond, rosy creatures, with... placid, bovine faces."

Related to these descriptions of joyously uninhibited companions was Levi's lifelong thirst for freedom and difficulty achieving it. Work at SIVA soon became a prison. With the constant tension between wife and mother, home was also a prison. *The Truce* takes its title from the reflection, in the closing pages, that the interlude between Auschwitz and the return to responsible life in Turin had been, for all its harshness, a period of respite and freedom, of "unlimited openness," before the need once again "to join battle, against still unknown enemies, within and outside us." The novel closes with Levi at home but dreaming that he is back in Auschwitz and that nothing is real outside the oppression of imprisonment.

Levi was committed to bearing witness, but lifelong adherence to the same appalling story is constricting. In a later work he speaks of a man who pesters him with a manifestly fabricated version of his war heroics; but Levi admits to envying the "boundless freedom of invention, of one who has broken down the barriers and is now master of constructing the past that most pleases him."

After completing *The Truce* Levi allowed himself the liberty of writing a series of lighthearted sci-fi stories, *Natural Histories*, published to general critical disappointment in 1966.

Each piece offers a smart idea, ironic and potentially alarmist—a society duped into believing that people need to wear heavy armor to avoid a deadly virus, a telephone network that develops its own intelligence and makes and interrupts calls as it pleases, a country where the duties of literary censorship are assigned to barnyard hens.

What is striking about all Levi's fiction is that despite the frequent references to sexual problems—a female spider discussing her consumption of males, a wise centaur torn apart by sexual desire who experiences "in the form of anxiety and tremulous tension" any sexual encounter that occurs in his vicinity—there is no attempt to dramatize however obliquely or discreetly what might have been the reality of Levi's domestic life, or to explore the many intimate but sexless friendships

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he was now in the habit of forming with women. To one of these friends, the German Hety Schmitt-Maas, Levi would confess his frustration with marriage and sense of entrapment, but nothing of this emerges in the fiction. The better stories in the later and looser collections are always returns to the wartime period and Auschwitz.

Another story collection, *Flaw of Form*, followed *Natural Histories*, before in 1975 Levi returned to memoir with *The Periodic Table*. The breakthrough here was to use his experience and knowledge as a chemist to provide the frame or cover for intriguing explorations of earlier relationships. Each chapter recalls some episode that features a different chemical substance whose qualities are allowed to take on a quiet symbolism. In a Fascist jail Levi speaks to a man who worked panning for gold, not just in order to sell it, but for the love of engraving and hammering it, and above all "to live free"; a job that involves extracting phosphorous from plants brings Levi into contact with the charming Giulia, who despite her imminent marriage may or may not be a possible lover; a problem with a paint that won't dry due to defective materials from a German supplier brings Levi into contact with the chemist who supervised his work in Auschwitz.

Crucial to *The Periodic Table* is that Levi knows everything about chemistry and we know very little. Many of the situations are presented as puzzles that Levi solves or sometimes fails to solve, but always with a wry panache. Again and again the material world appears as a canny guardian of secrets, requiring patience, caution, practicality, and knowledge, but not in the end intractable. By comparison human relationships are even more mysterious and definitely less susceptible to the qualities Levi displays. He is unable to challenge the flirtatious Giulia, afraid of meeting the Auschwitz chemist and disturbed that the man seems to be asking him for a forgiveness he is not ready to grant.

Levi had been concerned that his books might be admired more for their wartime witness than their literary achievement. The brilliance of *The Periodic Table* settled any doubts about his writerly credentials, though again there were complaints of distortion. In particular, it was not true that Levi had come into contact with the German chemist through his work; he had tracked his man down through Hety Schmitt-Maas, who was upset by how negatively Levi presented him in his book, since the German had been one of the few to give him some help at the camp.

With the success of *The Periodic Table*, Levi finally felt sufficiently confident to resign from SIVA. He was fifty-eight. Free from routine responsibilities, he produced in quick succession *The Wrench* (1978) and *If Not Now When* (1982). Both draw on the writer's special knowledge for their

authority and both present themselves as fiction, free from the constraints of bearing witness. In the short stories of *The Wrench* Tino Faussone, a hugely energetic, incorrigibly womanizing engineer, intensely familiar with pylons, rigs, boilers, and the like, tells the more intellectual narrator of his adventures around the globe with every kind of dramatic technical problem. Having complained of his own thirty years of "forced labor," Levi now celebrated work, or at least work as experienced by one of his typical foils, a man of boundless energy and freedom who basks in the sure knowledge of his immense practical competence.

If Not Now When, Levi's only novel, covers the same time period and territory as *The Truce*, telling the story of a Russian Jew who joins a band of Jewish partisans to battle against the Germans; they make their way to Italy whence they hope to move on to Palestine and the nascent state of Israel. In *Primo Levi's Resistance* Sergio Luzzatto observes how much this novel draws on Levi's own unhappy partisan experience, transforming it into something effective and triumphant. The hero, Mendel, a watchmaker, a man who can mend a radio and is prone to philosophic reflection ("Mendel is me," Levi said in an interview), boldly bears arms, engages in any number of skirmishes, finds himself a woman, then betrays her with another (though he now immediately feels trapped and threatened by her), and even executes a spy:

Ulybin handed the rifle to Mendel, without a word.

"You want me to...?" Mendel stammered.

"Go on, *yeshiva bocher*," Ulybin said. "He can't walk, and if they find him, he'll talk..."

Mendel felt bitter saliva fill his mouth. He took a few steps back, aimed carefully, and fired.

Levi had spent much time researching Yiddish Eastern Europe and the exploits of Jewish resistance fighters whose war efforts he wished to celebrate. "It's important that there be Jewish partisans," Mendel observes: "only if I kill a German will I manage to persuade other Germans that I am a man." However, the novel's dialogue comes across as wooden, the action is hardly credible, and those who knew Levi's previous work could not fail to see elements of fantasy and wishful thinking. Shortly after the book was published, Israel invaded Lebanon and Levi found himself alternately praised and criticized for promoting militant Zionism, something that could not have been further from his mind.

Constantly afraid that he would run out of subject matter or succumb to Alzheimer's, Levi stepped up production in his later years. Some two thirds of the almost three thousand pages of *The Complete Works* were written after he left his managerial job. Most of the

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writing was made up of articles and stories published in the Turin newspaper *La Stampa* and then poems that plumb Levi's darker moods: spared the duty of providing narrative content, the poems make for stronger reading than the stories. On the occasion of his wife's sixtieth birthday he wrote her this gloomy message:

*Be patient, my impatient lady,
Pulverized and macerated, flayed,
Who flay yourself a little every
day...
Please, accept these fourteen
lines;
They're my rough way of telling
you you're loved,
And that I wouldn't be in the
world without you.*

A year later he wrote "Arachne," spoken by a female spider who weaves a web from "a thousand spinning teats":

*I'll sit in the center
And wait for a male to come,
Suspicious but drunk with desire,
To fill my stomach and my
womb...*

Terrified of spiders since earliest childhood, Levi made a huge copper spider and hung it on his balcony. Warned by the Jewish community that people were gossiping about his relationship with a certain woman journalist, he immediately refrained from seeing her. He visited hundreds of schools to talk about Auschwitz yet protested that he didn't want to be labeled as a Jewish writer. Yearning to travel, he complained that his women prevented him from "going anywhere." His mother had never given him "a single kiss or caress," he confided to a journalist in 1982. "I've known some Jewish sons," remarked Philip Roth after meeting him, "but Levi's filial duty and devotion was stronger than anything I'd ever seen. There was a pathetic edge to it." Levi was on antidepressants.

It was in this unhappy state that Levi chose to return to his core material in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), a book that must rank as one of the most powerful and upsetting attempts at moral analysis ever undertaken. The story of Auschwitz, Levi begins, "has been written almost exclusively by people who, like me, did not plumb the depths. The ones who did never returned, or if they did their capacity for observation was paralyzed by pain and incomprehension." "Those who were 'saved' in the camps were not the best of us"; rather they "were the worst: the egotists, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators.... The best all died."

In unsparing detail Levi draws on other concentration camp memoirs to consider the facts in all their complexity and awfulness. The Sonderkommandos, he remarks, were "an extreme case of collaboration," Jews induced to lead other Jews into the gas chambers, "remove the corpses...extract gold teeth from their jaws; shear off

the women's hair." Again and again the surreal collective cruelty of the Nazi regime is examined in relation to its effect on its victims; the constant denuding of victims, the crazy obsession with bed-making and roll calls, the habit of forcing inmates to defecate in the open and very close to each other, and so on.

At every point, Levi's enemy is denial in all its forms. "The intrinsic horror of this human condition... has imposed a kind of constraint on all testimony," he warns. On both sides of the divide people don't want to remember, they exploit slippages in memory to establish a comfort zone, and artists offer portrayals that aestheticize or indulge in consolatory pieties. The whole book conveys a sense of the enormity of the task of keeping alive the truth of just how evil Auschwitz was.

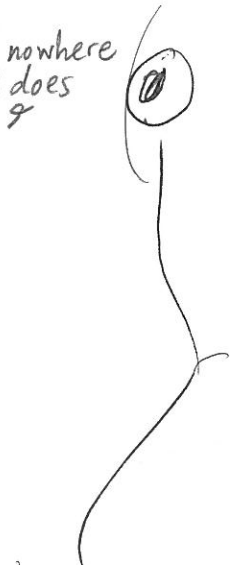
No sooner had Levi committed suicide in 1987 than attempts were being made to, as it were, defend his work from his life, his death rather, as if admirers were afraid that by killing himself he might have undermined the positive side of his witness. This is largely the subject of Berel Lang's *Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life*,³ which considers the interminable speculation about whether Levi's motives for suicide had more to do with Auschwitz or his chronic domestic unhappiness. [Whatever the truth, the views Lang records tell us more about the speculators' own anxieties than about Levi. Levi's best writing was about his life, about questions of freedom and survival, so it is inevitable that once we are aware of his possible suicide, it will always be there when we read him. On the other hand it is hard to see why this should detract from his remarkable achievement, if only because there is no point in his writing, at least that I can find, where Levi suggests that life is likely to end well, nothing that his death contradicts. If anything the contrary.]

¹*Primo Levi's Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy* (Metropolitan, to be published in January 2016).

²*Primo Levi: A Life* (Metropolitan, 2003).

³Yale University Press, 2013.

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