



Primo Levi

(1919-1987)

Dr. Bob Weintraub

“Primo Levi is now firmly established as one of the essential writers of our century. His two principal works on the the Holocaust—*If this is a Man*, 1947, a spare but searing account of his eleven months “in the depths” of Auschwitz, and *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986, a collection of essays revisiting the moral and historical dilemmas of that event and the memory of it forty years on—stand like twin pillars of humane meditation on the century’s darkest moment. Indeed, it is hard to think of another figure of comparable stature who wrote and spoke of these unbearable events with such accessible economy, wit and persistence over such a long period of time.”

(Robert Gordon, 2001, University Lecturer in Italian and fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge).

“Levi told his tale in what is now deservedly considered masterpieces: *If this is a Man* (1947) and *The Truce* (1963) —‘written forms of oral stories which I have told countless times after my escape from Auschwitz.’ But it was almost a decade before *If this is a Man* won recognition in Italy. Levi first sent the typescript to Natalia Ginzburg at Einaudi; she rejected it. But Levi looked back on the incident as fortunate: ‘If I’d had an immediate success with *If this is a Man*, I would have probably given up my career as a chemist, and without chemistry, I would not have written *The Periodic Table*.’ *The Periodic Table* (1975), a collection of part-autobiographical tales structured around elements of Mendeleev’s Table, finally confirmed Levi, as, in Italo Calvino’s words, ‘one of the most important and gifted writers of our time.’ (Ian Thomson, 1987)

(*The Voice of Memory, Primo Levi*, edited by M. Belpoliti and R. Gordon; *Primo Levi, Tragedy of an Optimist*, M. Anissimov)

Before Auschwitz:

Primo Levi was born in Turin into an Italian Jewish family. In 1937 he entered the Chemical Institute at Turin Univeristy.

In 1938 the first of the anti-Jewish Laws were passed. Jews were forbidden to study at the universities, but those like Levi who had already begun their studies were permitted to finish. His experimental subthesis was entitled “Dielectrical Behaviour of the Ternary System Benzene-Chlorobenzene-Chloroform.” The work was carried out under the direction of Nicola Dallaporta. Dallaporta was the only member of the faculty who agreed to accept Levi for an experimental project, all of the others backing away due to the racial restrictions then in force. Dallaporta later recalled having said to Levi, “Listen, do your thesis—who gives a damn about the Laws?” Levi earned his doctorate in Chemistry summa cum laude, in July 1941. The diploma specified that the holder was of the Jewish race.”

Under the Racial Laws, Levi managed to find semi-clandestine work with a asbestos mine with the task of looking into the enrichment and extraction of the nickel impurity, and then a position researching oral treatments for diabetes with an Italian pharmaceutical subsidiary of the Swiss Nestlé company.

On September 8, 1943, Italy surrendered to Germany. Levi joined the resistance and was arrested shortly thereafter on December 13, 1943. He was deported to

Auschwitz, where he arrived on February 26, 1944. He was 24 years old. He was tattooed with the number 174517. In the last months of imprisonment Levi's profession afforded him some privileges which enabled him to survive. He was put to work as a chemist at the Auschwitz buna rubber complex.

After Auschwitz:

He returned to his family home in Turin on October 19, 1945. He wanted to tell the world what he had experienced.

Levi's first book came out in 1947 and sold hardly any copies. The indifference to what he had to tell was a severe shock to him. Part from a few short stories, he gave up writing until 1961. Levi found a position as a lab chemist with a paint company near Turin, SIVA, where he later became technical director and finally managing director. He remained with the firm for 29 years, until 1977. He became expert on protective enamel wire coatings.

Primo Levi in a 1976 afterword to *If this is a Man*:

"Someone a long time ago wrote that books, too, like human beings, have their destiny: unpredictable, different from what is desired and expected. This book, too, has had a strange destiny. Its birth certificate is distant: it can be found where one reads that "I write what I would never dare tell anyone." My need to tell the story was so strong in the Camp that I had begun describing my experiences there, on the spot, in that German laboratory laden with freezing cold, the war, and vigilant eyes; and yet I knew that I would not be able under any circumstances, to hold on to those haphazardly scribbled notes, and that I must throw them away immediately because if they were found they would be considered an act of espionage and would cost me my life.

Nevertheless, those memories burned so intensely inside me that I felt compelled to write as soon as I returned to Italy, and within a few months I wrote *If this is a Man*.

The manuscript was turned down by a number of important publishers; it was accepted in 1947 by a small publisher who printed only 2,500 copies and then folded. So, this first book of mine fell into oblivion for many years: perhaps also because in all of Europe those were difficult times of mourning and the painful years of the war that had just ended. It achieved a new life only in 1958, when it was republished by Einaudi, and from then on the interest of the public has never flagged."

It was with the 1984 publication of the English language translation of *The Periodic Table* that Levi achieved wide recognition, two years before his death.

Primo Levi (*The Periodic Table*, "Carbon"):

"The reader, at this point, will have realized for some time now that this is not a chemical treatise: my presumption does not reach so far—"ma voix est faible, et même un peu profane." Nor is it an autobiography, save in the partial and symbolic limits in which every piece of writing is autobiographical, indeed every human work; but it is in some fashion history.

It is—or would have liked to be—a micro-history, the history of a trade and its defects, victories, and miseries, such as everyone wants to tell when he feels close to concluding the arc of his career, and art ceases to be long. Having reached this point in life, what chemist, facing *The Periodic Table*, or the monumental indices of Beilstein or Landolt, does not perceive scattered among them the sad tatters, or trophies of his own professional past? He only has to leaf through any treatise and memories rise up in bunches: there is among us he who has tied his destiny, indelibly, to bromine or to propylene, or the -NCO group, or glutamic acid; and every chemical student, faced by almost any treatise, should be aware that on one of those pages, perhaps in a single line, formula, or word, his future is written in indecipherable characters, which, however, will become clear "afterward": after success, error, or guilt, victory or defeat. Every no longer young chemist, turning again to the verhängnisvoll page in that same treatise, is struck by love or disgust, delights or despairs.

So it happens, therefore, that every element says something to someone (something different to each) like the mountain valleys or beaches visited in youth. One must perhaps make an exception for carbon, because it says everything to everyone, that is, it is not specific, in the same way that Adam is not specific as an ancestor—unless one discovers today (why not?) the chemist-stylite who has dedicated his life to graphite or the diamond. And yet it is exactly to this carbon that I have an old debt, contracted during what for me were decisive days. To carbon, the element of life, my first literary dream was turned, insistently dreamed in an hour and a place when my life was not worth much: yes, I wanted to tell the story of an atom of carbon."