

Auschwitz Report

by Primo Levi and Leonardo De Benedetti, Verso, 2006, 97 pp.

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Also under review: *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, by Primo Levi (edited by Marco Belpolti and translated by Sharon Wood) Polity, 2005, 190pp. and *A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories of Primo Levi*, by Primo Levi (translated by Ann Goldstein and Alessandra Bastagli) Penguin Classics, 2007, 164pp.

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In *The Truce*, Primo Levi describes a cruelly protracted train journey, following the liberation of Auschwitz, from Krakow to a transit camp at Katowice in Upper Silesia. When the train makes one of many unexplained stops, at a place called Trzebinia, Levi gets off to stretch his legs. Soon he is surrounded by a group of curious locals, on whom he unburdens, in a torrent of words, ‘those so recent experiences of mine, of Auschwitz nearby.’ [1]

Levi notices that the man translating these words into Polish refers to him not as an Italian Jew but as an ‘Italian political prisoner.’ And as the crowd begins to disperse, he remembers a dream, or rather a nightmare, he and his comrades had had in the camp – a dream of ‘speaking and not being listened to, of finding liberty and remaining alone.’

The struggle to be listened to would consume Levi for the rest of his life. When, finally, he made it back to Italy in the autumn of 1945, Levi began work on his memoir *If This is a Man* (to which *The Truce* is a kind of accompaniment or coda). Many years later, in an interview with Philip Roth, he confessed to having begun that terrible and incomparable book with ‘no definite literary intention.’ [2] He wrote out of the primordial need to bear witness. And his model, he said, was that of the factory manager’s ‘weekly report,’ ‘precise, concise’ and unencumbered by jargon.

This was a genre with which Levi, an industrial chemist by profession of course, was familiar. Earlier in the war he had worked, at the discretion of the Fascists, who tolerated his Jewishness, in a Milanese factory that produced hormone extracts;

though what he did there, he told Roth, was ‘mock work that I did not trust,’ a sort of premonition of the monstrous parody of work he was made to do as a slave labourer in Auschwitz.

At Katowice, where he set himself up as a pharmacist sorting through drugs ransacked from abandoned German *Lagers*, Levi was asked by the Soviets to write a report on what he had endured at Buna-Monowitz, or ‘Auschwitz III,’ a satellite of the main camp at Birkenau. He collaborated in this with Leonardo De Benedetti, also an Italian Jew and a medical doctor. Unlike Levi, whose selection for the ‘Chemical Commando’ had earned him a short stint in the ‘paradise’ of the laboratory at Monowitz, De Benedetti was never permitted to ply his trade in the camp. He enjoyed no respite, however brief, from the otherworldly degradations he and Levi were to enumerate in their submission to the Russians.

Auschwitz Report was originally published in an Italian medical journal in 1946, under the title ‘Report on the Sanitary and Medical Organization of the Monowitz Concentration Camp for Jews (Auschwitz – Upper Silesia).’ As if to rebut or disabuse the man on the platform at Trzebinia, Levi and De Benedetti remind their readers in the first sentence of the document that the Nazis created the camps for a singular purpose: not the concentration of ‘political prisoners’ or refugees but the ‘annihilation of the European Jews’ (AR p. 31). What follows is an exhaustive anatomy of the suffering of those who survived the initial ‘selections’ for the gas chambers and were instead put to work by the Nazis – work that was ‘unsuited to the physical condition of those condemned to it’ (AR p. 46).

This brief text is a catalogue of nearly unimaginable physical hardship: of boils, abscesses, ulcers and other inflammations of the subcutaneous connective tissue; of cold, exhaustion and constant hunger. It is probable that De Benedetti was responsible for much of this pathological detail, notably the division of the most frequently occurring diseases in the camp into six categories (dystrophic diseases, gastro-intestinal complaints, diseases due to cold and so on). By contrast, Levi’s hand is apparent in a number of disconcerting ‘everyday observation[s]’ and in the occasional eruption of malicious humour. We read, for instance, not only that the terrible wooden-soled boots issued to prisoners were ‘anti-physiological in shape and size’ (AR p. 49), but also that the foot rags worn under them were made out of prayer shawls plundered from the luggage of newly-arrived deportees. And in a discussion of skin complaints we learn of an uncharacteristic oversight in the organisation of the camp: no special ‘Commando’ was formed for scabies sufferers,

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which meant that they worked alongside those who weren't infected, thereby increasing the risk of contagion.

Several of the episodes related here reappear, suitably worked over, in *If This is a Man*, including an account of the dangerous work of the 'Chemical Commando' and a description of conditions in the camp infirmary (or 'Ka-Be'). However, *Auschwitz Report* is not just a source of raw material for Levi's later works of testimony. It is also the laboratory of a style – one in which Levi, described on the frontispiece of the report simply as a 'chemist,' trains his unwavering scientist's gaze (which is also the writer's power of noticing) on the moral and physical squalor of Auschwitz.

Philip Roth called this way of looking at things, without euphemism or superfluous elaboration, 'moral biochemistry.' The *moral* biochemist observes and notates the decomposition not of material compounds but of human beings. This was a description in which Levi was happy to collude, as it appealed to his sense of himself, as he puts it in *The Periodic Table*, as a 'chemist engaged in writing.' [3] In the conversation with Roth, Levi attributes the power of his testimony to a 'curiosity' like that of the naturalist, and he doesn't demur when Roth suggests that 'not only are the survivor and the scientist inseparable but so are the writer and the scientist.' [4]

This self-understanding is expounded by Levi at greater length in several of the essays, addresses and newspaper articles collected in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*. The following passage, from the preface to a school edition of *The Truce*, is typical:

[My] daily work has taught me ... many things which every writer needs. It has instilled in me the value of concreteness and precision and the habit of 'weighing' every word with the same care as when carrying out quantitative analysis. Above all it has accustomed me to the state of mind that normally goes by the name of objectivity, which is to say the recognition of the intrinsic dignity not only of people but also of things, of their own truth, which we should recognize and not distort if we do not wish to fall into the generic, into falseness and emptiness. (BH p. 16)

In books like *The Truce* and *If This is a Man*, Levi carries out the 'quantitative analysis' of human cruelty and stupidity. The 'objective' stance, his 'naturalistic attitude,' entails the recognition that such viciousness is ineluctable, a permanent feature of human nature. That is why Levi insists here on the 'intrinsic dignity' of

‘things,’ as well as that of persons: the world (including the evil that human beings do) is not endlessly tractable, not infinitely susceptible to refashioning by the hands of men – it resists. In fact, the very essence of fascism for Levi was its glorification of the spiritual life and its belief that the world is malleable: ‘It is the spirit that dominates matter, is that not so? Was it not this that they had hammered into my head in the Fascist and Gentile *liceo*?’ [5]

Not only are the writer and the scientist inseparable, therefore, so are the moralist and the scientist. Indeed, Levi appears to acknowledge as much in a discussion of his autobiographical work *The Periodic Table*. That book is both the story of his ‘life as a chemist’ and the traumatic ‘history of a generation’ – something like a natural history of suffering. Levi explains why he gave the title ‘Zinc’ to a chapter describing the infiltration of anti-semitism into Italian political life in the late 1930s. Zinc, he reminds us, will only react with acids in the presence of certain impurities. And Levi’s younger self ‘adapts to the position of Jew’ only when racial laws declare Jewishness to be something impure in the ‘pure body of the Italian people.’ In other words, he was proud of being an impurity (BH, p. 158):

Dissension, diversity, the grain of salt and mustard are needed: Fascism does not want them, forbids them, and that’s why you’re not a Fascist; it wants everybody to be the same, and you are not. But immaculate virtue does not exist either, or if it exists it is detestable. So take the solution of copper sulphate which is in the shelf of reagents, add a drop of it to your sulphuric acid, and you’ll see the reaction begin: the zinc wakes up, it is covered with a white fur of hydrogen bubbles, and there we are, the enchantment has taken place ... [6]

Several of the stories in *A Tranquil Star* also take the ‘enchantment’ of chemical reaction as their theme (perhaps this is what Levi means when he says, in a short but revealing piece in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz* entitled ‘The Writer Who is Not a Writer,’ that much of his fiction is a ‘writing of things’ too). For example, the narrator of ‘The Magic Paint’ is employed in the manufacture of paints. This is a venerable but ‘subtly fraudulent art,’ which involves giving to the underlying substratum of things the ‘appearance of what it is not.’ More often than not the subterfuge is successful, though the narrator and his colleagues are as accustomed to failure as to success and are ‘difficult to surprise’ (TS p. 76).

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One day, they receive from their agent in Naples a sample of a paint said to have the miraculous property of ensuring the good fortune of everything it touches. They test it on a culture of *E. coli* bacteria, which grows prodigiously as a consequence. 'Facts are obstinate' and the facts here suggest that the paint brings good luck 'even to microorganisms' (TS, p. 78). The narrator then sets about the 'complex and uncertain enterprise' of examining the structure of the paint in more detail. Having isolated the metal tantalum and after identifying it as the beneficial element, the narrator contacts an old school friend, Fassio, said to have been cursed with the power of an 'evil eye.'

Fassio needs no persuading to participate in tests, which establish that the malign effects of his evil eye can be mitigated if a screen coated with the magic paint is placed between subject and object. He then has the idea of painting his spectacles. When the paint dries, Fassio promptly falls down dead, one of the lenses in his glasses having reflected the power of his evil eye, concentrating it in 'some unspecified but important corner of the right cerebral hemisphere' (TS, p. 82).

Nature is not just the enemy of human vanity in these stories, however. In 'The Molecule's Defiance,' another of the 'later' stories in the collection (these date from the years after the publication of *The Periodic Table* in 1975), protean, unmanageable matter defeats even the decent and the conscientious. A middle-aged shift-worker in another paint factory presides, helpless, over the 'spoiling' of an unidentified 'batch.' The process of spoiling or gelatinization is a 'gesture of scorn, the derisiveness of soul-less things that ought to obey you and instead rise up, defying your prudence and foresight' (TS, p. 155).

The title story, which closes the collection, also has a scientific theme. An astronomer posted with his family in an isolated observatory has the job of monitoring the behaviour of a star in a distant galaxy. 'A Tranquil Star' begins with the narrator complaining that he lacks a vocabulary to describe either the vanishingly small (the microscopic particles that science tells us make up the world) or the overwhelmingly vast (the infinite expanses of space). Our daily tongue 'doesn't go beyond what our senses tell us' (TS, p. 157).

It is hard not to think of a famous passage in *If This is a Man* when reading this complaint about a language that is human, all too human:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word.... If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing near. [7]

Thirty years after composing this paragraph, Levi declared that 'it is my profession that helps me to communicate my experience' (BH, p. 105). Only by not being a writer, it seems, was he able to write about what happened to him in Poland.

Jonathan Derbyshire is a writer, critic, and part-time academic. His review of John Updike's novel *The Terrorist* is in the Winter 2006 issue of *Democratiya*.

Abbreviations

AR – *Auschwitz Report*

BH – *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*

TS – *A Tranquil Star*

References

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Levi, Primo 1987, *If This is a Man and The Truce*, London: Abacus.

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Notes

[1] Levi 1987, p. 227.

[2] Roth 2001, p. 10.

[3] Levi 1986, p. 139.

[4] Roth 2001, p. 9.

[5] Levi 1986, p. 154.

[6] Levi 1986, p. 34.

[7] Levi 1987, p. 129.