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Introduction

Minna Vuohelainen

This volume offers a host of interdisciplinary responses to the multilayered work of the Turinese Holocaust survivor Primo Levi (1919–87). Levi is now viewed not only as one of the most important survivor-writers of the Holocaust but also as a key literary figure of the twentieth century, an ethical thinker of great complexity, a scientist, an educator, and a political philosopher. The chrysanthemum on the cover of this volume, Jane Joseph’s closing illustration to Levi’s second book The Truce (La tregua, 1963), is intended to suggest some of the complexity of Levi’s extensive body of work. As the artist explains in the conversation that closes this collection, the image serves as an “accompaniment” to Levi’s nightmare of waking up from a seemingly peaceful postwar existence to a realization that he has not really escaped Auschwitz after all but is back inside the camp. Joseph’s drypoint of the complex, multilayered flower evokes Levi’s sinister dream within a dream, a shared nightmare among Holocaust survivors and a recurring theme within Levi’s significant and diverse body of work. “It happened, therefore it can happen again,” Levi reminds us near the end of his final book, The Drowned and the Saved (I sommersi e i salvati, 1986); the witnesses “must be listened to.”

The chapters in this collection approach Levi’s oeuvre from a number of disciplinary perspectives; philosophy, ethics, the medical humanities, history of science, memory theory, literary studies, interpreting theory, radio studies, spatial theory, Holocaust pedagogy, fine art, and book history are just some of the approaches that feature here. The chapters foreground Levi’s identity as a witness, as a chemist, as a journalist, and as a thinker and writer seeking to move beyond facile distinctions between good and evil, art and science, humanity and animality. They capture some of the complexity and richness of Levi’s oeuvre, while attempting to open up his work to innovative, original, and interdisciplinary readings and interpretations.
The collection is divided into five sections, although its key themes of testimony, humanity, ethics, intertext, and science recur repeatedly across the 16 chapters. The first section, “Ethics, Communication, and Education,” contains four chapters that focus on Levi’s complex ethical thought. In “Hope, Shame, and Resentment: Primo Levi and Jean Améry,” the late Norman Geras, to whom this volume is dedicated, examines the testimonies of two key survivor-writers. Geras begins by comparing Levi’s apparent sense of hope with Améry’s despair before moving to explore Levi’s articulation of personal and communal shame in the context of the fragility of human morality; he concludes by stressing the importance of the theme of communication in the work of both Levi and Améry. Catherine Mooney’s chapter, “The Ethics of the Gray Zone,” picks up on Geras’s discussion of the fragility of human character by examining the concept of ethical ambiguity in Levi’s work. Mooney reads Levi’s work against Western philosophy’s traditional insistence on the absolute concepts of good and evil, concluding that the notion of the “Gray Zone” represents a distinctive contribution to ethical and philosophical thought in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Mirna Cicioni’s chapter, “Labour of Civilization and Peace: Primo Levi Looks at Interpreters and Interpreting,” focuses on the importance of communication in Levi’s oeuvre through the lens of the act of amateur interpreting, often in extreme situations. Drawing on interpreting theory, Cicioni examines instances of interpreting situations in Levi’s work, noting the ethical decisions made by the interpreter in the process of rendering messages from one language to another. Intercultural communication, in Levi’s work, is both an opportunity and an ambivalent ethical position. Christina Foisy’s chapter, “Hatred in the Holocaust Classroom: Reading Primo Levi Affectively toward Forgiveness,” concludes the first section by examining what Holocaust Education can learn from Levi’s work. Examining pedagogic responses to expressions of hatred, Foisy argues that Holocaust Education can benefit from close attention to hatred as a sign of lack of understanding.

The second section of the collection, “Humanity, Animality, and Science,” continues an examination of Levi’s ethical thought but with a focus on humanity’s relationship to animality and to material science after Auschwitz. Christopher Hamilton’s chapter “Humanity, Animality, and Philosophy in Primo Levi” explores the relationship between humanity and animality by analyzing from a philosophical point of view Levi’s equation of concentration-camp inmates with animals. Hamilton concludes that Levi’s comparison highlights less the nature of animality than the contested nature of humanity. Damiano Benvegnù analyzes Levi’s ethics of science in “Witnessing Animal Suffering: Primo Levi on Animal Experimentation.” Benvegnù examines Levi’s 1977 essay “Contro il dolore” (“Against Pain”) in the context of a major public debate on animal experimentation, highlighting not only the essay’s historical context but also Levi’s attempt to provoke compassion toward animal suffering in his readers as part of his complex ethical
response to testimonial literature. In the final chapter of the section, “The Story of a Carbon Atom: Primo Levi’s Material Science,” Judith Woolf reads The Periodic Table as a text that bridges the “two cultures” of art and science. Woolf’s analysis of the book’s final chapter traces the intertwined themes of the history of science, Italian-Jewish history, Holocaust remembrance, and Levi’s personal experience, spotlighting the centrality of scientific themes in Levi’s thought.

The third section of the collection, “The Camps: Memory and Space,” also contains themes of humanity, science, and ethics, with a focus on Levi’s witness statements. Inés Valle Morán’s chapter, “Une histoire des odeurs: The Olfactory World in Primo Levi’s Narratives,” explores the connections between the sense of smell, memory, and the Holocaust in Levi’s fiction and testimonial writing. Valle Morán argues that Levi’s distinctive “smellscape” is central to his understanding of human memory. In “The Concentrationary Universe: Primo Levi’s Spatial Consciousness,” Minna Vuohelainen examines Levi’s writings from the perspective of spatial theory, focusing in particular on instances in which the deportees’ will to survive results in subtle challenges to the brutal regime of the camps. Levi’s use of spatial tropes, she argues, offers a fresh way of approaching the chronotope of Auschwitz. In “The Offense of the Memory: Memory and Metaphor in The Drowned and the Saved,” Brian Walter analyzes Levi’s final book as a meditation on the fallibility of human memory. Walter examines Levi’s use of metaphor and abstraction as rhetorical devices before concluding with a comparison between Levi’s work and Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiography, Speak, Memory.

The fourth section, “Literature and Intertext,” contains chapters that examine Levi’s relationship to his reading and chart intertextual references within his works. The section begins with Maria Anna Mariani’s exploration of Levi’s personal anthology, “Paper Memories, Inked Genealogies: About Primo Levi’s The Search for Roots.” Mariani reads Levi’s personal selection of formative texts from a phenomenological position, which allows Levi’s anthology of his favorite readings to emerge as a form of autobiography. Franco Baldasso continues this discussion of intertextuality in “Angelic Butterfly and the Gorgon: On Lightness in Primo Levi’s Writing,” a chapter that reads Levi’s use of Dante’s trope of the butterfly as a human soul in a post-Auschwitz science-fiction story in which Nazi experiments on human beings transform them not into superhuman creatures but miserable earthbound monsters. Baldasso argues that Levi’s writings articulate an impossible dream of weightless flight in which the burden of testimony is left behind. Catherine Charlwood’s chapter on Levi’s use of Shakespearean motifs, “Il resto [non] è silenzio: The Friendship of Texts between Hamlet and Se questo,” completes the section. Charlwood charts Shakespearean echoes in Levi’s oeuvre, focusing on the importance and limits of communication in Hamlet and If This Is a Man.
The final section of the collection, “Media, Publishing, and Illustration,” comments on Levi’s relationship with the listeners, publishers, and illustrators of his work. Giuseppe Episcopo’s chapter, “On Solid Air: Primo Levi and the Radio RAI,” examines Levi’s adaptations of his own work for the Italian Radio RAI. Episcopo explores the adaptations as an example of aural storytelling specifically constructed for radio audiences, a new hybrid mode. In “Best Regards from Home to Home: Primo Levi’s Letters to a UK Friend and Publisher,” the writer Anthony Rudolf charts his correspondence with Levi, which culminates in Levi’s only translation out of Italian, Leopardi’s poem “Il sogno.” The poem, which shows remarkable similarities to Byron’s earlier poem “Darkness,” anticipates a nuclear winter, and the correspondence between Levi and Rudolf thus sheds light on Levi’s concerns and mindset in the last ten years of his life. The final chapter of the section, “Illustrating Primo Levi: Jane Joseph and Anthony Rudolf in Conversation,” is an edited transcript of a discussion between Anthony Rudolf and the artist Jane Joseph, whose etchings accompany the Folio Society’s editions of If This Is a Man (1999) and The Truce (2001). Joseph describes the difficulties in illustrating a book that she felt needed no visual illustrations. The conversation is complemented by some of these etchings, which act as “accompaniments” rather than as literary or realistic visualizations of Levi’s powerful narratives.

Note