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In his first book, The Memoir If This Is a Man (1947), Primo Levi describes his arrival at Auschwitz in February 1944. After the number 174517 is tattooed on his left forearm, he and other Italian deportees are shut into an empty barrack. "Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within reach of my hand," Levi writes. "Warum?" [Why?] I asked in my poor German. "Hier ist kein warum" [Here there is no why], he replied, shoving me back inside.

Levi was born in Turin in 1919, to a family that had settled in the Piedmont region after the expulsion of Jews from Spain four centuries earlier. Despite the Race Laws, enacted in 1938, he graduated with a degree in chemistry from the University of Turin, though his diploma identified him as "of the Jewish race." In September 1943, when northern Italy was occupied by German troops, Levi joined an inexperienced unit of partisans fighting in the foothills of the Italian Alps. His career as a partisan, he says, was "short, painful, stupid, and tragic." Betrayed by an informer, he was captured that December. Under interrogation, he confessed his Jewishness, "in part out of weariness, in part also out of an irrational point of pride."

The following February, Levi, aged 24, was deported on a train of 12 closed freight cars to Auschwitz. "The railroad convoy," he wrote, "contained 650 persons; of these 525 were immediately put to death." He himself was sent to Monowitz, a sub-camp seven kilometers from Auschwitz. Many of his fellow prisoners, Levi writes, deprived of a name, dignity, and the right to question why, were degraded to "non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer." Death had become trivial and anonymous. After a year of enslavement in the camp, as memories of his previous life dimmed, Levi was a broken man. "I'm not even alive enough to be able to kill myself."

Serious writers must sooner or later confront something like the Psalmist's question: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" If an individual is of no worth, why make him the subject of literature? Levi was forced by circumstances to confront the question at its extremity: how do you write about a man who is no longer a man, living a degraded existence in which there is no why?

Heir to the long secular humanistic tradition of Italian Jews, Levi never cultivated a religious sensibility. In his childhood, he had thought of Jewishness as "a cheerful little
anomaly,” he says. “At Auschwitz I became a Jew,” he writes. “The consciousness of feeling different was forced upon me.”

But this consciousness afforded no consolation. After one of the periodic “selections,” Levi notices an old prisoner named Kuhn praying aloud, thanking God that he was not selected for extermination.

Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see, in the bunk next to him, Beppo the Greek, who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow, and knows it…? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no profitiary prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty—nothing at all in the power of man to do—can ever heal? If I were God, I would spit Kuhn’s prayer out upon the ground.

Even in this infernal factory for “the demolition of a man,” Levi never lost what he calls his “curiosity about the human soul.” On arriving in the Lager (as he calls the concentration camp in German), he felt like a “naturalist who finds himself transplanted into an environment that is monstrous, but new—monstrously new.”

The first monstrosity was the camp’s polyglot confusion, “a perpetual babel” of shouted orders and threats. He describes “the degraded, often satanically ironic jargon of the concentration camps.” Levi is attuned to the violence done to language. “In German,” he writes, “I know how to say eat, work, steal, die.” And another word. “Häftling [prisoner]: I have learned that I am a Häftling.”

Häftling 174517 survived with the help of a firm conviction and three lucky breaks. The conviction, learned from a prisoner named Steinlauf: “precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts.”

Levi’s first stroke of luck was to meet an Italian civilian bricklayer named Lorenzo Perrone, who brought him a piece of bread every day for six months. Levi writes that Lorenzo “reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that I had this book ready in my head, that I had only to let it out, let it fall onto the paper.”

On his return, Levi succeeded in weaving into his book the result, “If This Is a Man,” of his “pathologically precise” memories pressed into him an urgent need to bear witness. With his characteristic poise, he met that need by unflinchingly describing the inhumane in a humane way. He wrote at night, on the commuter train, in the factory canteen. “It seemed to me that I had this book ready in my head, that I had only to let it out, let it fall onto the paper.”

But he was haunted by the taunting of the SS: “Not one of you will be left to bear witness; but, even if someone were to escape, the world will not believe him.” Levi’s “pathologically precise” memories pressed into him an urgent need to bear witness. With his characteristic poise, he met that need by unflinchingly describing the inhumane in a humane way. He wrote at night, on the commuter train, in the factory canteen. “It seemed to me that I had this book ready in my head, that I had only to let it out, let it fall onto the paper.”

He describes the result, “Is a Man,” as “an interior liberation.”

But his was a message without an audience. Levi took the manuscript to the publisher Einaudi in late 1946 or early 1947, where the distinguished novelist and editor Natalia Ginzburg rejected it. After being turned down by five other Italian publishers, “If This Is a Man” was issued by a small press in 1947, and hardly noticed. The same year, the English version of the memoir was turned down by Little, Brown and Company with the verdict: “no one wants to hear about this thing.”

In 1955, Levi noted that it was still thought “indelicate” to speak of the camps. Only in 1957, when Einaudi agreed to reprint the book, did Levi gain wide recognition in Italy.

Constricted by the autobiographical mode, Levi began to permit himself the luxury of invention. He wrote stories that veer off into the surreal realm of science fiction, where machines replace human beings (collected under the titles Natural History [1966] and Flaw of Form [1971]). In his only novel, If Not Now, When? (1982), Levi chronicles the exploits of a brave band of Eastern European Jewish partisans fighting the Germans, desperate to “survive, do the maximum damage to the Germans, and go to Palestine.”

Levi also sought to “unbar the door,” as he put it, in his poetry (superbly translated in The Complete Works of Primo Levi by Jonathan Galassi). “Adorno wrote that after Auschwitz there can be no poetry,” Levi remarks, “but my experience is the opposite. At the time (1945-46) it seemed to me that poetry was more suitable than prose to express what weighed inside me.” One of the most anguished of his poems gave his memoir its title:

Consider if this is a man,
Who toils in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for half a loaf
Who dies by a yes or a no.

In Italy, Levi was acclaimed more as memoirist than as novelist or poet. In the United States, he remained all but unknown until 1984, when the critic Irving Howe and the translator Raymond Rosenthal persuaded Schocken Books to publish his collection of short stories The Periodic Table (1975), which correlates human types and experiences with chemical elements. The reviews were laudatory in the extreme.

In April 1985, Levi made his only visit to the U.S. for a publicity tour. He was received rapturously in New York (where he and Saul Bellow shared a fiction award), Claremont McKenna College, the University of Indiana, and Boston. He was on his way to becoming the most widely cited Holocaust survivor in the world.

But with every passing year, Levi was aware that his experiences during the war were growing more alien to his audiences. He felt
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it was “becoming harder and harder to speak with young people.” He suffered bouts of depression. In April 1987, at age 67, months after completing his book The Drowned and the Saved, a series of essays meditating on the varieties of dehumanization at Auschwitz, he threw himself from the fourth-floor landing outside his apartment and plunged to his death in the stairwell. “Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later,” Elie Wiesel said. Levi was survived by his wife, Lucia, and their two children. His marble headstone bears the number 174517.

Inevitably, as with other writers of the Holocaust who took their own lives (the poet Paul Celan, in 1970; the Vienna-born philosopher Jean Améry, in 1978), some interpreted Levi’s work in the light of his suicide. A piece in the New Yorker went so far as to suggest that “the efficacy of all his words had somehow been canceled by his death—that his hope, or faith, was no longer usable by the rest of us.” For many people, the novelist William Giraldi suggested, “the circumstances of his death still take precedence over the deathlessness of his work.”

The Complete Works of Primo Levi, some 15 years in the making, testifies to that deathlessness. Ann Goldstein, an editor at the New Yorker, has gathered all 14 of Levi’s books—memoirs, fiction, essays, poetry, newspaper columns—until now available in English only piecemeal. Thirteen of the books appear here in new translations by ten translators.

Levi conceded that he would not have become a writer if it were not for Auschwitz. But he came to the accidental accompanied by all the essentials. Most essential of all—and most sharply brought into focus in this three-volume collection—is the scientific detachment that lent its modesty and sober rigor to Levi’s unpretentious prose, marked through-out by a rejection of hatred, self-pity, and sentimentality. “I deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness,” he wrote, “not the lament of the victim or the anger of the avenger.” His profession, he added, “educated me to concreteness and precision, to the habit of ‘weighing’ each word with the same scrupulousness as someone carrying out a quantitative analysis.” Levi’s model, he told Philip Roth in 1986, “was that of the ‘weekly report’ commonly used in factories: it must be precise, concise, and written in a language comprehensible to everybody in the industrial hierarchy.”

But Primo Levi never entirely lost sight of that other factory, the one dedicated to demolishing man and meaning. Levi concludes The Truce with a recurring dream:

I am at the table with my family, or friends, or at work, or in a verdant countryside—in a serene, relaxed setting, in other words, apparently without tension and pain—and yet I feel a subtle, profound anguish, the definite sensation of a looming threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, little by little or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and is destroyed around me, the scene, the walls, the people, and the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Everything has now turned into chaos; I am alone at the center of a grey and murky void, and yes, I know what this means, and I also know that I have always known it. I am again in the Lager, and nothing outside the Lager was true.

Benjamin Balint is the author of a cultural history of Commentary magazine, Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine That Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right (PublicAffairs) and co-author (with Merav Mack) of the forthcoming Jerusalem: City of the Book (Yale University Press).
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