

Berel Lang, **Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life**

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 192

(printed edition)

**Levi's Moral Imagination. On Berel Lang's *Primo Levi. The Matter of a Life***

by Robert S. C. Gordon

The first full-scale biography of Primo Levi appeared in France in 1996: Myriam Anissimov's *Primo Levi: La Tragédie d'un optimiste* (Paris: Lattès) was broadly criticized for a gamut of failings, inaccuracies, misreadings and loose misconceptions that did Levi a profound disservice. One thing it certainly underlined, however, was the set of deep challenges to the biographer that Levi represented and still represents: in a review of the 1998 English translation of Anissimov's book, I commented: "A biographer of Levi has several divergent worlds to convey to us with an impression of expertise - the Holocaust, Italian Jewry, Italian literary culture, Turin and Piedmontese culture and industry, chemistry - before even beginning to explain the man;" and, further, "a tricky problem faces any biographer of Levi, that of absorbing but not parroting the autobiography that makes up so much of his own work. In part, the solution must lie in teasing out the many small semi-fictions and narrative elaborations that necessarily make up the apparently exclusively documentary works."<sup>1</sup> And Marco Belpoliti glossed further, "E anche così non si arriva al centro del problema, l'«enigma Levi»: confrontarsi con la sua sottile psicologia, con una intelligenza tanto discreta da risultare impalpabile."<sup>2</sup>

Since Anissimov's somewhat abortive attempt, Anglophone biographers have taken centre-stage. Berel Lang's short, but acutely sensitive and engaging *Primo Levi. The Matter of a Life* is the third English-language biography of Levi, following two major and fundamentally important works that appeared together in 2002, in uneasy competition with each other: Carole Angier's *The Double Bond. Primo Levi, A Biography* (London, Viking, 2002) and Ian Thomson's *Primo Levi. A Life* (London: Hutchinson, 2002). This was in itself a remarkable event, which spoke volumes about a deep and mutual affinity between Levi and the Anglophone world, and of the long and rich tradition within the latter of biographical writing, as a positivist research practice, as a sophisticated interpretative tool, and, last but not least, as a widely read, commercially lucrative product.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. C. Gordon, "The Centaur's Ghastly Tale," *Times Literary Supplement*, October 9, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Belpoliti, "Troppo complesso l'enigma di Primo Levi per la sua discussa biografia francese," *La stampa*, January 12, 2000.

Levi's own anglophilia can be traced back to some of his earliest readings. Like many of his generation, weighed down by the rhetoric and bombast of the Fascist education system, he found relief, clarity and even a form of freedom, in American and British literature (rather as he would find in his classroom encounters with chemistry). Melville's *Moby-Dick*, or more specifically Pavese's translation of it, was one of a handful of treasured possessions he took with him on his work travels during the war before 1943, described in the chapter "Fosforo" in *Il sistema periodico*. He had probably read Conrad by that time too, and had been introduced to Aldous Huxley by his eccentric English teacher in the 1930s. Indeed, strains of Levi's writing, several of its most characteristic stylistic and moral facets, find close analogies both in Conrad's narratives of work and struggle, and in Huxley's or Orwell's imagination of dystopian presents and futures, captured in the form of the modern parable. (Lang will pick up on this Orwellian Levi in a crucial moment in his book, as we shall see below). When Levi came to collate his anthology of favourite or most "intimate" books in *La ricerca delle radici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), with all due acknowledgement for his declared omission of over-obvious entries in the Italian canon, it is nevertheless remarkable to note that English-language authors dominate his polyglot selection: 11 of the 30 texts extracts are from English sources, followed by 6 from Italian (and dialects), and then 4 or fewer from originals in French, German, Yiddish, Latin, Hebrew and Greek. The mix of English texts is telling too: Charles Darwin, William Bragg, Swift, Conrad, Melville, Bertrand Russell, F. Brown, the ASTM manual, Arthur C. Clarke, T. S. Eliot, K. Thorne. Reading in English in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this list seems to declare, almost automatically gave Levi the eclectic mix of genres and of forms of both pleasure and knowledge – science, literature, philosophy, technical expertise, science-fiction, poetry – that would fully characterize his own hybrid and inventive voice as he built his own unclassifiable oeuvre. (How to classify Levi as a writer is a central preoccupation for Lang.)

Apart from his wide and eclectic readings in English (quite how wide is still hard to chart in detail: we await with fascination the unpredictable secrets of Levi's library), Levi also held onto a distinctly positive notion of the British or 'Anglo-Saxon' character. It is evident from his work that Levi was far from averse to indulging in the game of regional stereotypes and national characteristics as a lightly ironized window onto the spectrum of humanity he encountered, both during the war, in Auschwitz, or on his later work travels. *La tregua*, in particular, paints broadbrush portraits of 'typical' Germans, Russians, Americans, Greeks, Romans; *La chiave a stella* does the same for his fellow Piedmontese. And later, when writing about his passion for Piedmontese dialects and varieties, it came naturally to Levi to share a commonplace notion that the Piedmontese character has something of the British about it:

"Un mio amico in vena di paradossi, forse ricordandosi la tripartizione del 1984 di Orwell, aveva un tempo proposto di dividere il mondo abitato in tre sole regioni: la

Terronia ... la Plufonia ... e il Piemonte, collegato alle Isole Britanniche mediante un lungo istmo dai contorni incerti... . Il gemellaggio fra piemontesi e inglesi si fondava su dati storici e antropologici... Il comune sprito d'impresa. L'efficienza militare. L'amore per il lavoro ben fatto, per la legge e per l'ordine. Il rifiuto dell'esibizione, dell'astratto, del monumentale, della retorica e dell'apparenza ... Il rispetto dei diritti dell'uomo. La durezza della lotta di classe..."<sup>3</sup>

Several dispositions of mind and character in Levi - his rationalism, his pragmatism, his common sense, his measured restraint, his discretion, his wit - read rather like a catalogue of British-Piedmontese stereotypes, so that it is perhaps no surprise that many Anglo-Saxon readers of Levi have found him to be their greatest guide to the dark world of the genocide.

Although, as Levi acknowledges in *Racconti e saggi*, Britain and America, George Bernard Shaw's "two nations divided by a common language," are not classifiable as a single 'Anglo-Saxon' entity (indeed Thomson is British, Angier originally from Canada, Lang American), nevertheless Levi's English-language biographers reflect that deep bond between author and his English readers. And although it may be otiose to try to pinpoint the moment of clearest crystallization of Levi's success in English language and literature, and his human affinity with its culture, it would be hard to ignore the claims of the intimate, pellucid and deeply humane encounter between Levi and Philip Roth, described by Roth in a lengthy interview in 1986 and recently confirmed as of touching and surprising importance for both men by Roth's first biographer.<sup>4</sup>

Thomson and Angier each worked away for a decade or so before 2002, digging out paper trails and documents, reading, interviewing friends and relatives, chipping away at silences and (Piedmontese?) reticences, and they produced two vast, authoritative biographies of almost diametrically opposing styles and methods (although each aligned with powerful and competing traditions of modern life-writing in English). Schematically speaking, we might say that Thomson embodies the biographer as chronicler, detective and dogged researcher, the archive 'rat' who follows the document trail, who discovers pots of paper gold and charts in microcosmic detail the events, experiences, and webs of connection in Levi's life. As a point of method and principle, Thomson stands back and keeps a sober distance from the oeuvre, which he lets speak for itself: "From the start, I was determined to construct a life of Primo Levi not found in his books. It seemed to me dishonest, as well as dangerous, to recast Levi's printed words in a biography" (Thomson, p. xi). His book is sequential, descriptive, cumulative and gives us a mass of information on Levi we simply did not know before. Angier on

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<sup>3</sup> "Bella come una fiore" (*Racconti e saggi*), in P. Levi, *Opere*, (ed. Marco Belpoliti), (Turin: Einaudi, 1997): II, pp. 986-99 [986].

<sup>4</sup> Philip Roth, "A Man Saved by His Skills," *New York Times Book Review*, October 12, 1986; Claudia Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 163-5.

the other hand gives us the biographer as psychoanalyst and subject. Her book is less linear in structure, more elusive, speculative, metaphorical in its elaborations, including intimate narrations of her own experience as biographer, her own encounters and even fantasies. She reaches constantly for matrices of interpretation, for psychological and textual complexity, and for an intimate and intellectual engagement with her material, which could hardly be more alien to Thomson's mindset. If Thomson writes at times like the forensic pathologist, Angier wants to be the psychopathologist of Levi's life and work.<sup>5</sup>

Lang's *Primo Levi. The Matter of a Life* draws on Thomson and Angier (and others in the vast critical field on Levi), but his book has a strikingly different feel again from both. It offers us yet another model for the tasks biography can perform, based more on reflection than primary research. Lang sets to one side the aspiration to completeness, to a comprehensive account of the text and sources, in favour of careful thought: this is the biographer as essayist and reflective interlocutor.

His book is different first of all in sheer size (150 pages to Angier's 900 and Thomson's 600; Anissimov came in at nearly 800), in its format and the constraints of its publishing conditions; and also in the formation, critical temperament and intellectual make-up of its author. Angier and Thomson were published by generalist commercial publishers with a wide appeal to the general reader. Lang's book appears in series published by a prestigious American University Press, Yale, but in a cross-over series, intended for a broad, educated not exclusively academic readership, as the volume's elegant typeface (Janson), its rough-cut pages and nice illustrations suggest. The series is called "Jewish Lives" and the back-matter lists a strikingly eclectic range of good and great Jewish figures from all eras are to be included: Levi sits, somewhat anomalously, alongside Bernard Berenson, Sarah Bernhardt and Moshe Dayan, Solomon, Kafka and Tolstoy, among those published so far, with further volumes promised on Irving Berlin, Benjamin Disraeli, Bob Dylan, Proust, Wittgenstein and many more. In such a varied list, indeed, perhaps every single entry sits uneasily. Here is the broadly celebratory series blurb:

"Jewish Lives is a major series of interpretive biography designed to illuminate the imprint of Jewish figures upon literature, religion, philosophy, politics, cultural and economic life, and the arts and sciences. Subjects are paired with authors to elicit lively, deeply informed books that explore the range and depth of Jewish experience from antiquity through the present" (Lang, [endpages])

The brief is ecumenical and catch-all, perhaps excessively so, immediately posing the

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<sup>5</sup> See Robert S. C. Gordon, "The Battle of the Biographers: Primo Levi, and 'Life-Writing,'" in *Biographies and Autobiographies in Modern Italy*, eds. Peter Hainsworth, Martin McLaughlin (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), 23-36

question of how “Jewish,” how centrally “Jewish,” the lives led by many of these figures were; and the extent to which these biographies will be constrained to approach their subjects from a predominantly Jewish angle (and what indeed that might mean in many cases). As it happens, of course, this is an extremely uncertain, pertinent and acute issue in the life and in our reading of Primo Levi. Levi himself felt the strain on his visits to Israel and the US, where he was all but exclusively categorized as a “Jewish writer.” The dilemma famously described by Isaac Deutscher of the modern secularized but culturally Jewish intellectual, the “non-Jewish Jew,” was one that cut across Levi’s biography at several points of intersection, not least at Auschwitz, and one that this “Jewish Life” poses once more in its very editorial form.<sup>6</sup>

Lang is carefully aware of the problem and duly cautious - he imagines Levi accepting his inclusion in the “Jewish Lives” series, perhaps, but no doubt looking to join other series also, “‘Literary Lives,’ ‘Twentieth-Century Lives,’ ‘Piedmont Lives’” (p. 153). And Lang makes a virtue out of this provisional uncertainty in a core chapter of the book entitled “The Jewish Question,” where builds a delicate picture of a Levi (like many secularized Jews) set squarely against himself, inconsistent in his statements and experiences of his own Judaism. “Levi vs. Levi,” Lang calls it (p. 93), echoing Levi own image of himself as a “centaur,” adopted as a critical key to his work by Belpoliti and others, but with a difference tone and nuance: Lang set Levi’s disavowal of his Jewish roots against his “*emphatically* Jewish” experiences (ibid, Lang’s emphasis). This divided Jewish consciousness is reprised in Levi’s serially strange or strained responses to Yiddish literature, to Israel and its tensions with the Diaspora, to the Judaism he encountered in Auschwitz, and so on. As Nancy Harrowitz has argued, there is much more complexity to this question than a sterile contrast of belief versus atheistic assimilation might suggest.<sup>7</sup> Lang is especially good at projecting back into context and without hindsight: he sees Levi’s sympathy for Zionism, for example, but notes as no-one else quite has, that even before Levi knew whether or not his home and family were intact in Turin as he travelled home from Auschwitz in 1945, there is nevertheless no sign he himself contemplated emigration to Palestine (unlike the heroes of his novel *Se non ora, quando?*, say). More broadly, “Levi vs. Levi” or “Levi as a witness against himself” (p. 98) would not be a bad summary of Lang’s overall method of biographical reflection, his trick of reading Levi against the grain, through omissions, elisions and negatives, as much as through reasoned declarations.

One further element of the “Jewish Lives” rubric – and indeed the subtle engagements of Lang’s reflections on Levi’s Jewishness – alerts us to a key difference from Angier and Thomson. That is, the Yale series comprises commissioned biographies, selected pairings of biographer to subject. And the pairing of Berel Lang with Primo Levi is rather a

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<sup>6</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Harrowitz, “Primo Levi’s Jewish Identity” in *Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17-30.

remarkable one. Lang has been one of the most important and sensitive figures to have written on the Holocaust over the last quarter century. Having started out as a philosopher, interested in issues of aesthetics and representation, in particular meta-philosophy or philosophy as a form of writing, he proceeded to test out his thinking against the great historical problem of our time and perhaps all time, the Holocaust. At a moment when serious reflection on the genocide of the Jews within philosophy was the exception rather than the rule (exceptions included Arthur Cohen or Emil Fackenheim), Lang's *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) appeared as a work of signal acuity and importance, already marked by a personally engaged intensity and alert thoughtfulness, combined with a trenchant forcefulness of vision, that comes through in his biography of Levi as much as in his five intervening books and many further essays and edited volumes on the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

Lang therefore brings to his account of Levi a lifetime of pondering problems of morality, representation and history, and of addressing the Holocaust as our prime test case for all of these. He finds in Levi one of the most acute interlocutors with whom to ponder these questions further. He wears his biographical and historical research lightly, choosing not to weigh the book down with documentation, but his research is thorough enough nevertheless. (He credits his daughter, historian Ariella Lang as a "partner in the search and research for this book," as well as acknowledging his debts to Angier, Thomson, Belpoliti etc., pp.153-4). His acuity is brought to bear principally on a set of fascinating questions posed by Levi's life and work, and by the particular shape Levi gave to his own life and the history he traversed in his own writing, a shape often only visible, in Lang's view, between the lines. Indeed, Lang's signature move, as we saw in his account of Levi's Jewishness, lies in a feint away from the surface evidence of text, life and history, a slight disruption of the evidence, in order to tease out oblique presences that even Levi himself might not be fully alert to. In this sense, Lang's biography, although lighter in information and in bibliographical reference (and, indeed, simply lighter), is probably more attuned than either Angier or Thomson to the hidden patterns of Levi's voice, to the effort of probing beneath the surface of the oeuvre to see its foundations in value, form, style, ethics.

Lang's first disruption is formal and chronological, sealed in a witty epigraph from Godard: "But surely, M. Godard, you would agree that every film should have a beginning, a middle and an end;" "Yes of course – but not necessarily in that order." So, the preface ends the book, the first chapter is entitled "The End," and the sixth and final chapter "The Beginning." In between are four further chapters, one historical ("The War") and three interpretive, tackling in turn the three key axes of enquiry: Levi's writing career and style, his Jewish identity and his ethics ("Writing," "The Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> On Lang's work, including a full bibliography, see *Ethics, Art, and Representations of the Holocaust. Essays in Honor of Berel Lang*, eds. Simone Gigliotti, Jacob Golom, Caroline Steinberg Gould (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

Question,” “Thinking”).

“The End” tackles the troubling and interfering role played by Levi’s death in the reading and understanding of his work over the last 25 years, the distorting perception that the death in some way undoes the life and the work, the optimism of both intellect and will in the face of catastrophe that Levi ostensibly embraced. (It is perhaps fair to say that this strange obsession with the death as Levi’s final work has somewhat faded as 1987 recedes in the memory.) Despite the fact that most of Levi’s closest family and friends and both of his previous biographers are firmly convinced and have furnished compelling evidence that Levi’s death was indeed a suicide, Lang carefully acknowledges that a certain act of inference is still required to reach such a conclusion. This leaves open the possibility of, if not doubting the suicide verdict– he does not – then at least of exploring the problem of suicide and its accessibility to explanation, of what might amount to its necessary and sufficient causes (and whether such notions have any purchase at all); and of exploring how a life, its history and the history that surrounded it, might or might not be included in these causes. In other words, rather beguilingly, Lang’s uses his clear and well-documented account of Levi’s death – he touches on Levi’s family history, his state of mind, his family and medical circumstances, his suicide stories, his exchanges with Jean Améry, the other suicides that touched his life (Agostino Neri, Cesare Pavese, Lorenzo Perrone, Hanns Engert, Paul Celan, those who deny his suicide etc. - is also an introduction and a dry run for his own method in interpretive biography: take elements of the life and infer from it a set of problems in experience and thinking about experience (Levi’s and ours).

“The War” performs a similar task, starting not with a single event but with the broad canvas of the Second World War, its history in Italy and beyond, Levi’s perception of it and participation in it. In regard of the latter, Lang – like Thomson before him – treats in a few pages of clear and proportioned attention Levi’s days as a partisan, including his involvement in the execution of two fellow partisans, recently forensically and somewhat obsessively exhumed for analysis.<sup>9</sup> Lang acknowledges the eloquence of Levi’s near silence on these matters (“it turns out to have been much more consequential than he was later willing to acknowledge,” p.28) and he uses this as a lever to open up Levi’s life-long practice of “stretch[ing] and contract[ing] history in his writings” (p.29). But there is no facile accusation of omission or dishonesty here, nor of finding the single secret key to the man, but rather the beginnings of an understanding of how in Levi, his and others’ lives came to be written down and shaped in language (pp.30-32) and of the effort in him to understand fundamental questions of causality and responsibility in the process. Much emphasis is placed here on chance and contingency, as Levi sees it and writes it, on the ironic choices which were hardly choices at all (to declare himself a Jew

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<sup>9</sup> Sergio Luzzatto, *Partigia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013); Frediano Sessi, *Il lungo viaggio di Primo Levi* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013).

rather than a partisan), on the relatively trivial details on which our insight turns (in *Se questo è un uomo*, the wipe of a hand, or the throwaway remark that the public hanging of “L’ultimo” in the chapter of that name had been the fourteenth he had witnessed), or on strange and eloquent absences (why does *La tregua* not give us the actual scene of Levi’s arrival back home, when return has been the driving force of the entire book?).

In the following three chapters, Lang’s approach gets into its most confident stride, particularly evident in the last, “Thinking.” Chronology and conventional biography fade a little and the task is more centred on the work, its engagements with history and the inferences from and consequences of its form and voice. In a certain sense also, the specificity and otherwise of the Holocaust comes more clearly into view, as Lang drives home through example, his core assumption that in rare figures such as Levi, writing, the “moral imagination” (p. 82), can guide us through the quagmire of history and of *this* history at its worst. The chapter “Writing” takes a bold, original step by trying to discover hidden first principles, to capture the original founding impulse in Levi to write: why did he write at all?, Lang asks. Above all, he argues, Levi starts not with himself nor with style and language, but with *acts* (echoing Lang’s own *Act and Idea*) – “what had happened to him, what he had seen happening, and, still more urgently in a reflective mind, what had *happened*” (pp.48-9). Only from the acts, the acts of genocide, do writing and ideas flow. Levi is unusual and unusually powerful in deflecting focus away from himself towards those acts and events. In this context, Lang returns to the tricky problem of Levi’s reshaping of stories, constructing of events around his testimony, asking “what exactly Levi understands ‘facts’ to be” (p.60), and even more tellingly, how a writer chooses to give a particular form to a story or name to character without consciously choosing between fact and fiction.

These are elusive and rather abstract questions, but Lang manages to transmit them with exceptional force and clarity by coming at them through rather pragmatic questions: what writing and which writers did Levi like and, perhaps even better, dislike (Borges, Beckett); and how can we read into his sometime trenchant judgements a “theory of discourse” (p.70)? Similarly, what forms of writing worked in Levi and, better still again, what forms sat more awkwardly with him (poetry, translation, prose fiction)? Lang concludes that for Levi “writing is a moral act” and so required the constraint and the impurity (the grain of sand, Levi might have said) of a purchase in history, science, matter itself. It must be, in a characteristic Levian (and Popperian) sense, falsifiable, reproducible, subject to stress-testing in the world. For these characteristics, Lang convincingly places Levi in the company of a canon of moralist writers – Montaigne and Thoreau, Pascal and Aesop, Emerson, Camus, Orwell (p.87). Indeed, he nicely inverts the canon by suggesting that each of these was a Levian writer *avant la lettre*, each building their own scaffold of moral enquiry, their own “assembly of human elements – *their* periodic table” (p.88).



The chapter “Writing” sits most closely with the next but one, “Thinking,” since the ethical-philosophical company that Levi’s keeps as a writer in the former is developed in the latter into the most eloquent case yet made for Levi as a proto-philosopher, as someone who, whilst decidedly not prone to abstract philosophizing, nevertheless crossed a border, from history into the understanding of history and experience and so “into territory marked off – vaguely but nonetheless – as philosophy” (p. 114). “Thinking” proceeds to elaborate and to “stress-test” five philosophical topics in Levi, five problems each with a vast philosophical tradition and hinterland to them, which Levi tackles by way of memoir and history, experience and moral imagination: human nature, evil, justice, the unspeakable and God. At its most compelling, the chapter proposes that Levi can negotiate these topics in ways not accessible to a detached and “pure reasoned” philosophy. So, he is shown to be an anti-essentialist, a contextualist on human nature; the Lager does not prove that “man is a wolf to man,” but rather that in differing contexts man will act in a spectrum of different ways, none of which represents the stripped down essence of the human. On evil, Lang shows how Levi can embrace a contradiction, sustaining and assuming at one and the same time that the world is intelligible (Levi the rationalist), but also that an irreducible evil can exist, an irreducible “uselessness” in Nazi violence. On justice, Lang offers a careful and important elucidation of Levi’s category of the grey zone, as embodying another unresolved tension. This middle ground must not simply be reduced to a tricky case of a mitigated good and evil; it is a genuine third ground, “a third modality of ethical judgement ... in addition to good and evil, right and wrong” (p. 129), and for this reason, of profound moral significance. In this resonant conjunction of the professional philosopher in Lang and the proto-philosopher in Levi, both graced with a gift of persistence or what Lang nicely calls “patience” (“patience in the face of facts and the matter they embody,” p. 15), both having dedicated a lifetime to the slow contemplation of the Holocaust, the powerful synergies at work in this book are at their most compelling. So that in the end, one hesitates to call the book a biography at all, but rather an essay in moral imagination that not only Levi, but also Orwell and his fellow moralists (Anglophone or not), would swiftly have recognised, contested and embraced.

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