

Primo Levi in the Seventies: “letterato” or “impegnato”?

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Introduction

At first sight, Primo Levi does not seem to be one of the most characteristic authors of the Seventies. He did not partake in any discussion on the present and the future of the historical novel (he would rather write one: *SNOQ*)¹ nor in political debates on the position of the intellectual. Of course, Levi was a leftist intellectual, as most people of his social and religious background. He was immune for anti-Soviet ideology, having been liberated by the Russians and having travelled in their country, as he had described in his successful book *T*. On the other side, he was unable to identify with the Catholic and rightist movements that had ruled Italy from 1948 onwards. But this did not make him a militant intellectual. He was primarily a working man, a technician who was sometimes remembered as an author of remarkable books and, in fact, spent some of his leisure time in writing. And, of course, he was a witness of the *shoah*. Within the Einaudi “stable”, he was associated with somewhat similar amateur writers as his friends Nuto Revelli and Mario Rigoni Stern, all of them interested in war memories and in nature, preferably that of mountain regions.

¹ I will use the abbreviations first introduced in the late eighties in the Einaudi edition of the “Biblioteca dell’Orsa” (the first series of Levi’s collected works, published by Einaudi between 1987 and 1990) and now often used for the Italian titles of Levi’s books: SQ (*Se questo è un uomo*), T (*La tregua*), SN (*Storie naturali*), VF (*Vizio di forma*), SP (*Il sistema periodico*), CS (*La chiave a stella*), L (*Lilit ed altri racconti*), AM (*L’altrui mestiere*), RS (*Racconti e saggi*), RR (*La ricerca delle radici*), SNOQ (*Se non ora, quando?*), SS (*I sommersi e i salvati*), to which can be added UNG (*L’ultimo Natale di guerra*).

Still, for Levi, the Seventies form a crucial period, both in his life and in his being a writer. We shall therefore try to give a short chronology of his life in this period, before analysing into some detail the importance of Levi's work in the Seventies.

Life and works in the Seventies

Some dates:

1971: Levi collects a second series of short stories, publishing them under his own name: *VF*.

1972-73: for his work at the varnish plant SIVA, Levi travels more than once to the Soviet Union. This fact should not be ignored, neither as the artistic matrix of his later book *CS* nor as an activity with a political meaning. I shall explain myself further on.

1973: Levi becomes a member of Cogidas, an organisation of parents and teachers opposing the increasing neo-fascist intimidation on schools. Involvement includes posting at threatened schools, writing reports and submitting 'squadristi' for prosecution.

1973-74: the oil crisis causes serious problems for Italian economy, and still more for SIVA, that depends on petrol-based raw materials. Levi takes part in two television-documentaries, one by the Dutch Rolf Orthel about Eduard Wirths, a doctor at Auschwitz, and one filming his reunion with Jean Samuel and Charles Conreau, his former camp companions, in Strassbourg.

1974: Levi decides, after much deliberation, to retire from SIVA. This was one of the most difficult decisions he made in all his life, because his colleagues and his superior, Federico Accati, wanted him to stay and Levi was not the kind of man that liked turning his back on his responsibilities. Of course, the reason for this move was Levi's desire to dedicate himself to full-time creative writing.

He resigns as a director but, for the next three years, he continues working half-time as a senior consultant.

1975: Levi is elected as President of the Parents’ Council of the Liceo Massimo D’Azeglio, his own former secondary school. This is a difficult function, because Levi had to face the students’ demands for self-government, as well as new types of teaching and introduction of new courses, such as those of sexual education. Levi publishes *SP* with Einaudi and an anthology of poems, *L’osteria di Brema*, with Scheiwiller as a publisher. The frequent collaboration with the newspaper *La Stampa* dates from the beginning of this year, when Arrigo Levi asked Primo for an article on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The first texts deal prevalently with the *shoah*, but Levi published as well on the cultural page of *La Stampa* a series of poems and tales he would later include in other books.

1977: final retirement from SIVA; working on *L* and *CS*, some texts of which books are published in *La Stampa*.

1978: *CS* appears, and wins the Premio Strega, maybe the most important Italian literary price. In this years, the activity for *La Stampa* reaches a total of 24 pieces.² Towards the end of this year, Darquier de Pellepoix, the Vichy regime’s commissioner of Jewish affairs, and Roberto Faurisson, a professor at Lyons, launch their extreme denial of the *shoah*, which meant a shock of great impact for Levi.

1979: Levi, in obvious reaction to the aforesaid, returns to writing on the Holocaust, with a number of articles (11 in 6 months) and stories that would become part of *L* and received the group title of “Passato prossimo” (past tense), which literally means that even it is behind us, it is still so close to us as to retain its relevance. Of his essays, I’d like to mention “L’intolleranza razziale” (Racial Intolerance), maybe Levi’s

² Angier, p. 594.

longest essay before the group of *SS*³ and really a lecture held in Turin.

So, if we do not take in consideration *L*, we have four titles in one decade, three of which we may regard as really important books, not to count the translations, such as that of Presser's *De Nacht der Girondijnen* (*La notte dei Girondini*). Only in the eighties, Levi would prove to be (still) more productive, but we should not forget that much of the eighties' production was actually written, or at least conceived, in the last years of the seventies. Carol Angier justly observed that the gestation period of *SS* begins around 1975, when Levi read Presser and was impressed by the grey zone between suffering as a victim and collaboration with the enemy that the Dutch historian wrote about.

Technology and work from *Vizio di forma* to *La chiave a stella*

If we try to find a common denominator of the said three books *VF*, *SP* and *CS*, what strikes us is that they have all to do with technology and science. It is this very aspect that was present in Levi's first book of short stories, that Levi published under the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila, which mainly deals with classic science-fiction: strange machines cause both hilarious and menacing situations. The authors Levi as a writer of science-fiction has most in common with are Calvino, Buzzati and Landolfi, as can be clearly seen when reading "Cladonia rapida" (*SN*), that is based on Buzzati's "La peste motoria" (from *Sessanta racconti*, 1958) or "A fin di bene" (*VF*) which goes back to "Scioperi dei telefoni" (from the same volume of tales). Buzzati's "La creazione" (*Il colombre*, 1966), in which angelic technicians present the Project Earth to God, obviously inspired "Il sesto giorno" (*SN*). For Landolfi, it is not difficult to establish a parallel between his "In treno" (from *Racconti impossibili*, 1966) and Levi's "Anagrafe" (*UNG*), or between "La mattinata dello

³ Now in *Opere I*, pp. 1293-1311.

scrittore” (from *In società*) and “Il Versificatore” (*SN*). As far as Calvino is concerned, he was one of the writers Levi admired most and had frequent contacts with. He was the one Levi had sent his *SN* tales to when he was practically an unknown writer and Calvino had encouraged Levi to go on writing.⁴ The one thing Levi did not want at this stage was giving the impression that he was an epigone of Calvino. Levi’s short story (from *VF* and dedicated to Calvino) “Il fabbro di sé stesso”, however, is a kind of ‘Cosmicomico’, but clearly differs from his friend’s stories. Levi’s interest for Roberto Vacca is that of a “man of two cultures”, as both men were, and Levi wrote about at least two of Vacca’s books.⁵

In *VF*, attention shifts from the machine-related fantasy to the *reductio ad absurdum* of elements of reality intrinsically present in modern society, such as lab-built babies, communication networks, environmental pollution and so on, even if the fantastical technical inventions would play an important part in some tales, such as “Lumini rossi” (Little Red Lights). Levi would explain, in the “Letter to the publisher” he wrote on occasion of the book’s 1987 reprint, that the stories were inspired by Roberto Vacca’s essays *Medioevo prossimo venturo* (Middle Age On Hand), a book that gave an apocalyptic vision of the future. It was a few years before the *Club of Rome’s Report* (1972) gave a shock to Western readers, stating that natural resources had nearly run out and life would come to an end in a few decades’ time due to energy shortage. Levi not only translated this kind of concern in gripping tales, but created strong metaphors as well, such as in “Verso Occidente”

⁴ Cf., among other references, G. Einaudi, “Primo Levi e la Casa editrice Einaudi”, p. 396.

⁵ “L’ingegnere-filologo e i suoi sogni proibiti” (1966), now in *Opere I*, pp. 1152-54 and “Le parole esportate” (1978), *ibid.*, pp. 1223-26. It is not clear if Levi, when discussing the book *Parliamo itagliano* knew that its author, ‘Giacomo Elliot’, was really Vacca.

(Westward), where the suicidal behaviour of mankind is juxtaposed to that of lemmings throwing themselves into Northern seas.

Critics stress the pessimistic tone of the *VF* stories. This is correct, but we should be careful not to closely associate them with signs of depression. One could even say that modern (or post-modern) science-fiction only makes sense if it is pessimistic, linking the fantastic elements to real concern and thus assuming a moralistic dimension.

The shift from technical fantasy towards more philosophically inspired tales of the imagination, would proceed in the fantastic short stories of *Lilit ed altri racconti*.

The second title, *SP (The Periodic Table)* has become one of Levi's most beloved books. Strangely, when Levi wrote an autobiographical profile for Einaudi as an introduction to an edition of collected works (in the Biblioteca dell'Orsa), Levi arrived until 1975 and mentioned nothing at all about *SP*.

In the book, that may be read as a series of interrelated tales, as a novel or as an autobiography, Levi writes about his youth, studies at university, his first jobs as a chemist and – briefly – about his weeks as a partisan and his life in Buna Monowitz. But still more attention is given to the years after his return and various professional experiences. The way he writes about them is profoundly different from that of leftist writers of the Seventies. Levi does not question labour and the alienation it causes, he doesn't discuss workers' rights and demands. He doesn't see work as degrading, but as a challenge and, possibly, a source of great satisfaction and even happiness in life.⁶ Philip Roth has justly stated that the effort to give back to work its

⁶ "It would be good for the individual and therewith, for society as well, if the work one chooses is one that can become pleasant. Who succeeds in this, has some possibility of experiencing happiness, at least now and then", cf. *P.L. Conversazioni e interviste*, p. 117.

human dignity, freeing it from the cynic Nazi slogan *Arbeit macht frei*, can be seen as the central theme in Levi's work.⁷

After the book on inorganic chemistry, Levi planned a kind of sequel that would take organic chemistry as its focal point. The book would be named *Il doppio legame* (The Double Bond), but it was never finished and its materials ended up in Levi's next book, *CS (The [Monkey's] Wrench)*.⁸

CS further develops Levi's new idea about work. The book is, as, in a certain sense, its predecessor, a frame story, inspired by Levi's travels to the Soviet Union, and the tales he tells are partly his own. But more important is the book's hero, the engineer Faussonne, which Levi himself has called his *alter ego*.⁹ Levi's response to the ideology of class struggle, that was a rather important item of debate in those days, is shifting attention from the traditional dichotomy of the intellectual and the common worker, to that of an intermediary character, that of the qualified technician. Faussonne is not a worker (*operaio*), but neither an intellectual. He is a man that faces technical problems he has to solve, and he does so. Even the language Levi attributes him with is highly original: it is the Piedmontese Italian spoken in the world of industry and technicians. This could be seen as a subtle kind of polemic: Levi, himself a Turinese, living within walking distance of the FIAT, the most important Italian industry whose workers have played a leading role in social struggle, gives a language to a character that could have been one of them, but denies all class struggle. Doing this,

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

⁸ According to Angier p. xvii (for the complete references, cf. the Index on p. 882), Levi was working again on a book with the same title in the last year of his life. Angier claims to have read many sketches of the book. However, according to Thompson, “The Double Bond was [in the beginning of 1987] as yet little more than an outline” (p. 521).

⁹ *P.L. Conversazioni e interviste* p. 85.

he took the risk to be misunderstood as the writer of a rightist book and to have to enter in discussion with trade-unionists¹⁰. Levi tried to polemize both with the classic idea that only a humanistic education can give an educational value to work and “with the armchair trade-unionists for whom the world is made up out of slaves of the assembly line and bad-intended bosses”¹¹

1982 and the Peace in Galilee campaign - the end of the Seventies?

Until now, we have clung with some discipline to the idea of the seventies as being the decade between 1970 and 1979 or, maybe between 1971 and 1980. As many other contributors, we might, however, loosely apply this definition and suggest, at least for Jewish Italian authors, an important alternative milestone: the months of August and September of the year 1982. This year was marked in Israel by the war *Shalom le-Galil* (Peace In Galilee), in which for the first time, the young State of Israel took the initiative for a big military campaign – before that date, it had only reacted to Arab aggression. Aim of the campaign, or war, was the activity of terrorists attacking Israel from across the Lebanon border. Its military leader was the general Ariel Sharon, with whom later history would become more familiar, and who had the reputation of begin a hard-liner. Sharon bombed two Palestinian refugee camps, Sabra and Chatila, causing many casualties and a huge death toll. Leftist intellectuals all over the world reacted. In Italy, a traditionally pro-Arab country, this reaction had a markedly anti-Semite character. Italian Jews were practically accused of everything the Israeli army had done, they were menaced, aggressed and challenged in public opinion. Synagogues and schools had to be protected by the army, outward signs of Jewish culture had

¹⁰ On this misunderstanding by some contemporary readers, cf. *ibid.*, p. 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117 (1975) and 119 (1979)

better be suppressed and, of course, anti-Semite slogans and symbols abounded in graffiti-loving Italy.

This seemed to end an idea: the illusion that racial discrimination had finished with the fall of Fascism and Nazi Germany's defeat, that Jews in Italy were once again normal citizens, Jewish intellectuals had a normal place in public life and Jewish writers were normal writers writing about the same subjects as anybody else. Henceforward, many Jewish authors chose to 'come out', to stress their Jewishness. From 1982, Jewish Italian literature became far more Jewish. Writers that had never written from a Jewish point of view or from their experience of being Jewish, now started writing on Jewish subjects. We shall limit ourselves to one eloquent example. Paolo Levi, who was born in the same years as Primo, had become a well-known writer of detective stories in the seventies. In all these books, not a single word can be found to refer to Jewishness. In 1984, however, appears *Il filo della memoria* (The Thread of Memory), a history of his own family from 1800 till the present and maybe his best work.

For Primo Levi, stressing his Jewishness more than he had already done in books as *SQ*, *T* or *SNOQ* was, of course, impossible. His concern for the State of Israel made him plead for "suppressing our impulses of solidarity with Israel, so as to be able to reflect with lucidity upon the error of the actual Israeli ruling class. To bring about its downfall. To help Israel to recover its European origins, the equilibrium of its founding fathers, Ben Gurion, Golda Meir. Not that they had clean hands, but who has?"¹²

Levi's stance, which was essentially moderate if somewhat naive, has been criticised by some Jewish intellectuals and been adhered to by others. Levi wrote a number

¹² Cf. *P.L. Conversazioni e interviste*, p. 302. All translations from Italian texts are mine.

of articles and granted a series of interviews on the Israeli campaign, and was among the first to sign a public appeal “Perché Israele si ritiri” (Let Israel Retire) asking Sharon and Prime Minister Begin to resign. This appeal foreshadows the conclusions a special Israeli commission was to draw as to Mr. Sharon’s responsibility for the massacre.

For Levi, however, there was a far more important ideological and historical battle to fight: that against revisionism, the current that tried to deny or, at least, to belittle the horrors of the Shoah. From 1979 onwards, Levi tried to mobilise public opinion with his articles on revisionism and its champion Faurisson.¹³ At the same time, he proposed to write about the relation between oppressor and oppressed in the extermination camps. It is, of course, the origin of *SS* (The Saved and the Drowned), the book Levi was to publish in 1986.

In the years 1981-1982, Levi published the personal anthology *RR* (Searching for the Roots), the collection of various short stories and concentration camp memories *L* (Lilith and Other Tales, published in the US in 1986 under the title *Moments of Reprieve*) and finally his successful novel *SNOQ* (If not now, when?). In the meantime, Levi regularly contributed to *La Stampa*’s cultural page (the so-called *terza pagina*) with his poems and columns and began translating Kafka’s *Der Prozess*. So the period we are examining is a highly fruitful one.

Levi as a pacifist

There is still another field on which Levi was very active: that which regards the role of science and scientists. Levi was very worried by the cold war and the arms race. This concern can be at least traced back to the text of *T*, that ends with the nuclear

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-28, and, among other texts, “Ma noi c’eravamo”(1979), now in *Opere I*, pp. 1253-54, “Il difficile cammino della verità” (1982), now in *Opere II*, pp. 1173-80, and “Il buco nero di Auschwitz” (1987), now in *Opere II*, pp. 1321-24.

bomb on Hiroshima. Levi would return in the early eighties to this subject, focusing on the important role of the scientists in the arms race: their research provides the know-how deadly arms are made with.

In his essay, "Le lance diventino scudi" (Let the Lances Become Shields, 1981, later in *RS*)¹⁴ Levi asks the military to spend their money on defensive weapons rather than on attack arms. "That would be a clear signal to make known to the other side that vigilance has not slackened, but that they have no aggressive intentions".

In the essay "I padroni del destino" (Masters of Destiny, 1982)¹⁵ Levi proposes that young scientists take a modern kind of "Hippocrat's oath" not to do research that is obviously harmful to mankind. "It is naïve, I know; many will not take the oath, others will commit perjury, but there will be some who will keep true to it, and the number of witch-pupils will diminish."

This idea is repeated a few months before Levi's death, in an interview in the review "Uomini e libri".¹⁶

The essay "Eclissi dei profeti" (The Eclipse of Prophets, 1984, later in *AM*)¹⁷ appeared on the front page of *La Stampa* and is to be considered a text meant for topicality. Levi states that everybody in Europe has a safer and better life than before, but feels a kind of unrest all the same, mainly motivated by 'nuclear fear'. The man in power, politicians, soldiers, scientists and important technicians should not forget that "if they give way to an apocalypse, they too will be wiped away by it".

Significantly, the essay is placed as the last piece of the book, so it has a special value as a message. One could observe

¹⁴ Now in *Opere II*, pp. 935-38.

¹⁵ Now in *Opere II*, pp. 782-85.

¹⁶ Now in *Conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 58-60.

¹⁷ Now in *Opere II*, pp. 853-56.

that *AM* begins with “La mia casa”, describing the house Levi had been born, and ends with the idea that the whole world should be seen as the home of mankind, so the book moves from individuality to universality.

Conclusion

Gradually retiring from his work as director at the SIVA paint factory in the years 1974-1977, Primo Levi chose to lead the life of a writer. As such, he was fully conscious of the social and human responsibilities of his “new trade”. Even if he stayed far from literary and political polemics, he mobilised public opinion when he considered it necessary, such as in the case of the 1982 Israeli campaign. In the “anni di piombo”, which were particularly hard in the industrial metropolis of Turin, Levi actively engaged in opposing intimidation of school pupils by fascist thugs and pursued important school reforms. Neither did he hesitate to put forward ideas on the role of scientists in the arms race. On closer examination, Levi has lived throughout the Seventies as other engaged and avant-garde writers, exploring the borders of literary tradition and renewal, without ever ignoring actuality.

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