REACTIONS TO THE PUBLICATION OF

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF PRIMO LEVI

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A mia figlia,

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INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi’s first book, *Se questo è un uomo*, came out in Italy in 1947, and appeared for the first time in English in 1959. Since then, more and more of Levi’s works have been published in the United States, until the 2015 edition of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*.¹ This essay offers an evaluation of the current state of Levi’s reception in the Anglophone world, with a particular focus on the US, in light of the reviews to this edition of his *opera omnia*.²

When *Se questo è un uomo* first appeared in the United States, it did not obtain great success and Levi was almost forgotten for more than twenty years, until 1984, when *The Periodic Table* was published, receiving stunning reviews. The sudden success increased the interest in Levi’s work among American readers, and, in a few years, most of Levi’s works were published in English. The publication of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, in September 2015, constituted a major event for the American publishing industry and for the writer’s reputation. No other Italian writer has ever had the privilege of having his *opera omnia* published in English in a single edition. The first to believe in

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² I have included in my analysis not only reviews as such, but also interviews and articles related directly to the collection. Since there is not a specific and circumscribed audience, but this work is supposed to be accessible to ordinary people, the authors of the reviews are very different among them: journalists, writers, scholars.
this project was Robert Weil, editor in chief of Liveright. The collection was edited by Ann Goldstein, editor at *The New Yorker*. The collection was modeled upon the Italian edition of Levi’s *opera omnia*, edited by Marco Belpoliti and published by Einaudi in 1997.

The ambitious project aimed to improve the understanding of the figure of Primo Levi in the English-speaking world. Indeed, in this context the knowledge of Levi and his works has always been somehow incomplete, and a reductive interpretation of Levi’s writings has dominated among Anglophone critics and publics. Levi in the United States has been usually seen and labeled as Jewish writer of the Holocaust, and little more than that. But he himself was uncomfortable with this generalization: “They put a label on me. I don’t like labels. Germans do,” he used to say.³ Levi was fully aware of his complex identity as chemist, writer, witness, Jew, Italian, so much so that he used the image of the ‘centaur’ to talk about himself.⁴ Nonetheless, his figure has always been pigeonholed—not only in the United States, and not only from a formal point of view, as Bryan Cheyette points out in his essay, “Appropriating Primo Levi”. Cheyette argues that, on one hand, in Europe the dominant stereotype was of Levi as “a saint-like figure who is calmness and forgiveness personified.”⁵ On the other hand, in the United States Levi had to face different but not lesser problems: “whereas in Europe Levi’s supposed Christian characteristics made him the ideal survivor, in the United States his publishers feared that

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⁵ Bryan Cheyette, “Appropriating Primo Levi,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi* (New York, 2007), 68. Bryan Cheyette mentions as main examples the case of Jean Améry, also a survivor from Auschwitz, who used to describe Levi as ‘the forgiver’, and Francesco Rosi’ cinematic version of *The Truce*. 
he was not ‘Jewish’ enough and therefore would not reach his principal audience.”

Anthony Rudolph, his first publisher in the UK, comments with these words Levi’s relationship with his American readers: “Levi did not get on well with the Americans, and they did not get on well with him. For the Americans, he was neither Zionistic enough on the one hand, nor religious enough on the other; he was diasporic and secular. In the early days, people wanted him to fit into their preconceptions, but he was too big for that.” Therefore, in order to become more appealing to the audience, Levi became victim of a process of simplification: “Levi’s studied ambiguities are radically reduced in the United States so that he can be assimilated to the culture as a whole. What is particularly disturbing about this reduction is that the terms in which he was canonized in the United States (his ‘purity of spirit’) precisely reverse his own heartfelt beliefs.”

Ann Goldstein recognizes the same tendency to simplify Primo Levi. But, while Cheyette mainly criticizes a simplistic understanding of the content of Levi’s work, Goldstein, in the introduction to The Complete Works, identifies as the causes of the improper understanding of Levi by the Anglophone public the low quality of the translations and the scarce accessibility to his texts. The Complete Works of Primo Levi aims to remedy these shortcomings, and finally present Primo Levi’s work in his entirety.

But can improving the quality of the translation, offering all his texts, and re-establishing their order really fix the problem of the complexity of Levi? In short, has Goldstein’s endeavor been successful? Has it actually improved the quality of Levi’s

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7 Giovanni Miglianti, “Poetry out of pain: how Primo Levi found his UK audience,” interview with Anthony Rudolph, Jewish Quarterly, October 2, 2015.

8 Cheyette, “Appropriating Primo Levi,” 76.
reception? My impression is that, from the point of view of improving the understanding of Levi, the collection can only be considered as a partial success. From an editorial point of view, I believe, Goldstein endeavor should be praised. Reviews have debated at length on the quality of this editorial project. Overall, most critics agree that the fact that Primo Levi’s works are finally integrally available is an important resource. But this is not enough to achieve the higher goal. From the point of view of the content, of getting at the deep core of Levi’s texts, it does not look like the editorial improvements have been enough – at least so far – to help the Anglophone public appreciate the complexity of Levi’s work. Goldstein’s own analysis of the reasons why Levi’s reception is still immature was in itself reductive. As a result, some reviewers still label Levi as a Holocaust writer. And those critics who reject the label generally end up giving him a different label. Few seem to appreciate the fact that Levi is all of these things at the same time, and much more.

This essay is composed of four chapters. The first chapter provides an editorial history of Primo Levi’s works in English and especially in the United States. The second chapter presents The Complete Works, focusing on its format, content, and goals. The third and fourth chapters investigate the reception of this massive collection, by analyzing what reviewers, critics, journalists, and intellectuals have written about it. The third chapter will pay particular attention to those texts that have focused attention on the collection’s successfulness in retranslating the texts and offering to us Levi’s work in its entirety. Finally, in the last chapter, I will look at reviews that have tried to read Levi’s works with different criteria, in particular by focusing on Levi’s message more than on the formal aspects of the collection. I will show that some have offered overly reductive
readings, while others have succeeded in acknowledging and appreciating Levi’s complexity. I will finally offer my own perspective on the issue, arguing that, while the collection is successful with respect to language and completeness, by reading the reviews it seems clear that the risk to oversimplify Levi’s message is still alive.
CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF PUBLICATION OF PRIMO LEVI’S WORKS IN ENGLISH

Primo Levi’s writing was translated into English for the first time in 1959, but the first approach between Levi and the US is dated a decade before. Indeed, as soon as the text of *Se questo è un uomo* was completed, Primo sent the manuscript to some acquaintances in the United States, including his cousin Anna Yona, a Massachusetts resident, hoping to introduce his work to the American market. In 1946 Anna Yona circulated the first chapters of *Se questo è un uomo* among Jewish intellectuals and publishers, but was not able to find someone willing to publish the book.

The project remained in standby until 1959, when Stuart Woolf, a young British student, got to know *Se questo è un uomo* and—through the De Benedetti family—its author. Stuart and Primo soon became close friends and Woolf volunteered to translate the book into English. The two met twice a week for an entire year. The English translation of *Se questo è un uomo* was the second completed after the French one, but the first to be published. In 1959 Orion Press—a small American-based publishing

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company founded by Eugenio Cassin, which had an office in Florence—published the book in English with title *If This Is a Man*. When Orion Press went bankrupt, only a couple of years later, the rights for *If This Is a Man* were sold to another American company, Collier Books, which provided a new publication in the United States in 1961, with the questionable idea of changing the title: from *If This Is a Man* to *Survival in Auschwitz*, with the eloquent subtitle *The Nazi Assault on Humanity*. Levi’s first work in English was faced with the indifference of critics and public. None of the main magazines and newspapers devoted any space to it. Ian Thomson describes the American reviews as “mealy-mouthed,” while the British ones were better. But he points out that in both countries the book did not have great success.

A few years later a second work by Levi was translated into English: *The Truce* (*La tregua*), which had been published in Italy in 1963, almost 16 years after his first book. In Italy *La tregua* was widely and favourably reviewed, and had even won the first annual Campiello literary award. Levi’s reputation was growing. Once again, it was Stuart Woolf who translated *The Truce*, then published by Bodley Head (London) in 1965. *The Truce* was later published in the United States by Atlantic Monthly Press, a part of Little Brown. Once again, the American publisher changed the title, and *The

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10 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (Florence, 1959).


13 Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York, 2003) 270. Nonetheless, Anthony Quayle, an actor, remained so impressed that he starred in a BBC Home Service radio adaption of the book. *If This Is a Man* had great success in Canada, where in early 1964, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation realized an effective radio version of the first of Levi’s books.

Truce became *The Reawakening*.\(^{15}\) In Great Britain *The Truce* was welcomed enthusiastically, while in the States the reception was not as warm.\(^{16}\)

The first two translations were followed by a collection of poetry, *Shemà*, published by the London-based company Menard Press in 1976.\(^{17}\) The poems were translated by Ruth Feldman, whom Anna Yona, her Italian teacher, put into contact with Levi. Feldman had initially planned to publish the poems in the US, but the two most important Jewish magazines and journals, *Moment* and *Commentary*, rejected them.

Despite the publication of the three works in English, for quite a long time Levi was not well-known, nor properly considered. From 1966 to 1984 the figure of Primo Levi was surrounded by silence. This resembles what happened in Italy between the first publication of *Se questo è un uomo* by Da Silva in 1947 and the second one by Einaudi in 1958. Many have discussed the overall lack of fortune of Primo Levi in his first twenty years. It is worth pointing out that, in Italy as elsewhere, Levi’s “early works never received unfavorable reviews; they simply didn’t spark a great deal of reaction from critics and fellow writers, nor did they enter into an easily recognizable literary school or current.”\(^{18}\) Several explanations may be given for this fact, but the most important reasons is that American and British readers, just like Italians a few years before, were not ready for this kind of book—the painful memories of the war were still too vivid.\(^{19}\)

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18 Cannon, “Canon-Formation and Reception in Contemporary Italy: The Case of Primo Levi,” 32.

It is only with the publication in English of *The Periodic Table* that Levi achieved fame in the English-speaking countries. 1984 can thus be considered a turning point in his American reception. Interest in Levi began to grow steadily. Nonetheless, the path to fame was still arduous. It was still not easy to persuade someone to invest on Levi’s works. An important role in promoting Levi’s works was played by the initiative of individuals, who committed to sponsor their publication. For example, in the case of *The Periodic Table*, it was necessary that Alvin Rosenfeld, eminent literary critic and Indiana University’s director of Jewish studies, appealed to Irving Howe, important critic of *The New York Times*. His request was effective, and Howe ensured that Schocken Books bought the rights of *Il sistema periodico*, published in Italy in 1975, after many publishers in the United States had turned it down. Saul Bellow, who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976 and had become a great promoter of the book, reviewed *The Periodic Table* glowingly.\(^{20}\) The book, translated by Raymond Rosenthal and William Weaver, was published in the US by Schocken Books and then in the UK by Michael Joseph, an affiliate of Penguin.\(^{21}\) Translations of new works followed, along with new editions of earlier works. *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening* were reissued in the United States in 1986 because of the popularity of *The Periodic Table*.\(^{22}\) This link between the appreciation of a new work by Levi and a new evaluation of his earliest


books is noteworthy: “Rarely did a review of Levi’s subsequent books fail to mention and pay tribute to Se questo è un uomo.”


The presentation of If Not Now, When? was the justification for Levi’s first and only trip to the US. Summit Books had organized a publicity tour all over the country in 1985. The trip lasted almost three weeks, Levi visited six cities (New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, Indianapolis, Bloomington, Boston) and gave many interviews and lectures. The trip was the prelude of his future success in the country, despite the difficulties he faced with American culture and, in particular, with American Jews. Indeed, Levi did not gain only praises and compliments. Several voices of criticism were raised. The most famous expression of this was a review by Fernanda Eberstadt, in Commentary, where she criticized not only If Not Now, When? but Levi himself for his lack of authority in speaking of and describing Jewish topics, being a secular and non-practicing Jew, who had grown up in Western culture rather than in the Jewish one.

Nonetheless, that attack did not weaken the growing reputation of Levi. In October 1986, La chiave a stella (released in Italy in 1978) was published in the US by

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23 Cannon, “Canon-Formation and Reception in Contemporary Italy: The Case of Primo Levi,” 34.


Summit Books as *The Monkey Wrench* and in October of the following year in the UK by Penguin Books as *The Wrench*.\(^{26}\) Once again, Levi once again had to deal with an altered translation of one of his titles.

His death, on April 11, 1987, did not hinder Levi’s reputation. Instead, the interest in his figure became even more intense and several publishing houses provided the publication of the works that were left. In 1986 *Moments of Reprieve*—a collection of some of the prison-camp stories that had appeared in Italian as *Lilit e Altri Racconti*—was published by Samuelson, translated by Ruth Feldman.\(^{27}\) The same Feldman, with the collaboration of Brian Swann, returned to translating Levi’s poetry and in 1988 this was published by Faber and Faber with title *Collected Poems*.\(^{28}\) The collection gathered stories from *L’osteria di Brema* (1975) and *Ad ora incerta* (1984). *The Drowned and the Saved*, the last work Levi published during his lifetime, appeared in English in 1988 by Summit Books, translated by Raymond Rosenthal.\(^{29}\) Summit Books and Rosenthal also worked together for the publication of *Other People’s Trades* in 1989.\(^{30}\) *The Mirror Maker* is a collection of stories and essays originally published in the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*. Once again, it was Rosenthal who translated them into English, and they were published in 1989 by Schocken Books.\(^{31}\) *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, a collection of short stories, originally published in *Storie naturali* and *Vizio di forma* was

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published in English in 1990 by Summit, with translation again by Rosenthal.\textsuperscript{32} The Sixth Day and Other Tales did not follow the same structure of the Italian publication, therefore some of the stories that were not present in the collection were published years later as A Tranquil Star, a collection of seventeen stories translated into English by Ann Goldstein and Alessandra Bastagli, published in April 2007.\textsuperscript{33} The Search for Roots was only published in 2001 by Allen Lane, translated by Peter Forbes.\textsuperscript{34} In 2011 Penguin published The Magic Paint, a collection of 8 short stories taken from various collections and translated by Goldstein, Bastagli and Jenny McPhee.\textsuperscript{35}

2002 was a very important year for the reception of Primo Levi in the Anglophone world: in a few months, two biographies, The Double Bond by Carole Angier and Primo Levi: A Life by Ian Thomson, came out, and soon imposed themselves as points of reference for the knowledge of Levi’s life. This is a clear sign of the status that Levi had gained in the Anglophone world by 2002, as Joseph Farrell observes: “The appearance of two biographies of a foreign writer in the one year is probably unparalleled in British publishing history.”\textsuperscript{36} In September 2015, Liveright published The Complete Works of Primo Levi, edited by Ann Goldstein.

\textsuperscript{32} Primo Levi, The Sixth Day and Other Tales (New York, 1990).

\textsuperscript{33} Primo Levi, A Tranquil Star (New York, 2007).

\textsuperscript{34} The Search for Roots is a very interesting text: among other things, it highlights the importance of Anglo-Saxon culture for Levi. “It is worth noting that there are six British authors, including scientists and literary writers, in that book, the same as the number of Italians”; all the more noteworthy considering that Levi voluntarily omitted the British author with whom he probably most closely identified himself, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the writer of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Giovanni Tesio, ed., Diffusione e conoscenza di primo Levi nei paesi europei: la manutenzione della memoria: atti del convegno, Torino, 9-10-11 ottobre 2003 (Torino, 2005), 128. Primo Levi, The Search for Roots (London, 2001).

Let us now analyze the *Complete Works* in more detail. One is immediately struck by the scale of the edition: three volumes, ten translators, fourteen works by Levi, 2910 pages. A slipcase holds the volumes together. On the front side of the slipcase, the title in large font, the names of Ann Goldstein and Toni Morrison (respectively the editor and the writer of the introduction), and the division in three volumes. On the other side, a picture of Primo in his late years, covered by the shadow, and looking seriously at the reader. On the back, again, the title and the editors’ names, followed by a brief presentation and some extracts of significant reviews by Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Clive James and Leon Wieseltier. The sides of the three volumes form another picture of Levi, again in his sixties, again looking seriously at his interlocutor. Under the picture, the number of the volume, the name of Ann Goldstein, and finally the name of Liveright, the publisher, a newly relaunched division of W.W. Norton & Company. Moreover, each volume has in the front of the cover back, from top to bottom, the number of the volume, the title of the collection, the works present in that volume and

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the names of the translators. But it is the back of the cover to be particularly interesting: indeed, each volume has a short sentence selected from one of the many reviews and the name of the author. And it is interesting the nature of these endorsements, since they belong to very different backgrounds and cultural traditions, and yet they are all united in this celebration of Levi’s works, as if they were aiming to highlight the richness of Levi’s audience. Hence, we see in the first volume Ruth Franklin, Richard Eder, Germaine Greer and Michiko Kakutani. In the second there are passages from Italo Calvino, Thane Rosembaum, David Denby and Jonathan Rosen. In the last volume, Ian Thomson, Alexander Stille, Joan Acocella, Carole Angier and Robert Gordon.

In the editor’s introduction, Ann Goldstein sets the purpose of the collection. She complains about the tendency to label Levi as a “Holocaust writer” and the injustice that this represents, and speaks of the need for this to be rectified: “these three volumes are intended to address that need.” She then points out two reasons for the failure of a proper understanding of Levi. The first is the low quality of the preexisting translations, that Goldstein defines as “somewhat outdated” and not effective in safeguarding the homogeneity of Levi’s tone, because executed by different translators at different times. The second reason is that several of Levi’s works had never been translated into English, and others had been published incompletely or not following the exact chronological order in which they appeared in the original language. Therefore, in order to solve the shortcomings in Levi’s reception, two are the main roads Goldstein works on. As far as the language was concerned, the edition offers new translations of each text. As far as the

37 Goldstein, “Editor’s Introduction,” p. XV.

structure is concerned, Goldstein’s aim was to present Levi’s work in a chronological order and in its completeness.

The first volume opens with an introduction by Toni Morrison, the editor’s introduction by Goldstein, the editor’s acknowledgments, and a chronology curated by Ernesto Ferrero. Levi’s works follow in chronological order. The first is *If This Is a Man*, re-translated by Stuart Woolf, followed by Levi’s famous Appendix and a translator’s afterword. Then we find *The Truce*, translated by Ann Goldstein, and then *Natural Histories* and *Flaw of Form*, both translated by Jenny McPhee.


The last volume begins with *Collected Poems* translated by Jonathan Galassi. *Other People’s Trade* and the comment of the translator, Antony Shugaar, follow. *Stories and Essays* comes next, translated by Anne Milano Appeal, who has also authored an afterword. Then we find *The Drowned and The Saved*, translated by Michael F. Moore, who also provides a list of works cited and an afterword. The last of Levi’s work to appear in the collection is *Uncollected Stories and Essays: 1981-1987*; this section, too, is translated by the Barstaglis. But this is not the end. The volume continues with two valuable essays: the first one, “Primo Levi in America,” by Robert Weil, tells the history of the fortune of Primo Levi in the US. The essay starts from Primo sending his
manuscript to Anna Yona back in 1946 and ends with an account of the genesis of The Complete Works. The second essay is Monica Quirico’s “The Pubblication of Primo Levi’s Works in the World,” summarizing Levi’s editorial history around the world. The very last contents are offered by Domenico Scarpa: the “Notes on the Texts” and, finally, a concise select biography.
CHAPTER 3

HOW REVIEWERS HAVE EVALUATED THE COLLECTION

The next two chapters focus on the debate raised around The Complete Works of Primo Levi. In order to accomplish this purpose, I have collected and analysed 52 reviews, appeared between October 2014 and June 2016. Seven of them are Italian—five on national newspapers, one on a magazine devoted to translation-connected issues, and one on a cultural monthly magazine. Five reviews are British, two Canadians, and one Australian. Three reviews appeared on Israeli medias. All others are American reviews. Overall, eleven reviews were published in magazines, blogs or newspapers explicitly devoted to address issues on Jewish culture.

Journalists, critics and scholars have expressed their opinions in order to establish to what extent Goldstein’s purposes have been achieved or not and, thus, to establish whether this collection should be considered a success or a failure. In this chapter, I focus on those reviews that have evaluated The Complete Works according to Goldstein’s criteria and priorities. I will report first what reviewers have written about the new translations. Then, I will account for the reviews that focus on the collection’s structure, in particular regarding its claim for completeness and the importance of restoring the
original titles. Finally, I will deal with the reviews that address Goldstein’s assertion that
Levi was much more than a Holocaust writer.

As stated above, Ann Goldstein was persuaded of the necessity to offer new
translations of all Levi’s works “in the interest of achieving a high degree of consistency
and accuracy.”39 Not many reviewers have offered a deep analysis of the quality of the
translation. However, among the few who did, we see diametrically opposite reactions.40

Tim Parks is the only critic who has strongly criticized the quality of the
translations. He actually condemns the work of Stuart Woolf and Ann Goldstein, while
congratulating other translators for their good interpretations of the texts.41 First, Parks
points out the lack of foresight in choosing one of the translators as editor: “From a
methodological point of view it would surely have made more sense to have someone
from outside editing all the translators in the same way. After all, who edited
Goldstein?”42 According to Parks, lack of external feedback is the reason why
Goldstein’s translations are the least valuable. In another article, Parks argues that, as far
as Goldstein’s attempt to restore Levi’s homogeneous tone is concerned, that effort has
failed: the collection “offers both sprightly and wooden performances. Ironically, the
three books everyone is most interested in fall into the second category while some of the


40 Most of the reviewers seem to take it for granted: if everything has been newly translated, they
must have done it properly, according to a dynamic that Tim Parks has defined of “automatic
congratulation.” There is not a clear explanation for this lack of interest: according to Tim Parks, the
reasons may be a lack of space, default diplomacy or the diminishing importance of the written word. See

41 Tim Parks devoted the article “The Translation Paradox,” to deal with the translation of the less-
known works by Levi, and he praised in particular the works by Jenny McPhee (Natural Histories and
Flaw of Form), Nathaniel Rich (The Wrench), Anne Milano Appel (Stories and Essays).

least read works are brought to the page with exemplary freshness.” The three books are obviously If This Is a Man, The Truce, and The Periodic Table; the former translated by Stuart Woolf, the latter two by Goldstein. In particular, analyzing her translations, Parks finds not proper at all the use of cognates and Latinisms, since “the tone of the book becomes more solemn and literary” while “precisely the genius of Levi’s style is to sound straightforward and everyday about even the most terrible events.” Parks defines this English translation as “a little stilted or simply odd where the original is fluent and standard” and the final result is that “it is a long way from the fluency and intimacy of Primo Levi.” The other main aim of Parks’ attack is Stuart Woolf’s adaptation of his original translation. Indeed, If This Is a man was the only text that was not totally translated anew. From a textual point of view, according to Park’s, Woolf’s translation has similar problems to Goldstein’s, related to the overall tone of the book: “if your translation of the plain prose sounds anything but plain, it will be difficult to indicate a change of gear when you shift up a register.” Moreover, he finds the amount of changes quite insignificant; an aspect highlighted in Ian Thomson’s review as well, though he does not raise explicit critiques.

Many have highlighted that translating Primo Levi is particularly difficult, due to his peculiar attention to the problem of language. Indeed he loved to use puns and dialectic forms, as well as diminutives and superlatives, which are tough to express correctly in English. Maybe this was one of the reasons why not all his works were

43 Tim Parks, “The Translation Paradox.”


45 Ibid.

translated until now. As Domenico Scarpa says, “alcuni racconti, e alcuni brevi saggi, sembravano a prima vista troppo ‘italiani,’ o erano semplicemente difficili da tradurre perché basati su giochi di parole, o erano troppo fitti di allusioni culturali.”\textsuperscript{47} Moreover—Goldstein adds—Levi “loves to use pairs of words, pairs of adjectives, pairs of adverbs, and sometimes in English it begins to sound heavy-handed, even though in Italian it doesn’t.”\textsuperscript{48} Jennifer Maloney has observed in particular the difficulties in translating from Italian to English due to the Italian syntax and the use of dialect, which the editor chose to eliminate in this publication.\textsuperscript{49}

Italian reviewers, in particular Scarpa and Ferrero, have generally praised the quality of the new translations.\textsuperscript{50} In the Anglophone world, reactions have been more heterogeneous. James Marcus has praised the result of the new translations, notwithstanding a few flaws. In a first essay Marcus does not deny that there are some mistakes and imperfections, but states that, if we consider the hugeness of this kind of work, those flaws become irrelevant: “translation is an imperfect art [...]it should surprise nobody that \textit{The Complete Works} includes a sprinkling of errors, most of them minor blemishes that can easily be fixed in a reprint. A few, however, cry out for more immediate correction, and many of those seem to be clustered in \textit{The Periodic Table}.”\textsuperscript{51}

In a second article, Marcus actually puts some doubts on the necessity of new translations.

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\textsuperscript{47} Susanna Basso, “Si è guadagnato? Si è perso?,” interview with Domenico Scarpa, \textit{Tradurre}, No. 9 (Fall 2015).

\textsuperscript{48} Begley, “Even Elena Ferrante’s Translator Doesn’t Know Her Identity.”


\textsuperscript{50} This endorsement is not surprising, since both of them collaborated with the publication of this collection.

translations, arguing that the previous ones were not extremely dated. However, he recognizes Goldstein’s success in giving all Levi’s works a homogeneous tone.\textsuperscript{52}

The quality of the new translations is definitely a significant issue. If most of the reviewers have overlooked it, limiting themselves to fleeting praise of the result, it is interesting that, where the translations have been analyzed carefully, they have been criticized. The present essay does not allow enough space for a careful analysis of the differences between new and old translations, and doing so exceeds its goals. Since offering new translations in order to restore Levi’s tone was one of the main goals of the new edition, it would be worth, in future explorations, to focus in more detail on the changes in translations in order to establish, comparatively, their quality and effectiveness.

As explained in Chapter 1, the publication of Primo Levi’s works in English has been very fragmentary. Titles were changed, works dismembered or never translated. James Marcus writes that due to these reasons “the thrilling arc of Levi’s development as a writer [...] was lost. It all seemed very random, as if the books had floated ashore from a shipwreck.”\textsuperscript{53} For these reasons, one of the other main goals of the collection edited by Ann Goldstein was to publish all of Levi’s works and to follow the chronological order and original structure in which Levi originally wrote them, in order to reestablish that arc of development. Almost every reviewer has discussed the importance of this operation. Critics have expressed dissenting opinions on the successfulness of Goldstein’s work, focusing in particular on completeness and on the titles.


\textsuperscript{53} Marcus, “Free But Not Redeemed.”
Despite the broad range of the texts included, the collection is flawed in terms of its claim of completeness. The absence of *The Search for Roots*, which is present in the Italian *Opere* edited by Belpoliti, is emblematic. The choice is quite surprising, since Goldstein explicitly says that she followed Belpoliti’s model. Levi himself, in the preface to the book, explains its importance: if we want to understand Levi, we have to know where Levi comes from, and thus what Levi read. Edward Rothstein, Ian Thomson, Alvin Rosenfeld, and Robert Gordon have highlighted this absence. Thomson defines it as a “shame,” but tries to explain the controversial choice with the fact that “not much of it was Levi’s own work.” Gordon and Rosenfeld not only mention the absence of *The Search for Roots* but also the omission of *The Auschwitz Report* (a medical report co-written with Leonardo De Benedetti, a fellow survivor). Finally, Rothstein adds as serious omissions—besides *The Search for Roots* and *The Auschwitz Report*, the written testimony to the Eichman trial, the letter condemning Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and the fact that there is no mention to *The Double Bond*, an incomplete work Levi was working on towards the end of his life.

With regards to titles, almost every critic highlights the importance of restoring the original title of the first two of Levi’s works—*Se questo è un uomo/Survival in Auschwitz*, and *La tregua/The Rewakening*. Those were very controversial editorial choices: a different title gives a different meaning to a text. Magavern highlights the

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54 Although even in *Opere* it finds space only in the Appendix. See Primo Levi, *Opere*, edited by Marco Belpoliti (Torino, 1997).

55 Thomson, “The Ethics of Primo Levi.”


57 *The Auschwitz Report* is the first writing by Primo Levi and, even though it does not have particular literary claims, it is extremely significant of Levi’s need of communicating his experience.
importance of restoring the original titles in order to understand the complexity of Levi’s texts: “The jacket copy of the old American version praised it for portraying the ‘indestructible human spirit,’ but the truth is darker and more complex. One of Levi’s core themes is, in fact, the fragility of the human spirit, as proven by the way the Nazis demolished not just the bodies but also the souls of many victims: by treating them like beasts, like ‘nothings,’ and by pitting them against one another in a zero sum situation in which human solidarity became nearly impossible.”

To sum up, we can say that the omission of some works is quite surprising. Given the scale of the work, it is difficult to think that this was due to considerations of space. More likely it was a specific—and arguably unfortunate—choice of the editor based on the nature of the texts omitted. On the other hand, restoring the original titles and presenting the texts in a chronological order reflecting the way in which Levi conceived his works is no doubt a precious and necessary act in order to present Levi to English speaking readers in the most effective and pure way.

I will now address responses to Goldstein’s statement about reevaluating Levi as multifaceted writer. Can we consider this purpose achieved?

One achievement of the collection seems to be that it has attracted attention to a variety of works that the public considered as “minor.” For example, Levi was better known for his prose rather than for his poems. Nonetheless, he left many significant poetic pieces, and many critics have highlighted the importance of this side of Levi. A reviewer defines his poetry as a “revelation,” another writes it was “underrated,” someone that this is the part of Levi’s works that most reveals his inner feelings, which in

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58 Moreover, even though it is less significant in terms of meaning, even _La chiave a stella_ is translated in this edition as _The Wrench_ and no longer _The Monkey Wrench_, as it was known in the US before.
other works remain totally enigmatic. \(^{59}\) Analogously, many short stories were unknown and underestimated, and thanks to this collection we can now appreciate them in their integrity. \(^{60}\)

Why is the reevaluation of the lesser known works so significant? Several reviewers have praised Goldstein’s project for doing justice to Levi’s variegate writing. Chanes write: “We thought we knew Primo Levi, the Holocaust memoirist and poet, and well-known suicide victim but […] we discover that Primo Levi was (as is the case with all world-class writers) multi-dimensional and multi-layered; he was more than *The Periodic Table* and *Survival in Auschwitz,*” he is a “writer who transcends the Holocaust genre.” \(^{61}\) Ramon Glazov, Joshua Furst, and Louis Begley agree on this point. \(^{62}\) And Robert Gordon also praises the collection for “challeng[ing] us, push[ing] us to look beyond our settled, admiring view of Levi to the rich body of writing that moves […] away from his core subject matter,” \(^{63}\) and for “show[ing] us Levi probing and reflecting, inventing and telling stories across a spectrum of fascinations that goes from Auschwitz to chemistry to mechanical engineering, from sci-fi to submarines to rock-climbing, from language games to animal poems to virtual reality machines, from Job to Rabelais to


\(^{60}\) Timpane “‘Collected Works’ make case for Primo Levi’s singular art.”

\(^{61}\) Chanes, “Taking The Full Measure Of Primo Levi.”


Conrad. And back to Auschwitz again, since there is an important unity to Levi’s work across this bursting variety.\(^{64}\)

Not everyone has shown the same interest toward these often-unknown sides of Primo. Several voices have labeled these less well-known works as insignificant. Among these reviewers, Levi has not ceased to be seen as prevalently a Holocaust writer. It is the case of Adam Kirsch, who depicts Levi as witness, saying that his other works are not very noteworthy.\(^{65}\) David McConnell and Edward Rothstein are on the same line, as well as Martin Green.\(^{66}\) William Deresiewicz very directly says Levi was a limited writer, and an *opera omnia* is basically useless: “A selected works, at half the length for half the price, would have served him better,” because Levi “is not, outside his writing on the Holocaust, a deep or original thinker.”\(^{67}\)

However different the perception of Levi’s skills as writer may be, many reviews, on the terms of the criteria offered by the collection itself, seem to be stuck in reading Levi merely from a formal point of view in trying to establish what kind of writer Levi was. What is more interesting, and often seems to be missing, is a profound and deep reflection on Primo Levi’s content, and this is what I will investigate in the next section, by analyzing those reviews that try more hardly to get to Levi’s deep core.


\(^{67}\) William Deresiewicz, “Why Primo Levi survives,” *The Atlantic*, December 2015. Nonetheless, his judgement is overall positive since he affirms that “if the collection brings new readers and renewed attention, 28 years after his death, to this remarkable artist and man, it will have done important work.”
CHAPTER 4

HOW REVIEWERS INTERPRET THE COMPLEXITY

OF PRIMO LEVI’S WORKS

This final chapter focuses on a different kind of review, namely those that devote more attention to the contents of Levi’s oeuvre. The reviews in this category try to read Levi’s works with different criteria than those suggested by Goldstein; in particular, they do not limit themselves to reflect upon the formal outlook of the collection, but try to go to the deep core of Levi’s literary production.

Let us start from a controversial text, which is not actually a review, but is a good example of a reductive reading of Levi’s work. The text is especially relevant since it is part of the Complete Works itself. I am talking about Toni Morrison’s introduction to The Complete Works.\(^{68}\) In a few pages, she tries to go to the core of Levi’s work, and comments on his perception of human nature. Morrison praises “the triumph of human identity” that emerges from each page that Levi wrote and his “deliberate and sustained

\(^{68}\) It is worth mentioning that this very introduction was the aim of many and ferocious critiques. One of the toughest accusers is undoubtedly Jeremy Rosen, who considers Toni Morrison an anti-Israel supporter and, therefore, unworthy to write about such delicate themes (Jeremy Rosen, “The Disgrace of Associating Primo Levi with Toni Morrison,” The Algemeiner, January 24, 2016, accessed March 8, 2017, http://www.algemeiner.com/2016/01/24/the-disgrace-of-associating-toni-morrison-with-primo-levi/). Other critics of the introduction, but this time the aim of the attack is not the author of the article but it is its content, are Jerome Chanes (Chanes, “Taking The Full Measure Of Primo Levi”) and Tim Parks (Tim Parks, “The Mistery of primo Levi,” The New York Review of Books, November 5, 2015), according to whom, Toni Morrison misses the point, since she seems to give voice only to the positive side of Primo’s personality.
glorification of the human.” Her interpretation of Levi’s conception of human nature, therefore, is very specific, and leaves little space to other kinds of interpretations. The problem is that, while Morrison seems only to see Levi’s positive attitude, in many instances in Levi’s work he approaches reality from a different point of view, a much less positive one. Toward the end of the introduction, Morrison does write that in his poetry we can find “melancholy and sorrow;” even though she rightly assumes that Levi’s poetry is very different from the rest of his production, it seems contrived to present Levi as thus polarized, almost as if there were two different authors.69 Thus, one can observe in the very introduction of The Complete Works a certain tendency to simplify Levi. And, since this text is the very first impact that a reader is supposed to have with The Complete Works, this gives me the impression that the collection itself, to some degree, does not help to go beyond a simplistic and reductive understanding of Levi.

There are, however, reviews that approach the texts in a non-simplistic, but truly nuanced and multifaceted way. One is James Marcus’s review. He underlines what would be the biggest mistake in reading Levi, namely “the tendency to soften and sanitize his image.” Marcus explains that Levi, even before Auschwitz, was a problematic character: he “considered himself to be morally compromised even before he arrived at the camp. During his brief tenure as a partisan in the mountains of northern Italy, he had participated in the execution of two comrades.” Resistance is an important period of Levi’s time, because it reveals aspects of his troubled personality even before the terrors of persecution, and Marcus concludes that “Levi entered the Gray Zone before he arrived

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69 Toni Morrison, “Introduction,” The Complete Works of Primo Levi, xi-xii. However, that poetry has a special role in Levi’s expressivity is true as he himself explains: “at certain moments, poetry has seemed to me more appropriate than prose for conveying an idea or an image.” Primo Levi, At An Uncertain Hour, in Collected Poems, in The Complete Works of Primo Levi, 1877.
at Auschwitz.” To explain the possible drift of overall simplifications, Marcus alludes to two examples: the first one is an American introduction to *The Drowned and The Saved* where the content of the book was summarized as “a wondrous celebration of life.” Clearly nothing more distant from the real intentions of the author. The second one is Francesco Rosi’s 1997 film adaptation of *The Truce*, which Marcus defines “a well-intentioned but terrible whitewashing of Levi’s account.” Marcus closes by inviting the reader to “put aside the image of Levi as friendly, forgiving, white-bearded, benign—the Santa Claus of survivors” in order to start to appreciate him in his completeness and complexity. And, besides the lively image, I think his judgment is very appropriate.

Gavin Jacobson—voluntarily or not?—uses very similar words to Morrison to highlight the opposite idea. He writes that “Levi’s writings are not celebrations of the human spirit, as is so often claimed, but reflections on the effects that power and powerlessness have on the human capacity for violence.” Jacobson, as Marcus, gives a lot of space to Levi the partisan, in order to bring out the darker and unknown sides of Levi’s personality.70 That time of resistance during the war was precious in forming Levi’s mindset: “Levi forged his voice in opposition to neat moral distinctions like good and evil, innocence and guilt, justice and injustice, honesty and deceit, strength and weakness, perpetrators and victims, and life and death. For him, these coexist in one and the same person in precarious balance, […] as countless moral shades.”71

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70 Their reflection is based on Sergio Luzzatto’s newly translated *Primo Levi’s Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy* (New York, 2016), which is the story of Levi’s time as a partisan.

James Wood’s review expresses a similar view.\textsuperscript{72} He does not pretend to sell an easy image of Levi, and, instead, he is more interested in showing his peculiarities. At the beginning of his review, he highlights the importance of not reducing Levi into rigid categories, even though the risk is always alive. He states that “our incomprehension and our admiration combine to simplify the writer into a needily sincere amalgam: hero, saint, witness, redeemer.” Wood explains in this sense the reason why in America the titles of Levi’s first two books were changed, and gives three other examples of attempts to reduce Levi: first, the judgment of Jean Améry, who was Levi’s fellow survivor in Auschwitz and considered him a forgiver; second, the German official who saw Levi as paradigm of Christian values; third, all of those readers who after Levi’s suicide remained disappointed, because they considered him a hero. Wood instead writes “Levi was heroic; he was also modest, practical, elusive, coolly passionate, experimental and sometimes limited, refined and sometimes provincial.” He seems very conscious of the complexity of Levi: heroism is but one of the shades of Primo’s personality.

As Wood himself mentions, along the years, one of the most troubled topics of discussion has been Levi’s suicide. The debate is still ongoing, and I will now introduce a few different voices and points of views on this question, because I think that the theme of suicide is maybe the most evident example of trivialization of Levi’s figure. Despite the multiple evidence, many have inveighed against the idea of a suicide, arguing that it was impossible for Levi to have killed himself. The negation of the possibility of the suicide would be based on the fact that Levi, who had survived Auschwitz and its atrocities, would have never hurt himself. And this interpretation is still strongly present today. Carolyn Lieberg defines the hypothesis of suicide “grossly unfair to the man and

to his work.” And Adam Kirsch writes that “from his first book to his last, Primo Levi’s subject was not death but survival, not the triumph of evil but the defiance of evil.” This is paradigmatic of this kind of reductive judgment: a unique and definitive portrait that does not seem to leave any space to a darker and weaker side in Levi’s personality, which instead definitely existed. And so, Kirsch insists that it is problematic to accept his suicide: if Levi were so heroic, how would a suicide be possible? On this basis, he highlights all those passages in Levi’s works where he attacks the idea of suicide, especially when he took his distance from Jean Améry. According to Kirsch, there are two ways of reading Levi, either black or white: “it can be the hopeful story of a man who survives the worst imaginable torture and manages to find meaning, purpose, and happiness in life. Or else, it can be a story of a man who accidentally escapes death and is so haunted by the moral nullity of survival that, decades later, he takes his own life out of guilt or despair. So much is at stake in our analysis of Levi’s death that it comes as a strange kind of relief to hear that, in the view of some observers—like that of Diego Gambetta—his fatal fall was not suicide at all, but an accident.” Moreover, he argues that the title *Survival in Auschwitz* “may actually be truer to the spirit of Levi’s book than his own title.” This is another clear example of how a certain obsession with Levi’s suicide can become a reductive key to read each page of his rich literary production.

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74 Kirsch, “Primo Levi’s Unlikely Suicide Haunts His Lasting Work.”

On the other hand, there are those who accept the hypothesis of Levi’s suicide, but underline that this does not diminish his greatness. Parks, replying to Lieberg, states that: “given that Levi’s instinct was always to encourage the reader to confront the hardest of facts and not take refuge in any comfort zone, we owe it to him to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence of the way he died. His suicide does not diminish his work or his dignity. He was not obliged to his readers to behave in a reassuring way or protect the illusions they had built around his person.” Tim Parks writes that before this publication he knew only Levi’s three better-known masterpieces and therefore he used to see Levi as most of writers did, namely tending to hagiography. Instead “How different things begin to look when one tackles the almost three thousand pages of The Collected Works and browses the long chronology of Levi’s life offered in the first of these three hefty volumes.” In dealing for the first time with his other works, short stories, novels, poems, one can finally meet a different side of Levi, more unknown but not less true. “Why insist, then, in offering a sanitized, optimistic version of an author’s life, as if his work might be the less if we acknowledged his difficulties? Isn’t this, in the end, precisely the kind of denial that Levi fought against?”

From these examples of the debate around Levi’s suicide, it is clear that a deep reading of Levi is not something that we can take for granted. Levi’s *opera omnia* is so rich and so complex that any reader has the possibility and the responsibility to give his own interpretation. My last reference will be to Robert Gordon’s reading of Levi, since he is a major point of reference for my research given his expertise in Levi’s work. In his review to *The Complete Works*, he has underlined the importance of offering Levi’s works in all their entirety, and has highlighted that “there is an unity-in-variety, which is

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the Ariadne’s thread that helps lead a way through the labyrinth of Levi’s complete oeuvre.” Gordon claims the responsibility of each reader: “Not all his readers will be willing to follow the thread along all its meanderings; indeed, responses to the Complete Works have already divided somewhat between those willing to listen to the modulated, lighter, more elfin tones in some corners of this volume and those who, perhaps understandably, prefer to split the work into his greater and lesser achievements and pass over his forays into occasional writing, science-fantasy, zoomorphic poetry, and the rest.” Gordon continues by underlining the importance of this collection, not because it raises Levi as a modern hero, but because it manages to present him in all his richness: “the appearance of the Complete Works of any author inevitably cuts in two conflicting directions, at once both canonizing and destabilizing. Great works shine through and receive a mark of rightful recognition; but hidden corners, full and therefore also uneven writerly lives, come to light. Levi is no exception. These volumes reinforce his status as a clarion voice of ethically weighted, carefully calibrated, but also vitally human, witnessing in the face of the very worst of human violence.”

As I have tried to show, an accurate reading of Levi must deal with all these aspects of his personality without neglecting those that may seem more problematic, contradictory and ambiguous. And Levi was definitely this: a balanced mixture of opposites; a centaur, as he used to say.

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Has the edition by Ann Goldstein helped the English-speaking audience to achieve a fuller awareness of the complexity of Levi’s work? Even though, as I have shown in the last chapter, there are reviewers who acknowledge and valorise Levi’s complexity, these are a minority. As Cheyette points out, there has often been a deep-rooted ideological problem around the way we interpret Primo Levi, and by reading reviews to *The Complete Works*, the main impression is still of a Levi not fully understood. This is not just a formal problem of whether he is still reduced to the role of witness or is finally recognized more broadly as a great writer, Levi’s complexity is more profound. And, unfortunately, it looks like the tendency to oversimplify him is still surviving. Overall, it seems to me that *The Complete Works* has generally been reviewed according to those very criteria that the collection itself aimed to transcend, and the way in which we read Primo Levi essentially has not changed. That said, there are some reviews that foreground Levi’s complexity and attempt wholeheartedly to avoid simplifications, and these should be the starting point on which to build in thinking how *The Complete Works* can, even despite its limitations, contribute to a better understanding of Primo Levi’s work.
Levi does not fit with labels of any kind: memoirist or novelist, ‘optimist’ or ‘pessimist’, survivor or suicide… These categories simply do not belong to him: he is more than all of these labels. The hope is that any reader—not only an American one—can become aware of this. Unlike Goldstein, I believe that the tendency to reduce Levi has a deeper and more complex origin than simply shortcomings in his previous editorial story. It seems to me that there are different ways to understand and deal with Levi’s complexity. For example, Goldstein refers only to Levi’s ability in writing different kinds of text from a formal point of view—his ability to write both novels and essays, poems and short stories, and so on—and in dealing with different topics—Holocaust and chemistry, tradition and fantasy. But, even though to appreciate Levi’s variety of forms and topics is definitely important, I think that this is not enough to deeply understand Levi’s work. What I mean by complexity is not only richness in terms of skills and themes, but the impossibility to establish a unique and unilateral way to read the deeper human depth and character and of his writing. Despite common attempts to pigeonhole Primo Levi (and I have offered above some examples of this), it is not only ultimately impossible but also profoundly unfair to evaluate him through narrow categories. Levi himself invites us to avoid labels. At the beginning of the chapter, “The Gray Zone” in The Drowned and The Saved, Levi warns the reader of the risk of simplification: “What we commonly mean by the verb ‘to understand’ coincides with ‘to simplify’.” And a few lines later he highlights as problematic the “Manichaean tendency to shun nuance and complexity.” Such caution against simplification is absolutely key to Levi, not just in his writing on the Holocaust, and yet there are still those who look at him as black or white.  

That said, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* is undoubtedly a significant step towards a better understanding of Levi’s work. Even though the quality of the translations has been questioned, it seems at the very least fair to state that having translated the titles of *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua* in *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*, and having offered Primo Levi’s work as a whole and in a chronological order are certainly major achievements. Such changes are vital initial steps upon which, hopefully, others will build.
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