

A Secular Alternative: Primo Levi's Place in American Holocaust Discourse

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This essay sketches Primo Levi's emergence from obscurity to near-universal acclaim in the United States, where he is now considered one of the most important witnesses of the Nazi genocide and a significant twentieth-century writer. As he emerged into the American public sphere, Levi came to occupy a particular discursive place as a representative bearer of Enlightenment values. Among intellectuals across the political spectrum his reputation for sobriety and secular reason stands against other, more dominant tendencies in American Holocaust culture, such as the sacralization of the genocide often associated with another survivor-writer, Elie Wiesel.

Introduction

Today Primo Levi is considered by an educated readership in the United States to be one of the most important witnesses of the Nazi genocide and a significant twentieth-century intellectual. Levi is invoked frequently in intellectual journals and revues and his books are taught in dozens of classes each year in colleges and universities, thus assuring him a continuing stream of new readers twenty years after his death. But this wide recognition is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the following pages we sketch Levi's belated emergence from obscurity into near-universal acclaim in the mid-1980s. As he emerged into the American public sphere he came to occupy a particular discursive place as a representative bearer of Enlightenment values—as a proponent of “reason and light,” as one influential essay collection termed it. In this role, Levi

has come to stand against other, more dominant tendencies in American Holocaust culture, such as the perception of a widespread commodification of the genocide and, especially, the tendency to sacralize the genocide, an inclination often associated with another survivor-writer, Elie Wiesel. Levi's reputation for sobriety and secular reason has left him with less of a popular base than Wiesel—who is by far the most well known person in America associated with the Holocaust—but it has solidified his reception among intellectuals across the political spectrum both inside and outside the academy.

Part I. Publications and Translations

Levi's reception in the United States was enabled by the translation of his major works. The texts and typography of the American editions of Levi's first two books, *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua*, were virtually identical to those published first in the U.K., using the same reliable translations by the historian Stuart Woolf. What is noteworthy is that the American publishers changed the British titles of the two memoirs, which were in each case close to the original Italian ones, to titles that seem to promise a measure of redemption from the Holocaust. Thus, *If This is a Man*, first published in both the U.K. and the U.S.A. in 1959 by Orion Press, became *Survival in Auschwitz* in the 1961 Collier edition. *The Truce*, published in the U.K. in 1965, was re-titled *The Reawakening* when it came out that same year in the U.S.A.¹ It is safe to say that the reception of *Se questo è un uomo* was multiply displaced in the U.S. context: first, it was only translated after its second edition had appeared in Italy; second, it soon began to appear with the misleadingly optimistic title; and third, it only became well known twenty-five years after its initial translation when a spate of new Levi translations converged with a larger societal trend toward interest in the Shoah.

The much acclaimed *The Periodic Table*, rendered in English by the experienced translator Raymond Rosenthal, was first published in 1984 by Schocken Books after Rosenthal convinced chief editor Emile Capouya of the book's appeal. In fact, the first hardcover print run of 14,000 sold out in less than two months.² A paperback edition issued in that same year was cov-

¹*If This is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Orion, 1959); *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Collier, 1961); *The Reawakening: A Liberated Prisoner's Long March Home Through East Europe*, trans. Stuart Woolf (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1965).

²*The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984); Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan, 2003). pp. 414, 427.

ered with glowing blurbs, including one on the front cover from Saul Bellow, a writer with particular cachet among American Jews. The popularity of this book encouraged the rapid translation and mass-market publication of seven more books by Levi. His 1982 novel, titled in English *If Not Now, When?*, was translated by the esteemed William Weaver and published by Summit Books in 1985. A long introduction by Irving Howe confirmed that Levi had obtained a high stature in America, especially among American Jews. *The Monkey's Wrench*, originally written in 1978, was also translated by Weaver and published by Summit Books in 1986. In a glowing blurb, Alfred Kazin called Levi "one of the most valuable writers of our time."³ Given Levi's established reputation as a Holocaust writer, it is not surprising that his American publisher elected to issue *If Not Now, When?*, with its story of World War II Jewish partisans, before trying to sell him as the kind of writer who penned *The Monkey's Wrench*, a dialogue between an ironworker and a chemist who love their respective jobs.

With regard to the American reception of Levi as a Holocaust writer above all else, an instructive case is how *Lilit e altri racconti* (1981) was adapted to the American book market as, the cover proclaims, "a memoir of Auschwitz." The Italian text contains thirty-eight stories and is divided into three parts, the first of which contains twelve stories related to the Holocaust, while the other two parts contain both realistic and science fantasy stories. In 1986, Summit published *Moments of Reprieve*, a volume that includes only the Holocaust stories from *Lilit*, plus three others from different sources. The translations were undertaken by Ruth Feldman, who gained Levi's confidence after she translated his poems (published in Britain as *Collected Poems*). She has stated that Levi himself came up with the idea for the collection for the American market. The preface was apparently written by Levi especially for *Moments of Reprieve*, as *Lilit* has no preface.⁴

The Drowned and the Saved, Levi's last major book, was first published in 1988 by Summit.⁵ On Amazon.com, it is Levi's fourth most popular book, after *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Periodic Table* and *The Reawakening*. *If Not Now, When?* sells more than *Moments of Reprieve*, followed by *The Monkey's*

³*If Not Now, When?*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit Books, 1985); *The Monkey's Wrench*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit Books, 1986).

⁴See Ruth Feldman, "Moments of Reprieve," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, n. 2–3 (maggio–dicembre 1989).

⁵*The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988).

Wrench.⁶ In 2007, Norton brought out *A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories*. While not exemplifying Levi's best efforts, this collection, along with Norton's plan to publish the complete works in 2010, indicate that the writer's strong presence in America will continue into a fourth decade.⁷

II. Reception and Criticism in the Press

The rapid rise of Levi's reputation in the mid-1980s has no single source. The post-*Holocaust* miniseries context of popular fascination with the Nazi genocide certainly provided a necessary, if not sufficient condition. Levi's one visit to the United States in 1985 generated a fair amount of publicity, and the support of major Jewish Studies academics such as Alvin Rosenfeld of Indiana University also added to Levi's reputation (and presence on university syllabi). A 1991 *New York Times* article on the importance of book endorsements attributes much of Levi's American reputation to Saul Bellow's "memorable blurb" for *The Periodic Table*. And the *New Yorker's* brief review notes the blurbs of Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino, and comments that "for a change, these quotations do not exaggerate anything."⁸

The extent to which such endorsements catapulted Levi into the center of attention is difficult to calibrate, but it is certain that the *Times* itself played a significant role in the story. *The Periodic Table* received two glowing reviews in the newspaper of record, one a weekday review by John Gross and the other

⁶These were the rankings on June 16, 2007. Three other volumes by Levi have had less success and therefore less influence on how he is perceived in America. However, even these were published in both hardback and mass-market paperback editions and, with one exception, are still in print. All three were translated by Rosenthal. *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays* (1989) includes most of the stories and essays in *Racconti e saggi* (1986). *The Sixth Day and Other Stories* (1990) is made up of science fantasy stories originally published in *Storie naturali* (1966) and *Vizio di forma* (1971), books that had only modest success in Italy. The short essays in *Other People's Trades* (1989), originally written for the Turin newspaper, *La Stampa*, are drawn from the Italian volume *L'altrui mestiere* (1985).

⁷*A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories*, trans. Ann Goldstein and Alessandra Bastagli (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007). The collection was favorably reviewed by Jonathan Rosen; see "Prisoner of War," *New York Times Book Review*, 27 May 2007, pp. 14–15. Four other books have been published by small presses to serve the needs of scholars and students. Three of these contain interviews with Levi, *Dialogo* (1989), *Conversations with Primo Levi* (1989), and *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961–1987* (2001). The fourth is *The Search for Roots* (2002), Levi's personal anthology, which contains key passages from books that shaped him as a writer.

⁸Edwin McDowell, "For Some, Best Prose Is in Blurbs," *New York Times*, 22 April 1991, p. D10; "Briefly Noted," *New Yorker*, 24 December 1984.

a full-page Sunday *Book Review* piece by Rosenfeld that also included an inset box with a photograph of Levi at his bookshelf and a brief interview by E. J. Dionne.⁹ Gross calls the book a “remarkable memoir” and compares its “greater imaginative range” favorably with Levi’s two earlier memoirs. Alvin Rosenfeld notes that Levi “has remained all but unknown” in the U.S., despite his “considerable reputation” in Italy, because of a dearth of translations of his work, and then comments, “This situation has now happily changed with Raymond Rosenthal’s admirable translation of “The Periodic Table.” Like Gross, Rosenfeld points to the book’s “buoyant imagination,” but he puts the greatest emphasis on Levi’s ability to “forge an unusual synthesis of scientific learning and poetic sensibility, of rational procedures and moral perceptions.” Two years later, the *Times* gave Levi’s novel *The Monkey’s Wrench* an even more visible push. Besides a positive review in the weekday *Times* by Walter Goodman, the *Book Review* dedicated its entire front page to Levi, juxtaposing an interview by the novelist Philip Roth with a laudatory review by the important New York intellectual Alfred Kazin.¹⁰ The *Times* followed such positive reviews with frequent reminders to its readers about the quality of Levi’s work. *The Periodic Table* and *The Monkey’s Wrench*, for instance, appeared twice in the “And Bear in Mind” feature with which the *Times* follows up on books it regards as important. At the end of 1985, the memoir was included in the “Editor’s Choice: Best Books of 1985,” and the paperback editions of both books were listed in the column “New & Noteworthy” upon publication, while the memoir appeared again as one of the “Notable Paperbacks” at the end of the year.¹¹

⁹John Gross, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, 29 November 1984, p. C21; Alvin Rosenfeld, “Elements of a Life,” *New York Times Book Review*, 23 December 1984, p. 9; E. J. Dionne, “Driven to Write by the Unexpected,” *New York Times Book Review*, 23 December 1984, p. 9.

¹⁰Walter Goodman, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1986, p. C20; Philip Roth, “A Man Saved By His Skills,” *New York Times Book Review*, 12 October 1986, pp. 1, 40–41; Alfred Kazin, “Life and Steel: A Rigger’s Tale,” *New York Times Book Review*, 12 October 1986, pp. 1, 42. Both Roth and Kazin are key figures in the intellectual reception of Levi, and we will return to them below.

¹¹For *The Periodic Table*: “And Bear in Mind,” *New York Times Book Review*, 30 December 1984, p. 22; “And Bear in Mind,” *New York Times Book Review*, 6 January 1985, p. 32; “Editor’s Choice: Best Books of 1985,” *New York Times Book Review*, 8 December 1985, p. 80; “New & Noteworthy,” *New York Times Book Review*, 13 April 1986, p. 38; “Notable Paperbacks,” *New York Times Book Review*, 7 December 1986, p. 85; For *The Monkey’s Wrench*: “And Bear in Mind,” *New York Times Book Review*, 19 October 1986, p. 43; “And

While *Publishers Weekly* found *The Periodic Table* a “curious” and “odd,” if “haunting” book by an author “virtually unknown here,” the majority of other responses was closer to those of Gross and Rosenfeld in the *Times*. *Booklist* describes Levi as “an acknowledged master of Italian storytelling” capable of “a breathtaking range of observations on human sympathies, the drama of everyday circumstances, and the miracle of his survival at Auschwitz.” Situating Levi alongside Kafka, Melville, and Marlowe, *Time* magazine lauded Levi’s book as an “affecting memoir,” and accompanied its full-page review with a brief excerpt from “Argon” and a picture of Levi on the balcony of his home. The *Chicago Tribune* included a brief mention in its “Browsing” feature and called the memoir “a work of interest and beauty.” Hailed by the historian and writer Alexander Stille in *Saturday Review*, *The Periodic Table* was also the first of Levi’s works to receive attention in literary journals such as *Hudson Review* and *World Literature Today* (the latter an early review of the original Italian version).¹²

In an attempt to catch up with the flurry of new translations (and with the tacit admission that significant earlier works had been overlooked), many magazines and newspapers began to publish omnibus reviews or surveys of Levi’s production. *Newsweek*, for instance, began an August 1985 review of *The Periodic Table* and *If Not Now, When?* by remarking that “the recent appearance here of Primo Levi’s ‘The Periodic Table’—a decade after it was published in Italy—has gained him the delayed American attention that two fine earlier books, ‘If This Is a Man’ (1959) and ‘The Reawakening’ (1965), failed to win.” The *Wall Street Journal* came late to appreciation of Levi with a March 1986 review surveying Levi’s various memoirs, while across the political spectrum, the liberal /Left weekly *The Nation* provided a review by the feminist writer Ann Snitow of *The Periodic Table*, *Survival in Auschwitz*, and *If Not Now, When?*¹³

Bear in Mind,” *New York Times Book Review*, 26 October 1986, p. 49; “New & Noteworthy,” *New York Times Book Review*, 15 November 1987.

¹²“Nonfiction,” *Publishers Weekly*, 2 November 1984, p. 69; “Literature,” *Booklist*, 1 December 1984, p. 476; Patricia Blake, “Chemistry Becomes a Muse,” *Time*, 28 January 1985, p. 81; “Browsing,” *Chicago Tribune*, 3 February 1985, p. K43; Alexander Stille, “Primo Levi,” *Saturday Review* (July/August 1985), p. 70; Mirna Risk, Rev. of *Il sistema periodico*, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 1977), p. 75; Jefferson Hunter, “Troubles Overcome Are Good to Tell,” *Hudson Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Summer 1986), p. 329–33.

¹³Walter Clemons, “A Separate Peace,” *Newsweek*, 6 May 1985, p. 79; Amity Shlaes, “A First-Hand Look at the Holocaust,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 1986, p. 11; Ann Snitow, “Living Matter,” *The Nation*, 3/10 August 1985, pp. 86–88.

Equally enthusiastic, and more detailed, is David Denby's July 1986 *New Republic* essay, "The Humanist and the Holocaust: The Poised Art of Primo Levi."¹⁴ Opening with the now expected lament about Levi's lack of renown in America—"How is it possible that [*Survival in Auschwitz*], and its equally remarkable sequel, *The Reawakening* (1961), are not famous in America?"—Denby declares the two memoirs "the fulfillment of a literary ideal long imagined yet widely thought impossible." Denby situates Levi as a writer working against the grain of emerging truisms about Holocaust writing. Citing George Steiner's influential claim (itself an echo of Adorno and Wiesel) that "[t]he world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason," Denby remarks that Levi "did not suffer the losses to sensibility that many writers about Auschwitz considered almost inevitable."¹⁵ As a "humanist after Auschwitz," Levi "not only violates our sense of what a survivor should be, he violates our sense of what a modern writer should be. He lacks fierceness, anguish, a taste for extremity," even as he can be understood as "the great memoirist of the Holocaust—certainly the most extreme of all memories."¹⁶ Denby, taken more with the earlier memoirs than with later works such as *If Not Now, When?*, values especially Levi's modesty and gentleness. He ends by declaring that Levi "has restored knightly luster to qualities we have regarded as inadequate and even pathetic, qualities we have nearly ironized out of existence—dignity, personal cultivation, even lowly patience."¹⁷ Denby's literary portrait of Levi as a counter to expectations of survivor writing and as an untimely contemporary author best described by "go[ing] back through the whole of the 20th century—to Chekhov's stories, letters, and his report from a Russian penal colony" captures some of the important qualities that have come to define Levi's status as an intellectual reference point in American discourse.

Before turning to the question of Levi's place in scholarly and intellectual discourse, it is important to consider a further omnibus review-essay that raises a final issue pertaining to Levi's American reception—the rare, but still cutting negative review. Fernanda Eberstadt's "Reading Primo Levi" appeared in the October 1985 issue of the neoconservative intellectual journal *Commentary* and caused something of a scandal.¹⁸ The journal's editor Norman

¹⁴David Denby, "The Humanist and the Holocaust: The Poised Art of Primo Levi," *The New Republic*, 28 July 1986, pp. 27–33.

¹⁵Denby, "The Humanist and the Holocaust," p. 27.

¹⁶Denby, "The Humanist and the Holocaust," p. 28.

¹⁷Denby, "The Humanist and the Holocaust," p. 33.

¹⁸Fernanda Eberstadt, "Reading Primo Levi," *Commentary* (October 1985), pp. 41–47.

Podhoretz and Eberstadt, described by Ian Thompson as a twenty-five year old “minor novelist and critic with fashionable New York connections,” must have known they were breaking a formidable taboo in attacking the writings of a recently recognized survivor-author.¹⁹ Eberstadt’s seven-page essay begins innocently enough by mentioning the “universal critical acclaim” Levi’s works had received in the United States and continues with a brief, but relatively detailed history of the Italian Jewish community from the Risorgimento through the Mussolini years and the Second World War. She then turns to *If This Is a Man*, a work she begins by describing in familiar terms as an “elegantly constructed and remarkably compressed” “brief masterpiece” which is perhaps “less a memoir than a sociological and psychological study elevated into a work of art.”²⁰ But after four pages, Eberstadt suddenly reverses direction and reveals her ultimate intentions. The very qualities she praised come to be understood as “limitations of understanding which Levi has imposed on the events he describes.” Now the sociological insight of the text becomes a means of expunging the particularly German and Jewish aspects of the Holocaust via “a rather hackneyed social psychology.” “By adopting, however ironically, this denatured pseudo-scientific pose, Levi deliberately glosses over the plain fact that the ‘experiment’ of which he speaks was designed by a particular group of people, the Nazis, not to observe the human animal ‘in the struggle for life’ but rather to wipe another particular group of people, the Jews, off the face of the earth.” If, according to Eberstadt, “in thus stressing the ‘universal’ aspect of the Holocaust, Levi is being true to the secular and humanistic tradition of Italian Jewry,” that only contributes to her judgment that such a tradition is incapable of explaining “why the destruction of the Jews was conceived at a time and in a place in which the Jews had become thoroughly assimilated into society.”²¹ Eberstadt thus reveals her implicit agenda as one of Jewish-particularism and, given the essay’s appearance in the organ of Jewish neo-conservatism, consequently lends at least local credence to Peter Novick’s argument that the rise in a particularistic notion of the Holocaust in the United States can be correlated with the rightward turn of American Jewry.²²

¹⁹In reconstructing the context of Eberstadt’s essay, we are relying on Ian Thomson’s account in *Primo Levi* (London: Hutchison, 2002), pp. 482–83.

²⁰Eberstadt, “Reading Primo Levi,” pp. 43–44.

²¹Eberstadt, “Reading Primo Levi,” p. 45.

²²See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

Although subtly tinged by politics—a rarity in American Levi reception—not all of Eberstadt's complaints are hers alone. A number of critics share her sense that Levi is at his weakest when attempting to imagine culturally and religiously Jewish life—especially the life of the East European shtetl so unfamiliar to him. Eberstadt's description of both *Moments of Reprieve* and *If Not Now, When?* as “failure[s]” may be extreme,²³ but her complaint that “Levi's men and women [in the latter novel] are wooden logs whose mental qualities, backgrounds, motives, and convictions” never come to life finds echoes in H. Stuart Hughes's otherwise positive *New York Times* review. Hughes writes that “Mr. Levi's new book lacks the intimacy, the sureness of touch so evident in his volumes of reminiscence,” and notes that “the full force of his characters' Yiddish still escapes him.”²⁴ Sounding similarly ambivalent notes, *Newsweek* comments that “Levi is a better memoirist than novelist, and one reads ‘If Not Now, When?’ respectfully rather than eagerly,” and the *Chicago Tribune* judges the novel “disappointing” because its characters “seem types rather than individuals, and when they talk it's usually to give voice to an opinion or a feeling that may seem plausible enough, but rarely seems to come from the vital identity of the character who speaks.”²⁵

As Levi's biographer Thomson writes, Levi was wounded by such unaccustomed responses, even if friends and colleagues came to his defense and even though these setbacks came at the precise moment when Levi was finally becoming a household name for the American intellectual class and Jewish community.²⁶ Yet, while Eberstadt's unkind essay, together with the somewhat negative reviews of *If Not Now, When?*, hurt Levi personally, they did not have a lasting impact on his American reception, as is evidenced by reaction to his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved*. This collection of essays, immediately and broadly recognized as a masterpiece, is the only book that rivals the delayed, but long-term and wide influence of *Survival in Auschwitz* or the continuing literary interest evoked by *The Periodic Table*. Published in the United States in January 1988, *The Drowned and the Saved* appeared a few months after Levi's death; it is thus inevitable that the book would be read

²³Eberstadt, “Reading Primo Levi,” p. 47.

²⁴H. Stuart Hughes, “A Remnant in Arms,” *New York Times Book Review*, 21 April 1985, p. 7.

²⁵Walter Clemons, “A Separate Peace”; Reginald Gibbons, “Levi Sidesteps larger questions of Nazi terror,” *Chicago Tribune*, 16 June 1985, p. M43. It should be noted that the title of Gibbons's review does not actually reflect its content.

²⁶Thomson, *Primo Levi*, pp. 482–83.

through the lens of his presumed suicide. Thus, brief reviews in *Booklist* and the *Atlantic Monthly* call the collection, respectively, “[a] fitting legacy from a sobering and brilliant writer” and “a permanent warning” against the possibility of genocide’s recurrence.²⁷ Clive James’s “Last Will and Testament” takes up this theme, among others, in a long, meandering, and laudatory review in the influential *New Yorker*.²⁸ Besides describing *The Drowned and the Saved* as “the condensed, poised summation of all [Levi’s] written work,” James also takes the occasion to criticize at length both the translation of this book by Raymond Rosenthal and the hopelessly inaccurate title translations of *Se questo è un uomo*, *La tregua*, and *La chiave a stella* as *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Reawakening*, and *The Monkey’s Wrench*, respectively.²⁹

As the *Times* often does with significant publications, it reviewed *The Drowned and the Saved* twice. John Gross lauds it for its “courage, lucidity and intelligence,” and finds in it “a heroic example of humane and civilized understanding” despite its obvious darkness. Irving Howe finds Levi’s last book “a smaller work” than his early memoirs, but he terms it “a precious footnote” and, like Gross, finds much of value in Levi’s “humane, disciplined and, in its final impact, utterly sad” perspective. Howe concludes with a powerful affirmation of Levi, while simultaneously counter-posing him to the emergent American culture of commodified remembrance: “At a time when the Holocaust, like almost everything in our culture, has been subjected to the vulgarity of public relations, Primo Levi wrote about this most terrible event with a purity of spirit for which we can only feel grateful. This was a man.”³⁰ The words of Gross and Howe, along with selections of equally effusive reviews in *Time*, the *Chicago Sun-Times Book Review*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, are featured in a full-page ad that Summit Books ran in the *Times* on 21 February 1988, along with a sober picture of Levi in his study and copy directly beneath that reads, “He was a witness to man’s darkest hour.”

Since publication of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi has continued to appear with great regularity in the American press, right into the twenty-first century. Howe’s review of Levi’s last work was even included in a special issue

²⁷“Adult Nonfiction,” *Booklist*, 15 November 1987, p. 535; Phoebe-Lou Adams, “Brief Reviews,” *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1988), p. 86.

²⁸Clive James, “Last Will and Testament,” *New Yorker*, 23 May 1988, pp. 86–92.

²⁹James, “Last Will and Testament,” pp. 86, 88–89.

³⁰John Gross, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times* 5 January 1988, p. C17; Irving Howe, “The Utter Sadness of the Survivor,” *New York Times Book Review*, 10 January 1988, p. 3.

of the *New York Times Book Review* celebrating their 100th anniversary.³¹ Posthumous books such as *The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961–1987* (2001) have garnered attention, albeit less than the major works of the mid- and late-1980s. Continuing speculation about Levi's death has also become something of a genre in its own right, and the publication of three major biographies has served to remind readers of Levi's importance and, no doubt, to attract younger readers to his oeuvre.³² Thus, while reception in the press of Levi's writing was inordinately delayed, his position, especially in the more serious segments of American journalism, is now secure.

III. Levi in the Academy

Levi's reception in the American academy parallels aspects of his largely positive journalistic reception, although the academic field naturally possesses its own structure and dynamics.³³ He was mentioned, but only in passing, in Lawrence L. Langer's groundbreaking 1975 book, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. Langer's main point is that literature evokes the nightmare world of the Holocaust much better than historical studies do. He discusses Elie Wiesel's *Night* at some length because its "compressed imaginative powers"³⁴ effectively represent Auschwitz and also because of its status as a recognized classic among Holocaust memoirs (*Survival in Auschwitz* had not yet attained this standing).³⁵ By contrast, Levi is often cited as a source of factual evidence

³¹See "100 Years," a special issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, 6 October 1996. Howe's review appears on p. 101.

³²For one significant example of how Levi biographies have provided opportunities for further reflection on his legacy, see Tony Judt, "The Courage of the Elementary," *New York Review of Books*, 20 May 1999, pp. 31–38. In this lengthy essay, Judt spends only two brief paragraphs on the translation of Myriam Anissimov's biography, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, and spends the rest of time assessing what he sees as Levi's significant contributions to Holocaust writing.

³³Some of this ground has been covered before. See JoAnn Cannon, "Canon Formation and Reception in Contemporary Italy: The Case of Primo Levi," *Italica*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Spring 1992): 30–44.

³⁴Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 75.

³⁵Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. Levi is treated in more detail in Langer's subsequent books. See, for example, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982). Even before Langer's 1975 book, Levi was discussed in a volume that has been seldom cited: Irving Halperin, *Messengers from the Dead* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). While Wiesel is clearly

in *The Survivor* (1976), Terrence Des Pres's influential but now outdated ethical-psychological study of life in the Nazi death camps. The American habit of reading Wiesel's memoir as poetical and spiritual, and Levi's as informative and emotionally restrained is already evident in Langer and Des Pres. In fact, the relative merit and usefulness of the two memoirs will be argued over frequently in subsequent years.³⁶ Alvin Rosenfeld added nuance to this discussion in *A Double Dying* (1980), an influential study of Holocaust Literature which compares and contrasts *Night* and *Survival in Auschwitz* in ways that are still considered valid: the former is written from a decidedly Jewish perspective and the latter is "influenced by the traditions of Western humanistic learning." Levi's memoir receives its first penetrating analysis here. "Grounded in a humane intelligence and persistently curious and observant, it is turned toward whatever remains of the human face after it has been pummeled and befouled by the crimes of the camp."³⁷ With these few acute words, Rosenfeld anticipates a number of later studies concerning the scientific aspects and gentle wit of Levi's writing and also its ethical engagement with the dehumanized victims.

The above-mentioned scholars approached Levi from the vantage point of the nascent field of Holocaust Studies, which asserted that an international, multi-lingual assemblage of texts cohered into a single body of literature. (While this field of scholarship has received much support from Jewish Studies programs in America, it has developed its own methods and interests.) In the 1980s, American Italianists began to work from the original Italian editions to try to place Levi in the context of Italian literature and the history of the Italian Jews. Although much of this work has been published in Italian in specialized journals, an equal amount has been published in English and is of interest in this account. The most influential early study of Levi as an Italian-Jewish writer was written by the historian H. Stuart Hughes.³⁸ At the time of

Halperin's guiding spirit, Levi features prominently in the introduction, conclusion, and in a chapter on testimony.

³⁶*The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). On the differences between Wiesel's testimony and Levi's see, for example, Richard L. Rubenstein, "Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi," James S. Pacy and Alan P. Wertheimer, eds., *Perspectives on the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Raul Hilberg* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

³⁷Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 56.

³⁸H. Stuart Hughes, *Prisoners of Hope: The Silver Age of Italian Jews 1924–1974* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

its publication in 1983, *Prisoners of Hope* was particularly useful to non-Italian readers because it offered a succinct history of Italian Jewry's path to assimilation and also drew much information about Levi's pre-Holocaust life and the Jewish milieu of Turin from *The Periodic Table*, a book that had not yet been translated. Hughes's account of *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening* (the first one to appear in English apart from some short reviews) are more descriptive than analytical, suggesting that Levi's texts speak for themselves with crystalline lucidity, a commonplace in American scholarship. A 1989 Levi conference at Cornell University, the first major one in the U.S.A., resulted in the important anthology whose title, *Reason and Light: Essays on Primo Levi*, foregrounds this putative scientific clarity of Levi's prose. In the introductory essay, Susan Tarrow argues that "[Levi's] training as a scientist influenced his choice of form as well as content."³⁹ However, other essays in this volume, largely written by Italianists, complicate the question of his style and literary influences. In retrospect, it is evident that this anthology initiated discussions of the key texts and some key topics that continue in today's Levi scholarship such as the role of science and Enlightenment rationality in his writing, issues of style and language in his testimony, and ethics.⁴⁰

Having commented on the bifurcated foundations of American Levi scholarship, from Holocaust Studies to Italian Studies, it is worth describing some areas of concentrated interest and how interpretations have evolved. For example, many scholars agree that Levi's use of Dante's Ulysses in *Survival in Auschwitz* is crucial in any reading of the memoir but disagree about the implications of invoking a literary inferno to describe an actual place. In 1980, Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi thought the passage showed "the capacity of the victim to transcend, through art, the agony of physical and spiritual degradation."⁴¹ Lynn Gunzberg's 1986 article on this topic was the first to combine specifically Italianist concerns with references to Holocaust theoreticians and critics like Adorno and Langer. She argued that Dante offered Levi "a conceptual grid

³⁹Susan Tarrow, "Title of Chapter," in ?, ed., *Reason and Light: Essays on Primo Levi* (City: Publisher, date), p. 1.

⁴⁰On the question of science see, for example, Thomas Peterson, "The Art-Science Conjunction in Primo Levi's Periodic Table," *NEMLA Italian Studies*, No. 11/12 (1987/1988): 143–150; Lawrence R. Schehr, "Primo Levi's Strenuous Clarity," *Italica*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Winter 1989): 429–443; Jonathan Wilson, "Primo Levi's Hybrid Texts," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, Vol. 48, No.1 (Winter 1999): 67–72.

⁴¹Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 18.

through which to examine and make sense of the details of the incomprehensible world into which he had been so cruelly cast.⁴² A few years later, Langer added a new perspective to the discussion by using the Dante passage to argue that literary citations, far from enriching Holocaust testimony, actually sterilize it, filtering the reader's "experience of Auschwitz . . . through the purifying vocabulary of an earlier time."⁴³ More recently, Druker has argued that even as Dante's Ulysses was a model of human resolve for Levi when imprisoned in Auschwitz, he was also, for poets like D'Annunzio, an embodiment of the prototypical Fascist hero and, therefore, a figure that reveals the violence from which culture is constructed.⁴⁴ The general movement on this topic and others is from a hagiographic position, where Levi's texts were almost sacred and his assumptions were beyond interrogation, to more aggressive and more theorized forms of analysis.

An area of high interest in recent years has been Levi's Gray Zone and related questions about the significance of the so-called *Muselmann*. Much of this work, which involves close readings of *The Drowned and the Saved* and *Survival in Auschwitz*, is in dialogue with controversial ideas that Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben articulated in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.⁴⁵ For example, Debarati Sanyal disagrees with Agamben's supposition that the disabling

⁴²Lynn M. Gunzberg, "Down Among the Dead Men: Levi and Dante in Hell," *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1986): 27.

⁴³Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 44.

⁴⁴Jonathan Druker, "The Shadowed Violence of Culture: Fascism and the Figure of Ulysses in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*," *Clio: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Winter 2004): 143–61. See also Sodi's monograph which argues that "Levi's message is often clearest when filtered through Dante" (Risa Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* [New York: Peter Lang, 1990], p. 2). And also Jagendorf who writes, "what in [Dante's] epic is an incitement to action . . . becomes in Primo's quotation an incitement to thought which can effectively combat the visible signs of enslavement" (Zvi Jagendorf, "Primo Levi Goes for Soup and Remembers Dante," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4 [Spring 1993]: 39). Finally, see two chapters in Stanislaw Pugliese, ed., *The Legacy of Primo Levi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): Nicholas Patruno, "Primo Levi, Dante, and the Canto of Ulysses," pp. 33–40; and Isabella Bertolotti, "Primo Levi's Odyssey: The Drowned and the Saved," pp. 105–118. A number of other studies, which we cannot cite here for lack of space, discuss Levi's use of Dante.

⁴⁵Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

moral ambiguity of the Gray Zone is a “paradigm for modern civilian life.”⁴⁶ Geoffrey Hartman argues that Agamben misreads Levi’s famous remark that only the *Muselmänner* are “complete witnesses” to the full horror of Auschwitz. Levi “did not seek to invalidate the witness accounts of those who survived.” Contrary to Agamben’s claim, the special status of the *Muselmann* serves “more as moral admonition than as metaethical challenge.”⁴⁷

It is worth noting that Levi has been a constant point of reference in the works of major scholars of Holocaust representation and memory like Irving Howe, Dominick LaCapra, and Berel Lang.⁴⁸ Often, Levi’s texts are not the objects of study but the tools of analysis; this is especially true of the essays in *The Drowned and the Saved*. In fact, it is now well accepted that Levi is not only an indispensable Holocaust memoirist but also an important theorist of the Holocaust. For example, historian Christopher Browning used the Gray Zone concept as theoretical support for his explanation of how “ordinary men” in a reserve police battalion came to murder thousands of Jews.⁴⁹ In 1989, John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum anthologized the preface to *The Drowned and the Saved* alongside essays by scholars such as Raul Hilberg, Yehuda Bauer, and Robert Jay Lifton, none of whom had first-hand experience of the events.⁵⁰ In 2003, Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg included the same preface in their exhaustive anthology, *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, claiming that Levi’s writing, and that of other survivors like Jean Améry, “engages precisely in the kind of self-reflexive, critical meditation that we call theory.”⁵¹

⁴⁶Debarati Sanyal, “A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism,” *Representations*, Vol. 79 (Summer 2002): 6.

⁴⁷Geoffrey Hartman, “Testimony and Authenticity,” *Yale Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (October 2000): 8. See also Dominick LaCapra, “Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben,” in Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, eds., *Writing the Disaster: Essays in Representation and the Holocaust* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 262–304.

⁴⁸See, for example, Irving Howe, “Writing and the Holocaust,” in Berel Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), pp. 175–199; Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴⁹Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Perennial, 1998).

⁵⁰John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

⁵¹Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, eds., *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 25.

On the question of Levi's suicide, U.S. scholars tended to take one of two positions in the 1980s and 1990s. For some, it confirmed an overall view of the Holocaust as a rupture beyond repair, a trauma to which Levi's texts bore witness even more clearly in light of the suicide.⁵² Rejecting this teleological reading, other scholars who doubted that suicide could be the proved cause of death argued that Levi's passing had no particular affect on the meaning of his texts.⁵³ Since the publication of the biographies by Carole Angier and Ian Thomson in 2002, the manner of death is no longer in dispute. For example, Alexander Stille accepts fully Angier's claim that the suicide was premeditated and perhaps predictable because Levi was depressed even before the war, and depression and suicide ran in his family.⁵⁴ However, Millicent Marcus is uncomfortable with Angier's relentlessly deterministic approach in which every event in Levi's life, apart from Auschwitz, leads inexorably to his eventual suicide. This approach "denies us, as readers, our own prerogative to entertain the possibility that Primo's choices were conscious and free."⁵⁵ Notwithstanding the objections voiced by Marcus, it seems likely that the combined force of the two biographies has quieted speculation about the role of Auschwitz in Levi's death, muting further claims that his untimely end amounts to a damning commentary on his work. Whatever the controversies that have arisen over the question of Levi's suicide, it is clear that American Levi scholarship is wide and deep, and that scholarly studies are helping to confirm the overall importance of his writings in American Holocaust discourse.

IV. Levi as Intellectual Reference: A Secular Alternative

The perception of Levi in American culture, shaped to some degree by the scholarly study of his books, has been determined largely by serious newspapers, magazines, and journals of opinion. Given that the *New York Times* played a significant role in bringing attention to Levi's work, it is worth returning now to the *Times* to locate the writer as an intellectual reference point

⁵²See, for example, Lawrence L. Langer, "Legacy in Gray," in *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 23–42.

⁵³For an account of this position, see Jonathan Druker, "On the Dangers of Reading Suicide into the Works of Primo Levi," in Pugliese, ed., *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 221–231.

⁵⁴Alexander Stille, "The Biographical Fallacy," in Pugliese, ed., *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, pp. 209–220.

⁵⁵Millicent Marcus, "Primo Levi: The Biographer's Challenge and the Reader's Double Bind," *Italica*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Spring 2003), p. 69.

in the United States. In addition to the reviews of *If This Is a Man* and *The Reawakening*, the only other two pre-1984 mentions of Levi in the *Times* are significant for assessing both Levi's ultimate position in American Holocaust discourse and the changing contours of that discourse.⁵⁶ In both instances, Levi's name is juxtaposed to that of the man most responsible for bringing the Holocaust to the center of American consciousness, the embodiment of the Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel. The implications of this opposition will be significant for their respective receptions and for the kinds of cultural capital their names possess: Wiesel will always be the more well-known figure, but his fame will come at the expense of a certain respect among the more "serious" academics (although, to be sure, there is an enormous academic industry dedicated to his work, which remains among the most frequently taught in schools and universities); Levi, on the other hand, will not reach the same mass audience as Wiesel, but he will come to be the favorite of the American intellectual class. Levi will remain linked with sober historiography and documentary writing—with Enlightenment rationality—while Wiesel will continue to have a reputation as an emotive, mythologizing prophet.

The Levi/Wiesel opposition is most starkly illustrated in a fascinating personal essay by Alfred Kazin—an essay that would become a flashpoint of controversy when Wiesel later attacked it in his memoirs.⁵⁷ In "My Debt to Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi," Kazin narrates how he came to know and admire Wiesel in 1960 and how he subsequently grew disenchanted. As he turned away from Wiesel, Kazin turned towards Levi: "If I once related to the Holocaust through Elie Wiesel, I have learned over the years that Primo Levi is a far more trustworthy witness and indeed, as Italian literary opinion has come to admit, one of the two greatest (with Italo Calvino) postwar writers Italy has produced." Referring to Wiesel's "religious extremity" and status as

⁵⁶Herbert Mitgang, "Roll-Call of Death," *New York Times Book Review*, 11 October 1959, p. 10; Virgilia Peterson, "Road Back From Death," *New York Times Book Review*, 7 November 1965, p. 85.

⁵⁷Alfred Kazin, "My Debt to Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi," in David Rosenberg, ed., *Testimony: Contemporary Writers Makes the Holocaust Personal* (New York: Times Books, 1989): pp. 115–28. Our discussion of the Kazin/Wiesel/Levi controversy is indebted to Gary Weissman's meticulous, fascinating reconstruction. Weissman is ultimately less interested in Levi, however, than in Wiesel, as well as in the more general question of non-survivors' identifications with survivors. See Gary Weissman, "Reading Wiesel," in *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 28–88.

a “myth-maker,” Kazin writes that “[f]or me . . . the Holocaust had not and never will have religious significance. It was not a ‘sacrifice’ but a massacre most unspeakable.”⁵⁸ In contrast to Wiesel, Levi was an “old-fashioned rationalist” possessed of an “intelligence . . . of the kind that still stares life in the face even in those moments of extreme emotion that crush the heart.”⁵⁹ It is within this contrast between the mythical and the rational that Kazin writes the sentence that would infuriate Wiesel: “The more I learned about [Wiesel], the more I pursued the vast literature about Auschwitz, the less surprised I would have been to learn that the episode [in Wiesel’s *Night*] of the boy struggling on the rope had never happened.”⁶⁰ Several years after the appearance of Kazin’s essay, Wiesel would refer to it in his memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, and declare that Kazin “is among the few people whose paths I regret ever having crossed.”⁶¹ While the bitterness of this exchange is unusual in Levi reception—and has much more to do with the personalities of Kazin and Wiesel than with Levi—Levi nonetheless plays a crucial symbolic role in this exchange. His reputation as a cool, Enlightenment intellect, however well earned, emerges in even sharper definition because of the contrast to the emotive Wiesel.

The habit of juxtaposing the relative “merits” of survivor writings, so ably explored by Gary Weissman in the case of Kazin, is not restricted to the Levi/Wiesel dichotomy. Another pairing that has received attention, especially in the years since Levi’s death, is that of Levi and Jean Améry. In “The Suicide Note,” a long review of *The Drowned and the Saved* in the weekly *The New Republic*, the novelist and essayist Cynthia Ozick begins by contrasting Levi and Améry, only to bring them closer together by the end of her reflections.⁶² Ozick’s essay is a tribute to Levi’s last book, but one that takes the form of a troubling retrospective on his career. With the exception of her appreciation of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Ozick’s piece represents the harshest critique of Levi since Fernanda Eberstadt’s *Commentary* essay—and one written by someone associated with some of the political positions of that journal. Reading very much by the light of Levi’s suicide, Ozick situates Levi alongside other survivor-writers who later committed suicide—Tadeusz Borowski, Paul

⁵⁸Kazin, “My Debt to Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi,” p. 123.

⁵⁹Kazin, “My Debt to Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi,” pp. 123, 126–27.

⁶⁰Kazin, “My Debt to Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi,” p. 123.

⁶¹Wiesel, quoted in Weissman, “Reading Wiesel,” p. 30.

⁶²Cynthia Ozick, “The Suicide Note,” *The New Republic*, 21 March 1988, pp. 32–6.

Celan, and Améry. She quotes Levi's skeptical response to Améry's notion of "trading punches" as a way to achieve dignity under conditions of repression, and then uses the occasion to offer an ultimately heterodox evaluation of Levi's oeuvre: "This observation [by Levi]—that the rage of resentment is somehow linked to self-destruction—is, in the perplexing shadow of Levi's own suicide, enigmatic enough and bears returning to. For the moment, it may be useful to consider that Levi's reputation—rather, the grave and noble voice that sounds and summons through his pages—has been consummately free of rage, resentment, violent feeling, or any overt drive to 'trade blows.'"⁶³ While most commentators have valued precisely these features of Levi's work, Ozick finds in praise for Levi an attempt to elude the most challenging aspects of the Nazi genocide.

Levi's apparent "absence of hatred" has, according to Ozick, made him appropriate by an implicitly American audience as a "falsifying balm," as an "illusory—or self-deluding—glow of good feeling (or, at worst, absence of bad feeling)."⁶⁴ Although Ozick vacillates somewhat as to whether the fault lies with Levi or with his readers, she seems to condemn all his early works as a form of false consciousness: "And what of the predecessor-volumes? What of their lucid calm, absence of hatred, magisterial equanimity, unaroused detachment? Readers have not misconstrued Levi's tone, at least not until now. *The Drowned and the Saved* makes it seem likely that the restraint of 40 years was undertaken out of a consistent adherence to an elevated *idée fixe*, possibly to a self-deception: a picture of how a civilized man ought to conduct himself when he is documenting savagery."⁶⁵ Although most other commentators do not identify such a radical break between Levi's earlier and later work, most do find a shift in tone and find it difficult to avoid reading the work through the presumed suicide.

Ozick's highly visible essay did not go without comment, however. To take one substantial, albeit delayed, response, Eugene Goodheart's "The Passion of Reason: Reflections on Primo Levi and Jean Améry," published in

⁶³Ozick, "The Suicide Note," pp. 32–33.

⁶⁴Ozick, "The Suicide Note," p. 34.

⁶⁵As its title suggests, Clive James's *New Yorker* review of *The Drowned and the Saved*, "Last Will and Testament," also reads the work as a kind of suicide note. But, unlike, Ozick, James does not take this as an occasion to discredit Levi's earlier work which, to the contrary, he sees "compre[sse[d]]" in the last one (p. 86).

1994 in the democratic socialist journal *Dissent*, moves in an opposite direction from Ozick's review.⁶⁶ Initially underlining parallels between Levi and Améry, Goodheart ultimately seeks to distinguish them. As the conclusion of his essay makes clear, part of his aim is to counter readings of Levi's last work that interpret it as a "suicide note." Singling out Ozick in particular, Goodheart warns that such an interpretation amounts to "a kind of irresponsible reading of a text that invents from a merely literary interpretation a history that requires evidence of another sort."⁶⁷ Goodheart's complaint echoes Michael André Bernstein's useful notion of "backshadowing," a form of narrative in which later events cast the unwarranted retrospective light of necessity on contingent earlier events.⁶⁸

Before invoking Améry, Goodheart begins by taking up the secular/sacred opposition familiar from the Levi/Wiesel discourse. Wiesel is only mentioned indirectly, in a quotation from George Steiner, but the dichotomy functions nonetheless. Writing a year after the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the release of *Schindler's List* had brought the Holocaust once more back to the center of mainstream American discourse, Goodheart notes that "the Holocaust has acquired the sanctity of deity and become the object of a kind of reverence. Like a religious mystery, it has been shrouded with taboos." After citing one of Steiner's reverential references to Wiesel's *Night*, Goodheart comments that "not all the witnesses mean to invite reverence. Survivors such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry write from a strenuous moral point of view, springing from the rationalism of the classical Enlightenment. They have no quarrel with God, because they never believed in him."⁶⁹ After initially pairing Levi and Améry because of their "passionate commitment to moral reason," Goodheart goes on to distinguish them subtly: "If Améry is the man of reason, Levi is the reasonable man."⁷⁰ By this distinction he means to suggest that Améry was gripped by the extremity of the Holocaust in a way that Levi ultimately was not. Focusing especially on Levi's essay on Améry in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Goodheart suggests that "Levi

⁶⁶Eugene Goodheart, "The Passion of Reason: Reflections on Primo Levi and Jean Améry," *Dissent* (Fall 1994), pp. 518–27.

⁶⁷Goodheart, "The Passion of Reason," p. 526.

⁶⁸See Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Goodheart's essay and Bernstein's book appeared in the same year.

⁶⁹Goodheart, "The Passion of Reason," p. 518.

⁷⁰Goodheart, "The Passion of Reason," pp. 519, 525.

rebukes, if that is the right word, Améry's self-destructive impulses as the sign of someone preoccupied with death and remarks in contrast his own devotion to the aims of life.⁷¹ Goodheart is responding in part to suggestions that Levi's death may not have been a suicide, but even more importantly he is warning against reading the fact of Levi's death back into a literary oeuvre that spanned forty years. Positioning Levi between Wiesel's sacred mysteries and Améry's despair, Goodheart also refuses the two, somewhat different, poles of Ozick's response: Levi as easily assimilated "optimist"—the position Ozick condemns—and Levi as author of "a book of blows returned by a pen on fire"⁷²—the position she celebrates. Rather, Goodheart seems to seek an intermediate place similar to the one in which the historian and public intellectual Tony Judt would like to situate Levi: a place that acknowledges complexity, multiplicity, and "betweenness." The idea of situating Levi in such a place is inspired, of course, by Levi's own notion of the "gray zone." As Judt eloquently sums up the implications of this concept—one of the most important developed by Levi—the gray zone leads to an understanding of "the infinite gradations of responsibility, human weakness, and moral ambivalence that have to be understood if we are to avoid the pitfall of dividing everything and everybody into tidy poles: resisters and collaborators, guilty and innocent, good and evil."⁷³

As the skirmishes between Wiesel and Kazin, and Ozick and Goodheart make clear, Primo Levi's position as an intellectual reference in the United States has sometimes been contested, even as his reception, once it got underway, has been remarkably consistent and positive. Another striking and not unrelated fact about Levi's intellectual reception is how thoroughly it has been associated with Jewish writers. Even though much of the Levi reception has appeared in secular, non-denominational venues, these venues are precisely ones that grant particular visibility to Jewish writers and issues: the *New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *Dissent*, and *The New York Review of Books*. As their titles suggest, these newspapers, magazines, and journals are also based, for the most part, in New York, the city Levi identified in an interview as the quintessential site of contemporary Jewish culture.⁷⁴ With his secularism, left

⁷¹Goodheart, "The Passion of Reason," p. 526.

⁷²Ozick, "The Suicide Note," p. 36.

⁷³Judt, "The Courage of the Elementary," p. 38.

⁷⁴Levi's 1979 interview with Giorgio Segrè, included in *The Voice of Memory*, is cited in Nan Goldberg, "Primo Levi: Shunning Survivors' Emotionalism for an Almost Scientific Detachment," *Forward*, 27 April 2001.

of center politics, and commitment to science and culture, Levi shares many of the characteristics and values of an influential portion of the American Jewish community (particularly its urban, intellectual component). That community is certainly heterogeneous, and certain of its political and cultural tensions can be glimpsed, in very attenuated and allegorical form, in some of the responses to Levi (particularly those of Eberstadt and Ozick as well as in the persistent opposition between Levi and Wiesel). But for the most part, Levi represents a seemingly “neutral” terrain open to appreciation by the right as by the left, by the markedly Jewish community (whether culturally or religiously) as well as the assimilated and universalistic intellectuals.

Perhaps the most striking emblem of Levi’s embrace by the Jewish-American intellectual world is his brief friendship with the controversial but popular writer Philip Roth. Although they only met in 1986, first in London and then for a few days in Turin, Roth and Levi seem to have developed an immediate liking for each other, despite the obvious differences of temperament, experience, and literary style.⁷⁵ Roth’s interview with Levi, featured prominently on the first page of the 12 October 1986 *New York Times Book Review* across from Kazin’s review of *The Monkey’s Wrench*, was crucial to the growth of Levi’s popularity in the mid-1980s (and has been frequently cited since then, especially after being reprinted in *The Voice of Memory*). Beyond the text of the interview, interesting as it is, it is perhaps a single image that best captures Roth’s relationship to Levi and “illustrates” something about Levi’s place in American intellectual life. While an intimate and intense close-up of Levi sits on the front page of the *Book Review* between the interview and review, inside the *Book Review* a more unexpected photograph can be found. This rather touching image portrays Roth and Levi standing next to each other in front of the bookshelves in the latter’s study. A bearded Roth towers over the diminutive Levi, but they seem relaxed and comfortable with each other and are apparently united by an amusing comment Levi is making. In the physical contrast between the two writers we might see something of the distance that separates Europe and the United States, while in Roth’s appreciative gaze we find an openness—however belated—to the message Levi tried to convey.

⁷⁵See the account of their meeting and friendship in Thompson, *Primo Levi*, pp. 494–95, 514–17.

Conclusion

Has Levi's message truly been received by the American public or is Roth's appreciation more the exception than the rule? It is difficult to quantify the depth and seriousness of reception, but it is worth noting that despite the delay that has marked Levi's entry into the U.S. public sphere, his works are now a regular presence in American university courses as well as newspapers and academic reviews. Levi's works—especially *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Drowned and the Saved*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Periodic Table*—show up on the syllabi of History, Italian, English, Comparative Literature, Psychology, Sociology, and even various science departments at public and private universities across the United States. His works are taught in the context of Jewish and Holocaust studies, but also in courses on World and European history and culture as well as in writing courses.⁷⁶ Given the thousands of students enrolled in these courses, university education may become the most influential site of reception in the coming years—a fitting legacy for a writer dedicated to bringing an enlightened eye to some of modernity's darker regions.⁷⁷

We wish to thank Philippe Mesnard and Yannis Thanassekos for first spurring our interest in the American reception of Levi; and we are grateful to Ted Gournelos and Shawn Gilmore for research assistance and to the University of Illinois Research Board for support.

⁷⁶Evidence for these claims derives from an internet search under keywords “syllabus Primo Levi” on 16 June 2007. Levi also appears in most anthologies of Holocaust writing intended for course use, and a chapter dedicated to *Survival in Auschwitz* by Jonathan Druker appears in the recent Modern Language Association publication *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes (New York: MLA, 2004).

⁷⁷In another essay, we focused on other aspects of Levi's American reception, including discussions of his 1985 trip to the United States and artistic responses to his texts. We also provided background on the history of Holocaust memory in the American context so that Levi's role in this history may be more clearly delineated. See Jonathan Druker and Michael Rothberg, “La réception de Primo Levi aux États-Unis,” in Philippe Mesnard and Yannis Thanassekos, eds., *Primo Levi à l'œuvre: La réception de l'œuvre de Primo Levi dans le monde* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2008), pp. 197–212. For yet another perspective on Levi's American reception and diffusion, see Pietro Frassica, “Primo Levi negli Stati Uniti,” in Giovanni Tesio, ed., *La diffusione della memoria: Diffusione e conoscenza di Primo Levi nei paesi europei* (Turin: Centro Studi Piemontesi, 2005), pp. 45–64.