

A Primo Levi Atlas: Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo, by Marco Belpoliti

Alessandro Cassin (October 23, 2016)



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at the Italian Academy at Columbia University (1161 Amsterdam Ave, New York, NY 10027).
SYMPOSIUM - A Fresh View: Primo Levi's COMPLETE WORKS. A dialogue between Ann Goldstein and Marco Belpoliti, editors of Levi in 2015-2016

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Alessandro Cassin: your book seems like a —perhaps temporary— point of arrival of the long years you devoted to the study of Primo Levi.

Let's start with the book's structure. In the manner of an intellectual biography, it organizes information on the life and works of its subject, yet it is not a biography. It appears more like a sort of encyclopedia, or better yet a website where you can jump from one section to another, building a path of personal reading and consultation. Could you explain how you conceived of this volume, who are the target readers and how do you envision people reading/using it?

Marco Belpoliti: I had a vast amount of material I had written over the course of twenty years, and even more material, (from conferences, research projects, work outlines, etc.), only sketched out. Much of it had been published in Italian and foreign magazines, and books. Then there was material I had gathered for the issue of "Riga" (a thematic journal on art and literature founded by Marco Belpoliti and Elio Grazioli, published by Marcos y Marcos, editor's note) on Primo Levi, and for the notes to the 1997 edition of *Primo Levi's Complete Works*, as well as a book from the same year, for Bruno Mondadori, conceived as a lexicon. Further, there were several essays that had appeared in foreign languages, English, French and German; notes for my university courses, and more. I was concerned that this material was not readily available to readers because it was dispersed in many different locations. So I started to read it and work on it during my train rides back and forth from Bergamo to Milano (60 minutes each way). In addition, I conceived of new essays, some have been completed, others not. Eventually I began to imagine how to organize all this material, and the solution came by itself. I had imagined a bigger book, almost an atlas, with three different graphic levels of texts, one above the other, like notes. But the publisher dissuaded me. Instead, as I started to put the material in order, I came up with the idea of using different fonts and font sizes to differentiate each section. I handed over 500 pages to the book editor at Guanda, then, during the following two years, I added 200 more pages. Of the book's 735 pages at least 200 are new, previously unpublished material. The publisher probably had not noticed that the book was leavening like bread. For nearly ten years I have presented and explained over and over again the material in the book in my classes at the University of Bergamo. At the end, with the help of my wife Paola Lenarduzzi, who is a graphic designer, we found an affordable solution for the publisher: we did the layout of the manuscript ourselves using different fonts for each section. This book is the result: we made a virtue of necessity.

AC The book has different sections: ten photographs with comments; the story of the books that Levi wrote; lemmas, which are organized as encyclopedia entries, and finally a series of essays with long extended sentences as titles. These essays, as often the phrases that form the titles, are born or revolve around the questions you pose. Sometimes the questions are answered, other times times you leave them unanswered. The feeling is that taken together, they point to the questions that you asked yourself over the years, that are the driving force of the book ... Could you elaborate?

MB I wrote the long titles of the essays following a practice common in eighteenth century books. In addition to serving as titles they are also summaries, kind of like newspaper's half-titles. They came later. They are not exactly the questions I asked myself before writing, but the "summary" in the form of a question, to the content of each chapter. Sometimes the question is perhaps exaggerated or too graphic, but I liked it that way, I thought it worked. I did not want it to look like typical nonfiction books. A friend told me that mine is a third way between the traditional academic essay and storytelling by contemporary critics: sort of a narrated essay. There's nothing premeditated in my solution. I just tried to find the best-suited way to pull together many pages, striving to make the



content interesting or fresh. The titles are one more layer of the writing.

I included the photographs to make the book a bit “lighter”, as there were too many written pages. I decided I wanted ten, a perfect number, and no more. They are not the most beautiful images I had found, but rather the ones that were affordable. Some did not cost at all, because they belonged to friends or to “La Stampa”, the newspaper for which I write, or to people long dead, therefore free. Here, too, I made a virtue of necessity.

AC The title *Primo Levi di fronte e di profilo* (*Primo Levi Front-view and Side-view*) suggests both a 360 degree investigation, and photographic poses. Besides a “biography in 10 photographs”, the book provides a series of “snapshots” of the history of each book, followed by further examination. Paradoxically, a book of 735 pages presents data and reflections encapsulating them in units of succinct length and great concentration...

MB The title derives from a visit to Auschwitz when Davide Ferrario and I shot *La strada di Levi*, a film on Levi’s journey narrated in *The Truce*. We had a take with the images of the deportees hung along a hallway, police-like images, front and side view, as in mug shots.

Primo Levi is an enigma to me. He had been a deportee, and like those people in the photographs, subjected to a detention regime. I joined together many different things. Of course, no man will ever be represented by the pictures taken when caught by the police. Identification photographs are an attempt to grasp the identity of a man, yet the true identity always eludes us. So after 735 pages Levi still escapes. I have not pinned him down. I tried, but to no avail. The more pages I wrote, the more he escaped: he is a polyhedron, as I write in the preface; he has many faces, all different. Maybe I should have written a small book, a short one. As Pascal said to an acquaintance to whom he had written a long letter: I’m sorry but I did not have the time to right a short one. I probably would have needed another 10 years yet to write a good book. But fortunately, as you noticed, aside from two long chapters, all the rest is made of very short segments. It is a long, thick book, made of short or very short parts, which can be read by jumping here and there, following one’s own reading paths. I recommend it in the “Operating Instructions.” It makes it an easier and less challenging read.

AC Your thought provoking chapter on *The Search For Roots: A Personal Anthology*, bears a peremptory subtitle: “A book made of texts by others is his most perfect self-portrait.” You come back to the concept of the self-portrait at least 3 times before page 603, where you underline “In what is undoubtedly the key book for understanding his complex personality, *The Search for Roots* is both an anthology of texts and an intense human confession...” Curiously, in the recent US edition of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, Liveright, 2015 (which generally follows the order of the complete works you curated for Einaudi), *The Search for Roots* is absent. Could you comment on this omission and expand on what you think is the importance of this book?

MB First of all you have to know that even the Italian edition of *Levi’s Complete Works* in 1997 risked not having *The Search for Roots*. One of Einaudi’s executives had not included it. When I realized it, I raised hell: it is a very important book for understanding Levi. Then we came to an agreement: it was included, but in a smaller font size and as an addendum. I accepted the compromise. Now, in a new edition published in 2016, it will appear in the same font size as the other books.

Why is it important? Because Levi speaks of himself in a direct way, as a man and as a writer, and does so using the words of others: he anthologized pieces he identifies with, pieces he loves, and one that describes him.

Precisely in using other people’s words to describe himself, he felt freer. In the American edition it was perhaps not possible: they would have had to translate or search for original English texts from various authors. *The Search for Roots* has perhaps less of an impact in English, although I think it would have been better to include it. Certainly there must have been obstacles in acquiring the rights, and much had already been achieved by translating or re-translating all of Levi.

AC Over the years you often returned to Primo Levi. Your contribution to the critical debate on Levi (and the curatorship of his complete works) has been substantial and far-reaching. Could you explain



what led you back to this author? And further how do you think Levi can help us to read the present and the future?

MB I came across Levi almost by chance, many years ago, thanks to a teacher of mine who had been a prisoner in Germany, a military deportee who had refused to fight with the fascists of the Italian Social Republic and had been deported. He simply told us: on the subject of Concentration Camps, read *If This Is a Man*. He had been a communist until 1956 and then left the party after the Soviet's invasion of Hungary. He was a man of few words, very tough and competent. Then I read more of Levi's books, as they were published, during the seventies. But I was more interested in Calvino, Sciascia, Pasolini. I read following my social and political interests, as well as literary ones. I did not think about becoming a literary critic. I concentrated on philosophical studies. Then, in the early eighties, at the home of a friend, the epistemologist Mario Porro, I discovered *Other People's Trades* and a light bulb came on. I realized Levi was not only the witness, but a 360 degrees writer. He had combined literature and sciences, linguistics and ethology, chemistry and complexity theory. It was a true surprise. From there I began rereading his works and revised my view of him. It took nearly 15 years.

Then, in 1991 I started to edit the journal "Riga" and after five or six years I began planning an issue on Levi. "Riga" is made by myself and Elio Grazioli, so we are free to choose authors, subjects, collaborators, with no need to clear anything beforehand with the publisher. I started to ask around various writer friends and essayists if they wanted to collaborate: all of them had just reread Levi or were reading him. This is how the Levi issue came about. Stefano Bartezzaghi played an important role: it was he who opened my eyes to Levi as playful wordsmith. Meanwhile I had begun to work with Einaudi, they were publishing my book on Calvino, *L'occhio di Calvino*. I often went to Turin and I spoke first with Paolo Fossati, and later with Ernesto Ferrero. Fossati told me that Ferrero was preparing a new edition of Levi's Complete Works. Then I told Ferrero about my work on Levi and the things I had discovered. Meanwhile, Martin McLaughlin had introduced me to a young English scholar, Robert Gordon who had graduated with him from Oxford. Gordon was then studying Levi, so we began a dialogue. One day Fossati took me to see Ferrero, and asked me to collaborate with him on curating Levi's, Complete Works. We started together, but then, I ended up finishing the job myself. In Turin I spent time with Alberto Cavaglion from whom I learned a lot. Levi then was not who he is today. Now he is finally considered a writer, but not back then. He was only the witness, and received little attention from the literati.

Today, one of Levi's most interesting contributions is his investigation of the "grey zone". Here we hear clearly his voice as a scholar of power relations, in both their extreme manifestation inside the camp, but also in their less oppressive manifestations in the outside world.

His book for the twenty-first century and beyond is *The Drowned and the Saved*. He still needs to be studied and understood, he is an important author for our future. I find his anthropological and ethological perspectives to be decisive. This is the new frontier, without forgetting the Nazi extermination and concentration camps. There are still similar situations in the world, and I fear that it will occur again. In different forms, but this kind of horror will occur again. We see it every day. And again there is the theme of the "foreigner", xenophobia. [For all of this], unfortunately, Levi continues to be topical and relevant.

Alessandro Cassin is the director of Printed Matter and CPL Editions. Was a cultural reporter for *l'Espresso* and *Diario* and is a contributor of *The Brooklyn Rail*. His book *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* co-authored with Maria Rus Bojan received the 2015 AICA Award.

[Thanks to Centro Primo Levi](#) [2]

Info of Event:

NOV 1, TUE, h 5:30 pm at the Italian Academy at Columbia University (1161 Amsterdam Ave, New York, NY 10027).

SYMPOSIUM - [A Fresh View: Primo Levi's COMPLETE WORKS](#) [3]. A dialogue between Ann Goldstein and Marco Belpoliti, editors of Levi in 2015-2016



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