Book Review: Other People's Trades

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Though Other People's Trades is Levi's last published work in America, it first appeared in Italy in 1985. For my purposes its earlier publication date makes it a good starting point for Levi's wonderfulfryfertile mind. Readers who do not know Levi may be surprised to learn he was an organic chemist, who spent his professional life managing a paint factory. Indeed, his education in chemistry is one of the accidents of fate which contributed to his survival in Auschwitz, where he "worked" on the Nazis' ill-fated efforts to produce synthetic rubber.

In Other People's Trades, Levi's boundless curiosity and scientific training combine to produce some of the most engaging personal essays
"Gray tak privi" 79

The Saved, is captured in the book's motto, from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

"And till my ghastly tale is told"

That agony returns,

And this heart within me burns

Both as memorist and essayist, Levi could not rest without setting the record straight, and the eight essays of The Drowned and the Saved complete his task.

Examining his special position to recount Holocaust history, Levi writes in his "Preface":

...the best historian of the Lagers emerged from among the very few who had the ability and luck to attain a privileged observatory without bowing to compromises, and the skill to tell what they saw, suffered, and did, with the humility of a good chronicler, that is, taking into account the complexity of the Lager phenomenon and the variety of human destinies being played out in it.

And here in the eight chapters is his final installment in Levi's forty-year undertaking to tell the Holocaust story he witnessed. His determination is captured in the book's motto, from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

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bestialities to reach the outside world. But Levi will not let us condemn those who temporarily delayed their deaths by performing the Nazi's murderous chores; that is, not until we "meditate on the story of 'the crematoria ravens' with pity and rigor," and suspend our judgment. Difficult as this is for those of us spared the experience of the death camps, Levi underscores its painful reality: "human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression."

At the same time, Levi contemptuously rejects the fashionable cant of people like movie director Liliana Cavani, who says of her Holocaust films, "we are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily." For Levi, this distortion in recognizing responsibility "is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered...to the negators of truth."

In his chapters on "Shame," "Communication," and "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," Levi fills in the picture of camp life, teaching us about its victims and ourselves along the way: about the shame prisoners experienced every moment of camp life, which was carried into civilian life after their rescue; about the impossibility of human communication, deliberately reinforced by the Nazis to further dehumanize their victims; and about the devastating effects camp life had on the intellectuals, those least prepared for its horrors. Levi is uncompromising in his assessment:

The "saved" of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message: what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary... The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.

Still another painful chapter of The Drowned and the Saved examines "Useless Violence," that special Nazi invention of "violence as an end in itself, with the sole purpose of inflicting pain, occasionally having a purpose, yet always redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself": beatings over improperly made beds or indecipherable orders; interminable roll calls in rain and snow; even the numbers tattooed on the left forearm, reserved exclusively for Jewish prisoners because it was forbidden by Mosaic law. Levi concludes that... in the Third Reich, the best choice, the choice imposed from above, was the one that entailed the greatest affliction, the greatest waste, the greatest physical and moral suffering. The "enemy" must not only die, he must die in torment,...[he] must be degraded so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt.

In the final chapter, Levi reproduces samples of his correspondence with Germans who have tried somehow to explain the Holocaust. Their letters, collected over thirty years, range from understanding to obscene apologetics. Levi's responses are always polite, yet never wavering in his intention to hold people responsible for their actions, or inactions. He reminds his correspondents, "The true crime of almost all Germans of that time was that of lacking the courage to speak."

Let me conclude this review with a note on style because this is an area where Levi is frequently misunderstood. His previous Holocaust accounts were marked by their tone of equanimity, almost detachment. To many, The Reawakening seemed even to project a sweet nostalgia about the long journey home from Auschwitz, leading some critics to call Levi "the forgiver." Such a misunderstanding results from Levi's rejection of hyperbole, bombast, and high-flown rhetoric; in their place we find subtle irony, even understatement. In its patrician character his style reflects the man. It is also Levi's way of recounting experiences so horrible as to overwhelm the imagination. But in The Drowned and the Saved Levi is less elliptical and ascetic than in any of his previous Holocaust books. Here Levi raises his voice while pointing an accusing finger away foolish and tasteless chatter.

It is tempting to call attention to the historical flourish, but that is not Levi. Better to concentrate on the question, what is the Holocaust? Each of us was witness to a "reality"..."dimensions"; and this is a proverb reminding us that "tu derseynu" (Try to tell).  


As a lifelong reader of literature, I have observed with disinterest (scarcely to the point of scientific detachment) a growing public aversion to books and to reading, particularly of books. A recent Time magazine observes: "Literature...is a comparatively small part of the culture...and on reading..." These are the by-products developing eloquently out of devaluing the props of culture, centering on the props of the culture, centering on the props of the culture, centering on the props of the culture. American literature in no small part from increasingly shorter and shorter TV-watching to..."
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This review with a note on an area Levi is free. His previous Holocaust-minded by their tone of detachment. To many, The Man is the to project a sweet journey home from the critics to call Levi "the understanding results of hyperbole, bombast, etc.; in their place we find an understatement. In its patriotism, this reflects the man. It is the language experiences so from the imagination. But for Saved Levi is less elliptic in any of his previous works. Levi raises his voice while pointing an accusatory finger, stripping away foolish and fashionable Holocaust chatter.

It is tempting to end this review with a rhetorical flourish, but doing so would be false to Levi. Better to conclude by quoting his answer to the question, why continually write about the Holocaust? Because, as Levi answers, he was witness to a "trial of planetary and epochal dimensions"; and also because, as the Yiddish proverb reminds us: "Tzvekhem akhi" (Troubles overcome are good to tell).

Gilbert R. Davis


As a lifelong reader of novels (and for almost as long, a teacher of them), I have observed with dismay the gradual disappearance (scarcely too strong a word) of novel reading for pleasure. Nor do novels seem to be included in any programs of self-improvement, though not so very long ago being "well read" was an aspect of sophistication. (Jay Gatsby, as he set out to make himself over, resolved to read "one improving book or magazine" every week.) As we all know, turning on TV has replaced picking up a book. A recent article in the Yale Review states flatly what this means for literature:

"Literature. . .is an institution of print culture, centered on the printed book and on reading and writing. The rapidly developing electronic culture is knocking the props out from under Gutenberg literature in numerous ways, ranging from increasing amounts of illiteracy and TV-watching to the proliferation of photocopying machines and tape recordings. (Alvin Kernan, "Criticism as Theodicy," Autumn, 1987)

Obviously, as stated, all literature is affected, but the novel is the most endangered species. Poetry may even flourish, especially the short expressive lyric, and poetry readings are popular. The drama, too, can survive, adapting to the new taste for spectacle by moving from talkiness to dazzling stage business. Short stories are gaining in popularity, evidently the new taste for spectacle by moving from talkiness to dazzling stage business. Short stories are gaining in popularity, evidently becoming the Brontes, Tolstoy, James, Faulkner.

Perhaps the last of this generation is teaching the new professional. But now for the other bad news. While technological change is reducing the ranks of the general reader, the critical onslaught of the last twenty years is teaching the new generation to chase a chimaera: not only is it impossible deconstruction, it dissolves into a text among others — history,