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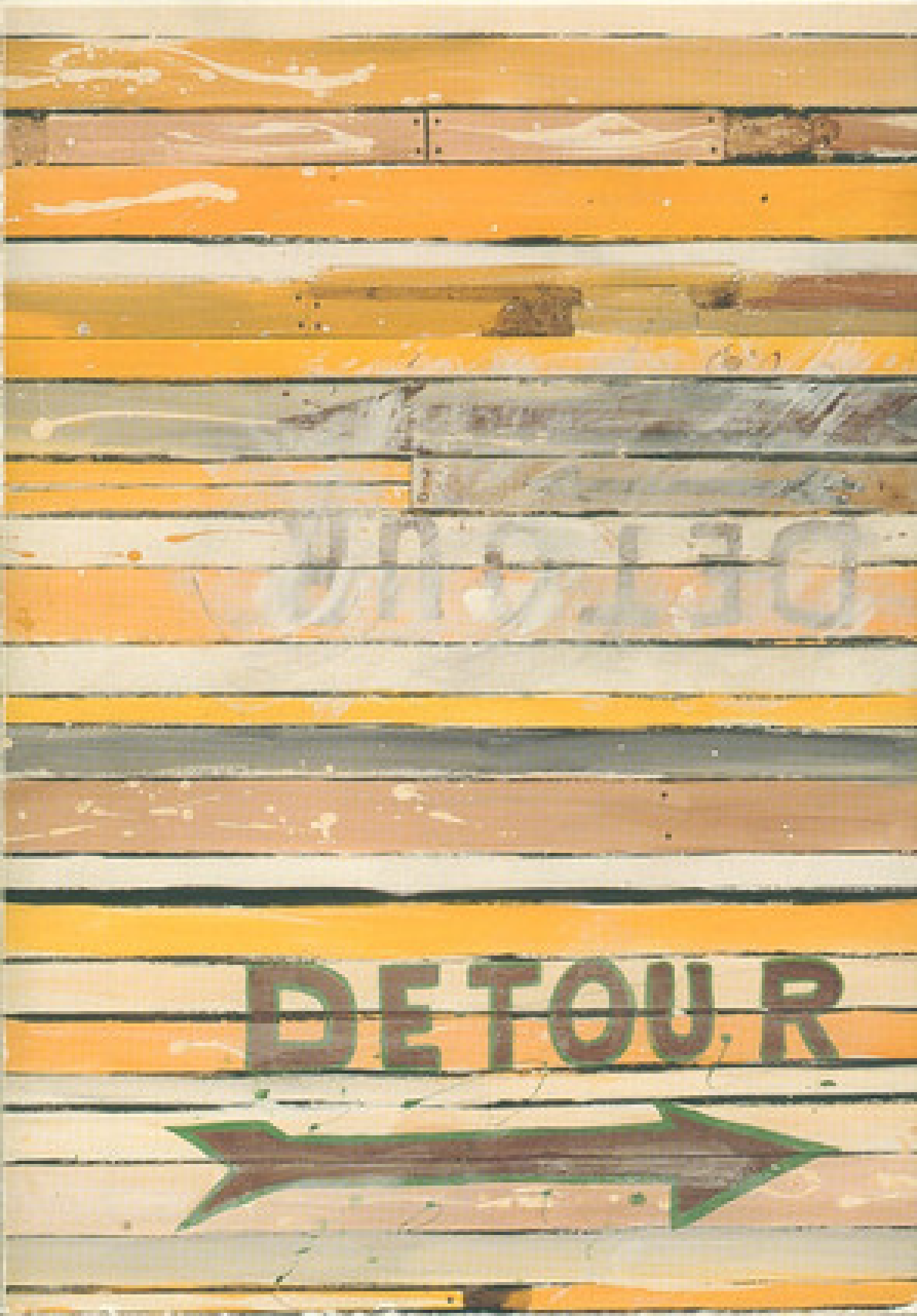

Primo Levi: The Art of Fiction, no. 140
Interviewed by Gabriel Motola

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Born in Turin in 1919 of middle-class parents whose ancestors fled the Spanish Inquisition, Primo Levi was subjected in the thirties first to Italian racial laws that threatened his academic studies, and then to German racial edicts that threatened his life. Because of a sympathetic professor who agreed to be his dissertation advisor, he finished his studies at the University of Turin, where he was granted the Ph.D. in chemistry that eventually saved him. Early in 1943, Levi left Turin with a group of ten friends and fled to the mountains with the intention of joining *Giustizia e Liberta*, the Italian resistance movement. These plans were aborted when Levi was arrested in the December of that year by the Fascists, to whom he admitted being a Jew. By February of 1944, he was imprisoned in Auschwitz. There, working in a chemical laboratory but expecting death at any moment, he knew he was living what he called "the fundamental experience" of his life.

After the war's end, he returned to Turin where he resumed his profession of chemist. In 1948, the year after his first book, *Survival in Auschwitz*, was published (if hardly noticed), he was made manager of a laboratory in a paint factory, the position he held until he retired in 1977. In 1975 he published *The Periodic Table*, in which, among other things, he acknowledged his debt to his scientific profession. Widely recognized by this time as one of Italy's most important writers, he continued to produce poetry, memoirs, fiction, and essays.

Levi committed suicide in 1987—hurling himself over the railing of the marble staircase outside his fourth-floor apartment. It was the same apartment in which he was born in 1919, where he and his wife raised their children, and where this interview took place in July of 1985. When we met, Levi led me into his study, where we sat on a leather couch and drank coffee served by the Levi's maid. A computer sat on the desk, and Levi mentioned how useful it was to him in composing his fiction. Like Levi himself, the room, whose windows looked out on the Corso Re Umberto, was extremely neat and well ordered.

In his person as in his writing, Primo Levi was a master of the understated. Speaking gently but animatedly and with the wry sense of humor that became increasingly evident in his later work, he ranged over topics as diverse as Tzvetan

Todorov's theory of language, Italy's socioeconomic structure, and the need to have all scientists study ethics in the university as part of their training.

Patient, soft-spoken, diffident, Primo Levi was nevertheless capable of intense passion. Relating the fundamental concerns of life to science, particularly its concision and precision, Primo Levi was able to perfect his art. *The Periodic Table*, a history of his family as well as of his time, is also a history of his own evolution from a scientist to a writer, which he relates metaphorically in the story of the carbon atom. In "Carbon," the last chapter of the book, Levi presents one of his major themes: the representation of matter as the universal thread that not only connects one life to another, not only to all life itself, but also to the very matter from which life is derived. Thus, that infinitesimal trace of matter, that particle of carbon, takes on symbolic significance of cosmological proportions.

The year before he jumped to his death Levi published *The Drowned and the Saved*, in which he spoke of the pain he suffered from having been a prisoner at Auschwitz, the shame that continued to torment him, the revulsion he still felt not only towards those who participated in the brutality but also towards those who could have but did not speak out against it. He believed, as he mentioned during our meeting, that all people have a responsibility to each other as well as to other living things, not only because of our moral and ethical tradition, but also because, whether ape or apple, we are all made up of the same material.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something about your education?

PRIMO LEVI

I had a classical education. Training in writing was serious. Oddly enough, I wasn't fond of the Italian literature program. I was fond of chemistry, so I refused the humanistic teaching of literature, but as matters go it entered me through the skin without my knowing. I engaged in a sort of polemic against my teachers because they insisted on proper construction of the phrases and so on. I was very cross with them because to me it was a waste of time when what I was looking for was a comprehension of the universal meanings—of the stars, the moon, microbes, animals, plants, chemistry and so on. All the rest—history, philosophy and so on—was simply a barrier to be crossed so I could get my diploma and enter the university.

INTERVIEWER

Your books suggest a deep as well as a very broad reading—American, Italian, German literature.

LEVI

Yes, my father was fond of reading. And so, although he was not very rich, he was generous in giving me books. It was different then. Today, it's easier to find foreign books everywhere—translated or not. You just go to a bookshop, and everything is there. At that time, it was not easy because the Fascists were very keen about distinguishing: this book, yes, this book, no. They allowed, for instance, translated English or American books if they were critical of English or American society. The books of D. H. Lawrence about life in the coal mines were not only published in Italy but distributed widely because they were so critical of the condition of miners in England. The implication was that Italian miners' lives were not like this. Lawrence mistook fascism for a romantic adventure, one reason more for translating him. Yes. The Fascist censors were intelligent, in their way. Admitting something and excluding something else. Like Hemingway, for instance. Hemingway had been a quasi-pseudo-communist in Spain. His books in translation came into Italy only after the war. My father let me read Freud, for instance, at twelve.

INTERVIEWER

Really!

LEVI

Illegally. Freud was not admitted. But my father managed to have a translation of *The Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. I didn't understand it.

INTERVIEWER

What about other American writers? Mark Twain? Walt Whitman?

LEVI

Mark Twain was politically neutral. Who else? John Dos Passos—translated. Sholem Asch—translated. Well, Italy was not completely cut off from abroad. Melville was translated by Pavese. *Moby-Dick* was a discovery; it had no political implications. I read it at twenty. I was not a boy anymore, but I was fascinated by him. Cesare Pavese was one of the great translators though hardly orthodox. He distorted it, fit it into the Italian language. He wasn't a seaman—Pavese—he hated

the sea. So, he had to prepare himself. I knew him. I met him twice before he committed suicide. In 1950, at full literary success, he killed himself in a room in the Hotel Bologna—for mysterious reasons, but then every suicide is mysterious. He had sex difficulties, apparently, without really being impotent. A sort of sexual timidity. Moreover, he was a very complicated man. He was never satisfied with his work as a writer. Political difficulties too—because he was a follower of communism during the war, but hadn't the courage to go in to the resistance. And so after the war, he had a sort of guilt complex for not having fought the Germans. These are some reasons for his suicide. But I don't think I have exhausted them.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Periodic Table*, you talk of the difference between the spirit and matter, suggesting that only through matter can we understand the universe and its components.

LEVI

The Fascist philosophy insisted a lot upon spirit. The slogan was: it is the spirit that masters matter. For instance, the Italian Army was badly equipped but if its spirits dominated matter, so we could win a war even without the equipment. The idea was that if you had the spirit, you'd be able to win. It was foolish, but it dominated the mood of the school. In the language taught us in philosophy hours, the word *spirit* had a very ambiguous meaning. Most of my comrades accepted it. I was cross with this insisting upon spirit. What is spirit? Spirit isn't soul. I was not a believer; I am not a believer. Spirit is something you can't touch. At that time it seemed to me an official lie insisting upon something you can't experience with your eyes, your ears, with your fingers.

INTERVIEWER

There's a danger in the spirit . . . that it can control reason.

LEVI

Mind you, spirit is instinct not reason. In fact, reason was discouraged because it was the tool of criticism. In their language, spirit was something very indefinite. A good citizen has to be tuned . . . You know Orwell? Do you remember the afterword of *1984* about Newspeak? It was copied from totalitarianism. The fact was many things in Fascist Italy didn't work at all. But teaching did. They were careful about having anti-Fascist teachers discarded, thrown away, or punishing them, and having enthusiastic teachers instead of them. So Fascist ideas painlessly penetrated, one of them this preeminence of spirit and not matter—the very reason

I chose to be a chemist, to have something under my fingers that could be verified as true or false.

INTERVIEWER

The spirit can never be proven except by those who believe.

LEVI

Yes. The same problems discussed by Plato are still discussed. There is no end to the discussion about what it means to be, to exist, if the soul is immortal or not. To the contrary, with the natural sciences any idea can be proved or disproved. Thus it was a relief for me to shift from indefinite discussions to something concrete, to what can be tested in the laboratory, in the test tube. You see it, you feel it.

INTERVIEWER

The question of science and ethics or morality comes to mind as one reads your work. Is the scientist expected to be more ethical than other professionals?

LEVI

I expect everyone to be ethical. But I don't think scientific training as one is taught in Italy or America brings you to an especially ethical consciousness. It should. In my opinion a young man or woman entering the university in natural-science departments should be told sufficiently and heavily to remember that you are entering a profession where morality is important. There is a difference between a chemist working in a paint factory like me or in a poison-gas factory. You should be conscious of your impact in real life. You should be able to refuse some jobs, some employments.

INTERVIEWER

What you are saying comes through in your writing. So does what is allied to loyalty, love of a friend. Sandro, for instance, in *The Periodic Table*. It's a very touching part of the text when you say, "Nothing of him remains—nothing but words, precisely." But you've made him live again through the words.

LEVI

Yes, for the reader. Not for me. It was the best approximation I could reach on the printed page. There is always a difference between a portrait and a living individual.

INTERVIEWER

He would regard your tribute to him with pleasure.

LEVI

Sandro would laugh. Oddly enough, I had not a quarrel, but a conflict with his family, because they did not recognize him. It is always like this. If you attempt to put any individual who's alive onto a printed page, you put him at unease, even if you have the best intentions to improve his or her qualities. Everybody has an image of himself. It's very rare that your personal image of yourself coincides with the one described by an observer. Even if the image in the book is more beautiful, it's not the same. It's as if you go to a mirror and find a face nicer than yours, but not yours. I wonder if you remember in *The Periodic Table* the story about phosphorous?

INTERVIEWER

Oh yes.

LEVI

The young lady in it is a friend of mine. After I wrote the chapter about her, I went to Milan where she lives and gave her the manuscript. I told her, I've written a story about you and me, slightly clouded up. I would like to have your permission to print it. She gave her permission, but because she is married, I read on her face a slight sense of uneasiness, embarrassment. In fact, I had changed her person for obvious reasons not to have her recognizable. Well, she said, "OK, I'm glad, I'm happy, I'm satisfied . . . But she wasn't.

INTERVIEWER

How about the man who created the college reunion in *The Periodic Table*?

LEVI

Well, he's an artifact. When your character is not first-rate—stupid or clumsy—it's good politics to reconstruct him from different parts. I took a forehead from one man, the chin from another, the tics from a third and so on. Despite all that . . .

INTERVIEWER

They all say, That's me!

LEVI

I met the one who had the trembling hands. He didn't tell me anything, but he didn't praise the book. He was cold with me.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose that's the penalty one pays. *The Periodic Table* is different from your other books in language and style. What is your awareness of what some call the new fiction or neorealism? Italo Calvino is considered to be a writer who belongs to that group.

LEVI

That's a difficult question. Calvino began in the wake of neorealism, but he minted a style and a personality so personal that you can't classify him in any way. I am often asked to which current I belong. I don't know. It doesn't interest me at all. Of course, in Calvino's writing—we have been friends for a long time—or in my writings you can find traces of dozens of writers: recent, classical, Dante, Virgil, and so on. They are all packed together. My background as a chemist weighs much more than what I've read. In fact, it does. It brings me new raw material. For Calvino, it was his travels, his stay in Paris, his coming in touch with important French intellectuals. All of this had a very heavy impact on his writing. Whether he's aware of it or not, I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't he also trained as a scientist?

LEVI

Not exactly. His father and mother were keepers of a botanical garden, first in Cuba and then in San Remo, Italy. And so his childhood was spent in botanical gardens with plants, animals, beasts. He's very attentive to new conquests of science, astronomy, and chemistry.

INTERVIEWER

Your career as a scientist also broadened your knowledge of languages. Is that how you learned English and German?

LEVI

I used to speak English when I was a chemist in the factory and talked to customers. But shoptalk is easier. The first time I went to the U.S. and appeared before an audience was the first time I spoke English continuously for more than ten minutes. Before an audience I was clumsy. People asked questions from far in the back, sometimes with different or blurred accents so that I had to ask somebody to translate from English into English! My difficulty is not in talking; my difficulty is in understanding. I have studied very little English methodically, but I do read a lot of books. My lexicon is rich. Many times I know a word but not its pronunciation.

INTERVIEWER

What about your knowledge of the German language?

LEVI

I learned German in a concentration camp. My English is incomplete but civil, polite. My German is not—wasn't. Not very polite. It was barracks German. I learned it in Auschwitz for reasons of survival. It was, in that life, necessary to understand in order to live. In fact, many comrades of mine died for lack of understanding. They were suddenly parachuted, dropped into a world speaking German or Yiddish or Polish. Almost no Italian speakers—it is unusual in Italy to study German, and of course, nothing of Polish or Yiddish. So it was a world of utter incomprehension. It was maddening; it drove me crazy. In fact, I remember with horror the first days, when luckily I knew some German from chemistry—because at that time chemistry was a German art. Many texts were in German, and I had studied some German to follow them. So I was not completely blank. But I hurried to friends, comrades from Alsace-Lorraine who were bilingual: Please give me lessons quickly to understand what this shouting means. The Germans used to shout orders, very rough . . . in their style like a dog barking. Well, I managed to learn some German, but in the camp it was sort of pidgin German, mixed with Polish, with Yiddish words. It was not polite German. After some years, in 1951, I went to a town near Cologne on business. After discussing matters, one of the Germans said, Look, it is very strange for an Italian to speak German. But your German is a weird one. Where did you learn to speak this way? And I purposely told him abruptly, Yes sir. It was in a concentration camp. Auschwitz. And then it was like a curtain fell. I used to do the same with other people. I don't resent it, but it was like a . . . litmus test with whom I was speaking. The way he or she behaved was a sign—if he was a Nazi, as most of them were, or if he worked in a concentration camp.

After that, of course, I tried to polish up my German to civilize it, to make it presentable—especially the accent. I have no conditioned reflex towards the language. I don't resent speaking German or hearing German. I think German is a noble language—the language of Goethe, of Gotthold Lessing. The language itself has nothing to do with the Nazis; it was distorted by the Nazis. Enough about German! Today's Germany is not a Nazi Germany anymore.

INTERVIEWER

So you don't feel uncomfortable going there today?

LEVI

Generally not. It's different with Poland and Russia. In Poland I was in Auschwitz twice for memorial services. I found a far different Poland: a country profoundly divided, very lively, a concentration of tensions, of interests, of mixed feeling toward Russians, toward Germans, toward Jews.

INTERVIEWER

Are they still strongly anti-Semitic in Poland today?

LEVI

They're not any more. For lack of material! Only about five thousand Jews left. Half of them in the government—as functionaries. And half of them in Solidarity.

INTERVIEWER

When you were a prisoner, did you expect to receive more humane treatment from scientists who recognized your own scientific background?

LEVI

I didn't expect it. My story was an exception. Because they discovered my background as a chemist, I worked in a chemical laboratory. We were three out of ten thousand prisoners. My personal position was extremely exceptional, like the position or situation of every survivor. A normal prisoner died. That was his escape. After passing an examination in chemistry, I expected something more from my bosses. But the only one who had a trace of human comprehension towards me was Dr. Müller, my supervisor at the laboratory. We discussed it after the war in our letters. He was an average man, not a hero and not a barbarian. He had no inkling of our condition. He had been transferred to Auschwitz a few days before. So he was confused. They told him: Yes, in our laboratories, in our

factories we employ prisoners. They are fiends, they are adversaries of our government. We put them to work to exploit them, but you are not supposed to talk with them. They are dangerous, they are communists, they are murderers. So put them to work but don't keep in touch with them. This man Müller was a clumsy man, not very clever. He was not a Nazi. He had some traces of humanity. He noticed I was unshaven and asked me why. Look, I told him, we haven't any razor; we haven't even a handkerchief. We are completely naked. Deprived of everything. He gave me a requisition that I must be shaven twice a week, which wasn't really a help, but a sign. Moreover, he noticed I had wooden clogs. Noisy and uncomfortable. He asked me why. I told him our shoes were taken away the first day. These are our uniform, standard. He made me have leather shoes. This was an advantage because wooden clogs were a torture. I still have the scars made by the clogs. If you are not used to them, after a half-mile walking, your feet are bleeding and encrusted with dirt and so on, and they become infected. To have leather shoes was an important advantage. So I contracted a sort of gratefulness to this man. He was not very courageous. He was afraid of the SS, like me. He was interested in my work being useful, not in persecuting me. He had nothing against Jews, against prisoners. He just expected us to be effective workers. This story about him in *The Periodic Table* is completely real. I never got a chance to meet him after the war. He died a few days before our appointment to meet. He phoned from a spa in Germany where he was recovering his health. As far as I know, his death was natural. But I don't know. I purposely left it undecided in *The Periodic Table* . . . to leave the reader in doubt, as I was.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about Lorenzo, the man who gave you food.

LEVI

It was a different thing for Lorenzo. He was a sensitive man, almost illiterate but really sort of a saint. After the war, when I met him in Italy, he told me that he didn't only help me. He helped three or four prisoners without telling one he was helping another one. Mind you, we almost never spoke. He was a very silent man. He refused my thanks. He almost didn't reply to my words. He just shrugged: Take the bread. Take the sugar. Keep silent, you don't need to speak.

Afterward, when I tried to rescue him, he was difficult to reach, to talk to him. He was . . . very ignorant, almost illiterate, hardly able to write. He was not religious; he didn't know the gospel, but instinctively he tried to rescue people, not for pride, not for glory, but out of a good heart and for human comprehension. He asked me once in very laconic words: Why are we in the world if not to help each other? Stop. Period. But he was afraid of the world. Having seen people die like flies at

Auschwitz, he wasn't happy anymore. He was not a Jew, not a prisoner himself. But he was very sensitive. After he returned home, he took to drinking. I went to him—he lived not far from Turin—to persuade him to stop drinking. He had abandoned his job as a bricklayer and used to buy and sell scrap iron because he was an alcoholic. He drank every lira he earned. I asked him why, and he told me outspokenly: I don't like to live any more. I am fed up with life . . . After seeing this menace of the atom bomb . . . I think I have seen everything . . . He had understood many things, but he did not even realize where he had been: Instead of *Auschwitz*, he used to say *Au-Schwiss*, like Switzerland. He was confused in his geography. He couldn't follow a timetable. He would get drunk and sleep in the snow, completely drunk with wine. He got tuberculosis. I sent him to be cured in the hospital. But they did not give him wine, so he escaped. He died of tuberculosis and of alcohol. Yes. It was really suicide.

INTERVIEWER

When you worked in a paint factory, you had a superior who appreciated your literary ambitions.

LEVI

He was a very clever, an intelligent man but at the same time there was a tacit understanding between us: You, Primo Levi, are supposed to be a writer in your spare time but not in the factory. He was proud to have a writer as a chemical director, but he never spoke about that, though I knew he did boast to other people. Afterwards, when I got a pension, we became friends. We invited each other to lunch.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't do that before?

LEVI

No. I wasn't that rich to be able to invite him to a fashionable restaurant. It would have been a transgression. He knew how much I earned. And I didn't earn anything by writing at that time. I lived out of my salary.

INTERVIEWER

You couldn't invite him to your home for dinner?

LEVI

He never came here. Sometimes I went to his house when there was a party, but the revenue difference was so high—he was a millionaire and I was his dependent. So it was a very sharp division. Now it is not like this anymore.

INTERVIEWER

Heinrich Böll has been quoted as saying that one of the reasons the Germans allowed the Holocaust to take place was that they were too law-abiding; they listened to the law. One of the things you say about the Italians is that they are not law-abiding.

LEVI

Yes. That's the main difference between the Italian Fascism and the German kind, the Nazis. We used to say that Fascism is a tyranny made milder on account of our general disregard of the laws. And it was like this. Many, many Italian Jews were rescued on account of that. When laws are bad, disregarding laws is a good thing. Generally speaking, there is no xenophobia in Italy. Having seen something of the world, in Europe and elsewhere, I'm not unhappy being Italian. Of course, I know our defects very well. We have never been able to express a political class worthy of the name. Our government is weak, not solid; we have corruption. In my opinion, our most serious diseases are the schools and the health policy, which is terrible. The teaching class is made of men and women in their forties who took part the upheaval of 1968, and many of them didn't study at all, didn't specialize in anything. How can you teach without having been taught? They refused culture for activism, adventure, quarrels, politics, and so on. Now, they are a majority of the teaching class. Their pupils resent it. Their textbooks are terrible.

INTERVIEWER

I notice in your work, and even as we talk, that in spite of the things that have happened to you, you show no animosity, no hatred.

LEVI

It's a question of natural hormones. In situations where I should get angry, with my children, for instance, when they were young and it would have been better to have a fit of anger to impress them, well, I was never able to. It's not a virtue; it's a defect. I have many times been praised for my lack of animosity towards the Germans. It's not a philosophical virtue. It's a habit of having my second reactions before the first. So before heating myself to a fit of anger, I begin reasoning. And

generally the reason prevails. That doesn't mean I'm prepared to forgive the Germans—I'm not. And I would prefer—although I am Italian—the law to prevail over personal resentment. I was happy when Eichmann was captured and brought before a tribunal and executed—although I am opposed to the death penalty. In this case it was all right. I had no doubt about that. But if I told you I hated Eichmann, I would be lying. My first reaction was to try to understand him. Two months ago I was asked by my publisher to write the preface to a book by Rudolf Höss. Do you know him? The commander of Auschwitz. It is a first-class book in my opinion. I wrote more or less like this: Generally, when a writer is asked for the preface of a book it is because he loves this book, because he thinks this book is beautiful. Well, dear reader, this book is not beautiful. I don't love it; I hate it. But it is very important because it teaches you how a normal man can be distorted by a regime into becoming a murderer of millions. Höss had in fact a difficult youth . . . put to fighting the fedayeen in Iraq during the First World War. Anyway, he was not made out of other stuff than you and me. The human stuff he had. He was not born a criminal. He was not a freak. He was of standard human matter. But entering into this channel of nationalism and after that of Nazi education, his training made him into a *Jasager*—the one who always says Yes. Law-abiding. Böll was right, Höss was the typical German. He didn't mind in that epoch if the law coincided with the words of Hitler and Himmler. He said quite sincerely that it would have been impossible for him and his fellow Germans to disregard an order by Himmler. It was not to be thought of. They were trained to follow punctually every kind of order—not to judge the content of the order. Just to obey.

INTERVIEWER

Matter is honest and irreproachable. Spirit, since to understand is irrelevant, can bring destruction and deceit. That's why I think you say Mendeleyev's periodic table becomes poetry.

LEVI

It's a joke in fact. Have you ever seen the periodic table?

INTERVIEWER

I've seen it in chemistry classes.

LEVI

It reads like a poem because you have lines, every one ending with a kind of element, like a rhyme. It's a very stretched simile. It is admitted in the text, told as

a paradox to Sandro: “Look, it’s like a poem. As you have rhymes, you have rhymes here too.” But, of course, there is something hidden behind this paradox. In fact, I think there is something really poetic about science and chemistry in understanding matter. In my opinion, Galileo was one of the most important writers in Italy, although he is not considered as such; his texts, which I have, are wonderful for precision and concision. And he had something to say. In my opinion, for a writer having something to say is very important. If a writer is convinced that he is honest, has something fundamental to say, then it is very difficult for him to be a bad writer. He is obliged to carry, to convey his ideas in a clear way. On the other hand, if a writer hasn’t anything to tell, even if he possesses the tools of writing, he’s second-rate.

INTERVIEWER

The Periodic Table has got a quality to it that shows that if you had not been a prisoner at Auschwitz you would still have been a writer.

LEVI

The question I am most often asked: if you hadn’t been an inmate, what would you have become? I am not able to reply. I am so ingrained, so intertwined with my condition of a chemist and of an Auschwitz inmate that I can’t distinguish anymore my other personality from that one. In fact, when at the *liceo*—the *liceo* is the high school, I was very weak in Italian. They taught me to imitate the top writers, to imitate Dante. I didn’t feel like this. I didn’t feel like imitating anybody. But I did imitate many of them unconsciously. I resented being invited to model myself on these writers. And so I was a very poor student in Italian, in fact I almost flunked. I was in despair. The top mark is ten; my mark was three. Three of us had threes and two of us are now writers. The second one is Fernanda Pivano, a friend of Pavese and Hemingway. She is a critic of American literature. Well, two out of three became writers. Although I was suspicious toward literature, I have always been fascinated by the history of languages. As a child, at eleven, I asked my father to give me a book on etymologies. And I kept it as a treasure. Well, I do remember that when in concentration camp, although as you know, the conditions were of hunger, cold, and so on, I was fascinated by the language, and by the similarity between German and English. In the few hours of respite, I pondered the similarities and dissimilarities. Why German had developed such a complicated grammar and English such a simplified one. I never studied systematically languages—theory.

INTERVIEWER

You had contact with Greek Jews?

LEVI

Yes, we managed to understand each other because they spoke Ladino and I spoke Italian. They were very hard-boiled because there were very few survivors of the deportation from Salonika, which took place two years before. The survivors were sly. They were without scruples. To be a survivor it's useful not to be too kind, too mild. They weren't mild at all. They were cooks or woodworkers. So, not very reliable people, but we had something in common. Not being able to speak Yiddish. So there was a trace of solidarity among us. Have you read my book *The Reawakening*? You remember Mordo Nahum? I had mixed feelings toward him. I admired him as a man fit for every situation. But of course he was very cruel to me. He despised me because I was not able to manage. I had no shoes. He told me, Remember, when there is war, the first thing is shoes, and second is eating. Because if you have shoes, then you can run and steal. But you must have shoes. Yes, I told him, well you are right, but there is not war any more. And he told me, *Guerra es siempre*. There is always war.