
Roberta S. Kremer, ed. *Memory and Mastery. Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001. 249p.

Ilona Klein
Brigham Young University

Primo Levi (1919-1987) is a well-known Italian contemporary writer whose works by now have been widely translated in almost all of the Western European languages with great editorial and critical success. Levi held a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Turin (*Summa cum Laude*, 1941). Levi, a secular Jew from Turin, was a concentration camp survivor who became, upon returning to Italy after his Auschwitz imprisonment at the age of 24, a successful chemist, a paint factory manager, a poet, a science fiction writer, an essayist, and a prolific witness to one of the most atrocious historical events of the 20th century. This volume edited by Roberta Kremer successfully emphasizes all these multi-faceted aspects of Levi as a writer, without attempting to corner him into the sole role of Shoah (Holocaust) survivor.

The authors of the essays collected in *Memory and Mastery. Primo Levi as Writer and Witness* comprise the finest contemporary world specialists on Primo Levi. The broad topics treated in the articles span from “Levi as a Writer, Levi as a Witness” (part I), to “Levi and Science” (part II), from “Levi’s Poetry” (part III), to “Levi and Language” (part IV), and finally “Levi’s Legacy” (part V). The volume ends with an ample bibliography of useful and important references.

The late Gian Paolo Biasin, Yaffa Eliach, and Risa Sodi wrote the studies that form the first part. All essays emphasize Levi’s role as a humanist: Biasin brilliantly analyzes Levi’s journey back home after the liberation, and compares it to a Homeric moment in which exile in the concentration camp and the great nostalgia for the return become integral milestone tassels of his humanistic profile. Eliach considers Levi’s various temporal frames against his spatial parameters which spanned from Poland to Italy. Sodi examines with great exactitude a number of stylistic and linguistic important peculiarities of Levi’s works, to draw conclusions about Levi’s use of language and the readers’ reception of his prose.

The essays in the second part of the volume are written by Nancy Harrowitz and Mirna Cicioni—they both treat Levi’s connection to science. More specifically, they both successfully demystify the purported gap between science and literature. Among other points, Harrowitz acutely highlights some commonalities between Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Levi’s more pessimistic science fiction short stories. Cicioni looks at Levi’s works and skillfully uncovers a Midrashic undertone.

The notable third part of the book treats Levi's poetry. Nicholas Patruno is, in fact, one of a small handful of Levi scholars to analyze this seminal genre of his writings, and Patruno's article is broad and thoughtful. The two essays written by Brian Cliff, and by Patricia Sayre and Linnea Vacca (part IV) treat in precise detail the importance of language in Primo Levi. Cliff's study analyses not only the violent use of language in the camps, but, just as importantly, how violence was committed against the ordinary language of civilians once deported to the camps, how the civilian language was violated in the camps, and how a new semantic universe was born of the German lagers. This theme remains central also to the study by Sayre and Vacca who carefully look at pre- and post-Auschwitz idioms in Levi's autobiographical narratives.

The last part of the volume is devoted to visual representations of Primo Levi in various artists. Here, Stephen Feinstein meticulously describes and assesses works by the contemporary artists Larry Rivers, Joyce Lyon, Mindy Weisel, Pearl Hirschfield, Susan Erony, Ted Hirsch, and Jack Wolsky. Feinstein correctly concludes that Primo Levi's works have been seminal for the intellectual make up of these artists and for their visual renditions of the Shoah. The penultimate article in the book is by Franca Molino Signorini who treats in depth Levi's role as a witness, and as a repository of historical, collective, and individual memory. Lawrence Langer's excellent essay "Legacy in Grey" concludes the studies. Readers probably will be familiar with his article, as it has already appeared as a chapter in Lawrence Langer's *Preeempting the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale, 1998: 23-42). Langer states that Levi's legacy is one of insightful questioning, forming a complex landscape in shades of grey with which we, his readers, are left.

Curiously enough, at least as far as this reviewer can discern, there is no mention in *Memory and Mastery* that the studies here published (with the exception of the article by historian Yaffa Eliach) originate from papers given at the successful and well-attended international conference *Primo Levi: Writer, Witness, and Holocaust Educator* held in 1995 at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, BC, and made possible through the support of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Center in partnership with the Continuing Studies UBC. Notwithstanding a couple of typos ("Optomist" 217; "Stephano" 123), this is an important volume which will well serve those interested in reading about Primo Levi. All the essays are sensible, complete, thorough, clear, and complementary to one another. After reading this book, it becomes clear why Primo Levi is regarded as one of Italy's most beloved writers, and why, still today—15 years after his death—Levi's books still frequently appear on the Italian best-selling lists. ✨