

## Book Reviews

**Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections**, by Jonathan Druker, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 173 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN-978-1-4039-8433-3

*Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz* addresses a disquieting and intractable issue: the Holocaust has shown the destructive potential of the Enlightenment and humanism, which have consequently become unavailable as cultural options. This, at least, is how Jonathan Druker reads Adorno's dictum, 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Deriving his critique of Western civilization from twentieth-century Nietzscheans, Druker contends that, if we are to make sense of Levi's writings, we must examine his 'unexamined humanism' (p. 122) from a posthumanist perspective. In other words, we need to read Levi against himself. Druker's aim is then to show how 'in trying to represent and interpret Auschwitz, Levi's texts not only recuperate Enlightenment values, but also undermine them' (p. 6).

Druker deconstructs a series of themes drawn from the traditional humanist agenda – 'Man', 'culture', 'language', 'ethics', 'history', 'science', 'labour' – and applies these to his counter-reading of Levi's texts. More than a half of the book (chapters 1–4) is devoted to *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man/Survival in Auschwitz*) – and rightly so, for this is undoubtedly Levi's masterpiece. According to Druker, at the centre of Levi's memoir lies the crisis of a belief system. The experience of the concentration camp makes Levi lose his faith in secular humanism. 'Theodicy', i.e. any master-narrative of human progress and salvation, fails to account for the stories of those who did not survive. The subject of secular theodicy, 'the universal human (Man)', dies together with the 'drowned', as Levi calls them (chapter 1). In Druker's view, Western culture as a whole is responsible for Auschwitz, as his interpretation of Levi's recollection of Dante's Canto of Ulysses attempts to demonstrate (chapter 2). Concerning language (chapter 3), Druker thinks that Levi's use of the personal pronoun 'we' embodies a Hegelian–Darwinian perspective, which subsumes individual stories under a universal scientific explanation and erases the presence of what Lyotard called the 'differend'. However, the mood of *Se questo è un uomo* is that of 'survivor guilt' (p. 72). Embedded within the survivor's narrative, the silent presence of 'the drowned' calls for an answer, which the narrator's voice cannot give. Nonetheless, argues Druker, the 'faces' of those who die in the camps compel Levi to write 'for-the-other' (p. 79). In writing 'for-the-other', Levi acknowledges his absolute responsibility for the silenced victims of history and approaches Levinas' ethics (chapter 4).

The remaining chapters each deal with a different text. *La Tregua* (*The Truce*) is the sequel to *Se questo è un uomo*, where Levi recalls the liberation of Auschwitz and his long journey home through Eastern Europe. In Druker's interpretation, the tale is one of latency. The traumatic experience of the survivor painfully re-emerges only when Levi is on his way back to Italy. European cities release the traumatic memories: both Turin and Auschwitz lie at the heart of European history (chapter 5). From his reading of Foucault, Druker draws the conclusion that the origins of the Holocaust can be traced back to the discourse of science (chapter 6), which turns the human into both the subject and object of knowledge/power. Druker believes that this genealogy of the scientific/humanist subject renders possible a more profound reading of Levi's *The Periodic Table*. Indeed, Druker argues that Levi inadvertently confirms Foucault's thesis in this collection

of autobiographical essays drawn from Levi's career as a chemist. In his final chapter, Druker focuses on *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi's last collection of essays completed shortly before his death in 1987 and published posthumously. Here, according to Druker, the meaning of labour has been reshaped by the experience of slave labour in concentration camps; Levi had begun to deconstruct the humanist and Enlightenment ideals that he had formerly endorsed.

Sometimes Druker's application of posthumanist theories seems unwarranted. Early on, for example, Druker writes that 'Horkheimer and Adorno compel us to ask whether culture, as Levi deploys it, contains forgotten brutality, and whether, in the form of Dante's terza rima, it nurtured the fascist ideologies that produced Auschwitz' (p. 36). Later, Druker 'deploys Lyotard's concept, "the differend"', to explore the unexpected intersection in *Survival in Auschwitz* between Primo Levi's humanism and Hegelian modes of discourse like those of Nazism and Italian Fascism' (p. 55). At other times, Druker seems more interested in theorising humanism, rather than carefully examining Levi's narratives. For instance, Druker reminds us that Ulysses appears in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as the prototype of the 'fascist hero', to demonstrate that Levi's identification with Dante and Ulysses is due to unreflected humanism (pp. 35–54). Two objections can be raised against this reading. First, literary characters do not simultaneously bear all the meanings that different authors have assigned to them; second, the Canto of Ulysses, as it is embedded in Levi's text, reveals a narrative choice that overturns naive humanism. In *Se questo è un uomo*, neither Dante nor Ulysses functions as a token of the redemptive power of literature. On the contrary, these figures represent only the emergence of childish memories in a moment of relief during another dreadful and exhausting day in the camp. Here, Levi, the character, is simply trying to remember some scattered verses that he had learnt by heart in school – and this in the company of one of the most ruthless characters of the memoir, who will certainly not become a better man after hearing these broken lines. Moreover, Levi's recollection of the Canto of Ulysses in *Se questo è un uomo* ends with the last verses of *Inferno* XXVI, when Ulysses' ship sinks and he drowns. If Levi the narrator is drawing a parallel between himself as a character and Dante's Ulysses, he is suggesting that both are 'drowned': as Ulysses was physically and spiritually drowned at the end of his adventure by God, so Levi is morally drowned through being forced to survive in a concentration camp. Far from taking a naive humanist stance, Levi shows us here that literature has no immunising and protective power against 'moral luck', i.e. he demonstrates the individual's lack of control over the moral significance of one's own actions, conducts, feelings, thoughts, and ultimately one's own life.

Druker is right to dismiss the humanist reading of Levi's literary works. However, it is not necessary to apply a deconstructive reading strategy, as Druker does, in order to do so. We do not need to read Levi 'against the grain' – we just need to read his narratives more carefully. Paraphrasing Descombes, we might say that the writer Primo Levi, if we take the narrative dimension of his literary texts seriously, is far more interesting than Primo Levi the public intellectual.

## References

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