



Massimo Giuliani. *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003. ix + 111 pp. \$69.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-0663-1.



Reviewed by Shalom Freedman

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Primo Levi was one of the most remarkable witnesses of the Holocaust (Shoah) and its aftermath. The objectivity and restraint, coupled with great humanity and insight, with which Levi describes his experience in Auschwitz made him one of the twentieth century's most heroic and memorable writers. Through twelve books including the much praised masterwork, *Survival in Auschwitz*, the autobiographical, *The Periodic Table*, and in his final work prior to his tragic death, *The Drowned and the Saved*, he painstakingly and accurately observed and interpreted mankind in extreme situation.

Massimo Giuliani who is Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Trent, Italy and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at George Mason University in Virginia, has authored a small essay in which he attempts to define the essence of Primo Levi's thought. This essay written with great sympathy shows how Levi succeeded in every genre he wrote, historical narration, poetry, science fiction, newspaper articles, essays in obeying his own imperative "to understand one's own experience in and of the world" (p. 91).

In analyzing Levi's method in writing and thought Giuliani makes use of two novel conceptions inherent in Levi's work; the conception of the writer as hybrid creature, centaur, and the concept of a process of salvation through action which he coining a new term calls "salvation." For Giuliani, Levi combines in a remarkable way opposing but not contradictory qualities, and thus has a way of understanding the world that is both surprisingly original and powerfully moving. The fundamental metaphor he uses is one Levi himself frequently employed that of that hybrid creature, the centaur. He asks:

Why did Primo Levi feel the need for such a self-definition? Why precisely this mythological figure? In 1982, Levi wrote 'I believe that I have a deeply hybrid fate, marked by a split. I am Italian *but Jew*. Chemist *but* writer. Deportee *but* not available to complain.' Levi's *but* is in reality an *and*. We can add to the list a scientist and humanist; a technician and a poet; a victim and an intelligent observer of the Shoah; a witness, against his will, of a unique historical event and a writer of science fiction (p. 28).

Giuliani shows that these seemingly contradictory aspects of Levi's identity enable him to form a more complex composite identity. For instance he contends that as witness Levi is objective, almost detached out of a need to be a faithful preserver of his own memory and the reality he was part of. But as a writer Levi is interested in "communication and pleasure" and so uses devices of subjectivity and fantasy. He draws upon another set of contrasts between the witness--writer and the chemist. Here he takes up Levi's well-known comparison of the chemist to a hunter.

"A chemist is a hunter looking for the hidden structure of concrete reality. Being a chemist requires the ability to search and detect, distinguish and measure and weigh, to examine elements and calculate their reaction when merged or separated, warmed or cooled. Such an ability requires training, patience emotional self- control and intellectual honesty and rigor" (p. 29). By applying this "chemical rigor" to his inborn "literary" drive of writing--especially his writing on Auschwitz--Levi commingles two worlds that are usually separated and unrelated, allowing each the extraordinary opportunity to influence the other. Giuliani explains that making this kind of order for Levi has an important social purpose, for it is a way of *tikkun olam* (rectification of the world). It is a way of bringing some justice into the terrible chaos, and to find in it some seed of human dignity and rationality.

The form of action which Levi undertakes to bring about this transformation is what Giuliani calls "salvation." Writing about Levi's thought in regard to the tormenting question of why the few who emerged from the Holocaust alive did so, Giuliani notes the three negative ways through which people were saved., prevarication,(egoism and violence) the drive of the wolf (skill, cunning)and through good luck. Overlapping these three negative ways of salvation are the two positive ways of understanding and laughter, and a

third the way of labor/creativity. This gives us a geometric figure with six corners, that can be named "the star of salvation. Salvation is a mix, an attempt at salvation through human means alone, a human effort without any certainty of success" (p. 59). But this salvation according to Giuliani is not seen by Levi as a form of redemption, nor even as a form of ultimate explanation, for there is no knowing of the why of survival. Moreover, the survivors are understood too as victims since part of their legacy is what Bruno Bettelheim himself a survivor and suicide, called "survivor guilt." Being saved does not thus mean being redeemed (and has no religious significance for Levi who held his Jewish identity dear, but not in religious terms) but rather means being freed and surviving.

Whether Levi himself was ever completely free is of course another question. And this question was raised most painfully with the last act of his life, his falling to his death in the family building he had lived in for most of his life, a possible suicide.

What this profound little work however makes abundantly clear is that the literary testament and example of witnessing he left behind should continue to interest and edify mankind for many generations to come.

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