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978-0-521-84357-7 - The Cambridge to Primo Levi
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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
PRIMO LEVI

Primo Levi (1919–87) was the author of a rich body of work, including memoirs and reflections on the Holocaust, poetry, science-fiction, historical fiction and essays. His lucid and direct accounts of his time at Auschwitz, begun immediately after liberation in 1945 and sustained until weeks before his suicide in 1987, have made him one of the most admired of all Holocaust writer-survivors and one of the best guides we have for the interrogation of that horrific event. But there is also more to Levi than the voice of the witness. He has increasingly come to be recognized as one of the major literary voices of the twentieth century. This *Companion* brings together leading specialists on Levi and scholars in the fields of Holocaust studies, Italian literature and language, and literature and science, to offer a stimulating introduction to all aspects of the work of this extraordinary writer.

ROBERT S. C. GORDON is Reader in Modern Italian Culture at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521604611

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

The Cambridge companion to Primo Levi / edited by Robert S. C. Gordon.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-84357-7 (hardback: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-521-84357-X (hardback: alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-60461-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-521-60461-3 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Levi, Primo – Criticism and interpretation. I. Gordon, Robert S. C.
 (Robert Samuel Clive), 1966– II. Title.

PQ4872.E8Z572 2007

853³.914-dc22 2007002293

ISBN 978-0-521-84357-7 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-60461-1 paperback

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 the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or
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Levi's Ordinary Virtues. From Testimony to Ethics (2001) and (co-edited with Marco Belpoliti) *Voice of Memory. Interviews, 1961–1987* (2001).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editor would like to thank the following for their help and support in the preparation of this volume: all the contributors; Linda Bree, Maartje Scheltens and others at Cambridge University Press; Zyg Baranski; Martin McLaughlin; the National Humanities Center, USA (John E. Sawyer Fellowship and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation); Gonville and Caius College and the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages at Cambridge University; Einaudi publishers; and the Primo Levi estate.

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Levi's Works

Full publication details of all Levi's books, volumes of interviews, and their English translations, are to be found in the first section of the 'Guide to further reading' (see pp. 189–92).

Quotations

Quotations from Levi's work are given in English, except where the original Italian is necessary for the analysis. Published English translations have been used wherever possible and unless otherwise indicated.

Sources

Quotations from Levi's works are sourced to both published English translations, by title and page number of first UK editions (where available and unless otherwise stated), and to the Italian original, as found (unless otherwise stated) in Primo Levi, *Opere*, vols. I–II, edited by Marco Belpoliti, Turin, Einaudi, 1997, abbreviated as OI and OII (e.g. *If This is a Man*, p. 3; OI, 7). References to book-length interviews or collections of interviews with Levi are made to English editions only (where available), using the title and page number (e.g. *Voice of Memory*, p. 71).

Titles

Titles of Levi's books are given in both English and Italian at their first appearance in each chapter, with year of first Italian publication, and then in English only thereafter. Published English titles are used wherever available (in italics; e.g. *If This is a Man*). On occasion, where a book has been only partially translated or translated with a different title, a literal translation

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of the title is used instead or also (in inverted commas; e.g. ‘Formal Defect’). UK titles have been preferred to US titles (i.e. *If This is a Man*, not *Survival in Auschwitz*, for *Se questo è un uomo*; *The Truce*, not *The Reawakening*, for *La tregua*; *The Wrench*, not *The Monkey Wrench*, for *La chiave a stella*).

Titles of shorter pieces (chapters, poems, stories, essays), both within Levi’s books and uncollected, are also given in English and Italian at first appearance in each chapter, where appropriate, and then in English only thereafter (in inverted commas; e.g. ‘The Canto of Ulysses’). Page numbers are not included for titles of short pieces, but the volume they appear in is included wherever this may not otherwise be clear from the context. Again, published English titles are used wherever available. There are, however, a relatively large number of untranslated pieces and omissions from translations of Levi’s collections, creating no little trouble for anyone trying to read Levi across the two languages (see ‘Guide to further reading’, pp. 192–4 below): in these cases, literal translations of titles are provided.

Additional note

As this book was going to press, the publication in English of a new collection of seventeen previously untranslated stories by Levi was announced for April 2007: Primo Levi, *A Tranquil Star*, translated by Ann Goldstein and Alessandra Bastagli, London, Penguin, 2007. Several of the stories labelled as untranslated in this book will be found in this new collection.

CHRONOLOGY

For those interested in investigating Levi’s life in detail, there are two fascinating (and strikingly different) biographies in English, both of which are worth consulting: Carole Angier, *The Double Bond. Primo Levi, A Biography*, London, Viking, 2002, and Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi. A Life*, London, Hutchinson, 2002.

- 1919 Primo Levi was born in Turin on 31 July 1919, into a family that was part of the city’s small, educated and largely integrated Jewish community.
- 1934–7 Levi attended the Liceo Massimo d’Azeglio, a school once (but by the mid-1930s no longer) renowned as a seedbed of liberal anti-Fascist views. Following the tastes of his father Cesare – an electrical engineer who had been close to the dominant positivist circles of the city’s intelligentsia – Primo developed a voracious, eclectic appetite for reading but rejected the classical humanist education on offer in the *liceo*.
- 1937–41 He opted to read chemistry at Turin University. Despite the obstacles set in his path by Mussolini’s draconian 1938 anti-semitic Race Laws, and the subsequent outbreak of war, he managed to graduate in 1941.
- 1942–3 Following a period of work in Milan, where he lived through the fall of Fascism and Italy’s Armistice with the Allies in the second half of 1943, Levi joined the armed partisan Resistance against the rump Fascists and Nazi occupiers of northern Italy; but he was betrayed and captured almost immediately. Preferring to declare himself a Jew rather than risk execution as a partisan, he was imprisoned at the concentration camp at Fossoli in central Italy.

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- 1944–5 In February 1944, he was deported from Fossoli to Auschwitz on a cattle-train with 650 others. Only a handful would ever return. On arrival in Auschwitz, he was assigned to the industrial slave labour camp at Auschwitz-III (Monowitz), which was run by the Nazis in collaboration with the IG Farben corporation. He remained a prisoner there until liberation by the Red Army in January 1945. He reached Turin again in October 1945 after a long, halting journey home described in *The Truce* (*La tregua*, 1963).
- 1945–7 On his return, he told and wrote down stories and poems about his time in Auschwitz, and also wrote, with doctor and fellow deportee Leonardo De Benedetti, a medical report on camp conditions for a general medical journal. He also met Lucia Morpurgo, whom he would marry in 1947 (*Auschwitz Report*). His stories came together in book form as *If This is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*) in 1947, published by a small and short-lived house called De Silva, having been rejected by Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese at the most vibrant and important of Turin's publishers, Einaudi. The book was praised by a small number of reviewers (including the young Italo Calvino) and noticed within the higher cultural milieu of Turin, but had little wider impact.
- 1948–55 Levi started a career as an industrial chemist and manager, which would last for thirty years. He stopped publishing with regularity, although he continued to think up and sketch out stories and poems throughout these years of apparent silence. He also did some work as a scientific translator.
- 1955–8 In 1955, with interest in the Holocaust growing, Einaudi agreed to republish *If This is a Man* in a slightly revised edition, although the book only appeared in 1958 after several delays and difficulties within Einaudi. The book was a success, and Levi was encouraged to write more.
- 1963–71 Levi published his second book, *The Truce*, in 1963, which won a literary prize and launched Levi into the role of writer *per se* perhaps for the first time. His public profile began to grow in the early 1960s also, as he was interviewed, appeared on television, began to visit schools (where his works, starting with *The Truce*, were beginning to be adopted as classroom texts) and give lectures, as well as write occasional newspaper pieces. His first book was adapted as a radio drama in Canada

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and staged in Italy, in a another version, in 1966. In 1966 and 1971 respectively, he published two collections of science-fantasy stories, *Storie naturali* ('Natural Histories'; selections in *The Sixth Day*) (initially under a thinly veiled pseudonym, Damiano Malabaila, to avoid causing offence to readers of his Holocaust memoirs) and *Vizio di forma* ('Formal Defect'; selections in *The Sixth Day*). Both contained stories written largely for amusement over a period of years, some dating back to those same months in 1946 when he was writing his first deportation stories. Their witty but often dark inventions have grown in stature over the years as both their subterranean links with the Holocaust work and their own literary qualities have become more evident. In particular, they are a focal point for Levi's important role as a bridge between 'the two cultures' of science and literature in Italy.

- 1975–8 In 1975, he published another work combining literature with science: *The Periodic Table (Il sistema periodico)*, an autobiography loosely structured according to chemical elements. Each chapter centres on a real, fictional or metaphorical encounter with an element at a certain time of Levi's life. The book was a marked success. His next book, *The Wrench (La chiave a stella)*, 1978), was, by contrast, very local in its style and theme, although it shared a common aim with *The Periodic Table* as a book of work stories: it consists of tales of a Piedmontese industrial rigger, Liberto Faussone, who, in his odd mixture of local brogue and technical jargon, tells of his epic and intimate struggles with bridges, dams and the other mechanical structures he encounters as he travels the world.

Set in the Soviet city of Togliattigrad, which Levi had visited for work in the early 1970s, *The Wrench* also stands as a farewell meditation on his career as a working, applied scientist: as he was writing it, he was also going into retirement to become a full-time writer.

- 1981–5 Levi's only fully fledged novel, *If Not Now, When? (Se non ora, quando?)*, the story of a Jewish partisan band in World War II, followed in 1982, winning two prestigious prizes, but also some criticism for its 'over-researched' reconstruction of the Ashkenazi Jewish culture and Yiddish language of Eastern Europe. The 1980s saw a rapid crescendo in interviews and

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international acclaim, and Levi also began publishing several volumes of collected and new essays, stories, poems and articles. 1981 saw *Lilith e altri racconti* ('Lilith and Other Stories'; selections in *Moments of Reprieve*), containing essays, camp stories and science-fiction stories, and *The Search for Roots* (*La ricerca delle radici*), a fascinating commented anthology of his favourite or most formative books. In 1983 came his translation of Kafka's *The Trial*, an occasion for an extraordinary and traumatic clash of temperaments. His collected poems appeared in 1984 under the Coleridgean title *Ad ora incerta* ('At an Uncertain Hour'; *Collected Poems*), as did a short book recording a conversation with physicist Tullio Regge. And the following year saw his most characteristically eclectic, 'encyclopedic' (as Calvino put it) and curious volume of essays, *Other People's Trades* (*L'altrui mestiere*). In this same period, his international reputation rocketed, especially after the publication in America of *The Periodic Table* in 1984, hailed by Saul Bellow as 'a necessary book'. He undertook a book tour of America in 1985.

- 1986–7 In the year before his death, more of his articles for *La Stampa* were collected for the 1986 volume *Racconti e saggi* ('Stories and Essays'; selections in *The Mirror Maker*); but, far more significantly, Levi drew together his reflections on Auschwitz in possibly his most striking, profound and also darkest book, *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986). The essays – on memory, communication, the shame of the survivor, Nazi violence, stereotyping, the role of the intellectual and, most tellingly of all, on the 'grey zone' of moral ambiguity between victim and oppressor – revisit many of the moral and historical questions thrown up by the Holocaust itself and by Levi's own first book, *If This is a Man*, and are models in humane, ethical meditation. At the same time, *The Drowned and the Saved* also contains moments of genuine anguish, anger and ambivalence. Indeed, this acceleration in publishing and public profile in the 1980s was by no means without its pressures and anxieties for Levi, who had always been prone to bouts of depression. He was vexed by periods of writer's block, frustrated by the distortions in his reception abroad (especially in America, where he felt he was being lionized, but also absorbed into a model of the European Jewish writer

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which he knew he did not fit, only then to be criticized for not fitting it), and deeply concerned by pernicious negationist and ‘revisionist’ accounts of the Holocaust appearing in France and Germany. He was also, increasingly, disillusioned with speaking to the young: he felt they no longer understood him nor had any notion of why what he had to say was important, let alone of the detailed complexity of what he was trying to describe. Nevertheless, he remained active, talking, writing and planning future writing throughout his final years. He completed several chapters of a book on organic chemistry entitled *Il doppio legame* (‘The Double Bond’) or *Chimica per signore* (‘Chemistry for Ladies’).

- 1987 Levi died by suicide on 11 April 1987, in the apartment block where he had been born and, with the exception of his youthful peregrinations in the mid-1940s between Milan, Auschwitz and back across central Europe, he had lived all his life.

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Primo Levi's works of testimony, his narrative, poetry and essays about his time in Auschwitz are among the most widely read and most widely lauded of all writings on the Holocaust. For many, he has become *the* witness-writer *par excellence*. Perhaps no other survivor chronicled and considered these unbearable events with such accessible economy, elegant wit and humane power, for such a sustained period of time, stretching from his first published work in 1946 to his death in 1987. If he started out as one of many survivors who turned to some form of writing in the immediate aftermath of the outrage they had endured – only to be ignored by most around them – Levi's work came to be recognized in due course as exceptional not only for its power as witness, but also for its potential to go beyond the limits of first-hand chronicle.

Even within the pages of his first book *If This is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947), Levi demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to move from chronicle to wider reflection on his experiences and back again. In this way, he confronted, with directness and persistence, the array of complexities in human cruelty and human suffering which he had learned first-hand in Auschwitz. His readers consistently found in him a sane, if troubled, voice to guide them through the quagmire of moral and historical dilemmas thrown up by the Final Solution. They also found in him a bridge-builder, between the unbearable horrors of the camps and the fragile values of the liberal, modern, secular world which had formed him and which had been pushed so close to annihilation by Fascism and National Socialism. Through him, many readers – Jewish and non-Jewish alike – could see themselves living through and thinking through the events that he described; and they felt a strong personal bond with him as a result.

Furthermore, just as his work moved outwards from testimony or chronicle to embrace large issues thrown up by the Holocaust, so over the course of his *œuvre*, his interests navigated outwards from the Holocaust towards other literary and intellectual spheres, whilst never losing sight of the history that

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had defined him and his age. As his writing branched out in this way, often propelled by ‘mere’ curiosity, serendipity and the pleasures of experimentation, his work developed into one of the most distinctive literary achievements of his time and into a multi-faceted body of reflections on, and storytelling about, some of the most challenging questions facing twentieth-century modernity. These included the risks and rewards of science, the nature of historical responsibility, the limits of the human, the workings of language and the ethics of everyday life. For all of these, the Holocaust loomed as a – often *the* – key test case, but Levi knew that the Holocaust was as much the starting-point as the endpoint to his probing. The different foci and scales of Levi’s concerns and the racking movements between them, both centripetal and centrifugal, are crucial to understanding the energy behind his work; and if the essays in this volume could be said to have a single, collective aim in mind, it is to follow the varied courses of these subtle movements.

Like all the *Cambridge Companions* devoted to a single writer, this volume starts out with a dual task: to introduce the student or general reader to the core components of the author’s work and the principal reasons for their importance in the literature of their time, both locally and on a broader stage; and also to give a sense of what new directions and perspectives research on the author has taken in recent years, challenging or refining commonplace judgements and, on occasion, opening up strikingly original insights into their work. In Levi’s case, a distinction perhaps needs to be drawn between approaches within Italy and in the wider world. Levi was lionized in the English-speaking world from the mid-1980s onwards and remains a constant reference-point not only for experts in the field of Holocaust studies but also for essayists, philosophers, journalists and writers in many other generalist contexts. Bryan Cheyette, in chapter 5 below, examines some of the problems and distortions that have come with these ‘appropriations’. More fruitful in shaping this book, perhaps, were new approaches to Levi emerging in Italy from a cluster of innovative critical analyses produced by a new generation of critics in the mid-1990s,¹ which turned to Levi and to the Holocaust in general as a fixed point in an increasingly disorderly post-Cold-War, post-ideological and, some would even say, post-literary world. Their analyses tended to stretch our sense of him as ‘only’ a writer of testimony, to challenge assumptions that Levi was a writer of calm, rational and astonishingly untroubled sobriety, and to integrate fully into the core of his *œuvre* his many other eclectic intellectual and literary interests, genres, tones and writing styles. This volume seeks to continue that work of integration, not in order to create a second (or third or fourth) ‘Levi’ to set alongside ‘Levi the witness’, but rather to show how all these strands coalesce into a complex, cross-fertilizing and highly articulate voice and body of work.

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With these aims in mind, it was decided not to structure this *Companion* in a systematic and sequential ‘book by book’ format. Considerations of space aside, a more important factor in making this decision was the fact that, for Levi, it was not the ‘book’ that constituted the core unit in which he thought, wrote and conceived of his work as a writer. Rather, the essential source of the intellectual flexibility and articulation of his work, branching into and across different modes of writing and ways of understanding the world, was his investment in short forms of writing. His core units were the short-story, the anecdote, the reflection, the short essay, review or article, the poem. When examined attentively, all his books – with perhaps the sole exception of *If Not Now, When?* (*Se non ora, quando?*, 1982) – turn out to be collations of such short-form primary material. Furthermore, the collations are often contingent; pieces from one book seem easily transferable to other books, as these shift in shape between one edition and the next or in the various posthumous collations of his work, making his *œuvre* feel strangely mobile and not defined by single published volumes. There has also been considerable and sometimes confusing movement, addition and subtraction between Italian editions and English and other foreign-language editions of his work (see ‘Guide to further reading’, section 1C, pp. 192–4 below). More than for many other writers, then, it makes sense to come at Levi through themes, issues and motifs which cut across the boundaries and the covers of separate books and circulate within his intellectual and, occasionally, personal biography.

This volume is divided into four main sections, each covering one overarching area of Levi’s work and formative interests. The first section is entitled ‘Cultures’ and looks at the two principal cultural contexts which shaped Levi and which remained as persistent substrata beneath all his life and work. His roots in the culture and history of Turin and Piedmont are explored by David Ward in chapter 1, tracing the city’s modern cultural history back to its brief time as the centre and capital of the newly unified Italy in the 1860s and forward to the generations before Levi’s, with its fervent philosophical, political and literary activism. Then Nancy Harrowitz in chapter 2 takes on Levi’s identity and upbringing as a secular, but not quite assimilated, Jew, with all the baggage of ambivalence and historical irony this brought with it, before, during and long after his time as a victim of first Fascist and then Nazi antisemitism.

The second section, ‘The Holocaust’, turns to the defining event of Levi’s life, the experience which propelled him into the darkest heart of twentieth-century history and also compelled him to become a writer: his deportation to Auschwitz. Three chapters tackle Levi’s encounter with and responses to the Holocaust. Judith Woolf in chapter 3 follows a path through the network

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of different texts – the stories, poems, novels and essays, from *If This is a Man* to *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986) – through which, for over forty years, Levi developed his voice as a survivor-writer. In chapter 4, Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon show how Levi was able to articulate the Holocaust in original ways by using metaphors and maps of understanding from eclectic areas of intellectual enquiry, such as ethology, molecular science and ethics. And Bryan Cheyette in chapter 5 looks at how Levi has been appropriated, distorted and, at times, reduced as a ‘Holocaust writer’, in Europe, in North America and in the burgeoning academic field of Holocaust studies. In doing so, he makes a powerful case for seeing a more complex, multi-faceted and uncertain Levi in his response to the Holocaust.

The third section, ‘Science’, is made up of two complementary chapters, by Pierpaolo Antonello and Charlotte Ross (chapters 6 and 7), which together paint a wide-ranging picture of Levi’s professional, literary and intellectual engagement with science. Antonello draws principally on Levi’s two works of applied, practical science – *The Periodic Table* (*Il sistema periodico*, 1975) and *The Wrench* (*La chiave a stella*, 1978) – whereas Ross concentrates on his two main collections of science-fiction or ‘*fantascienza*’ stories, *Storie naturali* (‘Natural Histories’, 1966) and *Vizio di forma* (‘Formal Defect’, 1971). Both show Levi grappling with complex (and often very contemporary) issues of the morality and philosophy of science, its limits and its potential and its implications for our understanding of modernity.

Finally, the fourth section of the book, ‘Language and Literature’, is made up of four chapters which position Levi as a writer in various ways. If Levi was a non-conventional writer within the traditional terms of the literary canon of Italy and beyond, he was nevertheless one who was constantly and engagingly fascinated by the workings of language and communication, the movement between languages, the subtleties of tone and voice and the relationship of reader to book, writer to book and books to other books. Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy in chapter 8 bring linguisticians’ eyes to bear on Levi’s fascination with languages, showing how Levi dipped in and out of an extraordinary range of different language systems and idioms, from regional dialects and argots to Italian and a panoply of foreign languages. They further show how this field is linked to his deepest convictions regarding the communication of a message about the Holocaust. Mirna Cicioni, in chapter 9, lays out the subtlety and variety of Levi’s humour, a core feature of his speaking and writing voice, a cultural constant as well as a set of literary devices which give great energy to all his writing. In chapter 10, Zaia Alexander offers three case studies of translation – Levi as translator, Levi translated and Levi using translation in his most powerful testimonial writing – to show how both the practice and the philosophy of translation

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84357-7 - The Cambridge to Primo Levi
Edited by Robert S. C. Gordon
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was fundamental to his work. Finally, in chapter 11, Jonathan Usher probes Levi's extensive engagement with the canon of Italian literature (among other literatures), and the many vital ways in which he practised what we might call 'intertextuality', drawing other books into his own. Usher comments also on the awkward position Levi himself has held within that canon.

The volume is completed by an extensive Guide to further reading, including a comprehensive bibliography of Levi's own writings, in both Italian and English translation, followed by the most important critical work to have appeared on Levi. Finally, for ease of navigation, there is an index of individual works by Levi cited in the book, on pp. 200–2 below, as well as a General Index. The result, it is hoped, is an accessible advertisement for the merits of returning to Levi's work in order to discover there new and vital facets which can only reinforce his status as an essential vademecum – a companion – to twentieth-century history and literature.

NOTE

1. One volume which captures nicely the variety and energy of this wave of work is Marco Belpoliti (ed.), *Primo Levi* (Riga 13), Milan, Marcos y Marcos, 1997.