

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Syllabus

Shedding skins. The Jobian Trials of Primo Levi as Witness and Survivor of Auschwitz - 13899

Last update 28-08-2023

HU Credits: 2

Degree/Cycle: 2nd degree (Master)

Responsible Department: History of Jewish People & Contemporary Jewry

Academic year: 0

Semester: 2nd Semester

Teaching Languages: English

Campus: Mt. Scopus

Course/Module Coordinator: Manuela Consonni

Coordinator Email: manuela.consonni@mail.huji.ac.il

Coordinator Office Hours: by appointment

Teaching Staff:

Prof Manuela Consonni

Course/Module description:

The purpose of this course is to explore neglected aspects of Primo Levi's reflective creativity and thought as a major contributor, not just to the documentation and phenomenology of the Nazi genocide of the Jews, but to the evolution and refinement of modern existentialist humanism. What the course attempts to explore is the way Levi's extensive engagement with his own Jewish cultural and religious identity and with what became for him key texts of world literature were combined with his advanced grasp of scientific method in the understanding of material reality derived from his advanced studies in applied chemistry and the mental discipline required to weld curiosity to objectivity in performing experiments and writing up their results. The conflation of these contrasting sources of understanding of his experiences arguably provided him with a uniquely tempered psychological armour to protect him from brutalization and psychological break-down in the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz, a will to resist which crystallized in his spontaneous sense of mission to survive for the sake of the mute and the dead so as to bear witness of what the millions of Nazism's victims suffered in the deportations and extermination camps. The course will be divided in 3 parts: 1) Job as avatar: innocent suffering and transcendent meaning; 2) Levi's ethical ontology of the witness-survivor; 3) Resisting the Gravitation Field of the Existential Black Hole.

Course/Module aims:

- 1 - Identify and describe the various forms of discourse within the cultural, testimonial and historiographical fields defined on the agenda
- 2 - To learn to apply critical approaches and methods to evaluate the documentation at hand and to apply diversified layers of interpretation.
- 3 - To acquire research skills and tools: libraries, archives and databases.
- 4 - To learn to organize and express arguments and thoughts, in writing and orally.
- 5 - To master the knowledge and skills involved in the historical practice

Learning outcomes - On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

1. To master the wide corpus of sources and studies while gradually acquiring and developing an analytical toolbox for understanding the relationship between a given historical phenomenon and the theoretical issues related to historiographical, cultural, social, and political questions
2. To understand the main arguments of the research and to distinguish the

research process of the different authors, emphasizing different types of writing

3. To develop critical abilities and evaluate the reading materials
4. To establish town original claims based on the reading materials and formulate it properly in academic writing
5. To develop awareness and sensitivity to the fundamental methodological questions that are important in constructing any scientific research
6. To acquire additional and diverse tools for use in further advanced studies in scientific context

Attendance requirements(%):

100

Teaching arrangement and method of instruction: seminar

Course/Module Content:

First Part: Job as avatar: innocent suffering and transcendent meaning

Lessons: first, second, third, fourth

1. Introduction to Primo Levi: *The Periodic Table*, "Argon", pp. 800-815; "Potassium", pp. 842-851, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015. [1975]
2. Marco Belpoliti, "I am a Centaur", *The Voice of Memory. Interviews, 1961-1987*, Robert Gordon and Marco Belpoliti eds., pp. 17-27.
3. Primo Levi with Leonardo Debenedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, edited by Robert S. Gordon, London-New York: Verso, 2005
4. Primo Levi with Edith Bruck, "Jewish, Up to a Point", (1976), *The Voice of Memory. Interviews*, pp. 261-265
5. Primo Levi with Giuseppe Grieco, "God and I", (1983), *The Voice of Memory. Interviews*, pp. 272-278
6. Primo Levi, "La ricerca delle radici ('The Search for Roots', 1981)," *The Voice of Memory. Interviews, 1961-1987*, Robert Gordon and Marco Belpoliti eds., New York: The New Press, 2001, pp. 98-102.
7. *The Book of Job*, King James Edition
8. Primo Levi, " 'The Just Man oppressed by Injustice': *The Book of Job, Bible*", *The Search for Roots*, pp. 11-22
9. Carl Gustav Jung, *Answer's to Job*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010, [1952]
10. Sergio Parussa, "The Modesty of the Starbuck", *Writing as Freedom, Writing as Testimony*, Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2008, pp. 132-165
11. Rachel Falconer, "Selfhood in descent: Primo Levi's *The Search for Roots* and *If This is a Man*", *Immigrants & Minorities*, 21:1-2, 2010, 202-230

Second Part: Levi's ethical ontology of the witness-survivor;

Lessons: fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth

12. Primo Levi, *If this is a man*, The Complete Works of Primo Levi, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015: [1947]: "On the bottom", pp. 46-61; "Initiation", pp. 62-65; "This Side of Good and Evil", pp. 104-113; "The Drowned and the Saved", pp. 114-128; "The Canto of Ulysses", pp. 137-143; "October 1944", pp. 151-159.

13. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York-London; Simon and Schuster, 2017 [1986]: "The Gray Zone", pp. 2450-2477; "Shame", pp. 2478-2492; "Communication", pp. 2493-2506; "Useless Violence", pp. 2507-2524

14. Gabriel Naudé, *Political Considerations upon Refin'd Politicks, and the Master-Strokes of State: As Practis'd by the Ancients and Moderns, Independently published*, 2020 [1639]

15. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man. Moral moral essays and satires*, London, Paris & Melbourne: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1891 [1734].

16. Sigmund Freud, 'The Subordinate Relationships of the Ego', *The Ego and the Id*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1957 [1917]

17. T.S. Elliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935, p. 43

18. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Selection from *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems: The Liquidation of the Self*', *Can one live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Rolf Tiedeman ed., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978.

19. Hannah Arendt, *The Concentration Camps*, *Partisan Review* 15.2, 1948

20. Giorgio Agamben, "Homo Sacer", *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1995], pp. 71-103

21. Giorgio Agamben, "The Witness", pp. 15-40; "The Muselman", pp. 41-86, *The Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, New York: Zone Books, 2002 [1999]

22. Manuela Consonni, "Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, and the Body of the Muselmann", *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 7.2., 2009

23. Uri S. Cohen, "Consider If This Is a Man: Primo Levi and the Figure of Ulysses", *Jewish Social Studies History, Culture, Society* n.s. 18, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 40-69

Third Part: Resisting the Gravitation Field of the Existential Black Hole.

Lessons: tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth

24. Primo Levi, "The Dark Stars" (1976, *Collected Poems*, The Complete Works of Primo Levi, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015.

25. Roger Penrose, "Black Holes", *Scientific American*, Vol. 226, 5, 1972, 38-47

26. Primo Levi, " 'We are alone': Kip. S. Thorne, "The Search for the Black Holes", *Scientific American*, 1974, 32-35 in *The Search for Roots*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2002 [1981], pp. 214-220.

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27. Kip S. Thorne, "Black Holes. The Most Luminous Objects in the Universe, But No Light!"
 28. Italo Calvino, "Afterword: The Four Path of Primo Levi", *The Search for Roots*, pp. 221-224, original *La Repubblica*, 11 June 1981.
 29. Primo Levi, *Other's People Trade*, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015: "About Obscure writing", pp. 2086-2092.
 30. Primo Levi, "Translating Kafka", *Stories and Essays*, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015. [1983], pp. 2370-2373.

Lessons: thirteenth, fourteenth

Students Presentations
Class discussion

Required Reading:

First Part: Job as avatar: innocent suffering and transcendent meaning

Lessons: first, second, third, fourth

1. Introduction to Primo Levi: *The Periodic Table*, "Argon", pp. 800-815; "Potassium", pp. 842-851, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015. [1975]
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Second Part: Levi's ethical ontology of the witness-survivor;

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12. Primo Levi, *If this is a man*, The Complete Works of Primo Levi, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015: [1947]: "On the bottom", pp. 46-61; "Initiation", pp. 62-65; "This Side of Good and Evil", pp. 104-113; "The Drowned and the Saved", pp. 114-128; "The Canto of Ulysses", pp. 137-143; "October 1944", pp. 151-159.
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30. Primo Levi, "Translating Kafka", *Stories and Essays*, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, Ann Goldstein Ed., New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015. [1983], pp. 2370-2373.

Lessons: thirteenth, fourteenth

Students Presentations

Class discussion

Additional Reading Material:

Grading Scheme:

Written / Oral / Practical Exam 80 %

Active Participation / Team Assignment 10 %

Presentation / Poster Presentation / Lecture 10 %

Additional information:
