

EDWARD ROTHSTEIN ON MUSIC

Beethoven at Dusk

"For us musicians," Liszt wrote, Beethoven's "work is like the pillar of cloud and fire which guided the Israelites through the desert. . . . His obscurity and his light trace for us equally the path we have to follow; they are each of them a perpetual commandment, and infallible revelation." Beethoven did not inspire Liszt alone to imagery of religion, prophecy, and revelation. Berlioz invoked the archangel Michael. Schumann envied the man buried in the adjacent grave. Schubert is said to have spoken his name with reverence in a deathbed delirium.

Beethoven was the prophet whose Word reached a century of composers and musicians who stood at the very dawn of our musical tradition, setting forth its themes and preoccupations. Now, in these late days of the 20th century, as the tradition itself enters its twilight years and its claims seem to have lost so much of their force, his shadow still looms larger than ever. It is still Beethoven who defines the culture of the concert hall and the extent of its once thriving ambitions. Orchestras still build their seasons around his symphonies. Pianists still call Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* the Old Testament, Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas the New.

And like the New Testament, Beethoven's music revised and reinterpreted what had preceded him. Our musical universe seems to turn on him. Before Beethoven there was the music of the patron and court and church; after Beethoven there was the music of the bourgeoisie and concert hall. Before Beethoven music showed something—as in a fugue; individual movements were pictorial or emphatic, revealing a single sentiment or passion. After Beethoven came music that told something, presenting the bildungsroman of a theme, a narrative account of transformation. Before Beethoven most music was written to serve a function, to be played at a particular place at a particular time. After Beethoven music acquired a new autonomy: most of it was written to stand on its own, to present its own aesthetic universe along with a claim to higher truth.

These are not casual distinctions. The play of form and manners was exchanged for the drama of inner life. As E.T.A. Hoffman put it in 1810, on hear-

ing the *Fifth Symphony*: "Beethoven's music opens the floodgates of fear, of terror, of horror, of pain, and arouses that yearning for the infinite which is the essence of Romanticism." It was as if the *St. Matthew Passion* had been rewritten as autobiography. Beethoven would not have disagreed. "Oh you men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn, or misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me," Beethoven wrote, finding his approaching deafness terrifying:

You do not know the secret cause which makes me seem that way to you. . . . Ah, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others. . . . Such incidents [of deafness] have driven me almost to despair; a little more. . . . and I would have ended my life—it was only my *art* that held me back.

Art saves. Not even Mozart would have claimed such power for his work.

Of course there are nuances needed in such a schematic picture, but the transformation itself is indisputable. Beethoven was one of the first Romantic composers in a musical tradition that has been fundamentally Romantic in its understanding and expectations of what art can be and do. It is perhaps no accident, then, that during the last two decades Beethoven has become the subject of extraordinary scholarly labors. After more than ten years of work, for example, Douglas Johnson, Alan Tyson, and Robert Winter (in *The Beethoven Sketchbooks*, University of California Press, 611 pp., \$75) pieced together Beethoven's sketchbooks—those scattered pages and fragments that chronicle the origins and development of the compositions in Beethoven's mind.

A decade ago, Maynard Solomon published a remarkable biography, *Beethoven* (Schirmer Books), that has become a definitive interpretation of the life. He analyzed Beethoven's character (at times in excessively orthodox psychoanalytic style). He identified the mysterious "Immortal Beloved," the woman whom Beethoven loved but could not marry, as Antonie Brentano, the wife of a friend; and he chronicled the crises that shaped a life, and in turn, our musical heritage. In April, Harvard University Press will publish Solomon's *Beethoven Essays* (384 pp., \$29.50) in which he fills out the earlier biographical vision with stunning detail

and intelligence. It includes a translation of the diary in which Beethoven noted everything from bon mots derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* to his cries of extraordinary pain ("God, God, my refuge, my rock, O my all, you see my innermost heart. . . . O hear, ever ineffable one, hear me, your unhappy, most unhappy of all mortals"). In addition, the subtle and touching biographical notes of Franz Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries—two of Beethoven's closest friends—have been published in English for the first time in *Beethoven Remembered* (Great Ocean Publishers, 224 pp., \$16.95).

As the life and music are re-examined, it is no surprise that Beethoven is being performed differently as well. The musical movement of "authenticity" has turned now from the vagaries of Baroque music to Beethoven himself, inspiring performances of his music on instruments of his time, accompanied by varied claims of fidelity to metronome markings, pitches, and musical style.

What sort of Beethoven emerges from these biographical texts, from the music, and from the new performances? If Beethoven is so clear a representative of—indeed, inspiration for—our musical tradition, what do these late visions reveal about our most central concerns? We all have heard the familiar tales: Beethoven destroying the dedication of the *Eroica Symphony* to Napoleon after the ruler crowned himself emperor; Beethoven defying the court of the nobility with the proud proclamation, "My nobility is *here and here*," as he pointed to his head and heart; Beethoven's "studied rudeness" and impertinence, his loud laugh, his slovenly dress that late in life caused him to be arrested for vagrancy.

The most common tales emphasize a certain liberal heroism. Here was a genius who took his nobility to be in his art and held it in higher esteem than all the honors and titles of his era. He cared not for the manners and the hypocrisy of his society, but found his calling in the proud declarations of the *Eroica* and the *Fifth Symphony*, and in the spiritual meditations of the late string quartets. "I shall take Fate by the throat," Beethoven wrote, "it shall not subdue me entirely." "I live only in my music," Beethoven wrote to Wegeler, asserting it as his refuge and his strength.

This popular image of the composer has elements of truth in it, and indeed it helped inspire a century of composers entranced by the heroic and the eccentric, who worshipped in avant-garde

spirit the rejection of social hierarchies and eagerly expanded on the pride and autonomy of the artist. The "human" side of the mythic character was just as affecting. It is astonishing to read, in the accounts by contemporaries, of the endearing sweetness that seemed to accompany the bearish and boorish manners, just as in the music the peasant charm of a Scherzo can follow the most sublime of meditations and be followed by the most violent of outbursts.

BUT SOLOMON'S biography and essays reveal that the full truth is far more interesting. To understand Beethoven as a sort of archetypal precursor to modern liberalism, proudly rejecting the notion of nobility, or as a model revolutionary, scorning inherited authority for the sake of freedom, is a distortion. He may have angrily removed Bonaparte from the dedication page of the *Eroica*, but seven years later he considered dedicating the *C-major Mass* to Napoleon, and he dedicated the *Septet* to the Empress Maria Theresa. He may (or more probably may not) have said "My nobility is *here* and *here*," but it was more important for Beethoven to be taken as nobility, the "van" slurring into a "von" without correction.

According to Anton Schindler, Beethoven's amanuensis and censor and tragically crude Boswell (he destroyed half of the conversation books Beethoven used to communicate with friends late in life because of their supposedly unseemly character), the rejection of Beethoven's noble status by the court "drove Beethoven beside himself; for he considered it the grossest insult that he had ever received." In fact Solomon traces a "nobility pretense" throughout Beethoven's life. He doubted, at times, even that he was his father's son and refused, despite his friends' urgings, to correct the rumor that he was the illegitimate son of the King of Prussia.

His real father, an alcoholic tenor who beat him regularly, was never referred to by name in any of Beethoven's surviving documents, and his brother, bearing the same name, was referred to by such phrases as "brain-eater" and "brother Cain." Solomon argues that Beethoven's ambivalence about nobility and authority is connected to the same powerful passions that seemed to rule his family life, that authority and rebellion were not abstract issues, but ones of immediate personal importance. Solomon even suggests a strong psychological component to Beethoven's deafness, a with-

drawal from the world: "Live only in your art," he wrote in his diary, "the only existence for you." Mixed with that acquiescence was also excruciating pain.

BEETHOVEN'S inner demons become all the more disturbing and powerful for being so concretely understood. Moreover, having identified the "Immortal Beloved," Solomon in his essays now gives a full portrait of the young married woman who loved Beethoven in turn. Beethoven chose a sort of dissatisfied isolation, of yearning; but the breakdown of this affair in 1812, Solomon suggests, led to a virtual mental breakdown as well. Beethoven became unkempt, isolated, withdrawn. He wrote to himself, "Thou mayest no longer be a man." And when he finally turned to composition after years of silence, it was to the empty bombast of *Wellington's Victory* and *Der glorreiche Augenblick*.

Solomon's most important achievement is to demonstrate with astonishing clarity the connection between the psychological dramas of the life and the stylistic transformations of the music. What ushered in the late period was a decade-long conflict in which Solomon sees all the themes of Beethoven's life coming into play. After years of litigation, he successfully wrested the guardianship of his nephew from his brother's widow. It was an effort to turn himself into a father, to create a mythic family after all hope of normal family life had been dashed. The adopted nephew was loved, and beaten, treated with immense compassion and heartless scorn, until he attempted the act of suicide so often considered by his uncle.

Solomon sees "many ghosts at the party" of these final years, a decade of fantastical imaginings and harrowing tales. Beethoven was said by one friend to be unable to distinguish the real from the imagined "and yet for all his odd ways, which . . . often bordered on being offensive, there was something so inexpressibly touching and noble in him that one could not but esteem him and feel drawn to him." Out of these conflicts—and a resolution—came the transcendental works of the late period.

In an essay on the *Ninth Symphony*, Solomon argues that the extraordinarily concentrated development of motifs and themes is part of a programmatic quest in the work for a lost paradise. It is made almost explicit in the final movement: one by one the themes of earlier movements are rejected and the bass declares

in a recitative on the verge of speech, "Oh friends, not these sounds," just before the "Ode to Joy" theme makes its sung entrance. That musical quest for the "lovely divine spark" of joy in this symphony is inseparable, Solomon suggests, from the struggles of his life:

The objects of his desire seem to be quite on the surface here: the reconstruction of a splintered family ["Alle menschen"], recapture of an idyllic past ["Elysium"], achievement of a loving brotherhood ["werden Bruder"], attainment of an extended moment of pure joy, and eternal life. . . . The objects of his fears—more obscure, even opaque—are equally at hand . . . the egoistic and authoritarian components of his character, constantly at war with his innate altruism, eruptions of irrationality, countered by a grandiose complexity of aesthetic structure, a variety of terrors, known and unknown.

Solomon's vision of the life has all the energy and reflection of the music itself. Its psychoanalytic texture turning and returning on itself, its implications of a life journey undertaken and resolved, its recurrent themes and motifs transformed and recapitulated, its respect for the reflective powers of the human mind place it in the tradition of Ro-

RELIGION

In American Public Life

A. James Reichley

"I am sure it is possible to praise too highly James Reichley's *Religion in American Public Life*, but it would take some doing. . . . His book should be added to the list of required readings in the continuing, and growing, debates about religion in the politics of a democratic society."—Richard John Neuhaus, *Chronicles*

"'must' reading for anyone interested in present church-state, religion-politics issues"—George W. Hunt, *America*

Cloth \$31.95/Paper \$11.95

at bookstores or from

BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 797-6258

VISA & MasterCard

manticism evident in Beethoven's music.

What is the style and spirit of this mercurial and powerful music? How did it have the impact it has had on our tradition? The main musical form in which Beethoven worked was the sonata—a form that was rigorously defined only after Beethoven's death. That definition is familiar to any music student: the basic thematic material is presented in the "exposition" section of the sonata; that material is then altered, appearing in new aspects or combinations in a "development" section; finally the original material returns in a "recapitulation" with all themes stated in the tonic, or home key. Such a pattern had been in use for decades before Beethoven, but only in the Romantic period did the sonata begin to resemble a literary narrative—an epic tale of a theme whose internal tensions are explored, analyzed, and finally resolved.

BEETHOVEN, as Charles Rosen, Donald Tovey, and earlier scholars have shown, turned the sonata into a style of immense concentration. All thematic material in a movement might be derived from the initial statement of the theme, its elements providing the conflicts that will play themselves out in the work. The development sections typically display intense dissections and repetitions of the components of the theme, each transformation building on the one before until the final restoration comes as the dramatic climax of the work. The listener experiences the process of reinterpretation and transformation. When the theme is heard at the close, it is not heard as it once was. The result is a mode of narrative, the evolutionary journey of departure and return that the literary scholar M.H. Abrams identified as a Romantic archetype; we finally feel the material "achieve a full and triumphant awareness of its identity, of the significance of its past, and of its accomplished destiny."

Beethoven insisted that he was a *Tondichter*—a "tone poet." And like such Romantic word poets as Wordsworth, he took as his subject the workings of his own mind. It's not the themes (which in Beethoven's case are often mere fragments, such as the famous rhythmic gesture of the *Fifth Symphony*) that are his true interest. The *Appassionata Sonata*, for example, has a simple theme that first consists of a tonic arpeggio that sweeps across four octaves of the keyboard, then ends in a peculiar trill that seems to

come from a world apart, bringing the energetic rhythms to a tenuous halt. The two parts of this theme generate nearly every rhythmic, thematic, and harmonic element of the first movement, as if an immense effort were being made to comprehend this difference and to resolve its tensions.

The subject of the work becomes not the theme, but the transformations of the theme. This is something that was not true of Bach, who could write a fugue without radically transforming the original material, and without thinking in a narrative fashion. Even Mozart, before his late works, treated the development of the sonata less urgently. But with much of Beethoven's music, the work becomes a narrative of a journey of understanding, spiralling back to its origins, a return that is also a movement toward greater awareness. That journey is carried out through a mixture of willful analysis and anxious submission; the music is pushed even as it pulls. As the *Sketchbooks* show, this required an excruciating struggle with the musical material. But the immense disparity between the folklike simplicity of the sonatas' themes and the awesome analyses and emotional energy they inspire carries the works toward the sublime.

BEETHOVEN'S music stands midway between Kant and Hegel, accepting the former's notion of a priori principles, while asserting the latter's vision of a continually evolving consciousness. He displays a faith that his own mind is no different from any other—and thus creates a truly public music. But he is also a believer in the egotistical sublime: the ever-changing truth can be found only within, thus linking the life and mind of the composer to the fate of his music. Beethoven's compositions are at once thoroughly objective, even brutal in their clarity, and hauntingly subjective, as if they were the record of a confession.

The challenge for performers has been immense. The greatest Beethoven players—including Schnabel and Furtwängler—have managed to balance these seemingly opposing realms. The music is not sentimentalized but personalized; the structure is revealed without distortion, in all its systematic glory, but it breathes with urgency. (Listen, too, to the newly released recordings of rarely heard Russian pianists on Harmonia Mundi—Maria Yudina playing the *Hammerklavier*, dating from 1952, and Heinrich Neuhaus playing Opus

31, No. 2, dating from 1948.)

The latest musicians to take up the challenge come from an unexpected quarter. Ironically the authenticity movement, which began at the turn of this century as a rejection of Romantic bourgeois mainstream repertoire, has now turned to that tradition's exemplar, Beethoven. But in place of the bourgeois focus on individuality and expression, the authenticity movement has asserted that there exists a true way—an objectively true way—to approach the music, to be found only by studying the circumstances of the music's birth. It's cleverest riposte: the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska telling a colleague, "You play Bach your way, I will play him his way."

THE MOVEMENT'S achievements with Baroque and Renaissance repertoire have been considerable, partly because its view is compelling: the manner and means of performance of this music had been clouded by the regnant musical culture of the 19th century. But once the movement turns to the 19th century, as it is now doing with Beethoven, it confronts an obstacle. That century may have misinterpreted the Baroque, but it did not misinterpret Beethoven; its music was largely shaped by the correct understanding. Liszt and Wagner and Berlioz and Brahms understood precisely how this music worked, how it balanced the objective and the subjective, how it stood at once for universal reason and impassioned individuality.

What, then, needs correction? Of course the forte-pianos of Beethoven and Schubert can help reveal certain aspects of the music blurred by the thrust of the late-19th-century keyboard, and the use of early instruments can clarify contrapuntal lines; but later instruments can also reveal aspects of the music slighted by earlier ones. The *Hammerklavier Sonata* is meant to sound like it exceeds the bounds of any instrument. Can this be as shattering a sensation on a Broadwood pianoforte as on a Steinway? Moreover, Beethoven's musical attention, like Bach's, is less on instrumental color and texture than on structure and argument; later in his life, of course, the instrumental sound was entirely imagined.

When we listen, for example, to the Collegium Aureum's performance of the *Eroica* under the direction of the concertmaster, Franzjosef Maier (ProArte), or to the *Fifth Symphony* played by the Hanover Band (Nimbus), the distortions are

immediately apparent. These symphonies, representative of the most emphatic work of Beethoven in his "heroic" period, are turned on their heads, sounding almost Mozartean. The performers ache for the spirit of the Enlightenment, not for any images of titans wrestling with the gods, or for Hoffman's vision of infinite yearning in the *Fifth*. Phrasing becomes abrupt, detached, breaking the brooding line; the music becomes more nervous, less certain of itself and less imposing. Christopher Hogwood, one of the most well-known figures in the authenticity movement today, attempts something similar in his own cycle of the symphonies with the Academy of Ancient Music (now proceeding on the L'Oiseau-Lyre label). But with Hogwood, the problem is often less conceptual than purely musical. He is fine at moments of driving energy, but elsewhere he can chug along as if he doesn't even believe in what he is doing; the phrasing becomes casual rather than committed, each thought seeming to ignore its predecessor.

ROGER NORRINGTON, who has recorded three of the symphonies so far on Angel, directing the London Classical Players, presents a more challenging interpretation even though he shares his colleagues' point of view. In the notes to his recording of the *Ninth* he writes, "We want to restore this *Ninth Symphony* to the humane quicksilver thought-world of the Classical Period, whose greatest progeny it is."

In quest of this quicksilver world, Norrington insists on an orthodox interpretation of Beethoven's metronome markings for the symphonies (as have such conductors as Benjamin Zander). I have always been a skeptic on this issue, feeling that absolute tempo counts for far less than conception; a great musician can give an Adagio a dancing thrust and make a Scherzo into a suspension of movement. In this case, it means the third movement Adagio moves along at almost twice the pace Georg Solti uses on his new London recording. It turns the recitatives of the final movement into stormy declarations. And it slows down the March in the center of the movement so that it becomes difficult indeed to imagine it setting the words, "run your course joyfully, like a hero off to victory." "Traditional" tempos—which have also varied widely—treat the final movement as an apotheosis, beginning with its literal finding of voice and

ending with a rush of joy. Norrington's tempos, along with his love of musical punctuation, give the music an unsettled quality. We are not sure how much irony or parody there is in that village march at the heart of the movement, or how much empathy there is to be found in the nervous patter of the third movement Adagio.

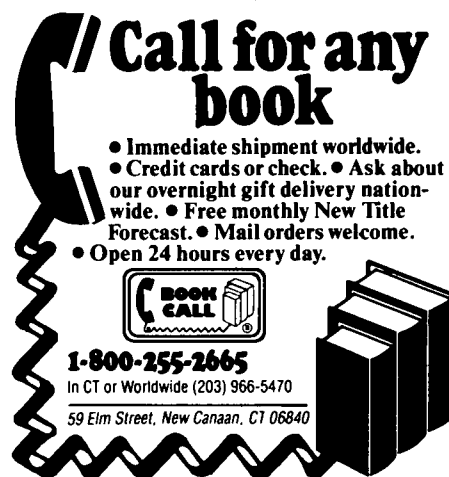
This makes it a very modern performance, detached, disturbing. But there is also something Baroque in its manners. We don't feel the music's forward motion; we attend instead to its mercurial temper, its spasmodic shifts of attitude. This performance of this willful, grandly obsessive symphony would have failed completely, in fact, were it not for the conductor's inherent musicality. It is put to even greater service in the recordings of the *Second* and *Eighth Symphonies*, which would have to be considered important whatever their claims to authenticity. Norrington applies a considered intelligence to every gesture, exposing each phrase to the light. He shares a concern for structure and balance displayed by Frans Brüggen conducting the Orchestra of the 18th Century in Beethoven's *First Symphony* on Philips. Despite the considered energy of these performances, they leave us a Beethoven who is neither Classical nor Romantic, but rather someone very like ourselves, graciously agnostic.

WHAT THAT MEANS for our musical tradition is another matter. For Beethoven and his musical heirs, music was not just a matter of style or tempo but was something more vital. It was bound up with the experience of life itself. Music was not entertainment or mere technical display; it was part of a spiritual quest. Bettina Brentano, one of Beethoven's friends, claims in a remarkable letter to Goethe that Beethoven explained his philosophy of composition to her and urged her to communicate it to him; if her transcription is invented (as is sometimes suspected), it is a perceptive invention indeed:

The more the soul takes sensuous nourishment from music, the more prepared does the mind grow for a happy understanding with it. . . . All true invention is a moral progress. To submit to its inscrutable laws, and by means of these laws to tame and guide one's own mind, so that the manifestations of art may pour out: this is the isolating principle of art. To be dissolved in its manifestations, this is our dedication to the divine which calmly exercises its power

over the raging of the untamed elements and so lends to the imagination its highest effectiveness.

Art is an education of the soul, at once sensuous and moral. Its laws are those of reason, its powers those of divinity, its domain one's own mind. This is surely the vision of the composer of the Opus 111 Sonata, the man who could with rigorous concentration create variations on a theme that would end in suspension of all time and tension, as if the very idea of variation were being dissolved, its fi-



Call for any book

- Immediate shipment worldwide.
- Credit cards or check. • Ask about our overnight gift delivery nationwide.
- Free monthly New Title Forecast. • Mail orders welcome.
- Open 24 hours every day.

BOOK CALL
1-800-255-2665
 In CT or Worldwide (203) 966-5470
 59 Elm Street, New Canaan, CT 06840

Serious Lighting

for Serious Readers

Write or call for FREE Catalog
 Levenger Design Company
 Dept. NR6, 480-C Concord Avenue
 Belmont, MA 02178 (617) 484-0014

"ORTEGA AND the Sandinistas have more friends in Congress than U.S. taxpayers do. The same good folks who helped turn Saigon into Ho Chi Minh City are trying to make Communism permanent in Managua, as it is still known."

For a free copy of the current issue of *National Review* write to Dept. R-51, 150 East 35th Street New York, N.Y. 10016

HOW TO EXECUTE AN AGENCY

by E. Waterhouse Allen

Wicked, informed satire about Bureaucratic Types you should recognize! Distilled from 50 years work in human service agencies. 1st edit., \$3.95.

BARK-BACK
 P.O. Box 235, Glenshaw, PA 15116.

nal phrases containing a musical gesture that Thomas Mann's Kretschmar calls, in *Doctor Faustus*, a "farewell" to sonata form, "the most conciliatory, pathological-reconciling thing in the world."

Thinking about Beethoven in such a manner is somewhat risky; it goes against the contemporary grain. It was more properly the vocation of such earlier figures as Romain Rolland and J.W.N. Sullivan ("Beethoven was a man who experienced all that we can experience, who suffered all that we can suffer. If, at the end, he seems to reach a state 'above

the battle,' we also know that no man ever knew more bitterly what the battle is"). But reason and faith are close to the heart of Beethoven's music. This is what binds him to Berlioz, to Liszt, to Wagner, and later to Mahler and to Schoenberg. Beethoven defined what reason was to accomplish in music and to what transcendent levels it was to lead; and he knew that nothing could be accomplished without struggle. If we can no longer quite believe in the struggle, at least his music reminds us of what it could once achieve.

through time, and the Furies, in whose existence we are forced to believe . . . perpetuate the tormentor's work by denying peace to the tormented."

Tadeusz Borowski, for instance, author of *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, eluded the gas at both Auschwitz and Dachau from 1943 to 1945; in Warsaw, in 1951, not yet 30, three days before the birth of his daughter, he turned on the household gas. Suicide. The poet Paul Celan: a suicide. The Austrian-born philosopher Hans Mayer—another suicide—who later became Jean Améry by scrambling his name into a French anagram, was in Auschwitz together with Levi, though the two never chanced on one another. Before his capture and deportation, Améry had been in the Belgian resistance and was subjected to Gestapo torture. After the war, Améry and Levi corresponded about their experiences. Levi esteemed Améry, appeared to understand him, but evidently could not like him—because, he says, Améry was a man who "traded blows." "A gigantic Polish criminal," Levi recounts, "punches [Améry] in the face over some trifle; he, not because of an animallike reaction but because of a reasoned revolt against the perverted world of the Lager, returns the blow as best he can." "Hurting all over from the blows, I was satisfied with myself," Levi quotes Améry; but for himself, Levi asserts,

"trading punches" is an experience I do not have, as far back as I can go in memory; nor can I say I regret not having it. . . . Go[ing] down onto the battlefield . . . was and is beyond my reach. I admire it, but I must point out that this choice, protracted throughout his post-Auschwitz existence, led [Améry] to such severity and intransigence as to make him incapable of finding joy in life, indeed of living. Those who "trade blows" with the entire world achieve dignity but pay a very high price for it because they are sure to be defeated.

Remarkably, Levi concludes: "Améry's suicide, which took place in Salzburg in 1978 [nine years before Levi's leap into the stairwell], like other suicides allows for a nebula of explanations, but in hindsight, that episode of defying the Pole offers one interpretation of it."

This observation—that the rage of resentment is somehow linked to self-destruction—is, in the perplexing shadow of Levi's own suicide, enigmatic enough and bears returning to. For the moment, it may be useful to consider that Levi's reputation—rather, the grave and noble voice that sounds and sum-

THE SUICIDE NOTE

The Drowned and the Saved by Primo Levi

translated by Raymond Rosenthal

(Summit Books, 203 pp., \$17.95)

Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish chemist from Turin, was liberated from Auschwitz by a Soviet military unit in January 1945, when he was 25, and from that moment of reprieve (*Moments of Reprieve* was one of his titles) until shortly before his death in April 1987, he went on recalling, examining, reasoning, recording—telling the ghastly tale—in book after book. That he saw himself as a possessed scribe of the German hell we know from the epigraph to his final volume, *The Drowned and the Saved*—familiar lines taken from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and newly startling to a merely literary reader, for whom the words of Coleridge's poem have never before rung out with such an anti-metaphorical contemporary demand, or seemed so cruel:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns,
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.

Seized by the survivor's heart, this stanza no longer answers to the status of Lyrical Ballad, and still less to the English department's quintessential Romantic text redolent of the supernatural; it is all deadly self-portrait. In the haven of an Italian spring—40 years after setting down the somber narrative called in Italian "If This Be a Man" and published in English as *Survival in Auschwitz*—Levi hurled himself into the well of a spiral

staircase four stories deep, just outside the door of the flat he was born in, where he had been living with his wife and aged ailing mother. Suicide. The composition of the last Lager manuscript was complete, the heart burned out; there was no more to tell.

There was no more to tell. That, of course, is an assumption nobody can justify, and nobody perhaps ought to dare to make. Suicide is one of the mysteries of the human will, with or without a farewell note to explain it. And it remains to be seen whether *The Drowned and the Saved* is, after all, a sort of suicide note.

Levi, to be sure, is not the first writer of high distinction to survive hell and to suggest, by a self-willed death, that hell in fact did not end when the chimneys closed down, but was simply freshening for a second run—Auschwitz being the first hell, and post-Auschwitz the second; and if "survival" is the thing in question, then it isn't the "survivor" whose powers of continuation are worth marveling at, but hell itself. The victim who has escaped being murdered will sometimes contrive to finish the job, not because he is attached to death—never this—but because death is under the governance of hell, and it is in the nature of hell to go on and on: inescapability is its rule, No Exit its sign. "The injury cannot be healed," Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved*; "it extends

© 1988 The New Republic. All rights reserved. Copyright of New Republic is the property of TNR II, LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.