

“Primo Levi’s Reverse Chronologies”

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This paper focuses on an important feature of Primo Levi’s narrative art: his tendency to describe the “demolition of man,” the central subject of his work, as a story that moves backwards through time. For example, in *If This is a Man* (1947), Levi explores how civilized characters were routinely stripped of their recognizable qualities and transformed into absolute victims deprived of the will to live. In other words, to describe what took place in the camp, Levi imagines the tape of civilization being played backwards. Interestingly, however, Levi’s fascination with reverse chronologies was not limited to his Holocaust works; it was also an important feature of some of his early science fiction stories.

While Levi’s early science fiction stories do not explicitly deal with the Holocaust, a number of them do reckon with the “demolition of man” but in another key. In this paper, I focus specifically on one of Levi’s early science fiction stories, “Retirement Fund,” which was part of his first collection of stories, *Natural Histories* (1966). I argue that this story, which focuses on a dangerous new technology, follows the same backwards trajectory that we find in *If This is a Man*. In the story, the protagonist begins as a civilized figure in control of his actions, but, by the end, he has been reduced to a kind of Muselmann, a passive figure straddling the boundary between life and death. In this way, the science fiction story can be read as a new kind of Holocaust story, one that looks back on and updates the story that Levi tells in his first work. The story, then, can be read as part of Levi’s on-going effort to keep readers attuned to the forces, old and new, that threaten to render the human face unrecognizable.