

Robert S.C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture 1944-2010*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. X-284.

by *Anna Baldini*

“What would talk of the Holocaust be like in America if a skeptical rationalist like Primo Levi, rather than a religious mystic like Wiesel, had been its principal interpreter?”

The first time I bumped into this question was not in the book where it was originally published – more precisely, in a footnote of Peter Novick’s 1999 *The Holocaust in American Life* –, but at the beginning of a paper published in 2006 by a British literary critic, as I am myself, on the journal “Italian Studies”. Its author, Robert Gordon, opened it by reformulating Novick’s question as a non-hypothetical one, thus asking himself and his reader: “What was talk of the Holocaust like in Italy, where Primo Levi was indeed its principal interpreter over many decades?”¹ The question, and the article containing it, was the first step in a long research, which has now led to the significant results displayed in Gordon’s volume *The Holocaust in Italian Culture 1944-2010*.² Gordon himself explains its genesis by stating that “the idea for the book grew out of a long period of intense work on one remarkable survivor-writer, Primo Levi. I began to be curious about the world beyond Levi’s texts, the cultural field in which he was embedded” (p. ix).

The book has already been translated into Italian by Giuliana Oliviero.³ The translation bears a different title, which emphasizes once more the centrality of Primo Levi’s work in the history of how knowledge of the Holocaust took its peculiar Italian shape, since the first and new part of the title – *Scolpitelo nei cuori. L’Olocausto nella cultura italiana (1944-2010)* – is actually a slightly altered verse from *Shemà*, the poem we read at the opening of Levi’s first book *Se questo è un uomo*. Gordon himself defines Primo Levi as “the prime mediator of Holocaust awareness and the embodiment of the dignified figure of the survivor” in Italy (p. 20). However, and despite Gordon’s university specialization, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture* is not a book that can appeal exclusively to literary critics or literary historians – in fact, quite the contrary. Throughout the book, Gordon acts as an historian and sometimes a sociologist of culture, rather than a literary analyst.

The perspective from which Gordon produces his research is the same from which during the last two decades similar works in this academic discipline

¹ R.S.C. Gordon, *Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy*, “Italian Studies”, 61/1, (Spring 2006): 85-113, 89.

² R.S.C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

³ R.S.C. Gordon, *Scolpitelo nei cuori. L’Olocausto nella cultura italiana (1944-2010)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013).

were born. From the point of view of the actual centrality of the Holocaust in Western cultures, Gordon tries to explain how we got so far, by analyzing a specific national context that is continually blending and interrelating with transnational and global levels. But there is a salient difference between Gordon's and seminal studies of the same sort (I am referring especially to Novick's 1999 book and Annette Wieviorka's 1998 *L'Ère du témoin*⁴): Gordon is not interested in the "memory" of the Holocaust, neither collective nor individual. He rather intends to investigate cultural artefacts that convey knowledge and representations of the Holocaust, by detailing how they shaped up in the context where they were produced, and how they in turn gave form to the knowledge and representation of those past events. To say it with Gordon's own words, his book tells "the history of how [...] Italy confronted and gave shape in cultural forms to what we now call the Holocaust or the Shoah" (p. 15). By effectively doing so, Gordon's work will serve as a powerful tool against the risks implicated in every cultural canonization: those of forgetting the historically and culturally specific background in which a given cultural product is created and firstly received.

I shall give just an example of this kind of misinterpretations, taking it from one of the subjects I know better, namely the troubled history of the reception of Primo Levi's work. At the end of the Nineties, the first of Levi's biographies, written by the French journalist Myriam Anissimov, triggered an animated debate amongst the still relatively few experts in the writer's opus.⁵ The dispute concerned the judgemental account given by Anissimov of the first rejection of *Se questo è un uomo* in 1947 by the publisher Einaudi and its editors Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg. According to the biographer, this refusal was just the beginning of a long-lasting failed recognition by the Italian cultural establishment of one of its best contemporary writers. Levi's relatively marginal position in the field of Italian literature, at least during his life, is a fact, which needs however to be explained through subtler cultural and sociological analytical tools than those employed by Anissimov, whose biography, unlike those by Ian Thomson and Carole Angier,⁶ repeatedly reveals an embarrassing lack of detailed knowledge about Italian cultural, social and political history. It is not, however, just a matter of details. I also believe it historically misleading and ethically unfair to judge the behaviour of writers,

⁴ P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1999); A. Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon 1998). See also A. Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Hachette 2003).

⁵ M. Anissimov, *Primo Levi, ou la tragédie d'un optimiste* (Paris: Lattès 1996); an Italian translation was published in 1999. For the debate, see E. Ferrero, *Primo Levi, l'ora dei veleni*, "La Stampa", December 7, 1996; F. Camon, *Primo Levi, l'incubo del rifiuto*, "La Stampa", December 23, 1996; C. Cases, *Ma gli italiani sanno biografare?*, "La Stampa" January 17, 1997; D. Scarpa, *Un Levi improbabile*, "La rivista dei libri", VII/4, (1997): 41-43; T. Judt, *The Courage of the Elementary*, "The New York Review of Books", May 20, 1999, 31-38; M. Belpoliti, *Levi: il falso scandalo*, "La rivista dei libri", X/1 (2000): 25-27.

⁶ I. Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Hutchinson 2002); C. Angier, *The Double Bond. Primo Levi. A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2002).

editors or literary critics, who came into contact with a text for the first time, on the basis of present-day cultural or literary evaluation criteria. Not only in 1947 the reasons why we now consider *Se questo è un uomo* an essential feature of the Holocaust literary canon, as well as a masterwork of Italian contemporary literature, did not exist; in 1947, the very idea of what we now call “Holocaust” or “Shoah” did not exist.

This stage in our cultural history is thoroughly detailed in Chapter 4 of Gordon’s book (“New Knowledge”), which is dedicated to the period between the end of WWII and 1963. In particular, Gordon’s accurate bibliographical survey clearly shows that during the first decade after the war, in Italy as everywhere else, the first accounts written by people who survived extermination or concentration camps used to encounter editorial rejections and public indifference. The editorial trajectory of Levi’s book should thus be no matter of scandal, and rather contributes to illustrate a larger bundle of similar stories. Gordon’s overview of the period helps us understand the meaning a book such as *Se questo è un uomo* could acquire in the eyes of its contemporaries, and also why it was so difficult for Pavese or Ginzburg to recognize its value in 1947.

The risks I have pointed up to through the example of Anissimov’s biography are nowadays far more widespread than singular instances of inaccurate research. Since the annual, worldwide celebrations of Holocaust Remembrance Days are based more often than not on ahistorical, even metaphysical perception and awareness of the past, studies such as *The Holocaust in Italian culture* are something we cannot consider relevant exclusively in the academic field, but acquire a broader social meaning.

The value of Gordon’s work also lies in the author’s ability to move its discourse between a plurality of levels: national, transnational and global; cultural and political. This is a result of the organization of the material in the book, whose structure continuously shifts the focus brought on the scrutinized objects. Sections such as Chapter 4, containing a broader outline and discussing the cultural products of a period in a more or less well-ordered chronology, alternate with others focusing instead on the story of singular artefacts or events, whose trajectory through the decades is followed and explained from their first appearance to the various meanings they acquire in different times and stages of the social and political scene. The design of the volume is something we should therefore focus on more in detail.

To begin with, the book is divided in two parts, the first of which provides a theoretical framework and an effective synthesis of the more relevant issues addressed by the research. Chapter 1 (“The Shape of Italy’s Holocaust”) begins with describing five templates of cultural elaboration concerning the Holocaust that occurred with common features in every Western culture from 1945 on. The succession of these phases shows a progression from the mid-Forties, when what we now call “Holocaust” was not an event perceived as such, to

present-day common-sense reading of it as “The Absolute Evil”. Obviously, “the Holocaust” is not strictly speaking an event, but rather a way to gather under a same labelling and understanding a bundle of singular, different, but also interrelated historical facts. The five templates of cultural elaboration have produced over time a series of meanings of the word that differ precisely in including or excluding certain historical phenomena, and which also began to be “remembered” in different historical periods. Gordon’s first chapter proceeds thus on detailing the principal among these meanings and on correlating them with specifically Italian issues. Hence, thinking of the “Holocaust” as a “Nazi genocide” has been a way to avoid measuring the extent of Italians’ complicity in it; using “Lager” – namely, the network of Nazi labour, concentration and extermination camps – as a metaphor for “Holocaust” have corresponded to early exclusively antifascist or Resistance interpretations of the figure of the deportee; the late definition of “Holocaust” as comprehending non-industrialised massacres, such as those carried out by the *Einsatzkommandos*, along with industrialised mass extermination, coincided with a renewed attention paid to the massacres (“eccidi”) committed by German troops in Italy; finally, the tendency to identify the “Holocaust” as something exposing the dark side of modernity has contributed to a consideration of Fascism as a typically modern totalitarianism.

Chapter 3 (“The Field”) accounts for the complex network of phenomena scrutinized in the book. Gordon distinguishes four “spheres of cultural production” involved in the apprehension and representation of the Holocaust. The first concerns the undertakings of associations and institutions, from those more directly involved (ANED, CDEC, Jewish communities) to the apparatuses of the State, of political parties and of the Church. We may loosely designate this first sphere as a “political” one, while the second relates instead to the knowledge developed inside the university, particularly by historians. The third and fourth spheres cover what should more correctly be apprehended as a common ground, since it is difficult to draw a line between what Gordon designates as “cultural sphere” and that of “cultural industries and media”. Such a distinction is vaguely reminiscent of a sociologically outdated polarity between “high” and “low” culture, according to which the cultural products disseminated through media are necessarily to be regarded as pertaining to a lower-rank culture. It is true, however, that Gordon does not make a divide between these two spheres in order to attribute different values to the cultural products he examines, but rather in order to distinguish between two types of audiences, of which the one targeted on by newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the internet corresponds to a “broad, non-expert and semi-participatory public” (p. 35). As I see it, although, the distinction remains arguable, since it implies, for instance, to include publishers in the fourth sphere, while on the contrary agents from the publishing world are thoroughly involved in the cultural production, as their activity is the channel through which literary or scientific works are disseminated between expert and non-expert publics likewise.

Be that as it may, the sphere of production Gordon calls “cultural” is the main area he investigates. Consequently, he identifies various subcategories inside this major one: “works, sites, artefacts and events” (p. 33). We may detail the contents of this area through a different set of categories: namely, fictional and non-fictional narratives (including early and late testimonial writings, poems, novels, short stories, theatrical pieces, fictional and documentary movies, television serials, songs, both produced in Italy or imported from abroad); monumental architecture; “events”, that is, public displays of art or official commemorations (and their political resonance). Gordon declares not to be interested in a formal or textual analysis of these different artefacts; what really matters to him “is rather how they are positioned within their field of production and transmission, how they are projected into the public sphere and translated into forms of knowledge and awareness” (p. 34). Gordon’s objective thus appears to be that of elaborating a sociological history of these cultural products; as a matter of fact, in a note at the beginning of chapter 3 he introduces a reference to the theory of fields by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: “The field of Holocaust culture loosely resembles this model, insofar as it contains agent groups and individuals “competing” to give shape to definitions and understanding of, and values and meanings drawn from, the Nazi genocide, in the context of both the larger field of Italian culture and the international field of Holocaust culture” (p. 213n). I shall discuss later the author’s appropriation of Bourdieu’s “elusive” – according to Gordon – theory.

The combination of the three chapters in Part I is an example of how the book continually shifts its focus between a synthetic and an analytical approach. Embedded between the theoretical and panoramic Chapters 1 and 3, Chapter 2 (“Villa Torlonia”) offers the first of numerous and exemplary close-readings of a singular cultural object, which is in this case the Italian national museum of the Shoah, still under construction in Rome. By discussing the significance of the decision to put the Museum in the site of Villa Torlonia, Gordon reveals it as a place where four major nodes of the Italian public discourse concerning the Holocaust symbolically interweave: firstly, having been Mussolini’s private residence, Villa Torlonia recalls the relationship between Fascism and the Holocaust; secondly, since under the grounds of Villa Torlonia were discovered several Jew catacombs a couple of centuries older than the Christian era, the site recalls the very ancient and peculiar history of Italian Judaism; thirdly, the choice to put the museum in the capital city abandoning an earlier project to create it in Ferrara show how impossible it is not to take into account regional and local issues as opposed or simply interlaced with national ones; finally, the name the museum will bear, “Museo della Shoah”, exemplifies a linguistic choice that distinguishes the Italian from the global context, where “Holocaust” is the more wide-spread naming option. The chapter highlights other connections between Italy and the world: the architectural concept of the project shows many similarities with homologous national museums built since the Nineties in Washington, Paris and Berlin, and

the decision to establish the museum in Rome was influenced by the support of Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. Gordon also explains how the museum educational plan reflects peculiar features of the Italian cultural elaboration of the Holocaust: for instance, an entire hall is to be dedicated to Primo Levi, and a "Percorso dei giusti" will echo not only the "Righteous among the Nations" celebrated in Yad Vashem, but also the myth of the "good Italian" as exemplified by Giorgio Perlasca's paradigmatic story.

By exploring the meaning of every feature of the future museum, Chapter 2 acts as a synopsis of the second part of the book, since many themes firstly presented in relation to the museum's plan are thoroughly discussed in the following chapters. Moreover, though Part II opens and closes with two chapters that detail in almost chronological sequence the events occurred during the years 1944-63 and 1986-2010, its more fascinating sections are those constructed in the same way as Chapter 2, where Gordon's historical narrative focuses on cultural products or facts on which several layers of memory and knowledge have sedimented.

Chapter 4 is followed by two monographic chapters that highlight the role played by a singular agent in making the Italian apprehension of the Holocaust different from elsewhere. In the first case, the agent is an individual, in the second, a place. Chapter 5 is thus dedicated to Primo Levi, since "local inflections of larger cultural and memorial discourse can also be determined by the agency and accidental influence of single voices in a given cultural field" (p. 64). The protagonist of this chapter is not the powerful, subtle and morally complex writer, who in the last two decades have been finally recognized as such, but rather the public intellectual: "a low-level, public Levi", who exercised his influence "in schools and other public arenas" by means of "occasional and pedagogical writings" (p. 68). Gordon begins by analyzing the picture of the Holocaust implied by "Levi's Holocaust library", namely the books the writer suggests as further readings at the end of the first school edition of *Se questo è un uomo* (1973); he then expands the perimeter of this "library" by surveying the network of historical works, testimonial and literary writings, in which Primo Levi was involved as translator, reviewer or promoter. Finally, the last paragraph examines Levi's choices about how to name the Holocaust, and how they have differed over the years. According to the persuasive Chapter 6, "Rome", the millennial history and heritage of the capital have been as influential in shaping the Italian Holocaust as the singular voice of the extraordinary intellectual and writer Primo Levi was. A brief chronicle of the events occurred in Rome between July 1943 and June 1944 is followed by an impressive account of books (fictions as well as testimonial writings or essays), movies, monuments, public debates, even judicial trials and urban mythologies, which in the following decades have been generated from or in regard to those events.

Chapters 7 ("Shared Knowledge"), 8 ("Grey Zones and Good Italians") and 9 ("Transnational Lines"), by cross cutting through the Sixties, Seventies and

Eighties, deal with cultural objects of the most disparate nature. I shall mention just a few of the issues arisen by them, those I have found most thought-provoking: why in Italy the prevailing naming choice for the racial deportation and extermination has been “Shoah”, instead of “Holocaust”; how, when and thanks to whom several Italian Holocaust memorials have been built, from the first in Milan (1946) to those built in Auschwitz in 1967 and 1980; how the Italian and other national Holocaust cultures have interrelated, especially the Israeli and American ones. Regarding the latter, I have found particularly remarkable Gordon’s choice to analyze this cultural exchange from an original point of view, namely, by following the direction leading from Italy to the Usa (the other way round being usually the more spoken of). The cultural products exported from Italy that met with an American success – a success then rebounding all over the world – are chiefly movies, especially those consecrated by an Oscar prize or nomination (Lina Wertmüller’s *Pasqualino Settebellezze* and Roberto Benigni’s *La vita è bella*), but a similar trajectory has also characterized Primo Levi’s international renown, having the writer’s fame become global since the “American discovery” of his work in 1984.

Talking of Primo Levi, in Chapter 8 a book of his becomes once again the point of departure of a significant track through the Italian cultural and political scene. “Grey Zones and Good Italians” relates the story of how, during the late Eighties and Nineties, the formula “la zona grigia” strayed from the use and meaning Primo Levi forged it for in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986). This story of misreading and misuses is a telling one, since it mingles with an important renewal in historiography, which at the beginning of the Nineties led to question the prevalent interpretations of Fascism, Resistance and Italian’s behaviour during WWII. In particular, historians began to demolish the defensive myth of “good Italians”, according to which the Italian people was one of the most reluctant and less cooperative in the racial extermination process. “One of the stories this book needs to tell”, Gordon states since the beginning of the book, “is about Fascism’s and Italians’ apparent distance from the Holocaust, and about how this notion seems to have been so completely turned on its head by the end of the century” (p. 16).

Finally, I would like at least to enumerate several noteworthy analyses of a singular cultural product we find disseminated in Part II: a detailed description of Giacomo Debenedetti’s, Curzio Malaparte’s and Umberto Saba’s seminal writings about the Holocaust in Chapter 4;⁷ a comparison between Carlo Lizzani’s movie *L’oro di Roma* (1961) and Ferzan Ozpetek’s one *La finestra di fronte* (2003) in Chapter 6; an examination of the background and significance of Francesco Guccini’s song *Auschwitz* (1965) in Chapter 7; an account of the international production of Gillo Pontecorvo’s movie *Kapò* (1959) put into

⁷ See G. Debenedetti, *16 ottobre 1943*, “Mercurio”, December 1944; G. Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei* (Rome: Atlantica 1944); C. Malaparte, *Kaputt* (Naples: Casella 1944); U. Saba *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (Milan: Mondadori 1946).

relationship with the director's subsequent career between Italy and France in Chapter 9.

The last chapter of the book ("After Such Knowledge") covers almost three decades: a period that witnessed a global explosion of Holocaust-related cultural production, in the context of a public acknowledgment of the event as something placed at the core of Western identities: "in 21st-century Europe, there is an imperative, embodied in international conferences and treaties, and in UN resolutions, to provide an official channel of memory of the Holocaust, as if to be a legitimate European democracy now is also to acknowledge and commemorate this "Event"" (p. 17). In Italy this universal trend was officially ratified in 2000, when the 27th of January was established by law as the Holocaust "Day of Memory". Gordon's overview of those years is no less meticulous than that we find in Chapter 4, but the outcome is less satisfying, undoubtedly due to the huge amount of facts and objects to be accounted for, which inevitably results in none of them receiving a specific consideration. Furthermore, the author's attention is less focused on cultural productions than on political issues, most of which were already hint at in previous chapters; their coming back well arranged and explained in chronological order produces a more opaque narrative than the prior close-up accounts of singular objects. The sensation is perhaps more intense for an Italian reader, for whom most of the information here provided is common knowledge; a non-Italian reader probably gains as much intelligence from this chapter as from the others.

The material gathered in Chapter 10, if examined as in detail as in previous parts of the volume, could fill up an entire new book. In fact, one of the research directions I see ensuing from *The Holocaust in Italian culture* leads towards a further investigation specifically devoted to the last three decades of Italian culture. Another one could have its point of departure in taking seriously Bourdieu's description of the inner working of the fields differentiating a national cultural production. "For Bourdieu", explains Gordon, "a given cultural field is structured by a set of possible positions and strategic orientations across which agents in the field – agents of cultural consumption and production – organise themselves, accruing authority or cultural capital and common sense ideas of value (*doxa*) that are at stake in the field" (pp. 212-213). Gordon defines Bourdieu's concept as "elusive", but I rather find vague his appropriation of it. I do not think that that "of production of Holocaust discourse" (p. 213) can be considered a proper "field" in Bourdieusian terms, at least not since the mid-Forties. Present-day academic discipline of "Holocaust Studies" probably now works as such, but the people creating Holocaust-related novels, movies or songs were (and are) engaged primarily in their specific field of cultural production, namely the literary, cinematographic or musical ones; it is there they tried to position themselves and their works by acting according to a specific logic and in the middle of conflicting values. Following such a pathway, I see the possibility of

studying how the peculiar logic and inner history of the various fields of cultural production have influenced the ways in which literature, cinema, historiography and so on have shaped the Italian knowledge and representation of the destruction of the European Jews. Just to give a few examples, taken from my field of expertise: which conflicts regarding literary values and which dominant/dominated positions inside the literary field do explain for instance why Giorgio Bassani was “the first story-teller of Italian-Jewish life and the Shoah to penetrate widely across the national culture” (p. 22)? Why in the mid-Fifties the conflict to acquire a symbolic capital did engage leading publishers like Einaudi, Feltrinelli and il Saggiatore in a race to publish or translate a series of Holocaust-related books?⁸ Which state of the publishing field around 1980 did create the conditions of possibility for the birth of a publisher exclusively dedicated to Jewish culture like la Giuntina? Which specific literary logic did cause the massive import of Israeli literature in Italy starting from the Eighties?⁹

My criticism regards however just a marginal aspect of Gordon’s volume, and it would be impossible even to begin to answer the questions suggested above in the absence of it. The impressive amount of information, the extraordinary clarity in the use of language and of conceptual distinctions that characterize the book make it bound to become a milestone of the Holocaust Studies in and regarding Italy.

⁸ See for instance R. Antelme, *La specie umana* (Turin: Einaudi 1954); A. Frank, *Diario* (Turin: Einaudi 1954); L. Poliakov, *Il nazismo e lo sterminio degli ebrei* (Turin: Einaudi 1955); E. Russell, *Il flagello della svastica* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1955); B. Piazza, *Perché gli altri dimenticano* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1956); P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Einaudi 1958); A. Nirenstajn, *Ricordati cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* (Turin: Einaudi 1958); R. De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi 1961); A. Scharz-Bart, *L’ultimo dei giusti* (Feltrinelli: Milan 1961); G. Reitlinger, *La soluzione finale. Il tentativo di sterminio degli ebrei d’Europa* (Milan: il Saggiatore 1962); G. Debenedetti, *16 ottobre 1943* (Milan: il Saggiatore 1963); P. Levi, *La tregua* (Turin: Einaudi 1963); H. Arendt, *La banalità del male. Eichmann a Gerusalemme* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1964).

⁹ See for an example of a similar research G. Sapiro, *L’Importation de la littérature hébraïque en France entre communautarisme et universalisme*, “Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales”, 144, (2002): 80-98.