

Da Primo Levi alla generazione dei «salvati». Incursioni critiche nella letteratura italiana della Shoah dal dopoguerra ai giorni nostri, Atti del convegno internazionale sulla letteratura italiana della Shoah. Zurigo, 10-11 maggio 2016, ed. Sibilla Destefani, (Firenze: Giuntina, 2017), pp. 179.

by Martina Mengoni

This collection of essays comes as the result of a conference held at University of Zurich in May 2016. As the editor Destefani states in the preface, it is characterized by a great variety of approaches and topics. The book has been divided into three parts: i. the first contains new reading proposals of Primo Levi's work, explored in the essays by Giovanni Miglianti, Nunzio La Fauci, Niccolò Scaffai, and Francesco Della Costa; ii. the second part moves to a wider literary representation of the Holocaust: the poetic and narrative self-confronting the dramatic experience, with essays by Marta Baiardi, Enrico Mattioda and Tommaso Pepe; iii. in the third and last part the focus is on post-memory, that is narrating the Shoah from the perspective of the generations that didn't experience it (with essays by Stefania Lucamante, Hanna Serkowska, and Andrea Rondini).

This review will first follow the topic of each essay, to find intersections with the other; then will discuss the main new ideas that the book proposes.

The first part opens with an essay by Giovanni Miglianti discussing the point of view of Levi as an anthropologist. Levi can be considered a "participant observer," in the ethnographic sense, since, his writing is the medium that transforms observation into interpretation. The specific point of view embraced by Levi can be collocated between extrangement and "*spaesamento*" (something near "disorientation," but with the additional meaning of having lost the typical acquaintance with your own hometown landscape), in the tradition of the "forced-journey" that put together authors such as Dante, Coleridge, Marco Polo, Conrad, all in Levi's pantheon. Being a "participant observer" of a "forced journey" is an oxymoric condition: and, as Mengaldo pointed out and as Miglianti reminds us, the oxymoron is one of the privileged rhetoric devices used by Levi, especially in *Se questo è un uomo*. The idea of "estrangement" as a fundamental Levian perspective is also one of the main focuses of Scaffai's essay. Scaffai's starting point is that Levi always wavers between the uniqueness of Lager as historical phenomenon and the universality of violence. Following this assumption, his main thesis is that Levi's sci-fi short stories, rather than being classified as allegories of Auschwitz, should be considered representations of the

estrangement and the overturning that the deported man experienced. Scaffai distinguishes between the stories in which Levi uses «estrangement» - the ones in which he depicts himself as a character – and “alienation” - the ones in which he is only a narrator. In his dystopian stories, Levi often chooses to explore the point of view of the monster, rather than the one of the victim: this choice avoids stereotypes and banalizations.

On the contrary, Francesco Della Costa suggests that the allegory should be considered the main tool that Levi uses in order to establish a connection between chemistry and alchemy in *The Periodic Table*. Allegoric devices have their roots also in the cabbalistic tradition; Della Costa sees in the convergence between that tradition and the alchemic one a way to understand Levi's *Weltanschauung*. A typical example is Levi's fascination for the Golem, as an allegory of re-creation and re-foundation of men through matter manipulation.

La Fauci's essay is less connected with the rest. He focuses on the choice of the title *Se questo è un uomo*: its intrinsic universalism and its specific meaning inside the Italian linguistic system, better understood in comparison with its different translations in English, German, French. La Fauci explores all the differences between the balanced *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi's first title choice, and the one that the publishing house chose, *Se questo è uomo*, apparently “*sbilenca e bisognevole integrazione*,” but in fact a question demanding the reader an answer, rhetoric at the first glance, complex and problematic in its true essence.

The second part of the book is dedicated more generically to autobiographical and poetic writing about Auschwitz and the Shoah – and yet, as expected, Primo Levi remains the main term of comparison. One of the decisive points that these essays share is the shift between juridical testimony and literary representation, which is explored both theoretically and textually by Mattioda and Baiardi. Starting from the assumption that testimony is always partial and subjected to a continuous re-elaboration, Mattioda claims that the value of a literary text as a form of transmission lies precisely in its partiality, in its specific choices rather than in the urgency of addressing facts. Mattioda proves his point in analyzing Levi's additions to 1958 edition of *Se questo è un uomo*: memorable descriptions of characters (Emilia and Alberto among all) built with many literary implicit and explicit references. The mythopoeic possibilities of literary work connected to the Auschwitz experience need to be explored and analyzed, since they concur to build knowledge and make that experience more understandable. From a similar perspective, Marta Baiardi discusses the limits of the autobiographical self in the

work of Liana Millu. She finds a contrast between biographical elements and facts as she discovered them in archive research and Millu's representation of them: an example is the tragic death of Millu's mother when she was four years old. That event destroyed Millu's family, and still Millu mentions it very few times, leaving it as an implicit turning point. However, more than assessing theoretical conclusions about the short circuit between factual data and literary representation, Baiardi is interested in analyzing the main problems of being Millu's biographer, with a lack of archives from one side, and a significant amount of autobiographical pages on the other.

In the third and last essay, Tommaso Pepe reflects about the possibility of mythopoeic function of Auschwitz poetry, connecting the work of Primo Levi with the one of Salvatore Quasimodo, Vittorio Sereni and Edith Bruck. In Quasimodo, Pepe finds an evident opposition between idyllic Italy and violent Germany, that tends to remove Italian complicities and responsibilities from the tragedy of racial laws and deportations, and in doing it, Pepe claims, he in fact monumentalizes a collective memory. On the contrary, Sereni is moved by an anti-rhetorical search and re-discover of the roots and profound paths of individual and singular memory. Levi and Bruck, both novelist and poets, share a certain use of poetic language as a different expression of memory, a *mémoire profonde* rather than a *mémoire externe*. In all cases, memory is re-created as a myth; a process that should be explored in many other Italian poets.

In the third part of the book, the essays deal with the representability of Auschwitz in what has been called the post-memory. Lucamante and Serkowska's essays converge in putting at the center of the analysis female writings: Elsa Morante and Helena Janeczek novels. Starting from combining the theoretical perspectives of Carlo Ginzburg, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Jean François Lyotard, Lucamante looks for the specificity of female voices in the *middle voice* of Holocaust literature, and finds it in the "*compartecipazione*" ("sharing" from within) to the representation of the Holocaust. Lucamante suggests that Morante herself wrote *La storia* in order to give voice to the "*intestimoniati*," the "drowned," the people that can't speak for themselves, as Primo Levi call them in the chapter "*La vergogna*" of *I sommersi e i salvati*; among these "*intestimoniati*" there is Morante herself, a woman with Jewish origins, evacuated during 1943, displaced and disoriented, and yet still devoted to her city. A similar perspective is embraced by Serkowska, that adds to the idea of female writing as "*compartecipazione*" the one of tracing the roots of a family, of a tradition, "presentified," that is continuously

re-activated in the present of the narration; a typical strategy used by Helena Janeczek in *Lezioni di tenebra*.

Finally, Andrea Rondini analyses Carlo Greppi's novel *Non restare indietro*, about his experience with secondary school students visiting Auschwitz. In the puzzle of quotations from movies, tv shows, books, graphic novels that characterizes Greppi's novel, Rondini finds a "polyphonic, post-bachtinian.. hybridized and confused" presence of the Shoah, in which the aim is to build a moral alphabet founded on "*immedesimazione*" (identification), or "*identità proiettiva*" (projecting identity), that is mainly based on emotions. For Rondini, this experience poses new questions about "the relationship between Auschwitz narration, media and public," using different and complementary media genres.

Even if the essays of this collection are highly heterogenous, not always convergent, different for methods and perspectives, they globally relaunch some crucial questions about the representability of the Shoah. Firstly: what is the *unicum* of literary writing in shaping the memory of Auschwitz? What is the specific contribution of mythopoeia in making a story memorable, and what is at stake if that story is the collective story of deportation and extermination? what is the relationship between that creation of myths and historiography? These questions are of course long term ones; they have been posed before with more theoretical rigor. This book not only tries to apply them to textual analysis, but project them on contemporary narrative, that is the Shoah narrative of writers that didn't experience it. How are these novels changing paradigms? How this kind of writings are dealing with the myth of memory? Even the chapters about Primo Levi, in reflecting about his narrative devices – allegory, estrangement, alienation, oxymoron -, make us wonder how these devices could change and redefine themselves in new generations of novelists that don't want to leave that experience behind. And the only regret is that this collection could have explored more that kind of narratives, still maintaining Levi (among others) as a term of comparison.

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