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THE 'INDISPENSABLE' LEGACY OF PRIMO LEVI:
FROM ERALDO AFFINATI TO ROSETTA LOY BETWEEN
HISTORY AND FICTION¹

It is important for students of Italian literature and culture to understand the peculiarities of Italian Jewish literature with respect to the *Shoah* and thus to understand why contemporary Italian writers frequently interrogate their immediate past.² This article will thus examine connections between more 'traditional' texts (testimonies and fictions) of the *Shoah* and contemporary Italian literary production. By 'contemporary,' I mean two kinds of works: those of writers such as Rosetta Loy who, relatively young at the time of racial laws, deportations, and concentration camps, have written about the Holocaust only in recent years and with rather different outcomes, and those such as Eraldo Affinati, who are the 'children of the Holocaust' because they have lived this part of history 'through' the destinies of their relatives.

It took many years for Italian writers to gain a full understanding of the Jewish genocide and to construct a historiography for this "epochal event," as Emil Fackenheim called the *Shoah* (as in Sullam Calimani, *I nomi dello sterminio*, 5). A temporal lapse thus separates the first testimonies, the survivors' more immediate reaction to the devastation of the *Shoah*, and contemporary works on this subject. Today, awareness and knowledge of events call for responsibility from all members of our society, particularly during the wave of anti-Semitism currently spreading across Europe.³ For some Italian intellectuals, their role in analysing historical events pertinent to the *Shoah* while at the same time re-writing them in a fictional mode, has become an acknowledgment of such responsibility (Sullam Calimani, *I nomi dello sterminio*, 3). By investigating contemporary literary and fictional works on the *Shoah*, I implicitly take a position in the long-standing debate on whether this tragic event should be recounted only by actual witnesses (Elie Wiesel's stand in his *The Night*), or whether it deserves and needs the contribution of fiction. As Wolfgang Iser points out, art is a means of human self-explanation (*The Fictive and the Imaginary*, xiii), and as such provides a wider space for reasoning and listening to other voices,

all the while incorporating the imaginary and the fictive to the human dimension provided by historical facts. In my view, fiction plays an important role in this debate, for it constitutes a hospitable space in which to remind, and constantly re-discuss, human nature and behaviour at times of extreme crisis.

In this article I will investigate the ramifications of the influence and 'indispensable' legacy of Primo Levi who appears to be the 'canonical' witness in the works (fictional and non-fictional) of this second generation of Italian writers of the Holocaust. I will consider some of the questions asked by Dominick LaCapra in the introductory pages of his *History and Memory After Auschwitz* as to whether or not "some events present moral and representational issues even for groups not directly involved in them" and whether "those more directly involved have special responsibilities to the past and the way it is remembered in the present." He then wonders whether "art itself [has] a special responsibility with respect to traumatic events that remain invested with value and emotion" (*History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 1). I will analyse Italian works ranging from testimony to essay and to fiction. I will do this particularly for those writers, such as Eraldo Affinati and Rosetta Loy, confronting a traumatic event they have not directly experienced, but which they have worked through in their own imagination and investigation.

Primo Levi and his "Indispensable" Legacy

Primo Levi's writings reaffirm the central dialectic of Holocaust narratives of trauma, the "conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud." (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1). Levi's intellectual legacy is such that, without his work, it would be difficult to study today's writings on the Holocaust. After his initial testimonial writings, Levi's work is based on the careful analysis of some basic categories at the core of Holocaust criticism, as well as at the core of works of fiction such as his *If Not Now, When?* (1982). The categories are those of the witnesses and their role; trial; representability; uniqueness of this tragedy; collective and individual moral responsibility, the "grey zone." Levi began defining them in 1946 in his *Survival in Auschwitz (If this is a Man)* and would revisit them throughout his life. While others chose silence as an alternative and as an understandable form of denial and of rejection of further suffering so as to avoid the trauma of recalling their experience, Levi chose instead to be like Coleridge's ancient mariner, telling and retelling his story even when nobody would listen to him. The recurring dream, in which he was not being listened to, the same one Levi shared with Antelme

and with so many other survivors, expressed not only the fear of not finding an audience, but also, and particularly in Levi's case, the anguish of lexical and syntactical vacuums that hinder the representation of the 'inde-scribable' that begs to be described, that block the utterance of the 'unspeakable' that needs to be spoken.

In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), Levi revisited his own memoirs at a distance of some forty years. By then Levi had already read an impressive number of testimonies and scholarly texts, and he had revisited Buna-Auschwitz with other survivors, all the while contributing to the ongoing discussion on the *Shoah*. What distinguishes him from other non-fiction writers of the Holocaust is that Levi managed in his lifetime to re-read himself in successive writings, to draw theoretical statements about his own experience, sifted through the process of retelling. Temporal distance from the events re-analysed allowed for Levi's categories to become even more universal in his *The Drowned and the Saved*. The process of decantation of the more 'physical' memories—as we perceive in Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, for instance—plays a key role in the readings of Levi's legacy to follow, particularly in this last text. The process of decantation eliminates the physicality of events and leaves space for more philosophical treatments. What follows is a closer examination of the witness in contemporary society.

How history is perceived today depends very much on an emerging notion of witness/victim and his/her role in historiographical discourse. Historiographical discourse and the duty of historians have been transformed, for their task now is to write history from the side of the victims, and not that of the victors. History as seen and witnessed by survivors constructs a parallel with the kind of discourse that re-tellers of that historical moment narrate. Unlike in the past, victims now record and testify to history themselves. According to Annette Wieviorka, testimony is always chronologically and sociologically bound to the *hic et nunc* of what remains, after all, an act of speech, a recollection of events:

Testimony expresses, above all, what each individual, each experience of the *Shoah*, has of unique. It does so, however, with *words belonging to the epoch in which the witness is witnessing*, starting from the implicit requests and expectations that are themselves contemporary to this testimony. They ultimately attribute to the act of testimony scopes that depend on what is then politically or ideologically at stake. Testimony thus contributes to create one or more collective memories, erratic in their content, in their form, in their function, and in the goals, more or less explicit, that they attribute to themselves. (Wieviorka, *L'età del testimone*, 14; emphasis added)

A new form of historical discourse is thus taking shape through the act of witnessing and through the collective nature of witnessing. But which witnesses inform us about historical facts?

Data meticulously registered in chronicles have been replaced by human voices. However, the "human memory" behind these voices "is a fallacious instrument," as Levi himself writes (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 16). These memories therefore "should also be read with a critical eye" —he adds—in the establishment of new ethical categories necessarily created by the transformation of the historiographical discourse. If memory is a "fallacious instrument," what should we trust in the transmission of these data to the future? It is significant to remember Levi's apology for his own fallacious memory, something of which is profoundly aware:

This very book is drenched in memory; what's more, a distant memory. Thus it draws from suspect source, and must be protected against itself. So here then: it contains more *considerations than memories*, lingers more willingly on the state of affairs such as it is now than on the retroactive chronicle. (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 21)

When we assume such a manifest importance for the role of the witness, a "crucial source for history" that is not devoid of "emotional implications," (LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 11-12) we should keep in mind that even this category is subject to individual assessment and that the kind of importance varies depending on the different purposes of its use in future times.⁴ Is Levi thus important as an historical witness or, rather, as an artist who managed to make of his own work a constant laboratory of ideas on human nature and artistic expressive forms about the limits of representability of extreme historical events such as the Holocaust?

Levi, as seen by historian Annette Wiewiorka, is a 'particular' kind of Jew; not at all representative of the collectiveness that forms the *Shoah*. For her, Levi and Antelme are not emblematic of the survivors of the camp experience, just as much as their testimonies are not emblematic of the event. As an historian, in fact, Wiewiorka wonders why their works are more studied than Adam Czerniakow's *Diaries*, which are certainly more representative of a vast majority of Eastern Jewry. Paradoxically, if the aesthetic aspect of Antelme and Levi's testimonies and their aesthetic uniqueness make them worthy of careful study, consequent inclusion in academic courses, and of being subject to such acclaim from a literary standpoint, from an historiographical point of view these qualities frustrate the work of the historian (Wiewiorka, *L'età del testimone*, 38). The universality of

their reflections on Auschwitz and the genocide do little to help understand the multitude of voices behind their testimonies. In support of Wiewiorka's point, I bring into the discussion another historian reader of Levi, Frediano Sessi. He has noted some apparent lapses that confine Levi's books and testimony to a literary realm. As a result, Levi's writing should not be considered an historical reference. Sessi does not search for mistakes: he simply shows how, even in his initial pursuit of objectivity and in the grandiosity of his tableaux of the camp and his painful way back to Italy and life in general, Levi suffers from historiographical lapses in the retelling of life in Auschwitz. These lapses are important, for they do not show weakness in Levi's legacy, but rather help us understand the discrepancy between historical truth and testimonial, which in itself contains, by necessity, fictional elements on which Levi's artistic legacy can be based. Here are two examples:

- 1) Levi claims that Auschwitz was built late and conceived from the beginning as a concentration camp. We know from Raul Hilberg that Auschwitz was not initially conceived as a *Vernichtungslager*, (extermination camp), but as a quarantine and transit camp for Russian soldiers and Polish resistance fighters, and that only gradually, in 1942, in a way that Sessi calls "the graduality of horror," it was turned into an extermination camp;
- 2) Diaries found near the gas chambers contradict Levi, in that at least six people have been able to narrate their own death, even using their own blood as ink (Sessi, "La letteratura concentrazionaria," 21). Still, Sessi never undermines Levi's reflections on the "graduality of truth," as he does not think of the writer as an historian. What emerges from Levi's writings about the unwitnessed remains valid, along with the aesthetic and epistemological value of his work. This holds true even though from an historical point of view, imprecision needs to be revisited (Sessi, "La letteratura concentrazionaria," 22), if only as survivals of Levi's own "fallacious instrument" called memory.

Sessi offers three reasons why *The Drowned and the Saved* attests to the importance of fiction as a mode to investigate the past. These three reasons are drawn directly from the lack of a connection between the deportee and the historian and the actuality of events, as "not even the sense of the event is automatically suggested to us by the recount of a witness." (Sessi, "La letteratura concentrazionaria," 22-23) Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* leaves open the debate on an ethical and aesthetic revisiting of the Holocaust; Levi's coming to terms with the fact that the 'heart' of the camp experience is in fact an event without testimonies, as the real witnesses are

the *Muselmänner*, thus making “fictional texts (novels and stories) the place from where one can have the drowned speak”; and one more possibility as the novelist touches upon topics and advances reflections and judgments, whereas the historian cannot, unless has documents”: the voice of the witness *per conto terzi* (“through somebody else”; Sessi, “La letteratura concentrazionaria,” 27). These reasons find their evidence in the work of Eraldo Affinati and Rosetta Loy.

Levi's Legacy: Eraldo Affinati and his Role as Intellectual

Eraldo Affinati's *Campo del sangue* exemplifies a new type of testimony, the composition of a Holocaust of ‘invention,’ which ‘finds’ a memory for events not personally witnessed. Written in 1997, more than fifty years after Auschwitz, Affinati's autobiographical work is unusual in its composite aggregation of personal material combined with passages from other texts. *Campo del sangue* is a personal narrative of a trip Affinati took from Venice to Auschwitz in 1995, interrupted by excerpts from texts written by Levi, Antelme, Semprun, and from other witnesses and scholars of the Holocaust. As is frequent in contemporary writings on the Holocaust, this is a hybrid text, not a novel, nor a travelogue, nor an essay. It defies generic definition, for this is a book whose hybridity attests to the difficulty of dealing with personal events while linking them to public ones. The purpose behind this book manifests the intensity by which the action of thinking about an historical and private trauma—one seen as collective—brings it constantly back to life in artists who feel their role in society to be one in which ethical duties toward themselves, their readers, and the past, are mandatory.

However we categorize his book, Affinati feels he belongs to a “second generation” of Holocaust survivors (*Campo del sangue*, 9). The “children of the Holocaust” are, in a way, the aesthetic agents of this “post-apocalypse” period, responsible for keeping alive the memory of such an apocalyptic event not only in life, but also in art. Holocaust recollection is constantly studied as a means to overcome the original mistake of “unbelievability” that did not allow the public to prepare itself for the tragic events that were to follow, as well as a way to come to terms with these events, an heroic act of working through that often requires the use of invention in order to link the fragments left hanging loose by the voices of the previous generation. Antelme writes: “‘Unimaginable’ is a word that doesn't divide, doesn't restrict. The most convenient word. When you walk around with this word as your shield, this word for emptiness, your step becomes better assured, more resolute, your conscience pulls itself together” (*The Human Race*, 290).

Like Affinati, these latter writers have not “witnessed,” but they bear witness to the Holocaust, nevertheless. They show art's commitment to

imagining what is not imaginable in real life. They reject the comfort of the 'unimaginable' word, and pursue instead new venues of discourse to 'imagine'.

Second-generation Holocaust Writers

An initial division in Holocaust writers was clearly defined by Norma Rosen's categories (in *Touching Evil*; see also Berger, "Ashes and Hope," 93-95). Briefly summarized, they comprise the literature written by witnesses themselves and that produced by "witnesses through imagination," as Alan Berger points out ("Ashes and Hope," 98). In his study, Berger claims that in Rosen's second category there has been a gross misuse of this historical event, seen merely as background for fiction, as in the oft-cited case of William Styron *Sophie's Choice*.⁵ He adds a third category, the one formed by the children of the Holocaust who write about the impact of this tragic event on their parents. There are two orientations: a specific Judaic quest and a more universal message about improving society at large (Berger, "Ashes and Hope," 99).

Berger's third category of such witnesses, defined as "children of the Holocaust," is not entirely appropriate for Affinati's case. Even if one of the most triggering instances of his book was that in 1944 his mother was "almost" deported to a concentration camp and his grandfather executed for partisan activities, the fact remains that the Italian writer is not Jewish, thus he fails to have the biographical tie with survivors in the most specific sense of the term. We also cannot compare Affinati's case to that of Binjamin Wilkomirski's "fraud" in *Fragments*;⁶ he is not assuming any false identity in order to write a testimonial of an experience that did not belong to him directly, nor is he fabricating stories he did not live.

What we have is an interesting case of a teacher, a traditional kind of intellectual according to Gramsci, who has determined to contribute to society with his work. "Non bisognerebbe mai separare il pensiero dall'azione" ("one should never separate thought from action") Affinati states:

Questa tentata spaccatura è, io credo, il tarlo dell'epoca moderna: il mondo senza testa e la testa senza mondo. Affermando il primato della coscienza sulla realtà l'artista novecentesco ha di fatto dato campo libero all'uomo d'azione, lo ha lasciato andare al proprio destino. Nel nazismo si riverbera tale abbandono. (*Campo del sangue*, 81)

(This attempted split is, I believe, the gnawing of modern times: the world without head and the head without world. By affirming the primacy of consciousness upon reality, the twentieth century artist has indeed given free rein to the man of action, has let him go to his own destiny. Such abandonment reverberates in Nazism.)

Affinati declares his debt and gratitude to Primo Levi for how Levi “helped him not to share the attitude of those who think they can stay free in front of the word they chose (“Primo Levi,” 57). Affinati states further:

Se il linguaggio non è un mero strumento di comunicazione, ma piuttosto il luogo dei nostri pensieri, il centro stesso dell’orientamento vitale, il colore della visione a cui siamo legati, allora risulta impossibile chiamarsi fuori rispetto al fuoco dialettico che si determina ogni volta che scriviamo o parliamo: dobbiamo necessariamente prendere posizione, o modificarla, se le conseguenze di ciò che abbiamo detto ci spingono a farlo. (“Primo Levi,” 57)

(If language is not a mere instrument of communication, but rather the locus of our thoughts, the very centre of the vital orientation, the colour of the vision we believe in, it then seems impossible to declare ourselves outside the dialectical focus which takes place every time we write or speak: we must necessarily take a stand, or modify it, if the consequences of that which we have said lead us to do so.)

The totalitarian systems of the twentieth-century fed precisely on the intellectual who would work apart from society.

When Affinati speaks about “the responsibility of the word,” he refers to the “constant attention” that an individual must pay to the “chemical combination that, along with the cultural education, determines our personality.”⁷

L’opera letteraria, così intesa, come un boomerang che torna a interrogarlo, diventa uno specchio retroattivo, la voce della sua coscienza, la prova del nove per misurare la legittimità di certe intuizioni, una sorta di banca-dati che va aggiornata per essere tenuta in vita nell’orizzonte delle future attese. (“Primo Levi,” 59)

(When conceived as a boomerang returning to question the author, the literary work becomes a retroactive mirror, the voice of his/her consciousness, the definite trial to weigh the legitimacy of his intuitions, a type of data bank which needs updating to be kept alive in the horizon of future expectations.)

In his writing, the private sphere, exemplified by his mother’s escape from forced deportation to the concentration camps and by his own grandfather’s execution, entwines almost seamlessly with the public role of *scrittura*, a role that he feels the *letterato*, the *uomo di lettere* should retain and be faithful to, at any cost, both as a writer and as a teacher in front of students. As Affinati writes, prior to his physical departure on this trip, he engaged in a series of readings on this topic. An individual obsession, linked to the private sphere of his existence, initially triggered Affinati’s writing of this autobiographical/ literary re-creation of his own journey to

Auschwitz, where his reading *littérature concentrationnaire* came finally 'to make sense,' an occasion for acting out experiences he never lived. He writes, "gli uomini sono capaci di mettere a frutto ogni cosa: forse io, come figlio, rappresento una risposta al pericolo che mia madre introiettò quel giorno." (*Campo del sangue*, 23; "human beings are capable of putting to interest any thing; perhaps, as a her son, I did represent a response to the danger my mother introjected that day.") Such individual, private obsession could become useful to all of us who still do not feel the reason for a collective, enduring, and tragic responsibility for the *Shoah*:

Al centro di tale percorso conoscitivo c'è, credo la composizione di *Campo del sangue* [...]. Il modo in cui è nato quel testo corrisponde pienamente alla mia idea di letteratura, oggi. Erano anni che leggevo documenti narrativi e saggistici relativi ai campi di concentramento nazisti e sovietici. [...] A un certo punto mi sono chiesto la ragione di questa ossessione conoscitiva: ho capito che riguardava non solo la mia persona, come figlio di una donna che era riuscita a fuggire, cinquant'anni prima, da un treno che la stava conducendo ai lager, e come nipote di un uomo fucilato dai nazisti in quanto partigiano. Le riflessioni che, di giorno in giorno, andavo facendo riguardavano ogni essere umano perché quello che accadde nei campi di concentramento, nella sua estremità, chiama in causa la natura stessa dell'uomo. E allora ho voluto compiere un'azione fisica, appunto il viaggio, per rendere conto e rendermi conto di ciò che credevo di aver capito. (Affinati, "Primo Levi," 61)

(At the centre of such learning process lies, I believe, the composition of *Campo del sangue* [...] The way in which that text was born fully corresponds to my idea of literature today. For years I was reading narratives and essays relative to Nazi and soviet concentration camps [...] At a certain point, I asked myself what was the reason behind my obsession for knowledge: I realized that not only regarded me as a person, as the son of a woman who managed to escape, fifty years ago, from a train going to the lager, and as a grandchild of a man shot by the Nazis because he was a partisan. The reflections which, day by day, I formed, concerned every human being because what happened in the concentration camps, in its extreme, questions the very nature of man. And so I wanted to accomplish a physical act, the journey, that is, to render and to realize an accounting of what I thought I had previously understood.)

Eraldo Affinati's relativizing approach to the painful theme of concentration camps,⁸ the intellectual and collective responsibility that we all should share regarding the *Shoah*, attempts to re-conceive an image of the intellectual at the service of society, an individual who, through his own experience, believes himself to be of value to society in reassessing events of his family's past—the private ones with which he deals everyday, even

unconsciously—that have a necessary reason to be reconnected to the recent history of a country, a race, or a religion. The issue of consciousness, aside from the idea of collective trauma, is at the centre of Affinati's *voyage au rebours*, an actual journey he took to Auschwitz:

Non posso comunque evitare di ripercorrere le tracce di chi mi ha preceduto: ho già deciso di assumerle in pieno, come se dovessi viaggiare nella matrice delle testimonianze, in un calco memoriale, diventando il modello teorico del deportato. (*Campo del sangue*, 13)

(I cannot help but to travel over the path which was left by those who came before me: I have already decided to assimilated them in full, as if I should travel in the matrix of the testimonies, in a memorial impression, thus becoming the theoretical model of the deportee.)

He himself, the 'intellectual' becomes the theoretical model of the deportee, "Il modello teorico del deportato" or a virtual *Häftling*, one of those colourless, almost unanimated creatures of Nazi propaganda, as Levi wrote in *Se questo è un uomo*, awkwardly translated in English as *Survival in Auschwitz*. If it is true, as Edward Said stated in a famous article, that "intellectual representations are the *activity* itself" (*Representations of the Intellectual*, 20), then, by reconstructing the "theoretical model of the deportee" Affinati tries to represent what his thinking process of elaboration corresponds to. The activity of elaborating the model, his attempt to visualize graphically, through letters, excerpts of other books, through his own private experience the 'product' of his intellectual activity, is touching evidence of his belief in the role of the intellectual in society, particularly in light of Primo Levi's legacy. As Affinati notes, Primo Levi made him "realize that a writer is someone who also and especially takes responsibility for those who cannot" ("Primo Levi," 61). Finally, Affinati warns about the danger of the lack of collective responsibility:

L'intero meccanismo che ha reso possibile lo sterminio del ventesimo secolo è basato sulla cancellazione della responsabilità: ogni uomo, nella Germania nazista, si sentiva giustificato, non direttamente punibile. In tale modo l'autorità morale viene resa inoperante senza essere sfidata o negata (*Campo del sangue* 39).

(The entire mechanism that has made this extermination of the twentieth century is based upon the elision of responsibility; each individual in Nazi Germany felt justified, not directly punishable. In this way, moral authority is not challenged nor denied and becomes non-operative.)

By attacking the functionalist theory by which Germans, educated in the Prussian system, simply had to 'follow orders,' Affinati renews the vow for an individual who, by assuming responsibility, impedes society from

not admitting a more universal one. Intellectuals more than others, Affinati claims, should take up the challenges of moral questioning. Commitment and awareness that literature is engagement is the true creed of Eraldo Affinati. Unlike many of his colleagues, orphans of absent political beliefs and role models, Affinati has never stopped his writing of engagement in favour of a literary production that could exploit the many postmodernist ways of rarefying meaning in order to re-construct, rather than deconstruct reality with words, faithful to Adorno's invocation in his *Negative Dialectics* to reconsider metaphysics after such reality took place. Affinati's work could be seen as a sort of paradoxically 'positive' Derridian *dissemination*, one which, instead of making meaning uncertain, in which—to cite LaCapra, "theory [...] displaces history in favour of its putative conditions of possibility", can actually re-enforce meaning by working through the vectorial connections between the word and the signified, and not "simply celebrated" (*Representing the Holocaust*, 98-99). Affinati's writings, from *Veglia alle armi* to *Campo del sangue* and *Un teologo contro Hitler*, are a statement of ethical duty on behalf of the writer to the service of society.

Rosetta Loy

The link between Affinati and Rosetta Loy's literary engagement is the lack of collective responsibility that Levi so vigorously warned against in his writings. Loy writes incessantly about this absence in Italian society. She denounces her own indifference and that of Italians in those years in which everybody should have spoken against racial laws, against the unfairness by which neighbours—the Levi family for instance—were deprived of work and means, but particularly of their identity only because they were Jewish:

There is a black border around those guiltless days of ours. [...] How to imagine the monstrous sense of isolation they [the Levis] must have felt in the grip of the SS and their orders, which, within twenty minutes, eliminated them from the human race?" (*First Words*, 162)

Just like Affinati, Loy also is not a camp survivor, but she, too, considers herself a Holocaust survivor. Loy's unbearable legacy is that of a Christian who suffers for the silence of her fellow Christians, of an Italian who realizes that fellow Italians allowed their neighbours to be deported to camps. Members of a society that, until the day before, had accepted them and had considered them to be part of their same world, as Loy or her sisters were. They were sent, instead, to extermination camps never to come back.

And on the evening of October 16, the student this writer once was, recites the rosary, sighing with boredom as she does every evening, let-

ting her eyelids droop amid the singsong of the Hail Mary and Our Fathers. She does not give the slightest thought to supplicating her God, who after all is also the God of the Levis and the Della Setas, to send the avenging angel down to help them. She feels no impulse to scream, to do something for that boy with the cheerful face who used to ring their bell [...]. On that night of October 16, the thoughts of that girl who was no longer little [...] aren't much different from usual, focussed mainly on the notes she exchanges, by way of an elaborate system of pulleys and strings, with the Calcagno girls, who live in the apartment nearby. (*First Words* 163-64)

Loy's description of her day on 16 October 1943 is certainly excruciating for the cruelty with which today the writer records her nonchalant existence and her inability to supplicate "her God" to save her neighbours Della Seta, or the boy Giorgio with his beautiful bicycle. Loy's *First Words* aptly combines autobiographical, fictional, and reportage genres in a hybridized form of narration that brings the reader back to Loy's childhood while understanding the ethical and cognitive intent of her book. Its aim, in fact, is to shed light on the Italians' responsibility toward the victims of the Holocaust, as well as to highlight their failure to resist the implementation of the 1938 Racial Laws. Loy's objective in her writing is a constant admonition to Christians to become aware of their complicity and moral responsibility in the annihilation of Jews during the Second World War. Not only the controversial *First Words* (*La parola ebreo*), but also her novel *Ciocolata da Hanselmann* and the more overtly autobiographical *La porta dell'acqua* are Loy's most convincing works, in that they retrospectively describe this historical period while connecting them to Loy's private life as a privileged Christian Italian child.

Using all hues and shades of narrative, from autobiography to fiction, Loy pursues the search for the moral and ethical duty of her fellow Italians. Virtually every one of Loy's books refers to the indifference of Christian Italians towards the *Shoah*, but they also reflect the underlying notion of a private trauma which the author seeks to work through in her writings.

On the jacket sleeve of *First Words*, we read: "Loy reveals one writer's struggle to reconcile her memories of a happy childhood with her adult knowledge that, hidden from her young eyes, one of the world's most horrifying tragedies was unfolding." Perhaps the editor and publisher needed this stark contrast to present (and sell) the book, but, in fact, if we read Loy's overtly autobiographical *La porta dell'acqua* carefully, we realize that her childhood was not happy by any stretch of the imagination. It was secure and safe; it was wealthy, with vacations in the mountains and at the beach, but certainly not happy. A sense of loneliness denominates Loy's

autobiographical writings on her childhood. In a way, it would impossible to read *La parola ebreo* (*First Words*) without considering the importance of Loy's unresolved childhood trauma, more visible in *La porta dell'acqua*. For Loy, this trauma stems from the repressed unspoken diversity in a world rigidly divided by those who were Jewish and those who were not. It all begins in that world which her Tyrolese governess, Annemarie, blindly accepts, in Loy's little nursery where Annemarie tells her stories of *Paulenchen*. There, the little girl who will later become a writer, learns to juxtapose her own security against the world of the other little friend, Regina, whose life is marked forever by the star of David on her chest. Not a happy childhood at all then, but marked by the awareness of a profound fracture in her society, marred by the indifference of the 'nice people' toward the tragedy that was unfolding. In the period of Loy's reminiscence, two religions, which in Rome had co-habited peacefully, find themselves in *First Words* to represent a particularly difficult issue: the assimilation that allowed Jews not to understand that the first racial laws were implemented to define their "racial difference." How could two families living in the same building have a different destiny, merely because one was Christian, the other Jewish? "How could this happen?" is a question that often resonates in Italian fictions of the Holocaust from Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* on. There is no temporal barrier between past and present. The personal story of the little girl is revealed through the gashes left open by the oppressing historical events of World War Two. It is an on-going past, as in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In a reply to Sergio Romano's then recently published book, *Lettera a un amico ebreo*, Rosetta Loy harshly criticizes her friend for trying too hard to break with stereotypes about Jews and for dismissing the unresolved issue of the *Shoah* as "counterproductive." Romano's hypothesis, that "the Shoah has become a permanent blackmail for Westerners" is rejected by Loy as she contends that a very basic distinction needs here to be made between Israel's political use of the genocide (particularly within its borders in order to justify anti-Arab paranoia) and the silence and indifference, which Levi feared the most, that have instead enveloped the issue in Europe, where the genocide took place. Loy states,

Like everybody else, Europe proclaimed its innocence, imputing the genocide only to the defunct Nazi ideology. Except for Germany, on whom every responsibility has fallen and who is the only one who could revenge a screening of its own behaviour. What does it mean that the Jewish genocide is 'encumbering'. Encumbering for whom? (Loy, "Caro, *permaloso amico*," 52)

According to Loy, a series of questions has long remained unanswered, because they have never been posed to those few who profited from the persecution of Jews in Italy and Europe. Posing these questions has become a "tumor inside the body of Europe," Loy maintains. The recurring rationalization that dismisses this issue ("the historical context of Auschwitz no longer exists") is not in her view an answer, but a mere excuse. "The history of every genocide is connected with the locals where it took place. One does not erase the other; and the closer it is (to us) in a cultural and physical sense, the stronger, the more inevitable, the more traumatic, our involvement will be" ("Caro, *permaloso* amico," 53). In contrast to Romano's theories of archiving the encumbering holocaust, Loy recognizes the Jewish people's "right to justice," the collective character of this particular type of responsibility. Loy's analysis also involves the stereotyping of Jews and their attitude that, according to some, should never be one of reaction and aggression. Loy completely rejects such a stereotype in her fiction. In the novel *Cioccolata da Hanselmann*, Loy presents the case of a Jewish professor, Arturo, who kills Eddie, the young man who is going to the Swiss police to denounce him. The stereotype of the Jews' necessary submission to events is for Loy morally wrong, and fiction—and this novel's underlying goal which is remote from the story of the sisters—is to present such moral issues to the reader, the necessity finally to break with stereotypes.

A further fundamental question Loy poses in *First Words* regards the mysterious encyclical *Humani generis unitas* which Pius XI commissioned from John La Farge, the author of *Interracial Justice* (1938) (Loy, *First Words* 81). In a letter to *L'Indice*, Guido Fink takes up Loy's challenge and wonders whether, "quell'enciclica avrebbe potuto davvero cambiare la sorte di milioni di ebrei" ("that encyclical could really have changed the fate of millions of Jews"; Fink, *La parola ebreo*, 5). It is important to remember, however, that "Passelecq and Suchecky frantically searched for that *Encyclique Cachée*, which the future Pope Pius XII claimed disappeared, though at a latter date he used some of its passages on the sufferings of the Polish clergy, while censoring everything regarding Jews and Nazism. It is in this sense that, perhaps, this book deserves to be recommended and not only to those who 'know little'" (Fink, *La parola ebreo*, 5).

According to Fink, what Loy as an adult contests in non-fascist and non-racist Italians is their not having posed the same questions she cannot ignore today. "Brucia dirlo" "It hurts to say it" (*First Words*, 135)—this simple phrase has become significant for all those who are Christians and live with the moral consequences of the racial laws, deportation, guilt, and shame for what their relatives did not do.

Conclusion

The peculiarities of the 'alternate route' I have followed in order to claim canonicity for Primo Levi's writings surface in the light of what has often been said to be the ultimate social, historical, and personal need for such a corpus of writings: never to forget what happened to others and to learn from our own past by means of art. 'Fiction' is not necessarily a synonym for 'novel,' and 'testimony' is not necessarily a substitute for historical research and authenticity. Every instrument can be a 'fallacious instrument,' but it can also be used with the best intentions to create artistic works and foster consciousness in readers.

In Cees Noteboom's novel *All Souls Day*, a character speaks about contemporary indifference for events memorialized in history:

we're no longer touched by the plight of others; they simply wound up on the wrong page of the history book ... because we know, even when it's happening, that's history—we're experts at that ... Amazing, isn't it, history in the making, and we don't want to have anything to do with that either ... Arno, what did that stupid Hegel of yours say? 'The days of peace are blank pages in the book of history,' or something to this effect ... Well, we are those white pages now, and they're truly blank, because we're not there. (89)

Whether or not we consider the Jewish Holocaust unique, it leads us to review a "past that is far from inert, in the sense that we rediscover it, having forgotten or repressed too much" (Hartman, *The Fateful Question of Culture*, 101). It is our moral duty today to resist the danger of considering times of peace to be "blank pages," in which there is no place for us because we do not want to remember nor to consider the past, times in which nothing seems to change simply because no wars are weighing down on the fate of Italians. But they do on others, always. Through Primo Levi's legacy, Eraldo Affinati and Rosetta Loy provide us with artistic examples of how to come to terms with historical facts and intellectual pursuits during a period of relative peace (that is, for Italians). These 'children of the Holocaust' by imagination—or vocation—are, in a way, the aesthetic agents of this 'post-apocalypse.' They feel the responsibility of keeping alive in art, and not merely in life, the memory of such an apocalyptic event. These writers have not witnessed, but they bear witness to the Holocaust, for art constantly commits itself to imagine what is not imaginable in real life. By making space in their writing for these issues, their pages are no longer 'blank,' but filled with the perpetual quest of intellectuals for a world that rediscovers humanity through culture without antagonizing these two terms. Theirs is thus a form of engagement which makes it pos-

sible still to believe in the ethical duty of intellectuals and in the necessity of art to try to “say what cannot be said.” Far from representing violations of the facts of history while juxtaposing a subject to them, as Berel Lang maintains (“The Representation of Limits,” 312), the work of Loy and Affinati only reaffirm that particular link between Italian Gentiles and Jews, one that has made the development of our contemporary literature virtually unique. Levi’s legacy resides in his reaffirmation of a link that was severed, but that we must now reconnect by whatever artistic means possible. Imaginative representation therefore, has a profoundly important task in uniting, rather than dividing, future generations. The specificity of artistic, *vis-à-vis* historical facts, should reside in the creation of speaking subjects who can, in their aesthetic endeavour, reach out and expose (linguistically or visually) areas where blank pages should have no reason to exist.

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NOTES

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²The biblical term *Shoah*, “a sudden disaster, individual or collective,” was used for the first time in Palestine in 1938. As Anna-Vera Sullam Calimani writes, in Palestine, poets and writers used the term afterwards, in 1942, on the occasion of a symposium on Jews in occupied Europe (*I nomi dello sterminio*, 19). After the war, it became the most commonly used term in Israel. Many contradictory opinions in merit to which term would be adopted, Holocaust, *Shoah*, genocide, make evident the oft-mentioned linguistic vacuum when facing an unseen phenomenon

³It is useful to look on the web to realize how many sites deal with the prevailing anti-Semitic feelings spreading in Europe today. Aside from the classic sources (i.e. Pierre Birnbaum’s *Antisemitism in France*), magazines such as *Vanity Fair* are publishing disturbing investigations and articles on this matter (see Brenner, “France’s Scarlet Letter”). The Center Simon Wiesenthal is preparing an official report on anti-Semitism in France and also collects signatures to protest with the French government for its failure at regarding the more than 200 incidents happened in France from 2000 on as more than “hooligans’ acts” (www.wiesenthal.com).

⁴“just as history should not be conflated with testimony, so agency may have to go beyond witnessing to take up more comprehensive modes of political and social practice” (LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 12). For an extensive treatment of this matter, see also Felman and Laub’s *Testimony*.

⁵For an interesting discussion of Styron's case, see Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*.

⁶See Bernard-Donals for an extended treatment of Wilkomirski's work, which he considers "a powerful testimony to events that are unavailable to those who were not there and that are available as open wounds to those who were" ("Beyond the Question of Authenticity," 1303).

⁷Affinati, "Primo Levi," 58. He also specifies the danger of utilizing memory, of the risk of turning it into a data bank to use when necessary. If this were true, Affinati claims, it would become an interior alibi.

⁸I am still referring to Said's rendition of Lyotard's theories on the postmodern intellectual (*Representations of the Intellectual*, 18), more prone to express his/her competence in the local than in the universal, thus refusing to engage in any debate on moral, ethical, in short, larger classes of value. We could also recall Guattari's notion of "bankruptcy of the idea of progress and modernity" that has ruined any positive idea about social action (*A Thousand Plateaus*, x), as well as the Derridean notion that, since our understanding is largely relative, all truth is consequently relative, and the rejection of metanarratives or universalistic constructs of any type is only a corollary of such notion.

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