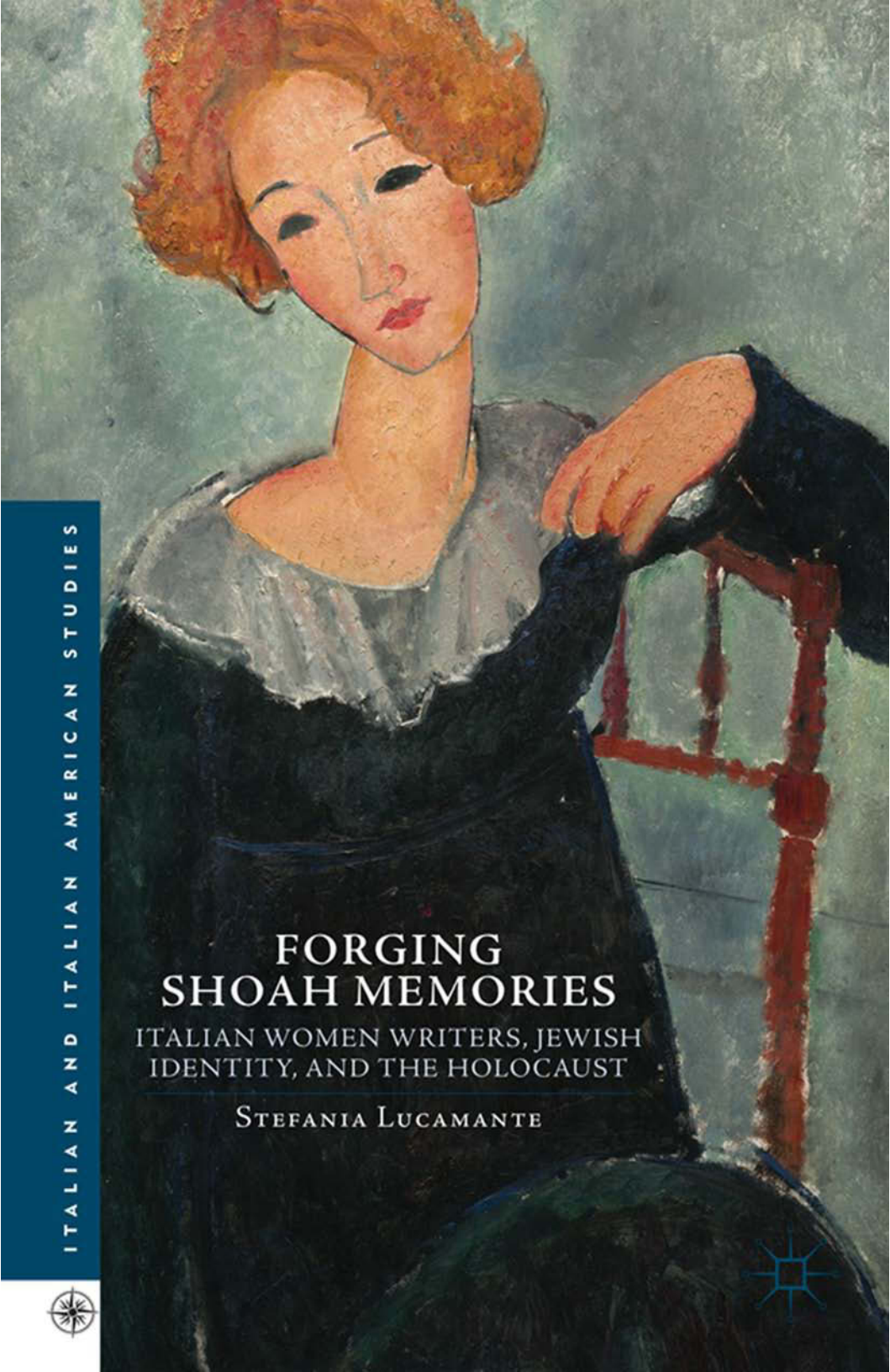
ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES
FORGING
SHOAH MEMORIES
ITALIAN WOMEN WRITERS, JEWISH
IDENTITY, AND THE HOLOCAUST
Stefania Lucamante

Italian and Italian American Studies

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Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust

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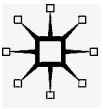

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Some of the topics covered in the book were originally published as articles. Parts that focused on the problems related to the representative genre of the novel were taken from my article "The 'Indispensable' Legacy of Primo Levi : From Eraldo Affinati to Rosetta Loy between History and Fiction," *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 24.2 (Fall 2003): 87–104. Previous versions of chapter 7 and chapter 8 have appeared respectively in "Quel che resta di Auschwitz nel mettersi al mondo: *Lezioni di tenebra* di Helena Janeczek," *Nuova Prosa*, no. 44 (2006), edited by Alessandro Carrera (127–46), and in the proceedings of a conference I organized with Sandro Portelli—"'Figli della Shoah 'o 'Figli del popolo ebraico'? Helena Janeczek e un problema di identità generazionale," *Memoria collettiva e*

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Abbreviations

For works commonly referenced in *Forging Shoah Memories*, I have used the following abbreviations to refer to the works in-text.

AI *Arturo's Island*, Elsa Morante
BB *Una bambina e basta*, Lia Levi
CA *Chi ti ama cosí*, Edith Bruck
DD *Dentro la D*, Giacoma Limentani
FB *Il fumo di Birkenau*, Liana Millu
FW *First Words*, Rosetta Loy
HIS *History: A Novel*, Elsa Morante
IA *L'isola di Arturo*, Elsa Morante
IC *In contumacia*, Giacoma Limentani
LS *La Storia*, Elsa Morante
LT *Lezioni di tenebra*, Helena Janeczek
PE *La parola ebreo*, Rosetta Loy
PS *I ponti di Schwerin*, Liana Millu
RM *Le rondini di Montecassino*, Helena Janeczek
SB *Smoke over Birkenau*, Liana Millu
ST *La spirale della tigre*, Giacoma Limentani
WL *Who Loves You Like This*, Edith Bruck

Introduction

Several critical and theoretical categories periodically undergo scrutiny within the complex panorama of studies on the literature representing the twentieth-century catastrophe of the Shoah. Still today, 70 years after the event, what remains salient is the pervasive and shared sense of intellectual anxiety in drawing any definitive conclusions with respect to the ethical duty of art—Geoffrey Hartman's idea of "redemptive thinking"—of the event. The complexity with which numerous Shoah literary works renegotiate the limits of representation (as they do with the notion of a revisited memory), mirrors the theoretical anxiety in their aesthetic analysis. After this event, for which the metonym "Auschwitz" often finds a place in critical reasoning, Theodor Adorno theorized the impossibility of a metaphysics interpreted in the conventional sense. Adorno pondered whether reality, with its ability to display disastrous evidence, constitutes a more suitable mode of analysis than any form of philosophy, particularly when the scope of this analysis invests the field with future awareness and a renewed ontology of being. The philosopher's practical question on how to think and write poetry after such a tragedy encapsulates the haunting issue that still divides artists and scholars. Along with these difficulties of how to say Auschwitz, the responsibility of art—its ethical zone with respect to this event— remains another pivotal issue (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 1). Representability of an event—whether in a visual or literary manner—is predicated upon the responsibility of the art (and of the artist). I argue that art manifests its ethical aspect when aesthetic creation is functional to the construction of an ethics of resistance. With this idea in mind, I wrote *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust.*

Forging Shoah Memories provides a critical analysis of and a testimony to the ethical commitment of Italian women writers (or those who have chosen Italian as a linguistic vehicle) to transmit their perspective on some of the seminal events that determined the history of Italy and Europe in the twentieth century, namely, the resounding effects of the 1938 racial

laws and the Shoah. The backdrop is composed by the troubling legacy of Mussolini's dictatorship, a historical period that philosopher Benedetto Croce famously labeled a "parenthesis" in Italian history. During this "parenthesis," humanity bore witness to the fall of humanistic values. Alberto Moravia's reflection in his preface to Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943* (October 16, 1943)[1] partly guides my reading:

> Racism is a mass ideology; and its victims have not, nor can be allowed to have, individual and recognizable faces; they too are seen as a mass. The pain, therefore, is not merely about the injustice but also about the crumbling of humanistic values, the end of the interval of individualism between primitive barbarity and the barbarity yet to come. ("Preface" 20)

By their actions, Italian women writers retrieve the lineaments of a gendered-defined Other. I borrow Emanuel Lévinas's expression concerning the face of the Other and apply it to the notion of an Other who is different three times over. The female Other in Shoah studies embodies a sense of otherness that my analysis assesses not only in terms of race and religion, but also in terms of gender. These writings direct our gaze toward the faces of other women who did not survive the tempest of racism, or were violated in their homes back in Italy. When we look at how women have represented those moments of grief that they and their fellow concentration-camp prisoners witnessed and were subjected to, we gain yet another opportunity to read the Shoah: the recollections and memories of these faces are shaped through distinct stylistic and rhetorical choices made by each of these authors. They resist the event not with silence, as many women did, for a variety of reasons, but with distinct and multiple possibilities of expression. They validate notions of collaboration and understanding between fictional writing and the (gendered) rewriting of historical events. Women writers' representations of the Shoah offer new ways of understanding the process of constant renegotiation between the word and the image by which the retrieval of memory becomes possible. The essayistic and novelistic genres (although the choice is not limited to these forms) often become efficacious instruments for investigating the nature of moral issues while concurrently taking into the greatest consideration the value of the aesthetic. I value the literary examples I discuss in my book as complementary and indispensable to the construction of a wider discourse on the Shoah because the very presence of these texts raises additional issues regarding discrimination and intolerance. What many Italian women espouse in their testimonies and writings is that, in the camps, they experienced a profound sense of discrimination imposed on them by their fellow Jewish women, who chastised these

Italian prisoners for being female citizens of a Fascist country and their complete illiteracy in the Yiddish language. Discrimination also persists throughout subsequent literary studies. The existence of these works—so clearly based on a gendered experience—problematizes any endorsement of Saul Friedländer's caution about the fear of a possible "weakening" of critical discourse on this epochal event by including a discussion of gender alongside those already accepted in the scholarly zeitgeist of the Shoah ("Historical Significance" 33).[2] The critic must simultaneously dispel Lawrence Langer's famous caution over the danger of a "laceration" due to gender specificity in the critical discourse of the Shoah (Bravo, "Presentazione" xi). In the struggle to win approval for a universal interpretation, we lose sight of many less traditionally considered aspects of the Shoah: voices, perspectives, experiences that all compose, in concert, the event.

Making the male point of view universal and making it normative should strike the critic as a renewed menace to the advancement of gender studies. Unlike Friedlander and Langer, as a woman and as a scholar, I believe that discourse on the Shoah can sustain and thrive under the pressure of the woman's image-constructing word in all its multiplicities and differences. As late as 2009, James Young, in recognizing the poignant gaze of women, expresses fear that the image and the pain of women may be manipulated. Young discusses how "the public gaze of photographers, curators, historians, and museum goers continues to turn women into objects of memory, idealized casts of perfect suffering and victimization, and even emblems of larger Jewish suffering during the Holocaust" (1778). Voyeurism thus represents a rather conventional way of looking at the "pain of women" (1778). I consider this attitude to be profoundly limiting, as it relegates women to the confines of suffering, and disregards any other potential roles occupied by women during the Shoah. Notwithstanding this undeniable, however ambiguous, interest toward the representation of women's grief, we should not be prevented from dealing with what women as subjects have to tell and how they depict their own grief as well as that of other women. To see how women privilege their point of view with respect to their identity when jeopardized by a state of exception is central to my study.

Another pernicious critical stereotype, rather dismissive of further investigations on the feminine aspect of the Shoah, is founded on the misconception of an already established knowledge of the humiliations suffered by the women in the lager. As with the aforementioned critical misunderstandings, this too suggests a fundamental lack of interest in analyzing women's writings.[3] The choice to *not* speak about the suffering of women because much has already been said comes dangerously close

to echoing another worrisome concept: the historiographical amnesia and indifference to events that seems to affect Italy from time to time. Further aggravating this "Italian amnesia" is the deficiency of systematic literary studies that exclusively address the subject of an "Italian" Shoah; Alberto Cavaglion describes this deficit as "an almost complete lack of interest and works" ("Ebraismo e memoria" 179).

The profound dissent within the Italian literary and historiographical debate on the importance of Shoah women's testimony and subsequent writing should not surprise readers. It intertwines two shortcomings that reconfirm the ambiguity of Italian studies and intellectual history: a prevalent misogynistic attitude toward women's studies and a long-standing fragmented narrative regarding historical discourse on Italian Jewish culture.[4] When scrutinizing the work of Italian Jewish women writers, the juxtaposition of the categories of the universal and the masculine does not only take place within the critical discourse on the Shoah,[5] but also represents a general vagueness toward Italian women's writings. Regardless of their faith, reticence to accept the word and work of women still looms large in Italian literary criticism.

Forging Shoah Memories does not aim to engage in the historiography of the Shoah; instead, I intend to combine two aspects of my scholarship: (1) an investigation into the generic transformations and hybridizations female authors have produced with their novelistic contribution, and (2) the problems of fictional representation in Italian literature of the Shoah. In this way, I define a chronologically linear trajectory and begin to define a possible taxonomy of Italian women's literary representations of the Shoah. By positioning female Italian writers within a comprehensive and international mapping of Shoah studies, this book fills what I call the Italian Jewish women writers' gap. As the concept of gender continues to be a central issue in literary and cultural studies, carrying with it a significance that crosses disciplinary boundaries, my gender-based analysis addresses women's experience of living and writing the Shoah. Gendered literary criticism and cultural practice expand the understanding of what is now an established canonical body of female writings on the Shoah. This event's history of representation only benefits from a systematic analysis of the substantial literary arch of Italian women's writing on the topic, spanning the writings immediately following the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps in 1945 to those texts inaugurating a new period of studies in the third millennium. My trajectory sets as its focal points the shifts by which experience and testimonials in predominantly nonfictional work of survivors move into the realm of fictional works authored by first- and second-generation writers. *Forging Shoah Memories*'s gendered

standpoint looks then at the strategies Italian women writers utilize in their fictive and nonfictive representations. Far from offering repetitive narrative patterns based on the deportees' recounting of the canonical moments of the arrest, journey to the camp, life in the camp, freedom, and return home, these writings vary in their approach to the narrative of the events and the way discourse articulates the emplotment of each distinctive work. I hope that the contribution of a gendered emotional and intellectual legacy of the event might alleviate the persuasive but erroneous binary dichotomy of woman as either victim or femme fatale frequently offered in male writers' works (Horowitz 368).

Starting from more conventional memoirs of the concentration camps, unknown to a large section of English-speaking audiences, *Forging Shoah Memories* assesses the ethical and aesthetic possibilities that selected writings deploy in order to defuse the danger of trespassing the limits of representability, or, in Berel Lang's words, the representative limits of literary writing ("The Representation of Limits" 300). *Forging Shoah Memories* evaluates the facets by which these narratives absorb and develop testimonial writing not only in the sense of "as I saw it," but also toward the exploration of fictional representation without trespassing on the limits of a claim for truth. Liana Millu's works demonstrate how, as early as the period between 1945 and 1955, women survivors' reflections begin to depart from the memorialistic and testimonial ("as I saw it") to approach the genre of the philosophical essay on the subject of the Shoah, racial intolerance, and theoretical reflections on the legacy to posterity. Distinct peculiarities surface in these women's artistic plights as we investigate works from different generations as well. How is Shoah memory negotiated today by new generations of readers? What distinguishes all these seemingly disparate works? Each author's contribution reveals the literary resistance to the transparency of language: their works state the presence of a Jewish Italian identity while also considering the political aspect of the (artistic) act of writing, for any writing of a woman amounts to that of an individual. As such, the message of these writers is intended not only for other women and other writers but also for the members of the community at large.

Critical shifts in the assessment of history—as in those works emerging from historical events—reflect the choices and changes of each generation living after the Shoah: they are all subject to the different patterns of historiographical criticism of this event as well as to the variables of societal modes and understanding of the event. Italy, the national focus of *Forging Shoah Memories*, has kept on living with a surprising historical amnesia that gravely hampers the understanding of the event and the responsibility of Italians and, in turn, has never really made it possible to

construct a palimpsest of writers of the Shoah. These writings bring with them an intrinsic gendered connotation—the author's point of view—but should also speak to a community that is not just Italian. The texts are relevant for their aesthetic as well as their ideological contribution; hopefully they will raise readers' collective and political consciousness. In the case of the distressed protagonist of Edith Bruck's *Lettera da Francoforte* (*Letter from Frankfurt*), a lager survivor, a female writer living in Rome, builds her entire existence on the drafting of possible realities and places of investigation of the Shoah in the shape of an actual investigation into what happened to her and to her family. Ironically, these investigations stir questions of her perennial mourning, the work's very necessity. The book shows the cruelty of existence not only during, but also after the Shoah: its story is entirely built around the Kafkaesque need to probe evidence of her protagonist's suffering and her enduring trial of living in death camps in order to receive a meager pension. Suffering, trials, investigations, these become loci of examination of the past shaped into conversations and letters between the elderly survivor and the Frankfurt inspector. In this awkward exchange of messages, the oft-used expression "elaboration of mourning" becomes the locus of contingency.

The infinite possibility of transforming the written word propounds these women's need for investigation of their own identities: the political sense of writing connotes their writing as both women *and* as individuals. It is our task to evaluate the emergence of a praxis of aesthetics that challenges "a community of language as a universal, unifying tool which totalizes and equalizes" (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 210). A narrative is subject to socio-anthropological readings, but that does not mean that it must address only other women, for it speaks to a much wider audience. Evaluating the aesthetic and ideological contribution of women's literary work partly aims to sensitize society to forms of racial extremism as pervasive as the ones we witness in our current epoch. To quote Moravia from the aforementioned introduction, "aestheticism [...] can signify compassion."[6]

I consider the realm of contemporary writings to be suggestive of two types of works published in the late nineties. Their dissimilarity resides not so much in the authorial intentions that sustain their respective projects, but, rather, in their authors' biographies. Writers like Rosetta Loy (born in 1936), relatively young at the time of racial laws, deportations, and concentration camps, have been writing about the Holocaust only in adult age. Other authors like Helena Janeczek belong to the generation of the so-called Children of the Shoah.[7] She belongs to the generation of the Children of the Holocaust because of her relatives' destiny. With their writings firmly based within the peculiarities of their gender

as constructed in Italian society, these writers discuss with their readers their Jewishness or *Hebräitude,* or, alternatively, the ethical weight and responsibility that Italian Catholics must endure. The contemporary reader finds this theme keenly explored in works elaborated upon by writers who belong, by blood or by imagination (as in the case of Eraldo Affinati), to the generation of the "Children of the Holocaust." Janeczek's work reveals the anguish of coming to terms with her traumatic childhood, of growing up in a household in which even the silence of her parents ironically speaks of a terrible past, echoed with long-lasting consequences. By considering their identity, their feeling Jewish (or the ethical burden of not having done anything to prevent such tragedy, as exemplified in Loy's narratives) before, during, and after the Shoah (the continuity of feeling or lack thereof constituting a thematic knot of their works) these women display veritable concerns that shape their ethical contribution. Their writing testifies, carries reflections and ideas that reveal how these women, initially considered liminal characters of the lager experience, act as participants and agents in the narrative of a public history, that of the Shoah.

In short, as my friend and colleague Carlo Tenuta suggested after reading my work, rather than with "the Shoah in the feminine," *Forging Shoah Memories* deals with the "feminine aspect of the Shoah" in all its facets, not least of which is the linguistic one. Indeed, the study also explores the writings in the Italian language of women who, like Bruck and Janeczek, have made a clear choice in giving up their native language and embracing Italian culture and Italian as a linguistic medium. The gravity of this choice should never be underestimated, for culture and language constitute the *sine qua non* for transmission of memory. Against those who complain of the expendability of the dramatic-pathetic women's writings, against those who want to impose the label of "victim" upon women even prior to an attentive reading of what they have written, *Forging Shoah Memories* adds a further—gendered—tassel to the representative possibilities of collective events.

Lastly, the significance of women's writing lies not only in its undeniable peculiarity that originates partly in the gender of the authors, but also in the fact that these women are *compartecipi* (from the Latin etymon of "participating with," *cum-particeps*). Their works are significant for and within a larger literature of the Shoah, for rather than juxtaposing the preexisting oeuvre, these authors share their representation with the already established narrative of the event. Seen from this standpoint then, understanding women's perspectives in their common experience of discrimination is not synonymous with the essence of their works' content. On the contrary, speaking of the "feminine aspect of the Shoah" instead

of "Shoah in the feminine"[8] reaffirms the importance of a gendered word addressing the community as intended by Kristeva. Feminization of culture, when viewed outside the distorting prism of misogyny, does not hold a pejorative meaning, nor does it weaken the ethical assets of a given culture. Far from being suggestive of a culture of sentiments connected with modern mass culture, as argued in several American studies (Tennenhouse and Gould), feminization of culture affirms the underwriting of a fruitful connection between the corporeality of the woman, the act of reminiscing about the event, and the place where it happened. It is a firmly situated gendered process that expands its meaning beyond mere cultural feminization. Gender peculiarities matter in both the reality of the event—as in the retelling of the deportees—and the fictional rendition of memories and postmemory reflections. As Primo Levi stated in speaking of the grey zone, "(W)hat we commonly mean by 'understand' coincides with 'simplify': without profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions" (*Drowned* 22). Through the act of writing, these authors seek neither a simplification nor attempt to free themselves from the ghost of the Shoah. Rather, they demonstrate the validity of other considerations (bodily differences) that can serve to vitalize literature and its self-awareness, constituting a useful element to the process of reconceptualization of a civil and civic existence after the Shoah.

Failure to understand the peculiarities of gender would turn representational examples of discrimination and suffering into oversimplifications of different perspectives and facets of the event. Difference means enrichment. An advantageous path to understanding the Shoah and its fictional representations begins with a rereading of women's memorial texts. The second step is looking at theoretical approaches to the texts of the Shoah's second- and third-generation writers. Efraim Sicher expounds on the subject of second-generation Shoah writers, particularly in his book, *Breaking Crystal: Writing Memory after Auschwitz*. The works by Norma Rosen, Alan Berger, and Rita Calabrese, as well as Maurice Halbwachs's reflections on collective memory dealing with the transformation of identity construction by later generations, have greatly influenced my reading of the matter of the Shoah. All along my thinking as to how the matter takes shape in these women's works has no doubt been colored by this forceful argument of Jean-François Lyotard:

> The real objective of literature [...] has always been to reveal, represent in words, what every representation misses, what is forgotten there: this "presence," whatever name it is given by one author or another, which

> persists not so much at the limits but rather at the heart of representation; this unnameable in the secret of names, a forgotten that is not the result of the forgetting of a reality—nothing having been stored in memory—and which one can only remember as forgotten "before" memory and forgetting, and by repeating it. (*Heidegger and "the Jews"* 5)

Perhaps, as some suggest, mourning cannot, and should not lead to the ablation of guilt, so that the genocide of European Jews becomes inserted into the story and the memory of the Jewish people who can mend the fracture of the Shoah and search for ties to the world that preceded it. The future should not be considered an inert abyss, but, rather, one that can be filled in by the well-intentioned understanding of those different from us. The Lévinasian Others—the not-us—experience racial hatred even today in ways that bear striking resemblance at times to events that happened 70 years ago to Jews, homosexuals, political and religious dissidents, and gypsies.[9] My view of a proper pedagogy of the Shoah is one that departs from that mortuary totem element that Helena Janeczek rejects as visual legacy of Judaism in the negative, a Judaism that is confined to grief and mourning, connected, that is, only to the legacy of the Shoah. The Shoah must be reinscribed with a Jewish history that has contained the abrupt rupture of Nazi persecution and can move forward.

My book aims to be a testimony to the engagement of Italian women in the betterment of society as they accept the ethical duties that the act of making art implies. Methodologically grounded by close readings and the politics of culture, I tackle the themes expressed in these women's writings. After the initial urgent necessity for confession and testimony, as in the case of Giuliana Tedeschi Fiorentino, Lidia Beccaria Rolfi, Fausta Finzi, and Liana Millu, Italian writers composed more restrained prose in which the analysis of the situation and of the consequences of the Shoah were sifted through by a process of rethinking, the result of a deeper awareness of the situation's enormity. Readings of other survivors' works, the 1946 Nuremberg and 1961 Eichmann trials, the reaction to a new generation who wanted to know, other genocides that followed the Shoah, and the revisionism of the early 1980s contributed profoundly to the transformation of the writing genre from the testimonial to the essayistic and fictional. It is this transition that one needs to examine, for testimony itself—however important—does not sufficiently explain and disseminate to future generations the ethical impact of historical facts on these women's lives. This is, more often than not, the duty of literature.

While researching material for my courses on the Shoah in film and literature, I became aware of the paradox related to Shoah understanding in Italy: while many claim awareness of the historic fact as given,

much ignorance still looms about impact of the event on Italian society and literature. Several Italian women writers have explored this subject in their writings and have not been properly acknowledged. Women writers/survivors are often forgotten and/or their writings have not been given the same prominence as those written by men. While constituting a far from homogenous group of artists, they had all either written traditional memoirs based on their own authentic experiences or deployed their recent memories in crafting works of fiction. The distinctiveness of women's issues presented in their works creates a thematic path that has helped me understand how, despite the fact that it is public knowledge how imposing the number of women's publications on this tragedy is, a tactful but consistent silence still reigns today over the literary contribution of these women.[10] These works were published, often at the authors' expense, in great numbers right at the end of World War II. Far from representing a sudden spur of writing in recent years, their reemergence in newly revised editions denotes a muted point of view that bears witness to the turn toward feminist studies in literary criticism. While these early and courageous publications revealed the need to speak of the until-then-unbelievable events just witnessed and lived through, texts in which women writers decided to face their own memory as well as the memories of those with whom they shared detention and humiliations needed a period of latency before resurfacing. This temporal hiatus was necessary in order to elucidate a working project and meditate on the trauma they endured or, in more recent cases, experienced themselves by proxy through the memory of others (their parents or even, as in the case of Gentile writers, their neighbors). In these texts, pressured by the need to speak and record the incredible, the Shoah functions as the fulcrum to bring together almost in unison the following: the retelling of personal experience from the discrimination before the deportation; the arrest and deportation; time in the camp; the corporeal mortification; long-awaited freedom; and finally, a return to civil life. After many years, the same themes resurface in the memoirs of the relatives and children of the survivors. These themes are claimed from these survivors so that their stories could be inscribed within a larger fresco and at the same time retain a private (family) space. These themes—filtered and reworked—constitute relevant categories for the genre of the Shoah novel: for those works, that is, whose narratives can be assimilated into a reality experienced by the subject and in which readers observe a fictional transfiguration of events.

It is this corpus of initial writings—the commonalities, with a more general discussion on the discrimination and camp experiences, as well as the diverging perspectives on how to write of these experiences—that facilitates a more theoretical discussion of what the Shoah means from

an ethical point of view; how such a tragic event can be narrated in a fictional and essayistic form; and, finally, the mother-daughter topos of women's writing brought into the trauma dimension of daughters of the Shoah dealing with their mothers. Politics of forgetting—in this case, forgetting the peculiarity of the language of women—can be as pernicious as any other politics of revisionism. My study begins by examining the narratives of the camps as literary works rather than as sociohistorical ones and grouping them into the body of works conventionally termed *littérature concentrationnaire* (concentrationary literature)[11] after Rousset's famous expression *l'univers concentrationnaire*.

Although we acknowledge the difficulty that Edith Bruck, survivor and writer, finds in *dividere l'umanità fra voci maschili e femminili* (*dividing humanity between male and female voices*; "Le mie esperienze" 66–67), we must, nevertheless, begin to properly address first the gendered voice to understand its peculiarity as well as its nonexclusiveness to its own gender. How does this voice gain relevance for itself and for those who hear it? By taking feminist theory's grounding principles and attempting to develop them beyond the realm of sex and gender, a gendered and female perspective of the Shoah constructs possible spaces from within such principles, thus expanding their hermeneutic possibilities. The contribution of women writers has been fundamental to a more complete understanding of the Shoah. As Toni Negri and Michael Hardt point out, "[T]he threat and reality of genocidal acts thrusts the theme of life itself onto center stage so that every reference to economic production and reproduction cannot forget the centrality of bodies" (*Commonwealth* 26). The notion of the body—usually modeled after a hierarchical system such as that of society in general, and the society of the camp (Gordon, 80–81) in particular—must be a profoundly gendered one, for, as Negri and Hardt maintain, both Simone de Beauvoir and second-wave feminist thought "focus attention powerfully on the gender differences and hierarchies that are profoundly material and corporeal" (*Commonwealth* 26). My argument finds substance in the historical research of Anna Bravo and Anna Rossi-Doria. As Rossi-Doria makes clear in "Memorie di donne," historiography did not take female specificity into consideration until the late 1980s. Historiographical silence, the one Lyotard contests in *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* was finally broken largely because several conferences at the end of that decade focused specifically on the differences between the experiences of men and women in the camps.

The second chapter of part I, "Not Only Memory: Narrating the Camp between Reality and Fiction," discusses narratives of the lager and visions of confinement. The writings belong to a stream of works whose most important titles are perhaps Giuliana Tedeschi Fiorentino's *Questo povero*

corpo (*This Poor Body*), and Liana Millu's *Il fumo di Birkenau* (*The Smoke of Birkenau*). Italian female survivors have produced narratives whose overtones are usually consistent with the traditional representative mode of *letteratura concentrazionaria*. They investigate and narrate their own experience as survivors in the construction of what I consider an ideal and complementary literary bridge with Primo Levi's legacy of remembrance. They have made us aware of their adversities in the camp as well as their existential path after the camp, in an elaboration of what Guri Schwarz refers to as *ritrovare se stessi* (finding oneself again). In some cases, finding oneself again signifies the overlapping of a feminine perspective with the recognition of one's own Italianness. With an emphasis on the concept of *vite romanzesche* (novel-like lives), intended as existences whose situations depend on a historical event of such proportions that life resembles fiction, these texts converse with events of the past from a temporal perspective that aims to resolve this past. My focus, then, is the functioning of the construction produced by memorial genotexts, those books painfully published upon returning from the camp, which lead to the fictional phenotexts through the employment of the literary modes of the novel, novella, and short story. These first set of narratives highlight a strikingly clear notion of gender difference. This is not surprising, for many categories of Shoah experience are exclusively women's issues that exist within the larger frame of Shoah narratives and its traumatic aftermath: immediate loss of a newborn upon arrival to the camp, forced abortion caused by stressful and dramatic situations, amenorrhea, hereditary anorexia, and conflicts among inmates (and same-gender family relatives, mothers, sisters, and daughters).

Part I, chapter 3—"The Power of Dignity, Or 'Writers Out of Necessity': The Case of Liana Millu and Edith Bruck"—constitutes the counterpart to chapter 2. As Bruck's works have lately gained more prominence, mainly thanks to the work of Philip Balma, Brenda Webster, and Gabriella Romani, this chapter focuses on the work of Genoese writer and survivor Liana Millu, an author who is hardly known to English-speaking readers. I investigate Millu's process of self-discovery chiefly in her autobiographical fiction *I ponti di Schwerin* (*The Bridges of Schwerin*). Often categorized as a text belonging to the larger canon of memorials by Jewish Italian survivors, I have long argued that this novel belongs to the *letteratura del ritorno* (literature of return). This novel is important because, in many ways, it offers the fictional counterversion of the Primo Levi's camp experience. If *I ponti di Schwerin's* many passages echo Levi's reflections on the sedimentation of memory, the narrator revisits (more often than Levi) notions of Jewish identity taken for granted before the camp that, in the light of the Shoah, have reemerged as a daunting matter

for Italian Jews like Millu. Also, throughout the novel, Millu's femininity unites each part, thus making form and content virtually indissoluble.

While it is almost a stereotype that the Jewish people show vigor and resilience in moments of difficulty, the discussion Millu's protagonist entertains with her faith and culture resists any such generalization. Elmina, the fictional alter ego of the writer, revisits episodes of her life in a narrative mode that oscillates between before and during the concentration camp. The wartime experience—and what she could still learn from it—haunts Elmina even when she is back in Genoa, the city she elected as her true place, because she is yet to find her existential compass. Hence, the moral and physical offenses of the concentration camps serve as catalysts for the development of self-discovery of one's own identity after the achievement of a so-called peace. Homecoming means trying to make order out of a life that, prior to her experience in the camp(s), was not defined by the traditional roles attributed to women: daughter, wife, and mother. Elmina fits none of these categories; hence, she is free to write and to speak. Elmina goes back to the nonplace that was her life prior to the Shoah: she has no loved ones waiting for her back home, no real home, and must face the uncertainty of her own country. While kept discreetly in the background of the fictional and semi-fictional works published during her lifetime, we will see how Millu will not hesitate to accuse Italy in her real diary, the posthumously published *Tagebuch*.

Liana Millu's attempt at bridging narratives drawn from autobiographical experience to experimental writing (in genres ranging from the short story to the novel) is the focus of this chapter. It addresses the shift in her writing from the necessity for a testimony of an event to its fictionalization. Her writings assume a literary relevance that departs from the historical truth about the Shoah and become another kind of necessity. Millu's life was unconventional; she never hesitated to speak of the unspeakable in a woman's life: abortion, rape, and violence before and after the concentration camps. In Italy, during the Fascist years, a woman's traditional identity was molded by marriage and procreation. The country's ideology provided scarce space for women whose identities did not fit its models. The main character of *I ponti di Schwerin*—Millu's most clearly fictional work—was violated prior to the concentration camp and remained tenaciously independent despite the tribulations she would experience. In *I ponti di Schwerin*'s map of physical return and the recollection of events, Millu's bitter discovery is that, if a woman's identity does not fit the norm, her life is always a war, before and after the Shoah. By fictionalizing her personal stories, I argue that Millu—somewhat echoing Sibilla Aleramo's 1906 manifesto *Una donna* (*A Woman*)—delivers her legacy to her ideal (and actual) readers. Events that belong to the

individual can serve to teach to everybody. Society must be aware of the most disconcerting events connected with a woman's existence, inside and outside the camp.

Chapter 4 of part I—"*Inside the D* and out of the Ghetto with the *bambine* of Rome: Lia Levi, Rosetta Loy, and Giacoma Limentani"—is devoted to works that are more contemporary, though historically based and rooted in authentic experiences of the early 1940s. Preoccupied by the narrative of resistance imposed by Communists in the aftermath of World War II, historians share responsibility in downplaying Fascism's more racial components. What shaped such theories about Italians' tolerance to different races (and religions) is rooted in many legends, but poorly proven by documents. In fact, it is enough to think of Italian racial politics in African colonies or, more to the point, of Roberto Farinacci's xenophobic writings dating as early as 1936—two years prior to the racial laws against the Jews—to understand the autochthony of racism vis-à-vis the popular and oft-imposed belief that it was Nazism that forced racism on Italians.

After the wave of Shoah testimonies, Italian authors took on topics that were unique to their own culture, questions of assimilation and integration into Italian society that set them apart (or so they thought, as in the case of Primo Levi's work) from the rest of the European Jewry. Rosetta Loy's *La parola ebreo* (*First Words*) and *La porta dell'acqua* (*The Door of the Water*), Giacoma Limentani's autobiographical trilogy beginning with *In contumacia* (*In Absentia*), and Lia Levi's *Una bambina e basta* (*Just a Little Girl*) each describes retrospectively the social circumstances surrounding the 1938 racial laws, Italy's deceptive assimilation of Jews after the Emancipation, the 1943 Roman roundup and the March 24, 1944 massacre of the *Fosse Ardeatine*. The responsibility of Catholics in this tragic period stands out amid the ever-present prejudice against Jews, for all these writers denounce the danger of a lasting intolerance of minorities in Italy. Walter Benjamin's much-quoted concept of *Jetztzeit* relates to each of the aforementioned writers for many reasons, but it is particularly relevant to Loy's purpose and ethical approach, as her writing becomes a constant admonition for Catholics to recognize their moral responsibilities in the tragedy. While witnessing and paying tribute to previously recorded testimonies, their writing also makes it clear that "ethics after Auschwitz must be characterized by openness to the Other. Any ethical system that thinks it has the solution to every problem has the potential to be genocidal" (Roth, "Introduction" xv).

In the second part of *Forging Shoah Memories* attention is exclusively devoted to one of the most important novels on the Shoah: *La Storia* by

Elsa Morante. Historical distance allows us to look at Morante's work unencumbered by critics' overreaction to the novel's political implications. While critical contempt almost marred the success of *La Storia* back in 1974, the political sensitivities that generated it no longer exist. "'*The World Must Be the Writer's Concern*': *La Storia* according to Elsa Morante" is divided into two sections, titled respectively "*Le Lacrime*: Morante and Her Critics" and "History and Stories: Historical Novels and the Danger of Disintegration." They revisit the genesis, ideology, and reception of Morante's controversial novel and explain each different element making up the ideological fabric of the ethical act of reading when applied to a novel such as Morante's.

Morante's authorial intentions can be understood better now than when the novel was first published, for, aside from the effect, which time always affords an unbiased appreciation of artistic works, deconstructionism and postcolonial studies have each opened new ways of looking at literature. Morante's essayistic and fictional writings predate *La Storia* and constitute the novel's philosophical backbone. Contrary to what was stated by her detractors, these writings fully justify both the physical structure and stylistics of *La Storia*. In a period when victims voicing their memories can finally contribute to the shaping of historiographical discourse and diminish the superiority of history's winners, in a time when the drowned appear paradoxically to be the ones actually saved and spared ignominy, Morante writes a novel that is most commonly labeled a *romanzo delle vittime* (victims' novel). Her characters are all victims of the tragic scandal called History, a scandal in which, far from representing life and its continuation, genealogical trees become sinister forebodings of disintegration and annihilation. Understanding the Shoah; making sense of the (re)discovery of Jewish identity; telling the world—the youth, above all—of the roundup and deportation of the Roman Jews from the Ghetto in the narrative transfiguration of *La Storia*: these represent some of Elsa Morante's authorial intentions. They compose the nucleus of this famous novel which Charlotte Wardi justly cites in her *Le génocide dans la fiction romanesque* (*Genocide in Novelistic Fiction*) as one of the most emblematic texts for the literary representation of the Shoah.

Part II, "Helena Janeczek: Understanding Jewish Memory from *Lezioni di tenebra* to *Le rondini di Montecassino,*" discusses the category of women writers whose parents' lives have been affected by the Shoah: they belong to the generation Helen Epstein called the Children of the Holocaust. In this group, I include Jewish and also some Gentile women writers whose lives were indelibly marked by this event. When confronted with the impelling necessity to depict her own pain as well as her mother's,

Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra* (1997) constitutes a vibrant example of the intervention of hybrid expressive forms. Moving from the personal to the political, the writer, in a talk she gave in 2002 in Palermo, proposes a muted typology of identity for all children who share her experience. She declares herself not a member of the Children of the Holocaust, but, rather, belonging to the children of the Jewish People. In her view, this should be the most appropriate definition for those who contest the lexical limits of the label Children of the Holocaust, without denying the incontestable trauma related to being children of Shoah survivors. The linguistic shift that makes them children not only of the Shoah but also of the Jewish people—hence members of a far-larger community—also represents a typological shift that, in the writer's view, might prove itself more useful to a peaceful coexistence with other religions and other cultures. Although optimistic and positive in nature, Janeczek's proposition is problematic as, in its fundamental ambiguity, it yields to numbness and oblivion.

The originality of my book reflects the lack of studies of indirect memory and fictional writing about the concentration-camp experience, as well as the Shoah's theoretical and ethical implications for current Italian female writers. As we witness new forms of ethnic cleansing, racial discrimination, and religious intolerance, as well as the brazen carelessness of young people regarding the dangerous power of racial hatred, it is vital for writers to continue to try to imagine and illustrate what happened less than seven decades ago in the heart of Europe. In the process they can show how long-lasting repercussions of tragic events affect everybody's lives. As we move farther from the time of the Shoah's historical occurrence, we realize that writers are engaged in building historical awareness that can actually raise consciousness in generations to come, rather than merely resuscitating memories. Young argues that "[t]here may be no place in traditional governing paradigms for sexual victimization, certainly not in male memory—but not even, perhaps, female memory" ("Regarding the Pain" 1784). But women writers often demonstrate their endurance of such acts and their ability to speak out through narrative strategies and a perspective that is neither that of the hapless victim nor that of the universal witness. Theodor Adorno opined that

> [p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural questions whether after Auschwitz you can go on living [...] confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death. ("Meditations on Metaphysics" 363)

While not denying the import of artistic works, Adorno denounced the dramatic change in metaphysics as it was known prior to this century.[12] Because of this change, the disavowal of the perspectives of *Italian Jewish women writers*—four words that indicate an even stronger discrimination when written in a string!—can also no longer sustain, for these women denounce passivity: the sensation of "not being quite there," of being "a kind of spectator" (363). The identity of these women is doubly difficult (if not more) to disentangle from Italian conventional historiographical narratives of the war and the Shoah. As women and writers looking at a historical event in our not-so-distant contemporary, they illustrate a complex subjectivity that merits further consideration. The difficulty of talking Shoah, which remains problematic today and will remain so, perhaps forever, and the awareness of its chronological and geographic proximity, leaves us perplexed. Whatever the categories and treatment of the Shoah, what one cannot do is comprehend the relative ease by which one could fall back into a common error as collective as the memory of the historic event itself. This error is the inability to understand that intolerance is innate in humans. Precisely for this reason, it must be controlled, monitored, feared. The more we know about the past, the more we can elucidate its mystifications. At the same time, considering David Bidussa's words, though spoken in a different context, the reflections of all those working and writing on the Shoah are important, in that they bring "testimony," because their being is "[t]he result of a double trial in which the versions received and accumulated in time and there more than the facts, actors are privileged. For this path, however, one does not only build a new version of memory, but also a new sensitivity toward history" ("La Shoah" 113).

Artists' engagement reveals its efficacy through the systematic investigation of what individuals cannot comprehend. By virtue of the plasticity of the expressive forms afforded them, artists become the protohistorians of the period in which they live: they appropriate the signs and the language that belong to collectivity. Writing of collective memory in musicians, Maurice Halbwachs noted:

> Beethoven, deaf, produced his most beautiful works. It this sufficient to say that, living on his musical memories, he was closed in an internal universe? Isolated, he was only in appearance. The symbols of music kept for him in their purity the sounds and their systems possible. But he did not invent them. It was the language of the group. In actuality, he was more inserted than ever, and more than anybody else, in the society of the musicians. He was never alone. And it is this world full of objects, more real than the real world that he had explored, it is here that he discovered for those living

> there regions that however belonged to their kingdom, and in which they settled immediately with full rights. (*La memoria collettiva* 69–70)

The language of the artist takes its shape and content from the language of the collectivity. When facing the difficult task of creative elaboration, the artist is never really alone. From the collectivity, and for the collectivity, stems the artist's compositional energy, that particular energy, which, in turn, produces emotive resonance. I want to conclude my introduction with the words of writer Lia Levi:

> I firmly believe in the validity of this way of transmitting History throughout the "retelling" of stories. Because "compassion escapes logic" and one single Anne Frank can move more than myriads of people who remained in the shadow. After all, we will never be able to suffer the suffering of everybody. [...] If "the history of the historians" cannot obviously leave aside factual truth and its research, up to what point can artistic transfiguration detach itself from the objectivity of things so tragically concrete? Can one allow him/herself to transcend the external data to the ends of one's own expressivity? My answer is "yes", but I do know that there will be also some "no." What matters here is not merely to tell, but to let run what lies behind the facts, let the subterranean river of a profound and impervious emotion emerge [...] What matters are expressive forms that need real data more than music and painting to construct their stories, and that, as such, have limits in their transcending effect. The "message," however, if, as we have seen, works per se in the case of music or painting, must also prevail when dealing with verbal narratives. This is what matters. It is understood that one must be before at least an authenticity of intents. Otherwise, our judgment is modified. When in front of rubbish, of obstinate research of a theme that might work according to transient fashions, this discourse no longer interests us. We can even experience horror and rebuke for some mercantilist profanations, but I don't believe that it is worth beginning a specific argument for these. We must struggle against everything vilifying and mortifying our society and we must certainly do with all our strength. Eventual and blasphemous manipulation of the Shoah belongs to this fight "against." ("Intervento" 224)

To let what lies behind the facts run ("far fluire quello che c'è dietro ai fatti"Levi, "Intervento" 224) amounts to unearthing the deep sense of what the collectivity feels, but cannot express. I believe this is what artists do. As Charles Baudelaire states, true genius sets us back to childhood for it resides in seeing with a magnifying lens what only children—not adults—can see (8). Literary texts carry the burdensome task of pushing us to see things with more focus; they shed light on obscure, yet important details. They push us to go beyond everyday life and to want more

for our future, and for that of our children. When it comes to women, this sense of isolation resounds even more intensely. Women's voices and their faces often remain unheard and unseen: participating in history and in tragedy does not warrant representation unless one finds a willing audience. Like us.

Part I

Survival and Representation of the Shoah in Italy

I

The Italian Shoah: Reception and Representation

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, use of the term Shoah is a contentious matter.[1] Shoah or Holocaust is a cultural construction in constant evolving of its concept, both for the individual as for its community. As a testament to the challenges associated with the theoretical elaboration of this epochal event, new critical treatments and revisions and revaluations of discourse are periodically proposed. In recent Italian publications, it is not uncommon for the critic to encounter the word *sovrabbondanza* (overload) in response to the proliferation of recent pronouncements of the Italian Jewish memory of the Shoah. Despite the fact that in Italian culture, the term Shoah designates *un'intera vicenda storica* (a whole historical event) in the same way as *Rinascimento* and *Risorgimento* recall entire periods (Sarfatti, *La Shoah* 6), its place in public memory is at pains with its narrative construction. Awareness of the Shoah cannot be found in many of those who attended public schools, at least before the institution of the *Giornata della Memoria* (Day of Memory), a day of commemoration instituted by the Italian republic on July 20, 2000, with Law 211 to honor the liberation of Italian prisoners from Auschwitz on January 27, 1945 (Meghnagi, "Introduzione" xxii). Michele Battini effectively analyzes the possible "reazioni di rigetto" ("rejection reactions") to the Shoah as the impending "assuefazione" ("inurement") to the *Giornata della Memoria* ("La Shoah" 3–13). Among Italian historians, Anna Rossi-Doria shares the same concerns as Enzo Traverso regarding the validity of the *Giornata della Memoria* for—in her view—events held throughout Italy on this day are often reduced to repetitive oral testimonies by few remaining survivors ("Il conflitto" 59–65). The risks of rhetoric are multitudinous:

> We are sorry to say: the Jewish imperative of memory (*Zachòr*), unbeknownst to unaware Yerushalmi, has recently become in Italy an empty

> container, the citation of that essay has become, if not a liturgical formula, often a given bothersome act. One feels that the time to start anew has come, starting from the gesture that we make every day going to a public kindergarten, re-examining our daily behaviors from a different angle. (Cavaglion, "Ebraismo" 169)

Criticism of repetitiveness even by historians about presumed overbearing and stale testimonies unearths a concrete concern about a correct mechanism of transmission of public memory in contemporary Italy. Contempt for the necessity to commemorate the Shoah as demonstrated by Italian culture is partly the result of a detrimental process whereby the memorialization of the event has been made banal and didactic in recent years. Paradoxically, in contemporary Italian society the fear of ritualization (following the *Giornata della Memoria*) intersects with a persistent lack of correct knowledge and need for the elaboration of the facts surrounding the Shoah. Before acquiring any indispensable knowledge, individuals advance a kind of moral fatigue that manifests, in turn, a collective anxiety that prevents contemporaries from looking at their immediate past. It is as if, by turning their attention away from the present and looking at the failure of human values in the twentieth century's tale of progress, one might lose track of the pursuit of happiness as dictated by a contemporary culture driven by consumerism. As Zygmunt Bauman often notes, our lives are governed by such an ephemeral pursuit: we are not allowed to mourn, for there can be hardly anything to mourn in a society ruled by the right to happiness (material, of course). Or else, the diagnosis can be Pier Paolo Pasolini's: that we are a people with no memory, and accordingly the past (with the responsibilities that memory invariably carries with it) can never be traced. The problem, then, lies not so much and not only in the necessity of knowing the facts about the Shoah or in its stale ritualization, but perhaps in how to remediate the inability to cultivate a humus apt to raise awareness about the relative ease by which systemic (and tolerated) intolerance spreads and produces historical events like the Shoah. Dehumanization can find a politicized and juridical system of difference (laws allowing for its formalization) at any given time. We need to come to terms with how the unveiling of a pronominal fiction, one that opposes the "us" to the "them," can reach such outcomes. The "them" indicates the discriminated minority against whose persecution the majority of Italians said little or nothing. Racial intolerance can hardly mark a specific point in history. It can touch tragic peaks, however, and the *Giornata della Memoria* has institutionalized the need to remember them. Like all institutionalized commemorations, it risks becoming rote, but its role is nevertheless valid, for public action must exact the act

of *fare memoria* (making memory) that every member of society recognizes and understands. But memory comes laden with questions about its very object. For David Bidussa, "[f]or an event to become of national significance for an entire community one needs to build the awareness of a mourning, thus of a void: a thing, that is, to publicly mark a before and an after. In that void, one builds a public memory" ("Che cosa"). The void, the fissure, the caesura, the rupture, the break: how many metaphors have we read/used to define the Shoah? And why should we be constantly turning to the past to fill the void? In Italian popular culture, there is perhaps no better example than the one survivor Davide offers in Ferzan Özpetek's 2003 film *La finestra di fronte* (*Facing Windows*); he advises his young friend Giovanna with the following: "Non si accontenti di sopravvivere, lei deve pretendere di vivere in un mondo migliore!" ("Don't be just satisfied by surviving, you must demand to live in a better world!") The hope is that a better world can, and must exist. We must all demand to live in a better world while cognizant of "a current cultural and political isolation of the Jewish Memory, [. . .] of a prejudice widely spread among the Gentiles" (Battini, *Il socialismo*, 204). Symbolically, Giovanna befriends Davide on a bridge connecting historic downtown Rome and Trastevere where Jews first settled. Her character's development reflects the benefits of Davide's long memory on a new generation. Similar to the intervention in the life of Antonietta by another discriminated individual, homosexual radio broadcaster Gabriele in Ettore Scola's 1977 film *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day)*, Davide transmits and shares his suffering of a double discrimination with the member of yet another discriminated group, a married woman of humble conditions and with no education. Giovanna's lack of knowledge of the deportation of the Roman Jews in 1943 demands that we reflect on two different kinds of history, the one we study (written) and the one previous generations hand down to us (oral). If Giovanna knows the reason for the tattoo she notices on Davide's left arm while—in an instinctively maternal gesture—she takes care of him in the bathroom, she knows it only because, like many, she has heard stories or seen popular representations of an event that feels remote from her. It's easy to speculate that the majority of Italians have seen Steven Spielberg's 1992 *Schindler's List* on television (Perra, 183–86). What Giovanna does not master is the history that concerns her *own* city and the persecutions that occurred in her hometown, Rome. Ignorance of what happened 60 years prior to 2003 in the very ghetto where spectators see her drinking a beer in Piazzetta Mattei with old Davide, persists as our collective problem. Giovanna knows nothing of the Roman roundup and deportation because social and gender discrimination, as well as her lack of educational assets confine her ability to build awareness of the

event. *Facing Windows*—a film replete with powerful however rhetorical images, like that of a hand imprinted on a wall in the ghetto to symbolize the bloodshed by the paths of history—represents an emblematic case of a *non-engagé* product that aims high nevertheless: attempting to fill the void between the generation who survived the Shoah and the generation that would follow.[2] Davide's journey into his own past is more fruitful for his interlocutor, Giovanna, than for himself, because she will listen to his testimony. Although entirely fictional, this relationship between two generations embodies the core of how public memory should be constructed and awareness raised. Without a collective effort (of which the image of a public in a movie theater is emblematic), one cannot begin to fill any void with vitally lacking basic knowledge. Reception through media constructs and arouses interest and curiosity that can lead to awareness. Without at least this, gaining a stable and collective memory becomes an almost impossible task and revisionism lurks menacingly on the horizon. We need to question what we think we know as a constructive method of reflection on the effective and immediate danger of getting used to both others' grief as well as justice inequality. As Eraldo Affinati states, echoing Primo Levi, giving this topic its due means "discovering information on the species to which we belong" (*Campo*, 28). In doing so, one must include an empathic understanding of literature and the visual arts as revelatory media to gain further insight. Understanding these aesthetic manifestations requires a transversality of methods that should not ignore philology but should consider it, instead, as a vital element for a correct education on the Shoah.

Testimony and Fiction

There are many difficulties associated with narrating and representing the Shoah, as Theodor Adorno's initial position of nonrepresentability significantly denied value to fictional (poetic) renditions of events (although we know he later reviewed some of his tenets). Adorno's is a problematic way of disapproving of an issue that, in actuality, still haunts us. How does one, then, represent human tragedies through artistic works that by their very nature transfigure their elements? Correct awareness of such events by younger generations demands clarity and lucidity from us in explaining facts, but are artists not allowed to project their personal traumas or ideas in unconventional ways? In the beginning of the nineties, a seminal volume edited by Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation,* was published. This volume's cogency, even today, resides in its pointing to the effective issues raised by a literary representation of historical facts.

Friedlander's claim was that "[t]he question of the limits of representation of Nazism and its crimes has become a recurrent theme in relation to various concrete subjects" ("Introduction" 2). Further, for Friedlander, "the extermination of the European Jews can, and should be, the topic of theoretical debates as the subjects in abstraction are related to the way contemporary culture reshapes the image of the past" (1). Rather than denial per se, Dominick LaCapra warns[3] about uneasiness in dealing with extermination, for such a topic in its abstraction must be related to the way contemporary culture shapes a new image of the past. What matters the most, however, is to establish what Friedlander calls a "claim to truth," an incontestable right to the truth about the Shoah. This suggests that limits do exist: limits to both the revision of historical discourse as well as limits to aesthetic representations of this event. In particular, both Friedlander and LaCapra invite us to divest Nazism of any aesthetic of the sublime that has often mantled this tragedy. Additionally, in eliminating the demoniac facet of Nazism, the historical event is transformed into a human situation that cannot leave Italians' position aside. This helps us understand that by human we do not only mean the presence of good, but also of evil. It is a human face, and as such it is a banal face that must be confronted. Contrary to Daniel Goldhagen's tenets about "willing persecutioners," we see evil-committing individuals far more commonly than we had initially imagined. Violence is not born out of motions of the soul: it is emptied out of hatred and turned into, in Christopher Browning's functionalist thesis, a "job to do." This banality—the thoughtlessness of the officer on trial—is what Hannah Arendt describes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. By extension, such banality of evil is applicable to all Italians who passively or actively accepted such a state within their own country, hence determining the Shoah's failure to exist as a negative point in our collective memory. The limits Friedlander discusses are those relative to aesthetic representation both beyond the possibility of identifying realities or sure truths (is a thing true if only few, or one believe in it?) and beyond the constant polysemy and self-referential aspect of linguistic constructs. These are the real limits of the discussion, which, in turn, create the necessity and obligation to establish the realities and the truths about the Shoah as a legacy for generations to come. These truths allow literary writing (but also visual and cinematic representations) to follow a path that is coherent with, and respectful of, the truth of the historical fact. All categories, be they ethical, juridical, or historical must be revisited. In the same way, the behavior of the victims and the persecutors, the consequent analysis of classic binary oppositions and the emergence of gray areas should be also revisited, because, as we are constantly reminded, "what is not confronted critically does not disappear" (LaCapra, "Representing

the Holocaust" 125–26). But the practices of social memory, such as writing, speaking, and reforming of society could only elicit what Derrida refers to as "the promise of democracy."[4] By representing the Holocaust in fiction we are always reminded that,

> The Shoah was a reality that went beyond powers of both imagination and conceptualization, and victims themselves could at times not believe what they went through or beheld… [but] the Shoah calls for a response that does not deny its traumatic nature or cover it over through a "fetishistic" or redemptive narrative that makes believe it did not occur or compensate too readily for it. (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 220)

Whether or not we consider the 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 101). The consideration of postmodern theoretical discourse in which meaning can differ relates to those critics who believe that even the most precise literary renditions of the Shoah are opaque when confronted with a historiographical discourse that is rooted in what was once identified as an objective rendition of events (considered to be the main difference between fictional and historical writing). It is precisely the "Final Solution" with its unbelievability that puts into question any "totalizing view of history" (Friedlander, "Introduction" 5). David Bidussa speaks of the unbelievability as the "essential component" that initiated the entire destructive machine; it was a scene of "non-sense legitimizing the acceleration of the process" (*Quel che resta* 8). The categories of the "unbelievable" or "madness" direct collective thinking in the wrong direction for they suggest a lack of solution to the matter. Aesthetic endeavors with Shoah at their center—even when created for mass consumption—do not allow for negate quick oblivion of the problem that lies at their very core.

History and Memory: the Importance of Memory in Italy

A series of rhetorical questions opens LaCapra's *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. To investigate the complex relation between the two terms of his book title, he wonders which and how events of such magnitude should be remembered. Is it true that "those more directly involved have special responsibilities to the past and the way it is remembered in the present?"; that "[t]hose who were not directly involved share responsibility for how such events are remembered in the present" (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 1)? Is it even possible that academic historiography stays in its vacuum, keeping its distance from the ethical implications

that such choice has for people and memory? Further, "[d]oes art itself have a special responsibility with respect to traumatic events that remain invested with value and emotion?" (1). Despite recent scholastic efforts engaged in the debate on the Shoah, a specific critical literary discourse in Italy—an attempt to find answers to these questions—has yet to be established. The Freudian repression of which LaCapra speaks seems to have bled outward like a huge stain over our nation and its consciousness. There are two important reasons for this repression: first, the cloud created by the misleading myth of Italians, good people, later deconstructed by Angelo Del Boca in his *Italiani, brava gente* and then by Bidussa in regards to the Jewish question (*Il Mito*; cf. Sarfatti, *Ebrei* 103–230). Second, the "Righteous" among the Italians were not few (Picciotto Fargion, *Il Libro*). Partly due to this general attitude, Italian public opinion has neither been consistent in describing the attitude of the Italians toward to the Shoah, nor has critically considered the responsibility of art representing the Italian people and the Shoah. Interestingly, some statements made by famous political thinkers like Hannah Arendt also contributed somewhat to this aura of benevolence around a much-praised Jewish assimilation in Italy as well as the behavior of Italians after the Armistice of 1943 (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 176–80).[5] In a case similar to the Italian one, there are many reasons that an extenuated "culture of the victim" about French Jewry determines the inability to actually empathize with them (Dean, *Fragility* 45). This extenuation can be compared to the Italian phenomenon and comes at a time when the research and study of the Italian Jewish community and identity, as well as their relations with the Gentiles, still requires substantial work. The absence of a commitment to scrutinize the problem as the legacy of a certain state of affairs characterizing postwar Italian society (Schwarz, 5–19) permeates more recent French and Italian historical and sociological studies focused on the path leading to current European anti-Semitism. We still deal with the lack of a correct trajectory defining the literary praxis of memory:

> Memory is a crucial source for history and has complicated relations to documentary sources. Even in its falsifications, repressions, displacements, and denials, memory many nonetheless be informative—not in terms of an accurate empirical representation of its objects—but in terms of that object's often anxiety-ridden reception and assimilation by both participants in events and those born later. (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 19)

For the literary text whose backdrop is shaped by a historical event, memory needs to constantly interact with artistic imagination for, in order

to construct its own images, the latter draws almost by necessity from someone's memory. The habituation toward repetitive oral testimonies on the *Giornata della Memoria,* then, does allow for the charge of a negative weight that the memory brings with it, so as Levi argues by drawing from Samuel T. Coleridge's ode, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." This form of memory, applied to the linguistic and rhetorical practice of writing a literary text (a text whose intentions intrinsically depend and benefit from the phatic role of language) belongs to collectivity and, as such, it must be studied and analyzed towards an awareness of historical facts. The power of expression represents the only form of strong narrative we can share at this historical juncture. Implicit to acquiring the tools to understand this form of narrative is a reconsideration of how art can carry an ethical meaning for all. Jewish memory cannot survive without a collective support in Italian culture:

> If I am overemphasizing the symmetries between the memories of Italian Gentiles and Italian Jews, I do so to react, as non-Jew, to the extreme solitude of the Jewish memory of the Shoah. I am in fact aware that the structural symmetries between the memory of the Italian Jews and that of the Italian Christians do not exclude the datum of the current cultural and political isolation of the Jewish memory, mirror of an opinion unfortunately widespread among the Gentiles according to which the Jewish imperative of remembrance would be excessive or an exaggeration. (Battini, "La Shoah" 13)[6]

Perhaps more optimistically than Cavaglion, Battini clarifies the need for redemption, however small and insufficient, for non-Jewish Italians when they look back to all the manifested passivity and tolerance to discrimination and feel ashamed for the customary Italian acquiescence to power that made their complicity possible. Battini's statement attests to the fact that for some Gentiles, the conventionally quiet Italian mode of living is a poor basis for nonaction and an insufficient justification for Italian reactions to the Shoah. It is a living that stubbornly eschews the Protestant rigor that compels human beings to be law-abiding citizens, respectful of the norm, and obedient to the rules. For if, on the one hand, such distinctly Italian mores facilitate pleasant living for the majority of society, shaped by an apparent flexibility, on the other hand, this very way of living is an affront to the rights of those who enjoy none of the protection that a collectivity should warrant through laws and norms recognizable and applicable to the entire population. Further, healing memory from the intense "solitude" felt by Italian Jews that Battini denounces signifies a correct understanding of aesthetics, the importance of artistic

productions that feature the subject of intolerance as their thematic focus. It is often in these artistic undertakings that we find creative and original considerations of the possible ways in which collectivities should handle the rights of minorities.

Symbolic Representations

It is within this unstable context of literary criticism and public reception that I situate my work on women's writings on the Shoah. Or better put, the ways in which Italian Judaism and the Shoah—if studied from a gendered perspective—constitutes a topic of research that presents many questions still awaiting clarification and foregrounding. Our topic is hence useful for two reasons. First, international Shoah literary criticism rarely deals with Italian production. This is a noteworthy issue that Cavaglion laments in his introduction to the Italian edition of Walter Laqueur's *Dizionario dell'Olocausto* (*Dictionary of the Holocaust*). Cavaglion criticizes the scarcity of "works in Italian connected to the symbolic representation of the extermination (literary, first of all, but also figurative, artistic and cinematographic)" ("Nota" xix). This paucity of Italian works addressing the Shoah "makes cruel the comparison at times with publications in other languages, usually English" (xix).[7] The glaring absence of a more specific field of study on Italian Shoah literature should come as no surprise because "[i]t constitutes the continuation of a thread that ties this absence to the one of a specific literary research on the *hebräitude*, also due to visible conditionings" (Cavaglion, "Prefazione" 7). It is a *hebräitude* that, before the Shoah, chiefly consisted of "the specificity of the antisemitism which in the past would limit itself to be an underissue of the bourgeois question" (8). It is with Primo Levi's generation that Italian *hebräitude* becomes the focus of study and research for those who believed they had been assimilated to Italian culture before the Shoah only to be later betrayed. For some Italian writers, writing "Jewish" after the Shoah amounts to a *ritorno alle origini* (return to the roots). Primo Levi, Giorgio Bassani, and Liana Millu define themselves as "Jews of return" because, as Luca De Angelis notes, "In Italy—given the high degree of assimilation—diversity was not until then fully experienced, the effects of the racial persecution were doubly traumatic and it prompted in Jews' souls a supplemental potential propellant" ("Qualcosa" 19).

The tragic propellant of racial laws, persecution, and deportation decrees initiated the mechanism for a new cultural and literary cycle regarding the understanding of Italian Jewry. We have another, more palpable kind of "return": the mixed feelings experienced by survivors

after the *actual* physical return from the camp produce, in fact, an even more extreme solitude than the one defined by the sense of belonging to a minority. One of Giorgio Bassani's *Five Stories of Ferrara,* "Una lapide in via Mazzini" ("A Plaque on the Via Mazzini"), is staged against the backdrop of deep discrimination. The story ironically interrogates the power of one's own collectivity to forget individual faces after the catastrophe of the Shoah. An interrogation of provincial life as well, "Una lapide in via Mazzini" tells the ghastly story of Geo Josz's return to Ferrara where he finds a plaque with his name in via Mazzini as perennial tribute to his memory. But even three years after his return to Ferrara, life for him will no longer be the same in the provincial town where relative acquiescence allowed nearly the entire Jewish community to be swept away. Like a ghost, without giving notice, Geo leaves Ferrara for good. As is widely known, in several writings and interviews Primo Levi describes his own former relative disinterest in Judaism and in Jewish culture before his lager experience.[8] While fictional characters like Geo can disappear at any time, Levi is an artist and a witness who needs to give testimony at the risk of being unheard. Duty triggers the narration of his own particularity as an Italian Jew discriminated against and deported; duty triggers the constant admonition never to forget the repressed that has not been dealt with and can thereby return. Bassani's fictional character and the arc that unfolds for him reify the larger underlying sentiment about those returning from the camps: they are physical evidence of an inhuman disaster.

The narrative of personal tragedy experienced under unbelievable conditions begins then to constitute the material for artistic endeavors building the literary Shoah corpus. This phenomenon occurs despite, or perhaps because, of the enormous resonance of Primo Levi's work. Paradoxically, while contributing immensely to the knowledge of the concentration camp's workings and of Italian Jews in the Shoah, Levi's two most acclaimed works *Se questo è un uomo* (*Survival in Auschwitz*) and *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*) have concurrently dimmed the distinctive Italian aspects of Levi's experience. Levi's *Il sistema periodico* (*The Periodic Table*) is far less read, and yet many aspects of Piedmontese Jewry are presented there in a way that, without assuming national features, allows readers to better understand Jewish Italian culture. The very fabric of Levi's writing, while going beyond and above Italian Jewry and making of him one of the most acute interpreters of Shoah's complex psychological mechanisms, has also overshadowed both a possible international recognition of other Italian texts as well as the profoundly diverse culture of which these texts are representative. Levi's process of universalization through the sifting of specific

reminiscences of his experience has hampered—particularly abroad—the chance to claim a wider readership and space for other Italian Shoah writers. Knowledge of Italian writings on the Shoah requires at this point a mapping of the Jewish Italian writers whose literary representations do not only regard the Shoah, but also construct a temporal trajectory that proceeds at least from the racial discrimination of the late thirties, brings into consideration testimonies and memoirs of the survivors, and looks at later writings by younger generations. One of the tasks of art resides in lending its manifold shapes and formats to the reasoning and listening of voices other than the author's while folding his/her imaginary world into a dimension (often) steeped in historical events that closely related to the author's life. Such voices will necessarily be heard distinctly by willing listeners of future generations.

A Gendered Italian Jewish Identity

It should hardly be a surprise then that marginality and scarcity of interest have always characterized Italian Jewry in general, and the figure of the Jewish Italian female deportee and survivor, in particular. Women, as Anna Rossi-Doria argues in her excursus on historiography on women in the Shoah ("Memorie" 29–71), constitute a vast number of Shoah victims, and for this very reason their presence looms large within the context of the oppressed collectivity. From a conceptual and critical standpoint, their voices as well as their experiences, both audible through their writings, have remained largely unheard. Critical of the threat of manipulation and voyeurism at the expense of women's grief, James Young recognized that the gaze of female writers focuses simultaneously on their own identity and on their participation in the Shoah despite themselves. Notwithstanding a general agreement with Cavaglion's denounced dearth of critical works on Italian literary representations of the Shoah, the aspect of its gendered literary representation still needs to be fully analyzed. We witness here a double lacuna. (1) Women's texts are denied proper analysis because they are considered of limited interest by international criticism (just like most of Italian Shoah literature.) (2) Their stories, as well as their creative elaborations, remain largely unknown and limited to select readership. This double lacuna stems from a lack of criticism on testimonial writing and extends to a wider paucity of critical writings. As soon as one looks at the reception of Jewish Italian women, one finds a relatively small tradition of documentation both of the specific experience of deportation as lived by Italian women as well as of those who decided to write in an effort to come to terms with their experience during the Shoah. This lack of secondary

writing exists whether one looks at nonfictional and strictly autobiographic expressions or at creative and fictional texts (realm of the literary narrative genres). It is important to note that until the eighties such lacunas were international and shared thus by the voice of all women in the Shoah. Key obstacles to a correct study of writings determined by gender derived from the widespread opinion that by separating the female voice from the more universal one—declined in the masculine—we run the risk of weakening the power of one single chorus of testimonies (Bernard; Heinemann; Kremer; Rittner; Ringelheim; Roth). In short, by separating female voices from a "universal" representation, the importance of what Lawrence Langer calls "the unicity" of the Shoah would be diminished. In addition to this risk then, a second one would arise: the possible formation of a "hierarchy of suffering" (Langer, in Bravo, "Presentazione," xi). But a study of gender cannot subtract any elements from the Shoah's unicity and much has been published to mend this failure to understand the import of women's voices writing this time and event. However, very little documentation and few secondary works exist today both on the specific experience of Italian women as well as on the writing of some of them. My perspective looks at the memory text as both a starting point and momentous marker for the following transfiguration of the historical event within a context that gradually transforms itself from the confession to one in which a literary and/or essayistic vein decants memory of events. As Anna Bravo notes, the deportees' contribution is precious in that it shapes and enriches the comprehension and study of Shoah transmission through their testimony. This study addresses the threshold between the fictional and the realistic data of narrated events while also dealing with the experience of an identity under constant scrutiny in the relationship between Italian Gentiles and Italian Jews. All these texts that address the Shoah, however, share a common desire to retell, to proceed in a reconstruction of the memory of the events as close as possible to the rigidly historical datum of the Shoah, to the deportations, to the return to a civil life and to the significance their authors attach to being Jews in Italy today. In turn, and with different intensities, each of these works generates a specific relationship within each personal history between the understanding of one's own identity and gender specificity.

In his foreword to the Italian version of Hermann Langbein's *Uomini ad Auschwitz (Menschen in Auschwitz; People in Auschwitz*), Primo Levi divides the writings on the camps into three categories: "diaries or memorials, their literary elaborations, socio-historical works" ("Prefazione" 5). Notwithstanding the adverb "grossolanamente" (5; "roughly") that accompanies his distinction in genres, Levi's categorization reveals the different outcomes of works bearing the Shoah as their topic and I in turn

apply this categorization to my own analysis. In particular, I draw from the differentiation Levi makes between the diary and its literary elaboration, as from his comment about the title in its Italian translation. He notes how in the original title the term chosen was *menschen* not men: people, that is, not men according to the grammatical formula by which the masculine renders the concept of a plurality in the Italian language. In the French translation the title acquires gender specificity. *Hommes et femmes à Auschwitz* points thus to a gender distinction in the articulation of the experience these men and women who lived in the camps. The Italian translation mirrors neither choice; as Levi's preface suggests, the term *Uomini* was chosen to underscore the concept of *Mensch* that ties together victims and perpetrators. The universalizing term *Uomini*, however, misses that fundamental reference to human beings in terms of gender specificity, hence inducing us to believe that the *univers concentrationnaire* has to be thought of in the masculine. Langbein's book carries many female testimonies, and it is one of the relatively earlier works incorporating women's voices. While Langbein's is a text to which Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo's *La vendetta è il racconto* owes much for the pattern of utilization of survivors' voices woven in his narrative, the Italian critic decries both the "excesses of distinctions amongst the various sources and the tendency to undermine the value of direct and lived testimonies" (15). Yet, Mengaldo's overwrought amalgamation of female and male experiences as a critical tool used to reinforce discourse in the name of, and as a voice to, collectivity, can hardly render justice to the specific suffering of women. Shoah writing is completed, not reduced (or worse, undermined) by women's voices; their works show perspectives and stylistic differences from those deployed by their male companions in the camps. It is not by reduction, but by augmentation and difference that a correct knowledge (and awareness) of the Shoah can be reached.

Few–even today–are the studies connecting Italian literature, women and the Shoah. Giovanna De Angelis's *Le donne e la Shoah* attempts to create a temporal trajectory while looking at the themes of compassion and forgiveness in the work of Etty Hillesum, Edith Bruck, and Gertrud Kolmar. While representation of totalitarianism tends to monopolize the reading, and the treatment of the Italian deportees is quite limited, De Angelis prepares readers to understand the impact of women's literature on Shoah studies. A properly Italian itinerary of this complex web of writings seems difficult to draw. Aware of the constrictions one applies to literary expression when trying to establish periodization, my path proceeds along a chronological vector that starts with some of the early writings whose date and publication fall shortly after liberation and moves on to what Levi calls their "literary elaborations." From testimonials and

memorials my attention moves by necessity to the ways in which experience is represented in different degrees of intensity of the use of fictional representation. Any critical discourse on artistic imagination (as well as creativity) with respect to literary representation of historical facts must take into account an intermediate fissure: the one between reality as represented by a text that was intended to be a work of fiction, and reality as represented in writings that were not initially conceived with a literary scope but were born out of the testimony and memory of historical fact. There is an ample corpus of memories from the camps. We can say along with Alberto Bertoni that camp literature "oscillates between the two genres of the diary (or epistolary collection) that annotates the sequence of events in chronological order; and that of the novel (almost always autobiographical fiction) that re-elaborates in a specific narrative poetic the vicissitude of the 'first person protagonist'" (211). Such definition simplifies the process by which, in the majority of cases, the writing of memories came with great compositional difficulties such that "writing the Shoah is a struggle against the conventional literary form that unveils its complete grotesque inadequacy to express the inexpressible, it's a struggle against words unsuitable to yield to testimony" (Quercioli Mincer 125).

If it is unquestionable that testimonies as memorialistic writings often present a sequence of scenes aligned along the same trajectory—starting with the recollection of the moment of deportation, the voyage in the cattle cars of the train convoys, the selection and registration upon arrival in the camp, shame, and feelings of hunger (Labbé 48)—such similar experiences acquire, however, dissimilar features in writing. It appears as if the themes had gained a double valence, becoming at once themes and structure of the memorial text. Within the topoi of deportation, voyage and camp, the text becomes endowed with a constellation of elements that do not render all stories of deportees similar to a "notebook whose pages are all the same" (48), but create instead an immeasurable repository of influences and citations for novelistic texts to come, a rich repertoire of images varying in tones and intensity. What we see here is a fruitful relationship of experience translated into nonfictional texts that give venues to fictional explorations of the Shoah: writing constructs the basis of an alternative, but no less important, reading of the event for future generations. Not many authors, in fact, purposefully betray truth of events. Rather, literary texts push readers to distinctive (and perhaps more insightful) possibilities of understanding truth than those available through the more tautological medium of the history book. What is important to the ends of a correct critical literary reading then, is to sift through the variations on and shifts away from the memorialistic genre that allow text to

enter the realm of the literary. The relative imaginative freedom that literature (for instance, the novel as a genre) bestows upon writers allows a woman writer to reconstruct a genealogy of influences that is specific to her own gendered experience. Just in the same way, temporal ellipses and other strategies distinctly shape the outcome of the story. The weaving of events that refer to the same historical topic in all testimonies and memories can thus hardly be the same. What I consider the intermediate step of fictional writing by female deportees leads, then, to diversified texts. Writing reveals for all these instances how literary fiction becomes an instrument of tormented self-affirmation that only through imagination and creativity can come to its maturation. And it is hardly therapeutic.

Temporal Distinctions, Genres, Returns to Testimony

A ductile taxonomy divides Shoah women's writing into three main periods of production. The first period can be situated in the immediate aftermath of the war. Texts by Liana Millu, Giuliana Tedeschi, and Luciana Nissim, among others, underscore the need for the memory of the Shoah to find space in writing. In many cases we notice a vast temporal lapse between the time of writing and that of publication due to many reasons, not least the relative young age of some of these survivors, which made them unequipped to undertake the writerly task (Bruck). According to Labbé, the urgency to write but hesitance to publish "consisted mainly in the getting rid, through writing, of an unbearable weight" (48). Even if several women wrote immediately upon their return, the delay of the publication of their writings is attributable to several factors that, aside from confirming commonalities with the rest of the survivors, hold distinct gendered peculiarities. The delay in publication was also due to a powerful sensation of fear that the diction of the lager would sound too stark if spoken outside the boundaries of the Babel of the camp. Delays were also a result of possible misunderstandings of the deportation system that in the nascent reconstruction of the nation's image, which could hamper both writers' attempts at a private recollection as well as publication (Bravo, "Relazione introduttiva," 15). The bravery of these women resides in their administration of memory. It is even more strikingly so, if one considers how the fulcrum of their experience was also more complex and more delicate than that of their contemporaries. Relative silence characterizes the decade spanning from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. In the 1970s, few memoirs are published. In 1972, Fausta Finzi bequeathed her diary to the *Centro di Documentazione Ebraica* (CDEC) in Milan. This diary represents the most important text of that round of literary production

and was only published as recently as 2002 with the title *Varcare la soglia* (*Cross the Threshold*) edited by Federico Bario and Marilinda Rocca. Finzi was also interviewed by Bario and Rocca for the volume *A riveder le stelle. La lunga marcia di un gruppo di donne da Ravensbrück a Lubecca* (*To See the Stars Again: The Long March of a Group of Women from Ravensbrück to Lubeck*). Vannina Finzi Pellegrini's *Il portone di S. Francesco* (*Saint Francis' Gate*) still awaits consideration.

The second output of publications follows the first Italian conferences on life in the camp in the mid-1980s and mainly concerns oral testimonies. Lastly, the most conspicuous period of production, the third period, occurs between the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Its expansive domain hosts both the last memoirs and fiction by survivors as well as the production of those conventionally referred to as children of the Holocaust. These last writers are considered recipients of this legacy either by way of imagination or by way of direct biological descent from Shoah survivors. A multitude of texts belong to this most recent period. We remember Elisa Springer's *Il silenzio dei vivi: All'ombra di Auschwitz, un racconto di morte e di resurrezione* (*The Silence of the Living: In the Shadow of Auschwitz, a Story of Death and Resurrection*) for she is one of the non-Italian survivors who always wrote in Italian. Austrian-born Springer moved to Italy after the war and wrote always in Italian as other survivors did (Bruck, Schneider). Mimma Paulesu Quercioli collected four anonymous memorials that still demand critical attention. A memoir worth remembering is Fiorenza Di Franco's *Una ragazzina e l'armistizio dell'8 settembre 1943* (*A Little Girl and the September 8, 1943 Armistice*). Di Franco was born Francovich in 1932, to a Hungarian mother and an Italian father, who was born in Fiume (in the contested area between Austria and Italy), belonged to the Salò Republic (ending up first at Mauthausen, then in Lumezzane, Lombardy), and personally met diplomat Giorgio Perlasca—one of the "Righteous"—who saved many Jews in Hungary, passing himself off as the Spanish consul in Budapest (*Una ragazzina* 19). Di Franco's memoir reveals traits emblematic of a well-to-do Italian Jewish girl; she is particularly close to her diplomat father. Another memoir worth mentioning is Liliana Treves Alcalay's *Con occhi di bambina (1941–45)* (*In a Girl's Eyes*). Born in Benghazi, daughter of yet another Italian Jew working in the colonies, Treves Alcalay retells of her escape with her mother and siblings. Their long journey started with going into hiding, moving from Milan to the Emilian countryside, then to Switzerland. They were then interned in a cottage with three Catholic Swiss spinsters who would constantly terrorize the children and deny them food. Although very young at the time (she was four years old in 1939), Treves' memories are still vivid.

In particular, the image of the little girl closed up in her room looking at a cross as a constant reminder of the deicide committed by the Jews is striking. The unearthing of remembrances and testimonies generates also Daniela Padoan's *Come una rana d'inverno. Conversazioni con tre donne sopravvissute ad Auschwitz* (*As a Frog in the Winter. Conversations with Three Auschwitz Female Survivors*). Primo Levi's famous simile of a woman to a frog carries particular significance for it refers to the halting of any reproductive activities in women's bodies. The testimonies of three eminent survivors, Liliana Segre,[9] Goti Bauer, and Giuliana Tedeschi are also recorded. But the ineluctable passing of many survivors marks the close of the third period of literary output. As the end draws near, a sense of duty toward new generations overcomes a plausible form of silence in many cases tacitly self-imposed.

As their dedications often mention, survivors are often encouraged by daughters and granddaughters to put their experience into writing – a process that reflects needs other than testimony or speaking at a public commemoration. Instead, it reveals a personal need, an intimate act of generosity that these aged women feel that they owe to the generations that have come since their own experiences during the Shoah. In other instances, rather than encouraging, granddaughters themselves take on the task of editing and publishing their grandmother's memories: This is the case of Lydia Terracina Di Segni's *Memorie 1943–44*. Her granddaughters, Sandra and Claudia Terracina write in fact, "This is the diary of our grandmother Lydia, who tells of the Terracina, Cohen, and Bonfiglioli families who found refuge and help in Villa Santa Maria and surroundings" (in Terracina Di Segni, 4). One of the relatively few works translated into English is Piera Sonnino's *Questo è stato. Una famiglia italiana nel lager* (*This has Happened: An Italian Family in the Lager*). Sonnino, very active in the Communist Party, wrote it in 1960 and never submitted her work to a publisher; it was only after her death in 2004 that her daughters published *Questo è stato*. Sonnino's text transmits a sense of authenticity regarding the fatalism and the casual ways in which middle-class Italian Jews could be arrested and deported.[10]

If the periodization of these writings can kindle the hypothesis of a temporal parallelism between a bibliography of historical studies of the Shoah and testimonial production (public and private histories conjoined), the most expansive contribution of women's writing has taken place only recently. Female survivors were markedly less interested in talking and writing in the two earlier periods. Memoirs dominate the first period (1945–55), while in the second period (1974–85) oral testimonials tend to prevail. Most certainly exceptions to my categorization do exist, but it is not incorrect to state that the third period evidences a

wealth of literary output ranging from the essay to the novel *tout court*, moving back again to memoirs and testimonies (oral and written). It is almost by default, then, that it is in this third period that the critic sees many generic hybrids occupying the space of the *scritture di frontiera* (border writings).

The division of these writings into three periods finds its logic in the increasing number of women's publications on the matter. The scarcity of memoirs published contemporary with internment in the camps and subsequent liberation—whose authors often felt inadequate to express what really happened, what they really felt—is, however, understandable. Survivors' attempts to work stylistically on their narratives produced two rather distinct effects. In many cases, the most immediate desire was to write. Such necessity sprang for many almost as much from the hope to lessen their shame of survival as from the affliction for what they had seen and left behind: the victims who shared the same event but endured extreme consequences. In reference to the second point, for some, the thrust to write stemmed from the awareness of survivors to not be *i testimoni veri* (the true witnesses) who, "by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch the bottom" (Levi, *Drowned*, 83). For others, instead, the opposite reaction would prevail: modesty prompted a desire to forget that would make working through the memory (*Durcharbeit*) impossible. *Not* speaking meant getting rid of the burden of memory, as we will see in the attempt made by Giacoma Limentani's character Mina in her *In contumacia*. Erasing the memory of the faces of those who were no longer there—the true witnesses—was the psychological weapon needed to survive everyday life, to escape the dramatic moments of one's past existence.

Understanding this briefly sketched trajectory signifies understanding the composition of a rather complex palimpsest, still at pains to find its configuration. Writings of imagination depend on writings of testimony. Pacts are signed between these two forms to which we chiefly consign literature. Relevance of testimonial representation is again renewed for its thematic categories (principle features such as the arrest, the prison-internment in the camp, the description of life before the camp and the return home) functioning as spatial conduits for fictional constructions that reveal an authorial interest in sharing both a period and an experience (Shoah, like *Rinascimento* or *Risorgimento*) with those who lived through it. Lastly, but importantly, these women tell of their difficult reinsertion into the social fabric of an Italy that, until then, had manifested, if not empathy and understanding, a relative form of tolerance toward its citizens of Jewish faith.

By the 1950s, novels on the subject had already been published in Italy, some which are virtually unknown. One forgotten example is that of writer and actress Neda Naldi, *nome d'art* of Italia Volpiana, wife of Salvo Randone. In 1955, Naldi published her novel, *L'ebrea* (*The Jewess*) with Cappelli, her publisher in Bologna. This is a novel focused more on the forced exodus of Italian Jews from their homes than on life in the camp. It is nevertheless a novel dealing with the Shoah and its extreme consequences as it narrates the decisions (we can think of autobiographical reasons due to the anagram of her author's last name, Naldi-Landi) made about leaving one's own country due to racial laws and deportation. The exodus novel, another subgenre of the Shoah, finds several novels penned by women in Italy. We remember Angela Bianchini's *Capo d'Europa* (*The Edge of Europe*) and *Le nostre distanze* (*Our Distances*). These two novels narrate respectively the voyage of an 18-year-old Roman Jewish girl to Portugal on her way to the United States, and her settling in Baltimore in 1938 while studying at Johns Hopkins University with comparatist Leo Spitzer. From the date of Naldi's novel's publication we can see how the Italian Shoah novel—focusing particularly on the emotive repercussions endured by women forced to part from their family and environment—already emerges as a subgenre. Its emergence occurs simultaneously with those of memoirs and thus complicates the issue of the geno-phenotext. To note how literary and generic paths cross unveils already from its outset the difficulty of saying Auschwitz, a difficulty writers will always challenge with their work.

A Novel on the Shoah?

As a Reader Response theorist, Wolfgang Iser has investigated modes of reception and modes of interpreting the role of the fictive and imaginary in the production of literature. The old tenet of the binary relationship between fiction and reality is obsolete in his view, as the fictive should be conceived as an "operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world" (Iser xiv). In so doing, the fictive is always aware of when it has "overstepped," and its role is that of disrupting and doubling the referential world. Our world can be always subject to interpretation; interpretation (as an act of writing the world) is a shifting, fluctuating tool that, nevertheless, creates the role of the poet and the very reason for being a poet, as Elsa Morante famously states (see chapter 5). The plasticity of human beings and of literature stand as mutually indispensable elements, for, as Iser notes, "[s]taging the human condition

in literature makes conceivable the extraordinary plasticity of human beings," but it also defies essentialization, for essentially human beings "do not seem to have a determinable nature, can expand into an almost unlimited range of culture-bound patternings" (xviii). Due to its fluidity, the novel as a genre can absorb social changes and reshape them into a forms that can contain and express them as literature:

> Literature [. . .] has a substratum, albeit one of a rather featureless plasticity that manifests itself in a continual repatterning of the culturally conditioned shapes human beings have assumed. As a medium of writing, *literature gives presence to what otherwise would remain unavailable*. It has gained prominence as a mirror of human plasticity at the moment when many of its former functions have been taken over by other media. (Iser xi; emphasis added)

Literary narratives are segregated from narrated events by way of the plasticity of the literary medium, the presence that literary writing gives to sublayers of human history and human behavior and beings, and the mimetic and all-encompassing quality of literature. In the case of literary narratives, the problematic representation of the Shoah appears then proposed by selecting elements of the literary—for instance rhetorical figures—that can render (in a no less real, factual, and effective way) the prevailing ethical issue. In their reference to the camp, these texts request from their authors a kind of narrative aligned along genres similar to, but different from, memorials. Consequently, the reader must organize a horizon of reception/perception necessarily different from, but no less complex (and potentially more so) than, the one defined by the reading of a memoir by a survivor. Some of the women to whom I dedicate my study have not, for instance, lived the camp experience. Their experiences and motivation to write, however, as in the case of Elsa Morante or Rosetta Loy, derive from the same historic event that prompted the actual camp survivors to be active in writing: the facts Morante narrates in *La Storia* are endowed of the same ethical fabric as Giuliana Tedeschi's and Edith Bruck's. These fluctuating borders of writing are the symptom of the difficulty to find new modes in which to make poetry and literature in general after the Shoah, for any aesthetic device needs to be correlative to what intends to depict. It is understandable that artistic testimony of a historic fact sublimates the recorded event. The truth becomes true, once again, through literary fiction, which, with its inexhaustible figurative and rhetorical means, amplifies and dilates—through this process of reckoning with the true—the reception possibilities of the historic event.[11] To the structural problems of how to utilize (chiefly) literary narrative

prose, we need also to add the problems related to the social construction of gender and what such distinction entails when narrating extreme or unimaginable situations.

In "Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives," Barbara Foley theorizes the existence of three kinds of Holocaust novels: the realist novel that typifies a personal experience; the one in which expressive modernist and mythological forms express the sense of unreality of the genocide; and the pseudofactual that uses history to recount a story. The whole corpus of literary narrative prose—fragments collected by historians, memories written in a breath right after returning and published much later, texts written after a long period of decantation, distant in time from the emotive and linguistic immediacy of the writing almost carnally transferred into ink right after returning to civil life—needs to be rethought within the historical novel genre, for its conventional form can no longer suffice. The Shoah novel has the merit of juxtaposing at least two genres: the historical novel and the psychological one, faithful to the concept of an ever-present history, "eternally" contemporary if intended in Crocean terms. The female Shoah *Zeitroman* implies analyzing how memorial genotexts, published upon the return from the camp have actually opened up the path to phenotexts for some of the survivors (Millu) as well as for other writers (Loy; Morante). In my literary mapping this interest stirred in Italian women writers deserves attention to construct that *esile filo* connecting literary works. In critical terms, such interest corresponds, in fact, to a transformation of writerly practices that is dissatisfied with the traditionally accepted generic categories.[12]

The fiction arising with and accompanying the event sees different moments for its own genesis. In its tension to be a hospitable involucre for such complex content, the form of these novels constantly changes. The fluctuations and mutations in the form of the text notwithstanding, what we witness in all works studied here is the authors' obligation to *vraisemblance*: the need to adhere to the reality we know without betrayal. This does not mean assimilating the writing of a novel to a documentary text, for that would not be part of the generic characteristics of the novel. For this reason I distinguish my own critical approach from that of Charlotte Wardi. The functionality of real events within the novel must respect the *vraisemblable*—the duty of an author toward readers for making what they are writing believable, according to the novelistic tradition. What one tells readers, whether implied or not, is to always be plausible within the frame of the narrated facts. Verisimilitude grants this to fictional writing. If this plausibility ceases to exist, aside from the failure to complete the moral message wished to be conveyed to readers, we witness

the establishment of a psychological barrier between who writes and who reads. In the case of Shoah novels, then, one might wonder how believable can we make those terrible realities that fiction tries to carry and from which it itself derives.

The analysis of the texts cannot omit what Derrida calls the "instability" of genres. Whether dealing with concentrationary novels or with *Zeiteromane*, all texts must be evaluated singularly according to a larger scale of thought that might situate them within the perspective granted by collective memory. In her investigation of the *Zeitroman*, Ruth Glynn looks at a temporal difference not to be intended strictly as such but more as a psychological distance (14–16). Perhaps this is a proper way to understand the Italian Shoah novel by women: a historical novel without defined temporal definitions that points at the contemporaneity between the female author and the things happened in the novel. A kind of historical novel, that is, that takes more into consideration the affinities rather than the discrepancies of the two times intercepted by the writing (15). I consider thus the definition of *Zeitroman* intended as a historical contemporary novel—a shared presence of past and present in the sense Henry Bergson gives to this concept—as almost necessary in most Shoah novels by Italian women writers. We read in them the same instances, encapsulated by other non-Italian novels sharing similar topics. But the reality in Italy (reality for women) was different and specular differences appear in fictional works accordingly. We have few scenes set in the actual camps, because for many Italian writers the Shoah represents the horror they lived in their own homes, in their towns, and refuges during the war. It is auspicious to think that the shift from nonfictional to fictional with regard to the representational modes of the Shoah, its successive reelaboration born out of reflections on the event and the state of exception that produced it (a shift matured also by virtue of a string of literary examples), can continue to find more complex spaces to investigate human behavior in extreme situations. These are texts that are expanding the already conspicuous series of possible definitions of Auschwitz[13] as a metaphor—a representational category—for the disaster, for the *Zivilizationsbruch*, that rupture theorized by Dan Diner ("Aporie" 30–32). The horror has been, from the start, written from a variety of perspectives: as a topic; in order to understand how to write about it; as a useful tool for rethinking (if not understanding) representational strategies for Auschwitz—in short, to confirm how the Shoah is still the negative zenith of Western society.[14] What becomes arduous even to think about is that one can actually tell history *wie eigentlich gewesen ist* (how it really was). The proclamation by Leopold Ranke, famously contested by Walter Benjamin in this sixth thesis on the philosophy of history, betrays any possibility of

understanding history not as a chronicle of events but as a complex narrative built *over* events.[15] Writers of the Shoah investigate the same temporal structure as historians, proposing complementary and alternative readings of the same event. In this effort, they confirm the difficulty of conceiving Auschwitz's basic aporia of being a fact, that is, at once unforgettable and unthinkable in the terms that constituted it; the same tension regulates historic knowledge in the "non-coincidence between facts and truth, between evidence and comprehension" (Agamben 8). As Enzo Traverso notes, "History and memory have their own temporalities that constantly tend to overlap without, however, coinciding. Memory possesses a qualitative temporality that problematizes the *continuum* of history" (40).

A fictional space as immense as the one marked by Shoah novels produces reflections on human nature, ethical values, and the behavior of Italians. Its size constitutes an added issue in working through the fictional possibilities of remembering through the written word. Word recomposes events which, in the case of World War II and the Shoah, constituted unprecedented situations in modern history: deportation of civilians, in particular women and children and the gratuitous annihilation (not human sacrifice) of women and children who never took part in war events. To think of it, the act of not writing on the Shoah by novelists would amount to an incontestable victory for the oppressive totalitarian powers. In the case of some Italian female novelists, it is important to note how, rather than writing of the physical presence of the camp, these authors often write of an ethical absence. Of how they have chosen to speak of the responsibility we all must share; of the absence of forgiveness.

More recent writings can only elicit further concerns as expressed by memorial writings, namely the problem of hegemonic culture (not only Nazi-Fascist but also Catholic) that witnessed the progressive elimination of Jewish culture from Western European civilization. Gentile and Jewish Italians alike claim that Italian Jews have integrated and assimilated into Italian culture, but problems with this issue arise even today due to the prejudice against Jews that is still apparent in the proverbs and colloquialisms of the Italian language, a prejudice emphasized by the lack of empathy for Jews, extending to even attempts at normalization of their genocide. Finally, and always, standing prejudices about gender and the role of women in society trigger questions of the marginalization of their word and experience, a problem in which anti-Feminism and anti-Semitism form a fatal match. In her evaluation of writings of the turn of the nineteenth century, Rossi-Doria tries to understand the ties of discrimination of the Jew and of the woman, both perceived as inferior and

frightful beings. The most ancient root is the sexuality issue (Rossi-Doria, "Antifemminismo" 459) to which a more recent is added, the question of the universal rights of the man as citizen. Both the Jew and the Woman are forbidden from being part of the public arena "for only the Christian male has access to public life" (460). Guilty of instigating undesired societal changes, both the Jew and the woman live a forced marginality. We see a common thread of discrimination that remains culturally significant in contemporary Italy until recently, and a common marginalization that should never go unnoticed.

2

Not Only Memory: Narrating the Camp between Reality and Fiction

A Modern Return to Barbarity: Survivors, Testimonies, and Memorials

The year 1986 marked the surge of a strong reaction by Italian survivors against the revisionist wave of *Historikerstreit*.[1] This reaction was channeled in Italy via the organization of the conference *La vita offesa: Storia e memoria dei Lager nazisti nei racconti di duecento sopravvissuti* (Wounded Life: History and Memory of the Nazi Camps in the Narratives of 200 Survivors) followed in 1987 by the publication of survivors' *racconti* (oral narratives) in a volume edited by Anna Bravo and Daniele Jalla, with a foreword by Primo Levi.[2] The necessity of situating the Italian voice of testimony within the international landscape of Shoah testimonies and studies is clearly and ubiquitously stated by the volume's two editors. But *La vita offesa* tries to fill a void that concerns first of all Italian society, for awareness and recording of testimony were slow to develop in Italy, particularly when compared to the studies and research on the Shoah that were being undertaken internationally. The volume *La vita offesa* is divided into three sections: the antecedents to the camp, with facts and conditions that led to imprisonment; narratives focused on the deportation and time in the camp; and the return home. The paradox of the impossibility of language to render images collected during those moments emerges from all narratives. And yet, survivors entrust themselves with the duty to put limits on the discourse of incredibility and use of unreliable sources. Personal recollection constructs the reality of those events; it makes us comprehend the extent of the survivors' trauma and frames the collective sense of such trauma and of the dissolution of the family. Further, recollection sets the

stage for the difficult relation that, from thereafter, survivors engaged in with their country as well as with other Italians and Italian Jews who accepted Fascism with all its known consequences.

From the *racconti* by Italian survivors collected in *La vita offesa* the reader gets a sense of uneasiness regarding the role of Italians and their passive acceptance of both the racial laws and the very ambiguous juridical outcome of the postwar amnesties that obliterated responsibilities, names, and a just verdict for all those whose action was instrumental to the denunciation, deportation, and annihilation of the Italian Jews. This critical impasse long hampered the possibilities of an assessment, of a clear affirmation of the role of Italians in the event while also obstructing the full value of survivor testimonies. The undeniable protection and help that Italian *Giusti* (Righteous) offered to some Italian Jews also constitutes a significant element in the creation of such ambiguity. The presence of these *Giusti* in fact encouraged a sense of unjustified obliviousness by Italian society at large. The evidence of responsibility was erased twice then: once by the law that granted undeserved amnesty to many, and then again by the proliferation of the commonly held belief that all Italian nationals had helped the Jews. The idea was that a veil should be cast over the entire event, just as was done with the Fascist parenthesis. Toward the effort of reconstruction, the country managed to delay until the mid-1980s a collective *compte-rendu*.

As Primo Levi states in his foreword to *La vita offesa*, the volume came late. In his view, this conference and the publication could no longer wait, however, for witnesses' interviews state the prescience of awareness of political mass deportation: "political mass deportation, associated with will to slaughter and the recovery of slave economy, is central to the history of our century, in the same way as the creation of the nuclear arms" ("Prefazione" [Bravo and Jalla] 7). At the core of Levi's reflections stands the "modern return to the barbaric," which, in his view, is to be acknowledged by the "guilty back then as by their heirs" (7). Levi identifies the "ugly revisionist effort" as the attempt at neutrality that some historians try to imbue their discourse by the means of "rhetorical fireworks" (7). According to Levi, such efforts are to be blamed and fought against, for the scope and purpose of these revisions lies in demonstrating "that we did not see what we have seen, that we have not lived what we have lived" (7). In 1986, Levi's words conveyed the urgency for evidence of suffering to not be obfuscated by revisionist shading; to not let revisionist historians talk freely about theories that could sound merely offensive as they advanced with a presumed scholarly integrity, even when faced with the multitudes of survivors willing to testify and offer evidence to the contrary. This urgency parallels the one that compelled Levi to

publish in the same year his daunting cautionary work about the inanity of evil and humankind, *The Drowned and the Saved*. Levi's precise ethical and political reasons for composing the text indicate a larger wave of protest against the possible effects of revisionism that, by claiming a presumed lack of evidence, dispenses scholarly discussions on the Shoah from examining the notions of guilt and shame. While survivors' *racconti* all protest against the ghost of revisionism (as they all brought evidence), their testimonies are composed without clear uniformity.

Rather than looking at consistencies across all testimonies, Bravo and Jalla underscore the distinct features of each account; they look at how survivors' accounts display the witnesses' voices claiming the power to speak up. Further, such lack of consistency between narratives should not surprise, for it manifests the heterogeneity of the Italian Jewish fabric and the particular narrative structure that each witness selects to narrate her/his stories (Chiappano 71–134). Primo Levi attributes great relevance to the testimonies of survivors, as he does to the equally dramatic, yet more conventional narratives of war prisoners ("Prefazione" [Bravo and Jalla] 8). Ignoring the destiny of civilians destabilizes the war narrative of military personnel imprisoned on active duty, and subsequently calls for critical reflection. Aside from providing a vivid recollection of the complex modes of dehumanization, each camp narrative reveals the "desire to speak up, to find an attentive and empathetic listener" (8). Italian survivors finally enjoy "a long-awaited opportunity to give written form to those experiences now far in time" (8). Witnesses tend to share similar hopes: surviving and being heard, retelling their experience to make sure that their "life is not devoid of a reason" (8). The survivor's act of speaking is not limited to a conversation with the interviewer. Levi equates this act to a "moral and civic duty," for

> if we will die here in silence as our enemies would like, if we won't come back, the world will not know of what man has been capable, of what is still capable: the world will not know itself, will be more vulnerable to a renewal of the Nazi-socialist barbarity, or any other equivalent one, no matter the actual or supposed political background. (9)

Levi claims the relevance of the *racconti* in two distinct fields: civic duty and the literary genre. The truth of the narratives is assimilated to that of a literary text, for "the narrative of a survivor is a literary genre" (9). Levi ties the 1986 survivors' narratives of *La vita offesa* to illustrious literary examples steeped in the Italian tradition. He compares the squalor of Buna-Monowitz to that of Spielberg's prison as depicted by Silvio Pellico in *Le mie prigioni* (*My Prisons*); Ruzante returning from the battle;

Tibullo's soldier narrating his exploits on the war field while drawing with wine the encampment on the table. Closer to Levi is the reference to Eduardo De Filippo's *Napoli milionaria*. Gennaro comes back to his hometown, now devastated by war and hunger, and tries, without luck, to find someone to listen to his stories (9). Levi's considerations of the *racconti* legitimize the idea that a survivor's narrative belongs to a literary genre with specific topoi and interpretive strategies. The act of retelling of one's own suffering and return to civil life amounts to a "moral and civic duty" that elevates the composition of a testimony to an act of "social advancement" (8). To elucidate its intended effect, the survivor's narrative combines several layers of meaning along with expressive potentialities. The destination for the most appropriate reception of the text lays in a referential future, locatable already in the structure of the narrative—as our close reading will show in the next chapters—and demanding full attention and empathy from its reader.

Relations between history, memory and ethics support a rethinking of the psychoanalytic categories that address such issues as transfer, acting out, and working through, for "[w]hat is not confronted critically does not disappear, it tends to return as the repressed" (LaCapra, "Representing the Holocaust" 125–26). Such acts of remembrance are intimately connected with mourning and melancholia as well as with other forms of social action that "require the ability to recall in a desirable way" (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 4). Hence, although Levi understands those who have chosen to remain silent, he nevertheless encourages survivors to speak: they came back, therefore they must talk or act out, particularly when faced with the outrage of revisionism. Retelling implies the physical act of remembrance, a rhetorical exercise of finding words to express what happened. Working through such a trauma recognizes our engagement with the past: testimonies as memorials simply need to be, and our act of reading implies our understanding of such need. Bravo and Jalla speak of the fatigue that accompanied the survivors' retelling of their experiences. They must speak before their grief is questioned by the systemic negation of facts by those who want the Jews' annihilation to reach total fruition. Even if memory is, as Levi called it, a "fallacious instrument," facts of the terrifying horror in the camps remain indelibly carved into the memory of survivors. The two editors are cognizant of the value of memory despite the temporal distance:

> Memory has an iron core that is impregnable to time and more fragile contours. It is not possible to forget the Camp, the horrendous treatment to which one has been submitted and the scenes of desolation and death one has witnessed. [. . .] It is much easier to confuse a date, a number, a secession of events, forget names. (Bravo and Jalla, "Introduzione" 14)

Memory is fallacious only when dealing with details tied to contingencies. Its eventual shortcomings do not erode the total sense of the camp experience. In its aftermath, memories of the camp come to be characterized by misunderstandings because the categories of historiographical analysis (just like language) failed to grasp the antihumanistic transformation in action; this is even true in the revisitation of the concept of war *tout court*. Racial deportation constitutes one of the main misunderstandings, for it was "traditionally perceived more as one of the many risks of the time rather than as the outlet of an ongoing persecution, or the price of one's opposition to it" (23). Still in 1986, deportation remained, for the majority of Italians, "a nebulous item whose meaning does not clearly appear" (23) for many reasons, chiefly those of a society preoccupied with disengaging its image from complicities with Nazism. As an instrument unequivocally connected to war, deportation does not hold its conventional meaning if considered in light of the fact that Jewish survivors were not soldiers, but civilian men and women.

It is partly due to this reason that Primo Levi dissuades us from pointless comparisons between the Shoah and World War II military imprisonments. Bravo and Jalla lament the perpetual lack of attention to what is traditionally a duty of historiography: recording the actual number of deportees and survivors. Both of these are the vestiges of a historic conscience that needs mending. The Nazi system had imposed a different signified meaning on the signifiers of imprisonment and deportation. Memoirs and testimonies often depict a double act of incredulity: that of the survivors hearing themselves telling seemingly untellable stories; and that of the disbelief of the relatives or friends to whom which the survivors try to tell of their experiences. Telling of their experiences becomes a risky business for survivors in postwar Italy. The recurring dream of the refusal of being heard as recorded by many survivors—not only by Levi—stems from the doubt that a future in which victims can actually become witnesses could ever exist.

The advancers of racial cleansing were aware of the fact that the apocalyptic scenario of the camp could have hardly been understood and configured by those who had not lived that world *renversé,* one in which, more often than not, it was the lie and not the truth that was to be rewarded. The camp was a place in which, in order to survive, one had to behave at one's worst, led by the survival instinct to emerge from the living inferno—an inferno in which people were imprisoned not for their involvement in the war, but for motives and reasons that had little to do with the conventional concepts of war and imprisonment therein. To describe this shift, new linguistic parameters were needed, for the concentrationary universe was not based on known or previously experienced human situations. Rather,

situations in the camp were prompted by the lowest common (human) denominator that reduced any act of violence to the banal, to an ordinary act of camp maintenance. In some cases, the almost systemic acceptance of such treatment on the part of the prisoners was determined not by passive acceptance of man's evil, but an action taken precisely to affirm their own humanity against that barbaric behavior. This was a form of functional resistance that some prisoners used to articulate their existence in the world of the camps.

The will to receive human justice from a world ignorant of the camp inculcates in the survivor the necessity of making manifest a truth that is no longer relative to what has been lived and is justifiable within the reversed logic of the camp, but a truth that depends on explaining the mechanisms of this world *renversé* to listeners who did not take part in such reality. The *racconto* follows the path indicated by the narrator's own sense of justice that she applies to make listeners and/or readers ideal witnesses to her pain. In response to the "personality change" (Bettelheim, *Informed* 125) activated by the absurd rites of initiation of the camps whose goal was to "break the prisoners as individuals, and to change them into a docile mass from which no individuals or group act of resistance could arise" (109), the witness can now retell a singular, individual story. Returning from the camp did not mean the end of anything for them; rather, for many it was the validation that theirs was another life from which "is not possible to come back" (Tedeschi, in Ferri 29). The witness demands from us that we believe her, lest a loss of validity impinge on her own self-appointed duty as both survivor and transcriber of the camp reality. The witness restores to the word survivor the significance of its Latin etymology: the term points to an individual who has lived through all the stages of an event and can thusly bear witness, though what Agamben labels the actual witness (*der Muselmann*) will remain forever silent (23). The anguish that remembrance inevitably triggers—recalling is the trauma—cannot possibly be addressed by any judicial trial as a possible solution to an individual tragedy. In the process of recollection, a personal idea of justice is present, but is brought to a level that, rather than to a *quaestio juris*, connects to a *quaestio facti* (17). The concern that guides the act of recollecting is not collecting evidence for a trial but keeping the memory of the facts witnessed alive. "Everything that places human action *beyond* the law is what interests the survivor, radically withdrawing it from the Trial," notes Agamben (17; emphasis added), for what this individual witnessed is *beyond* the known. Bravo and Jalla believe, in opposition to Agamben's tenets, that trial deposition and spontaneous narration share the same nature, for they both want to retrieve the memory, and not only facts, of the dead. Bravo and Jalla also

believe that acts of retelling the camp serve as forms of "denunciation against executioners able to disappear as well; against indifferent accomplices and spectators, against the world who delayed to believe and to intervene, and that often still doubts" ("Introduzione" 26–27). Following the private memoirs of the mid-1940s and 1950s, the survivors who spoke in the 1980s aimed to reestablish the contention that their nightmare was in fact never concluded or fully dealt with. Their act of writing sought a further confirmation that their perspective was heard and read without ambiguity. Hence the shared nature of deposition and spontaneous narration merge into a public testimony that combines the scopes and structures of trial discourse and private accounts.

Understanding Testimony

In 1995, almost ten years following the publication of *La vita offesa*, the conference *La deportazione femminile nei Lager nazisti* (Female Deportation in the Nazi Camps) was held. In the collected volume of proceedings that followed, Gianfranco Maris and Bruno Vasari declared the importance of the dissemination of female survivors' texts, particularly of those "endowed with an analytic *literary value*" for the latter possess the distinct merit of "expanding the knowledge of deportation" (9; emphasis added). In the same volume, Bravo sheds light on the paucity of testimonies by women published in the aftermath of the war, underscoring how the effective number of deported Italian women hardly justifies such scarcity. The number of testimonies could have been higher despite the fact that the number of Italian women in the camps is rather low when contrasted with that of the number of women from Eastern Europe. Italian women survivors were missing a sense of worth to attribute to their stories: the mosaic of the initiatives promoted by women was placed under the generic "female contribution": a definition that would immediately weaken women's gendered voice in the discussion (Bravo, "Relazione" 16).[3]

Bravo quite rightly attributes the explosion of women's writings in the mid-1980s to the confluence of second-wave feminism and women's increasing self-awareness. Italian women began to speak up about their experiences when the suffering of many women might otherwise go forgotten and be omitted from history. As such, silence would mean another death, this time symbolic, of the women survivors left behind. This was not possible. The return of these women to Italy will be equally difficult; Bianca Paganini Mori remembers: "[W]hen we got back from Ravensbrück we tried to say something but we were looked in

a strange way [at meetings] even by our fellow prisoners. No one knew of Ravensbrück and no one imagined that there could be an exclusively female camp" (Paganini Mori 168):

> At home at last we got into a troublesome situation. We were not believed, when we were trying to tell something we were looked at with perplexity and doubt and then we preferred to remain silent. But when we began to realize that the silence meant to betray the companions that we had left there, to destroy and undo the suffering of many women, then we started talking. (171)

This was the atmosphere that hindered women's writing at first and then—after a temporal lapse—prompted reaction. Marginality and lack of interest have often connoted the character of the female deportee and survivor; in strict coherence to historiographical discourse, the focus has been on universality rather than individuality. Women—who until recently had been relegated to marginal positions by critics and historians, barely mentioned in any narrative, hidden by the universalizing (and hence discriminatory) term *uomini*—now find the opportunity to say and add their word to that of those whose voices first composed the narrative of the camps. Speaking out depends on who is listening, as well, for "[s]aying or not saying depends on the way the word is received. Seen from the listener's perspective, *unsayability* (indicibilità) has often functioned as a pretext to elude the effort of imagining an extreme condition that one prefers to remove" (Bravo, "Relazione" 17–18; emphasis added). Bravo cites "political forces…schools of historiography and single scholars" as silencing powers against the voices of women survivors (18). Further, as LaCapra states, the repressed that is not confronted critically tends to return. Instead, it is interesting to note that the most common form of self-justification for female survivors' repression was that "women would have not spoken out, actually that they would not have even wanted to do so" (Bravo, "Relazione" 18). Commonplaces about innate female modesty—also used in our contemporary era as justification for the spreading social phenomenon of feminicide—would further endorse official justifications for the lack of women's accounts of the Shoah.

In the mapping of Italian women writers, the rise of feminist activism denotes the end of women's silence (and the purported lack of listeners) about the camps. We know that when a woman is not the one speaking of her experience, the characterization of her reality of deportee/survivor experience is often exploited and reduced to a mass media object in lowbrow and commercial productions. Why is women's presence important to the market-minded; why are women such effective bodies for

reification? To see the pain of a woman captivates audiences. We quickly identify with weaker characters, superficially empathize with them and do not quite dwell on the reasons of their suffering. In short, a woman's presence is needed to edulcorate the historic event, reproduced by mass media products with a sentimental and banalizing effect. Exceptions do exist, but so does the danger of what is generally called the feminization of culture. In order to be grasped by as many readers or viewers as possible, an event is unburdened from any thorny intellectual connotations and offered in turn to mass spectators/readers. Feminization, taken at face value, signifies adding a female protagonist to fictional works to make these unpleasant works more palatable to their consumers. Rather than underscore the stand that many female prisoners did take while in the camps or on their way home from the lagers; rather than highlight their enormous wills and power of their resistance (as many writings speak to the memory of those who fought in the camps), their presumed weakness and their stereotype-laden foolish frivolities are always played against a realistic portrayal of who these women were. The pain of women is hence modified by mass media to the benefit of a global spectacle, and the rendition of their true pain is manipulated in the terms aptly described by James Young. With the goal of maximizing mass consumption of such an event, women are confined, once again, to a position of diffused marginality. Impenetrability to a gender study remains nevertheless, a defensive position, for "[t]o deny the importance of gender is equivalent to maintaining that the narrative canon must remain male, a claim today obsolete in all research areas" (Bravo, "Presentazione" xi–xii). Bravo follows up on her comments in all her subsequent works, and openly declares the fissure between female historians' work now often based on women (and also men seen in their masculine specificity) and that of male historians who still believe in a study of historic events made (in theory) in a comprehensive way. She protests against a patriarchal approach that divests history of the "primary orienting factor," namely the sexual gender of appurtenance (Bravo, "Prefazione" 9). Thematizing women's experiences "stirs discomfort and alarms individuals to the point of being labeled of 'revisionism'" and instills "fear that attention to sexuality might desacralize death, or, worse, that facing the men/women relations reveal inherent sexism in Jewish men" (Bravo, "Presentazione" xi–xii). Finally, topics tied to gender biological peculiarities, such as "maternity, pregnancy, abortion, [and] sexual vulnerability are too identified with female life normalcy to find a place in an event defined unique" (xii). This theoretical absurdity, as noted (among others) by Joan Ringelheim in her seminal "Women and the Holocaust" (745), lies in the relentlessness by which "Nazism feared of and hit on Jewish women precisely because they were the procreators

of their race" (Bravo, "Presentazione" xi). I cannot endorse the refusal to present the peculiarities of women's situation in the camp and their difficult return home. Elimination of the Jews—and consequently the demographic growth of Aryans—is a topic that necessarily regards women's bodies specifically.[4]

Demographic politics of annihilation (and the proliferation of racial groups) depended on women's reproductive powers. Bravo calls attention to the specific experiences of women because the work of historians can reshape misunderstandings of the Shoah as a universal issue. The paradox of the critical and historiographic discourse Bravo discusses so frequently lies in the unwillingness to divide the plurality of voices, for fear of diluting the import of the event when, in all actuality, it was precisely the specificity brought on by sexuality that held great relevance in the elimination of the race. In his alignment of binary opposites, Mengaldo clarifies how women constitute the most noticeable example of master/slave dialectics: "[I]t is a fact that the survivors of the German camps and extermination of slavery have repeatedly insisted on the diversity and uniqueness of the experience beyond the women" (*La vendetta* 45).[5] While Mengaldo finds it unquestionable that "the camps (more than the gulag) also put in place the destruction, by starting and often completing it, of the intrahuman fundamental distinction between man and woman" he also divests the reader of responsibility to the specific peculiarity of women's suffering: "[T]he humiliation, and worse, of femininity in the concentration camp universe is a phenomenon so known that *there is no need to dwell*, if not to remember that it was due in part to the direct action and ritual of the jailers" (45–46; emphasis added). In view of Bravo's comments, can we agree with Mengaldo in stating that today "*there is no need to dwell*" on the "humiliation, and worse, of femininity"? Who is observing and desexualizing the image of the female prisoner? For instance, the condition of amenorrhea demands a critical pause to understand the extent of the horror of the camps: dehumanization declined also in terms of gender. Focus on women's suffering does not mean reinstating victimization claims, but instead invites a critical observation specific to the identity of who is telling the story, and to further empathize with this kind of victim.

In its tragedy, the camp represents a field of inquiry that offers the possibility of transposing a perturbation of gender to which individuals are subjected in extreme circumstances, a gray area that is not only moral but also physical. Analyzing the *racconti* by female survivors urges readers to notice how the camp builds a grotesque but true social apparatus wherein the way women talk of the loss of femininity expresses not only their desexualization, but also a modification of the biological and social characteristics linked to their gender. The state of exception represented

by the camp shapes that uncanny closeness of men and women—Mengaldo's idea of a "fundamental intrahuman distinction" (46)—which can, in abject yet verifiable modalities, deconstruct the binary opposition of man/woman. The particularity of gender can break down such given constructions and reveal other gray areas with regards to sexuality. What the deportees deny in their stories is the reduction of their humanness to something indistinguishable: a defeminization that gives them nothing in exchange for the subtraction of gender. Their *racconti* defy the logic of the camp and make plain the suffering of women and their attempt to react against defeminization.

The distinctive features of gender remain an important legacy of the Nazi politics of ethnic cleansing, a politics that would immediately eliminate many women with children at railways sidings, while leaving men alive as an indispensable labor force for the German companies that employed these twentieth-century slaves.[6] The target of this secret war against the Jews was not to defeat the enemy, but to eliminate a race. This peculiar type of women's victimization, the focus of Ringelheim's interviews with female survivors, deals almost invariably with sexual abuses (745–47). Women's sexuality was used as an instrument, to negate a female human condition to the prisoners, as they were carriers of inferior genes. The process of dehumanization—subsequent to which medical doctors could feel free to execute genetic experiments, hysterectomies with no anesthesia, inflict any possible pain to women's bodies—was a crime committed directly on the particularity of the female gender, not on its predicated universality. This characterization of sex—medical experiments equivalent to torture carried out on women because of their specificity—can be considered a cruel counterpoint to the forced reproductive politics imposed on women in Fascist and Nazis regimes. In the camp, femininity becomes an issue as it "can easily capsize into a target" (Bravo, "Presentazione," xv); it can become the reason for rape and violence, for harassment and morbid curiosity perhaps to a greater degree than what was experienced in the male barracks. However mistreated, femininity remains a gift for these women, for gender is not only shaped by society but can be something women feel and something by which they recognize themselves. In general, the loss of femininity represents an impairment that women greatly regret, as evidenced in their documentations and writings.

If there are unquestionably elements of fate shared by men and women in the camp—like death, hunger, and work as a tool for the loss of human dignity—there are also situations in which women were more vulnerable precisely because of their sex and construction of gender. Dehumanizing women meant denying not only generic human qualities, but their

femininity as well. The biological difference, the specific sexual reproductive capacity of a woman, makes her simultaneously more vulnerable and more threatening. Analyzing gender specificity means adding to the universal (male) experience a female perspective, different and complementary to the construction of suffering tied to the body and to gender. The consideration of the Shoah from a gendered perspective has been met with critical resistance (if not diffused hostility). But in light of contemporary scholarly assessments of the presence of the body in writing, the analysis of the physical injuries and suffering by women in the camps can no longer be separated from the issue of difference. Representations and narratives of the Shoah must undergo an examination of what female experience and testimony add to the discussion.

The Return from the Camp: How Can Women Narrate?

Yet, there is a dearth of publications—even those based exclusively on women and/or feminist studies—that focus specifically on Italian survivors and writers. While Kremer's *Women's Holocaust Writing* touches upon a few Italian women, Heinemann's *Gender and Destiny* makes no mention of them at all.[7] Italian prisoners continue to be discriminated against, even in the critical history of the Shoah: they do not seem to deserve attention from critics, neither for their difference from other Jewish women writers, nor for their individual expressive abilities as writers. Symptomatic of the discriminatory situation of Italian women is the fact that even the oft-cited volume *Women in the Holocaust* (*Donne nell'Olocausto*), edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, while an important and many-sided collection in presenting the complex events surrounding female deportation, does not include analysis and/or studies of Italian women. With the exception of the introduction compiled by Bravo, nothing has been added to the Italian edition of the book, *Donne nell'Olocausto*. Likewise, there are few studies that address fictional representations of the Holocaust by Italian women authors.[8]

There are undeniable differences between the situation of Italian women and women of other nationalities, ranging from experiences in the camps to the reasons for their silence after their return home, but a marked editorial void regarding women in the camp begs the question: why have women remained in the background? This is a critical interrogative that Kataline Pécsi addresses. With all due differences related to the Hungarian sociopolitical and ideological context, Pécsi's responses are similar to my own. According to Pécsi, not only publishers, but the very writers themselves can be blamed for the absence of women's publications. Before World War II, Hungarian women of Jewish origin did

not identify as such, and from the Holocaust onward, a new generation of writers has been equally reluctant to write about their Jewish identity and/or of women. As in Italy, women in Hungary had additional difficulty divulging their accounts due to a sustained fear of a failure to reintegration once back home, when their traumatic experience would become public knowledge. Their decision to speak out would hamper marriages, would ostracize these women from their tight-knit society. As a result, the feminine aspect of Eastern and Central European Jewish existence is absent from a comprehensive map of Jewish narrative. As a further marginalization (that Pécsi does not fail to point out), discourse on gender becomes just as problematic as discourse on ethnicity, for "[t]he situation of Jewish women was further aggravated by the old Jewish fear of being 'different.' Mimicry, the art of superficial resemblance [. . .] was useful for women writers as well, and is still necessary today in a world in which acts of segregation are still more dominant than acts of unification" (Pécsi).

What are the reasons for the presumed indifference to gender issues that accompanied Italian and Hungarian women, a feeling that affects the testimonies of these women and their subsequent reception? What reasons can be found for this double marginalization in Shoah testimony and in the literature substantiated by such a topic? Our case studies being Italian, I discuss possible discriminating factors limited to their experience: once in the camp, Italian Jewish women witnesses and survivors appear to be doubly penalized compared to other groups under the same strenuous situation. We then have a problem that pertains to all female testimonies of the "double choice made by women not to speak of before and after" in addition to "the absence of precise biographical data" (Labbé 55). This eventual "reduction of testimony" may explain the "relative indifference that welcomed many women's writings after the fall of the initial wave of interest aroused by the discovery of the camps at the end of the war" (55). A lack of writings addressing what life was before the camp and after the return hinders the reader's ability to actually identify with the protagonist (Labbé; Masoero). The choice of authors to reduce accounts of deportation to a parenthesis in their lives limits the import of survivor testimonies. Italian women are penalized as if they are eccentric witnesses (just like their fellow- countrymen) when compared to what Annette Wieviorka considers the witness *par excellence*—the Eastern European Jew (see 39–40). Penalization occurs because of their membership to a thoroughly assimilated Jewish group—the Italian Jewish group, a very small population when compared to the numbers of Eastern Jews. Hence, women are not only disadvantaged as women, but also by virtue of their membership to a cultural *métissage*, which often braids memories of Christmas celebrations to the customs of *Péssach* (Passover)—memories

that are often accompanied by a uniquely Italian attitude of carelessness with respect to the observance of rituals. Finally, what can be inferred about the prevailing and penalizing ignorance of Yiddish among Italian women (as well as their male counterparts)?

The image of Christmas and nativity in Italian women's accounts confirms appurtenance to a cultural space they shared with Italian gentiles, not with their fellow Jew. The distinct features of Italianness appear to be a deterrent for the integration of Italian women into the camps, which in turn hinders their proper integration in a correct bibliography of the Shoah.

With respect to their failed integration into life in the camps, Italian women report both a cultural and a social disjuncture between them and other deportees. Without analyzing accounts of survivors and writers like Liana Millu, who clearly dismantle the myth of sisterhood, we are bound to generalize the portrait of the experiences of women in the camps. If one ignores the national, geographic, social, ideological, and political gaps existing among women in the camps, one cannot properly understand the distinct features of these *racconti*. While it might be true that, as Labbé maintains, the absence of the authorial biographical details inhibits a better characterization of individual women's experiences, the camp and the sad living conditions hardly appear portrayed according to preconfigured patterns. Texts by Italian women record how their nationality would immediately trigger contempt from their fellow inmates. Political reasons frequently (but not exclusively) made these Italian deportees unpopular with the other prisoners. Bianca Paganini Mori remembers her arrival at Ravensbrück where the Italians came among the last in 1944:

> Suddenly we realize that we Italian women are not well received; we are considered fascists, that is, we belong to a people that sparked the war that destroyed their homes and their families, and for the Germans are the dirty women of Badoglio, that is the very expression of betrayal. At this point it is clear to us that if we are to survive this hell, we should be able to find within ourselves the strength to react. (170)

Italian women are isolates—despised by those who put them in the camps and despised by those who, like them, were forced into those camps. In critical discourse addressing the Shoah, we see the same kind of marginalization as occurred in the camps, where the Italians were often unpopular with German or Eastern Jewish prisoners. The distinctive peculiarity of Italian Jewishness, and the awareness of a falsely achieved emancipation in the society of origin, becomes distinguishing and leads to discrimination within the camp. With few exceptions, Italian women remained

segregated from the rest of the prisoner population. These were Western Jews: they did not live in ghettos, did not speak Yiddish, and in everybody's mind, came from a nation that was allied with Hitler's Germany. Not speaking German, not speaking Yiddish, "non essere parlat[e]," writes Primo Levi (*Opere* 1, 722; "not being talked to," *Drowned* 93) produced grave consequences in the camp.

Texts were written initially without literary purpose; instead, they were crafted as authors attempted to find some consolation. It is in this sense that these compositions recall the essence of the ancient function of writing as a "testimony of the subject" (Beer, 600). Elaborating the memory of suffering endured as an anguish is indispensable in outlining the elements by which the shift from testimonial to fictional writing is made possible. Testimony's rhetoric concerns the strict evidence of the fact retold; fictional writing attempts persuasion with an added layer of pathos to its narrative. There is an important thread that binds direct memory to indirect memory, building the connection between what some women have experienced and what they themselves (as well as other nondirect witnesses by imagination and responsibility later) want to take from direct experience and elaborate in later writings. Italy is not immune from the liability that is already present in the camps, as female prisoners instinctively condemned the Italians for conflicting reasons.[9]

The difficult position of the displaced Italian, whose experience in the camp is also marked by the discourse of nationality, sometimes results in an ethnic gaze that leads to assessments that border on racism. These women, many of whose families had acquired freedom and equality with the second emancipation for the Jews of the Savoy Kingdom, marked by the Royal Decrees of the Albertine Constitution of 1848, shared the habits of the bourgeoisie and had access to professions. Being discriminated again and persecuted in such way thus produces a double trauma. The differences between Italian women and the other prisoners deepen, for various reasons—membership to a different social class, habits of living according to the canons of bourgeois life, finding the language of the enemy difficult to understand—with few exceptions, for almost all (F. Finzi, "Colloquio" 93). In particular, it is Italian nationality, a *patria* that, in the eyes of other prisoners, stands as a sufficient factor for establishing a hasty equivalence to the Nazis and determines the initial rejection of Italians by the rest of the prisoner population. It is only later then, according to Paganini Mori that, "that great spirit of solidarity that allowed many of us to survive the horror" arises (171). Practices of solidarity among women are essential to their very survival. Labbé argues testimonies "consist of a series of vignettes, whose main logical link lies in chronology, intended to illustrate the different aspects of camp life and

martyrdom of the deported" to constitute a kind similar to the "jail stories," (51); however, I contend that the writings of the Italian women retain some distinctive features. In addition to disagreeing with the notion of a plot consisting of a "series of vignettes" and an alleged "logical link" conferred on them by "chronology," I also believe that these writings are remarkable insofar as they shed light on the tensions inside the female prison barracks. The tensions arising from differences seem at odds with the clichés of solidarity in force between women, as Millu states in her testimony. Women are different because many of them do not know how to react, because many of them are too submissive, because they feel they are now living amid foreign women with whom the only common denominator (aside from gender) is supposed to be their faith, and yet faith fails to function as mediating tool. For the rest, the camp confirms its status as a Babel tower of races and languages. Respect for emotion on the part of these women does not comply with the heroic virtues exhibited by men; however it helps them in Auschwitz, forming the basis of a sisterhood, a community that is at least affective. Paradoxically, sisterhood coexists with violence: it is an incontrovertible fact that amid the horror, the deportees try to recreate a sense of warmth, a desire made all the more potent as a result of forced separation from family. However, the myth that women are neither violent nor aggressive crumbles, when we note that, in extreme situations, conflicts with other women do arise:

> And sisterhood?
>
> I do not like myths, especially those postdated. The myth of sisterhood makes me think of gilding something that is not gold. In the camp, inequalities were fierce, feudal, and immediately identifiable by few more pounds. What did have to do the florid girls of the kitchens: heavy set, full-chested, with beautiful aprons due to the mafia of the warehouses, with the miserable women who defied the beatings just to grab something from the piles of garbage?
>
> Nothing. (Millu, "All'ombra" 133)

This is the logic of the camp: pitting human beings against one another to prohibit the fomenting of group action. In women's writings, this experiment in dehumanization examines human beings placed in extreme conditions in a reversed universe. It is only with notable exceptions (like Etty Hillesum and Getrud Kolmar) that we find little or no space for the process of universalization of emotions. Accordingly, reversals and destabilizations of female behavior must take into account the particularities of gender and the particularities of life in the camps for Italian women.

The Body of Italian Women

The Shoah demands a larger narrative of Italian women, one that connects the omissions of history committed at their expenses, that fills the void left by historiography, that ties together the events that marked their lives forever. For some women, the Shoah necessitates rediscovering their sense of Judaism within the Italian social context after the war, after the verbal, psychological, and physical violence against which little could be done. The Shoah became for these women upon their return, a zero point of a Cartesian system along whose axes the different stages of their pain could be measured. For many women, this period in their lives (the camp, the return) represents a singular nadir.

Few Italian women chose to speak out and write after their return home. Yet their role is fundamental for, unlike their male counterparts, who adhered to anti-Fascism and new political parties, the work by these women manifests a willingness to tell as much as they could about the camp. Their written texts reveal long-practiced speeches and/or mental soliloquies with the camp as thematic center, and these works still remain relatively unknown to a public ostensibly interested in Shoah literature. Among other works (aside from those cited in the previous chapter), we remember Luciana Nissim's *Ricordi della casa dei morti* (*Memories from the House of the Dead*), Frida Misul's *Fra gli artigli del mostro nazista: la più romanzesca delle realtà, il più realistico dei romanzi* (*Between the Nazi Monster's Claws: The Most Novelistic of Realities, The Most Realistic of the Novels*), and Alba Valech Capozzi's *A24029*.

The nonfictional writings by Liana Millu—the first important pieces on the camps to be penned by a woman—are articles printed immediately after her return to Italy. These texts set a tone that finds its echo in later nonfictional work of Italian women. The real name of the first important female Italian writer of the Shoah, Liana Millul, was slightly different from the name she used to sign all her publications. Of Pisan origin, Millu was born in 1914 and died in 2005. As a young woman, Millu moved to Genoa, where she led anti-Fascist activities during the war and joined the *Gruppo Otto* (Group 8) radio communications effort for the Resistance. She had entered the Patriotic Action Squads (SAP) whose task was to save the radio systems from the Nazis. She thus fully adhered to the dictates of the National Liberation Committee (CLN). As interviewed by Myriam Kraus for the Spielberg Foundation, Liana Millu represents the ideal witness for her unrelenting bravery to speak of what she saw, to speak to thousands of students, including Edith Bruck and other survivors. Her life story presents difficulties and hers was an unconventional lifestyle well before Auschwitz, but the camp is the turning point of her existence,

and becomes intertwined with memories of her time in the Resistance. At the recommencement of civil life, this complex sharing of war-and-camp experience compels her to leave testimony for those who disappeared in the extermination camps. Millu always started her testimonies in schools with an explanation of her registration number in Auschwitz-Birkenau, n. A 5384. Her actual oral testimony is often summarized by some few key moments: the arrival at the camp, the undressing, the shaving by the hands of the Italian lady, and the grotesque encounter with the woman who, facing the sky, wonders why such a calamity was befalling her specifically. But her work as a writer and journalist—abruptly put to a halt following the promulgation of the racial laws—started well before her act of oral testimony. Her first piece, "Auschwitz 'lager' della morte: gli orrori del campo di annientamento" ("Auschwitz Death 'Camp': The Horrors of the Extermination Camp"), appeared in the Genoese newspaper *Corriere del popolo* on October 11, 1945. Millu could publish this piece, one of the earliest on the camps in Italian, only through the intercession of the female writer Willy Dias who acted as her literary mentor. It was extremely difficult to include an article on the scabrous theme of Auschwitz in the pages of a newspaper because it was difficult to speak plainly of the terrible reality of the camps to those who knew so little. Also, for Italians, the removal of the immediate past was believed to be the way of leading the country forward following the war, the way to lead the nation and its identity to effective reconstruction. Following this first article, Millu collaborated for years with *Corriere del popolo*; however, she was presented with a twofold problem: how to make the experience of the camps understood by compatriots and fellow citizens who tended to equate their experience with those of the survivors, and her sense that she had to "pay the guilt of one's own survival, against the tribe of the dead, with a commitment so you do not forget" (Verdino 90). Her most effective tactic (quite different from the impersonal testimonies left by other female prisoners) was forcing her readers to identify with the characters who were subject of her writing. For Millu, focalization and identification meant involving her readers in the text by placing her feelings and experiences as author on a par with theirs as readers and compatriots. Millu's goal was to make people see what they had not seen. If she would confess her earlier disbelief in certain things—the horror of the camps, for instance—she did so by demonstrating how she had indeed lived them and how that turned her life into something unimaginable. In turn, she would try to get readers to imagine life in the camps, for she could probe the facts as the truth of her story. In other words, Millu involves her readership because she, too, in a typical ana/cataphoric hinge in which deictics become metaphor for the experience of the camp, did not believe before. And, after, she did.

Readers would understand only by identification what Millu had experienced in the temporal lapse: "[I]t was not propaganda! *We survivors who are bringing back the signs of a life worse than death, we have been able to see it*" ("Auschwitz" 11; emphasis added). Millu listened carefully to the radio, in fear of being discovered since racial laws forbade Jews from listening to the radio. Yet, she could not believe the news before going to the camp. In addition to identification, another strategy Millu applies in her writing is the sarcastic treatment of German stereotypes; black humor becomes an effective mode of presenting bleak details. The renowned precision of Germans contributes, in fact, to the construction of a bitter tale set in a faraway place that will become sadly exotic for many Italians ("Auschwitz," 11–12). The incipit of Millu's work—"immediately after the conquest of Poland"—marks the beginning of a horrible tale perfectly placed within the history of the war that just ended. However, this story seems so divorced from reality that writing it in the historical present seems unlikely. This is a story that Millu did not fabricate, but actually experienced. Yet, because it is so unbelievable, she draws us into a fable-like system of narrative. Millu wants to tell us of an event that is part of historical records; a precise testimony of what the author had just lived. At the same time, ensuring that the facts did not push readers away from reading made the introduction of lightness both necessary and difficult to achieve without undermining the gravity of the reportage. Sarcasm marks the overthrow of the meaning of German precision, their oxymoronic scientific barbarism from which the name *Vernichtunglager* is derived. The scientific barbarism of this stereotypical linguistic accuracy (whereby Germans maniacally sought appropriate definitions for all elements of their racist and purifying campaign) reveals the tragedy of the progress of the twentieth century. Reversing the sense of these hyper-precise definitions would add considerable rhetorical impact to the grotesque effects on which these pages build their sarcastic tone: the witness-journalist broke the news that, yes, it was true, camps were exactly as Allied propaganda had described them before she was brought there, and, in fact, much worse. Millu appropriates the foreign words heard in Auschwitz and recreates for Italian readers that same anxiety caused by ignorance of the perpetrators' language, that same feeling that had caught her upon arrival in the camp. She reveals the perception of her ignorance to all who read her writing; ignorance that made her think things then proved absurd: "if the Germans had even provided the trucks for those who did not want to go on foot, the devil is not so black as he is painted" (Millu, "Auschwitz" 13). The magnitude of her own inadequacy in the face of this disaster—felt by strong Liana, always used to taking care of herself—is enormous and remains to be made recompense even after her return home. The

return via Venice and then Genoa carries, in fact, "the signs of a life worse than death" (11), because the permanence of the experience of the camp is equivalent to psychological death. Upon entering the camp, life is not, and never will be, the same. Upon arrival, once placed in their block, the younger ones who survived the first selection ask for their companions from the convoy. "The others have already been taken care of," answers the "women with a stick" (11)—the notorious kapos whose beatings and violence the witness would soon come to know.

The term barbaric is again used to mark the image of the shower—a term whose call to an old binary opposition between classic and Germanic culture, for once, garners the sense of what the witness lived, what Levi called the Nazi-socialist barbarity. Seemingly denying the veracity of death by gas, the narrator's irony only reconfirms it in all its horror as she describes that "sinister smoke" (Millu, "Auschwitz" 14). Millu describes systematic extermination with a growing sarcasm that echoes Tadeusz Borowski's book *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*; irony is deployed in outlining images of intense pain. All those lives that had once meant something, forming part of a human society lose their meaning and value in "ten minutes" (14). They become smoke. Millu's narrator warns that such a show happened every day, and "it was a show so habitual that no senior in the camp cared anymore" (14). Indeed, "since there was a war, and Berlin warned that 'all the wheels must turn to win,' the command of Auschwitz, which was *zealous*, had thought that even human ashes can be a good chemical compost, and was spread in the fields to fertilize" (14; emphasis added).

A finishing touch for those who were not yet fully satisfied by the horror of which they read: the image of the ashes of humans as fertilizer. This disposal of human bodies points not only genocide, but, if possible, something more profound: the chilling pragmatism, of which the prisoners' bodies used as ashes becomes emblematic. Here we proceed beyond what is believable. Bodies considered nonhuman (such as the Nazis considered any of the prisoners') can apparently be well worthy of becoming fertilizer. Human bodies return to the humus, whose etymology refers to the concept of *humanitas*. But such use reflects a concept of humanity that is denied and erased by the very act of its use. Only "culture is the condensed residue of such perpetuation" (Harrison 2). The lack of a proper burial denies the ashes the same component of such etymology, for burial relies on a society being worthy of the label of humanity, a society where ashes are given their deserved honor as a perennial remembrance of the dead. Thus, the use of these ashes for fertilizer is the most total process of the systematic erasure of human dignity. In the exercise of

a more perversely productive type of violence "[b]y means of experiments that surpass in their savagery the known range of cruelty, it is essentially aimed at fabricating a victim, insensitive by now to the *vulnus*, in whom the human dignity of the defenseless degenerates into a caricature of itself" (Cavarero, 36). And yet, those who came back from the camps are not necessarily sure to have retained their dignity after having attended to and participated in these events despite themselves. The field of death gives its horrendous crop to the land surrounding Auschwitz—the perverse apex of the whole process of annihilation.

Millu's article stays true to the conventions of journalistic style: quick and decisive in its pace, the piece offers information, is freed from reflective moments, does not indulge in unnecessary rhetoric. The witness' most impelling need is to make readers aware of the extent of the horror, without filters. In the brightness of those scenes, the offense to *humanitas* becomes obvious. The ability to use the lexicon to ironize imbues the article, which is characterized by a firm control of writing and rejection to sell to invective, with grotesque overtones. For instance, *Lager* is translated into the Italian *campo*: the narrative of the spreading of human ashes as fertilizer on the fields surrounding the camp distorts the very meaning of the terms "camp" and "field," since nothing grows in the Auschwitz, which is, instead, a death camp. Millu's techniques denote a writer who does not treat the written word as therapeutic, but rather is already on tilt, and is now propelled to her vocation by a moral and ethical necessity. Beyond the ironic component in which the fury of the soldiers on the bodies of prisoners is treated as a demonstration of zeal, Millu shows, with powerful rhetorical devices, the *unicum* Auschwitz.[10]

While Millu's courage and independence propel her otherwise free-spirited nature to publish her tragic experience in the newspapers, other Italian women—when they write—opt for narratives. These writings are consistent with the conventional representational modes of the Shoah: a narrative that attempts to keep a temporally linear line and is suffuse with the usual facts related to the arrest, the camp, and the return. These key moments come coupled with digressions on the authors' transformed condition. Above all, these narratives underscore the strong ties these survivors keep with the place, with the "casa dei morti" ("house of the dead," to quote Luciana Nissim) from which they managed to leave. As Marina Beer notes, "testimony signals the link between a subject and an event, and who testimonies of this link wants this rendition of events to be believed [. . .] the fact that the narrative is modulated and shaped as a testimony is the mark of its origin and necessary destination" (607). It is this link with the house of dead, never allayed, that demands redress. The

unity of these recollections is ascribed to the text by the listener/reader; the retelling of the witness' pain is a pittance for the other women for whom she could do little.

Another author who exemplifies Italian women's experience of the Shoah is Luciana Nissim. She recounts her experience in Auschwitz, the camp where the overwhelming majority of Italian deportees were sent. Her narrative recalls her departure from Turin with Primo Levi, Vanda Maestro, and Franco Sacerdoti; the arrival in Fossoli di Capri; the separation from her friends; the two lines where the fate of the women and children was cast; the showers in the *Sawna* (sauna); the tattoo of the number 75689 by which Nissim was registered in the camp (19–26). In speaking of the tattoo, she wonders, "[h]ow is it possible that Germans let go around the world people bearing on their body such a testimony of their systems?" (26). Hunger-stricken, she and her friend cannot even bear talking about food (48). In the camp, Nissim tries to explain in her choppy German that she is a doctor, "Ich bin Aertzin" (26); she wants to be useful, cultivating the illusion that her deportation is a fact inextricably connected to war or at least the notion of war as she had been taught in school translating Tacitus. Nissim reflects on life in the camp: "Everything that has value in the world, everything we thought to be honest and worthy appears ridiculous in a camp; here you don't see anything generous, noble, disinterested, but only iniquity, selfishness, hatred" (39). From Turin, a place where she thought herself to be assimilated, Jews like her landed in a place where there is no why (*Hier is kein Warum*). The issue becomes more pressing when Nissim turns to the problem of discrimination within the camp: Italian women were discriminated against by the other prisoners, with few exceptions (most of those being French nationals). If all are camp prisoners, Italian women seem to succumb more easily to all tricks and deceitful behaviors:

> But the Italians who were in the camp would get immediately sick. They were used to another climate, to another food, did not know how to manage, would only speak Italian . . . and would always receive the hardest jobs, the shabbiest clogs, the least nutritious food. None of them managed to get a good job, no one had rich acquaintances that could help her: they would get sick one after the other and die. (55)

Among the many atrocities she witnessed, the medical experiments practiced (without anesthesia) on women's reproductive organs shatter Nissim most profoundly, both as a doctor and as a woman. Nissim's dry and precise annotations suggest how the deportation of civilians constitutes—for all women, not only Italian—a phenomenon without antecedent in

modern age. Italian women, until then extraneous to any active role in the war (their substantial contribution to the partisan struggle in the North of Italy was until recently hardly recognized), lived the war at home. They knew the pain and suffering of the war, and the restrictions, but did not yet know what imprisonment would entail. Racial deportation does not equate to a so-called active participation in war, but nevertheless Italian women are thus catapulted into a world completely unknown to them—an event unprecedented in modern European society. Women, excluded from the patriarchal system of war, are admitted into the camp as inferior beings, and as such, are valuated as devoid of any female attributes, save those needed for medical experimentation.

Italians were regularly the subjects of these medical experiments; one of these women was linguist Giuliana Tedeschi Fiorentino who retells her story first in 1946, publishing at her own expense *Questo povero corpo*,[11] later republished in an expanded version with the title *C'è un punto sulla terra… Una donna nel Lager di Birkenau* (*There Is a Place on Earth: A Woman in Birkenau*).[12] Tedeschi's memoir often ponders on issues related to the female body: feminine vanity offended by the act of stripping their civilian clothes at the entrance of the camp and the ragged uniforms that turned these women into prisoners. The body suddenly reveals the inhuman horror of the fate of these women; as they were slowly emptied out of their very essence, it "seemed that the soul gradually fell out of these human wrecks" (*Questo povero corpo* 17). In Liana Millu's work, the analysis of the mechanisms of the death camp and the vitalistic aspect of this physical experience coexist. Even when humiliated and insulted in every sense, the body is still opposed to its own degradation. Its need not to succumb constitutes its very vitality because the body is supported by the ability to think. For Tedeschi, it is essential to never give in to madness to which many women, already depressed by a prolonged war condition, then by the distance from family, succumbed. The textual omission of the serious offenses inflicted to her own body partly justify Marie Orton's comments on how these atrocities were psychologically expelled by Tedeschi ("Deporting Identity" 301–14). Remote from her own identity, for madness was near, Tedeschi voluntarily avoids recounting her own forced hysterectomy. In the chapter "Cavie," her paratactic syntax alludes to what happened. Tedeschi leads us in a sober way to extract the import that the experiment will have on her life: "I thought of my body, brutally mutilated of its vitality, to the point of renunciation of the most feminine function imposed by nature […] Not being able to escape, being unable to protect my body: I was going crazy" (*Questo povero corpo* 51). Despite everything, resistance in the camp continues, with the deep desire to "repeat the experience of procreation" (51), the inalienable right

of the female body. As such, mortified procreation—an emblematic component of several women's memorials—becomes the topic of one of the most touching segments of Tedeschi's book. On Christmas Eve (a culturally important date for Italians regardless of their faith) a fellow prisoner in the German camp, Edith, gives birth to a child, a baby boy, who will die immediately after opening his eyes. The part entitled "Christmas Eve" ends with a sad reflection. "You can not demand what is logical and natural in a German camp. And the era of fairy tales and miracles has passed long ago. So have the comet, the ox and the donkey" (75). The representation of a Christian nativity in the negative reclaims the space for a time to come that will never recover the good before the camp. Close to death, convinced that it takes more strength to resist "moral and physical torture" (118), the protagonist of *Questo povero corpo* reflects on the possibility of a new world after Auschwitz. A world that "purified from this gigantic suffering, made anew, would have been better, had to be better, it had to satisfy our need for perfection, our thirst for improvement, so that martyrdom of so many would not be lost. I want to live: extreme aspiration to resistance" (119). With great dignity, Tedeschi uncovers the pain of physical and mental offense and the loss of decency, and yet, still continues at all costs to claim dignity for herself. After Auschwitz, her existence will continue to be shaped by the state of exception in which she lived during her time in the camp. Everyday life will no longer have the same weight: "[A]fterwards, I have not changed my mind. I did no longer conform. The values, for me, are always the ones that I found leaving the camp" (Tedeschi, in Ferri 29). While it is true that during her time in the camp Tedeschi finds comfort in her intellectual upbringing and uses it as an instrument of opposition against the risk of madness, the ethical system by which she will lead her life is inevitably transformed by her time at Auschwitz. As Beer notes, "[I]t is true perhaps that while poetry and art are founding elements of the identity of a subject through education and can serve to keep self-respect not for their content, but because they point to the intellectual habits of another life, it is harder for the contents and forms of humanistic culture to provide justification to the humanist or to the philosopher or in concentration camps" (601).

The need for women to explore the corporality of their experiences comes coupled with a compelling desire for authenticity. Even if invested with a justifiable emotion in telling of their direct experience, their pages abound of facts, and texts are often free from any moralizing intent. What is striking in these memoirs is the jagged representation of violence specifically linked to gender: "[a]ccustomed to the safety of their homes and their private lives," writes Bianca Paganini Mori, "[women] are now forced to live in a community that is almost animalistic. Their bodies are

exposed naked in front of everyone, but in particular to the looks of men who seek in their body the ability to work in the factories" (167). It would be difficult to define a greater awareness of one's own difference than the one in which the nakedness of the body is assimilated to the system of slavery imposed by totalitarianism and no longer retains any of the classical references of a female nude. For other women, the body has lost the specifically human characteristics that compose the subject of artistic investigation and expression. It is not possible for aesthetics to be part of the camp:

> It seemed as if the soul gradually fell out of these human wrecks, that it disdained the seat assigned to it by nature, the body. That body that, as plastic matter, should have followed all its infinite mutability of feelings with a grip and responsiveness of expressions just as changing and infinite, it was now an empty husk, inert and passive! The concept of the body, sublime shell of the soul, respected and honored as the seat of the divine spark seems to be an ancient legacy of religious or philosophical conceptions. (Tedeschi, *Questo povero corpo* 17–18)

Denying the offense of the gaze—which belittled female subjectivity by subverting individuality—would offend the memory of the women who experienced the Shoah, and reduce the experience to universalistic issues that do not lead to a deeper understanding of a particular kind of suffering. It is for this reason that female experiences of the Shoah cannot be absorbed into a general context. The psyche of these female prisoners remains forever marked by these attacks aimed at their very specific nature as women. In this light, the link between biology and sexism as advanced by critic Joan Ringelheim becomes all the more prescient. Vulnerability, created by biological instances (pregnancies and abortions), other forms of weakness, and sexism, perpetuates violence against women in the forms of humiliation, harassment, violence, and sexual exchange. Ringelheim also analyzes the cliché of the more viable woman, wondering if biological differences are indeed, responsible for the differences of the effects of malnutrition felt by the survivors. It would seem that women, more so than their male counterparts, can transform and change roles, taking on those usually ascribed to the other gender and thereby better adapt to the changing conditions of life.[13] The oft-mentioned opportunity for many (but not all) women to form a community in the barracks is coupled with the trivial concerns of survival (Ringelheim 749). Adriana Cavarero's notion of the "vulnerable" as being "the absolutely exposed and helpless one who is awaiting care and has no means to defend itself against wounding" (21) expresses the condition of

all these women's children who lost their lives upon their arrival at the camps. But the vulnerable—among the many subcategories we can find in the universe of the camp—encompasses also those women who underwent medical experiments like Tedeschi.

Pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare—elements that connote a woman's most conventional existence—become dangerous facts in the camp, as a woman becomes vulnerable because of her own body. Immediately upon arrival at the camp, a pregnancy that was too evident was equivalent to an immediate trip to the crematorium.[14] Likewise, if women would arrive with small children, their fate was similarly marked. Perhaps even worse, those women arriving at the camp with small children had the option of disposing of their babies by throwing them in a pile, as some witnesses recall (Springer, *L'eco del silenzio* 66). These are horrifying choices, for which women shall forever bear shame and pain. Contrarily, the acts of heroism that are distinctive to women in similar situations consist in letting the power of childbirth prevail, to defeat death and organize collective help for the hapless mother. However, experience in the camp generally means reaching adulthood without ever seeing or knowing what a delivery entails, without understanding the facts of life and the event that transforms the existence and the body of a woman most profoundly (Horowitz 381–94).

The abuse suffered by these women cannot be limited only to physical sexuality nor, even worse, be limited to the time and confines of imprisonment in the camp. It goes beyond the temporal limits of the camp, informed by a difference as fundamental as physiological distinction. Answering the rhetorical question of Sara Horowitz—who addresses the reasons for not only a racist but a gendered discourse of the genocide as well (Warren's notion of gendercide is appropriate here)—becomes relatively more simple if we speak of a repressed life cycle and its subsequently suppressed agents in contrast to women who dare to advance the rights of survival through their own fertility against a well-planned and organized program of continuous and relentless death. Horowitz also recalls the stereotypes established by male narratives in which the woman is recounted as a peripheral and fragile subject, morally not on the level of the situation (376). This is most often made manifest in references to women who are erotic, victimized objects who are unable to even keep a diary of their own experiences. There is therefore a psychological and emotional debt owed to those women who wrote of their experience, not only for their suffering, but because they chose to speak and write, thus providing a written trace of the facts they tragically experienced. These women forced themselves to speak after initially living in a form of often—but not always—self-imposed silence[15] about their very presence in the Shoah. From direct

testimony, a series of reflections and historical considerations unfold, which historians prevent from being heard for fear of the dissonance and accuracy that a single witness's unique testimony could bring to bear on the larger narrative of the Shoah (A. Wieviorka 14).

The positive redefinition of testimony, creating a path through life and becoming the only identity impossible to lose, characterizes the thought and behavior of our era. Starting from her previous studies about books of remembrance—the *Memorbucken* of Polish *Kehilà*—Wieviorka traces a profile of some key moments in the testimony for the *dritter hurbn* (third destruction). The first writings of the ghettos and extermination camps are those of the drowned. For Wieviorka, Yiddish represents the language of testimony, for these books of memory were written in this language that speaks of a double death; Yiddish is the "only language that shares the fate of its speakers" (Rachel Ertel in A. Wieviorka 49):

> *Testimonies, at times, take the path of literature*. It is believed that a true book can better ensure better. But above all, in a landscape where death is omnipresent, the idea is spread that the book, at least, is immortal, that it alone can ensure the memory, that is, eternity. (39; emphasis added)

Wiewiorka selects the example of Calel Perechodnik, who speaks about his memoirs in creatural terms. Perechodnik dedicates his book to his wife, who was deported to Treblinka along with their two-year old child. He generates for them, and to their eternal memory, another child, a creature made of paper: his memoir (40). Such dedication denotes the urgency of his act as a "protest against death, the need to leave a trace, to ensure a filiation for himself" (40).[16] Perechodnik's protest against the death symbolizes the effect of testimony as act of resistance.

Testimony in the first person—the one that is always preceded by the sentences "I have seen, I have done"—indicates a need to be believed, and constitutes an action that, in turn, gives rise to other transmuted testimonies that help validate the value of the original. There is the possibility of a translation as in *translatio*—a transit of words to somewhere else. The first testimony will beget other testimonies, this time of the second degree, which, by this definition, can comment on and work around the problems inferred from the former text. The prospect of changed historiographical discourse—the whole paradigm of what we now mean by history—causes the ethical-political legacy of Auschwitz to depend on the meaning of the word witness. What is meant by history now depends also on the voice of the witness. The story, as seen by the survivors, creates a type of discourse that makes survivors the storytellers of a given historical moment. Other experiences, motivated by different causes, stem

from the initial experience of the Shoah, which Liana Millu will always describe as irreplaceable and indispensable. These ensuing testimonies elaborate the earlier ones and, by doing so, they also interpret these earlier texts and legitimize the words that formed them. They legitimize the importance of earlier texts, in that they represent eternal caution to communities plagued by emotional apathy. The warning for future generations comes through the literary medium.

Moreover, testimonies speak with one another and this thread takes on a specific relevance, for they speak of the things that happened to women in the camp, and thus establish a filiation. Different in tone from Levi's distinct ability to extract memory from physicality and distill universal truths from it, women's narratives create facts in the dimension of a distinctive (female) corporeality. It is the viscosity of the lived experience that translates into a narrative whose image transmits the same kind of opaqueness. Women never forget offenses to their bodies, instead keeping alive the memory of these injuries. Women want to affirm their being within the pragmatics of their lived experience. However, motivations connected with gender should not be confused with Langer's threat of a "hierarchy of suffering."[17] The terms by which philosophers and historians discuss the Shoah fail to give justice to women and we need to accordingly *fare ordine* (make order/organize) among these narratives. Many of these women do not wish their *racconti* to enter the theoretical organization of the "necessary" horrors of war that compose the bulk of the material of history books. "Women are like stitches," claims Giuliana Tedeschi, "if you lose one, you lose all" (in Padoan, *Come una rana* 189). The metaphor of the stitch—the part of the whole that makes a sweater or a chain—helps us to understand how these women, and those shreds of domestic life from which they were extracted, are not lost in vain. I like to think that the admonishments of these courageous women have gained traction over time and are now made contemporary. The texts of these women who, unlike professional writers, did not write for literary purposes but for existential ones, reveal important literary elements for Shoah texts that follow. Their *racconti* should be heard with their distinct features ringing loud as we meet the challenges posed of these women, receiving the gifts of their testimony.

3

The Power of Dignity, Or "Writers Out of Necessity": The Case of Liana Millu and Edith Bruck

Testimony versus Creation

Survivors recover memories of the Shoah in choosing to retell their experiences. Recollection and recounting do not always take a straightforwardly mnemonic and anecdotal form—the writing of memory can also take a literary form: when authors/survivors tell of their experiences using literary modes of writing, what they recall is recounted in a transfigurative way. Their recollections go through a doubled process defined by sedimentation and distillation. The writing process takes hold of a story that the author decides can no longer be told as a chronicle of events, and in doing so transfigures its facts into a narrative project. As this process unfolds, writing facilitates the leap from the facts lived toward values that exceed the threshold of detailed memory, thus generating a transition: from a survivor's story into a survivor's literary text. The survivor's own experience in the camp legitimizes the historical relevance of her literary fiction and leads her readers through the deeper layers of the psychological study of her characters. It is a journey that originates in literary writing which, more than nonfictional writing, implies the difference in positioning between the writing subject and the speaking subject:

> If there is no articulation between the living being and language, if the "I" stands suspended in this disjunction, then there can be testimony. The intimacy that betrays our non-coincidence with ourselves is the place of testimony. *Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation*. In the non-place of the Voice stands not writing, but the witness. And it is

> precisely because the relation (or, rather, non-relation) between the living being and the speaking being has the form of shame, of being reciprocally consigned to something that cannot be assumed by a subject, that the *ethos* of this disjunction can only be a testimony—that is, something that cannot be assigned to a subject but that nevertheless constitutes the subject's only dwelling place, its only possible consistency. (Agamben 130; emphasis original)

Survivors who have already given testimony in Agamben's "non-place of articulation" look at writing in the literary mode as a step further toward the elaboration of what, perhaps, remains impossible to elaborate in full. Theirs is a step beyond the testimony born from what Agamben describes as a disjunction. Survivors' decision to write in the literary after giving testimony exacts novelistic techniques that give greater integrity to the Shoah novel and influence other writers addressing the same ethical questions prompted by the initial experiences and testimonies of survivors.

A commitment to literary writing recognizes the connections that exist between an author's own story and her engagement of the collective (the ethical sense of one's own artistic gesture). Ethical commitment implies a form that wants to keep delivering the crucial transmission of facts but needs a particular path for the recollection of events. For, it is in this step further that memorial writing selectively takes in real-life events, transforming the lived experience into a shared vision that, unlike testimony, only the tools of fictional narrative can allow writers to propose. That "fallacious memory" that Primo Levi warns against if employed with an aim toward achieving historiographical accuracy becomes a powerful and compelling tool for literary writing. This is largely due to its capacity to grant distinctive meanings and subjective expansions to the factually bound images of the camp. The underpinnings of fallacious memory are needed to remember the civil, ethical, and moral reasons behind the use of literary fiction. In literature, the desire to engage the consciousness of others by the seduction powers of eloquence is inherent in the communication process and is understood in the pact between author and reader. This process does not only take place in the narration of inalienable facts claimed with objectivity—always relative and therefore dangerous—but also in historiographical discourse (White, "Historical Emplotment" 37–53). The relativity of representation is a function of language apt at describing and then restoring textual fragments that have been virtually torn away from the survivor's life and are then presented in her narrative. The act of writing, aimed at repairing the destruction of humanistic values, represents a salvific and complementary act to that of testimony. The attempt to write a perennial account of the transformation of the value of

human life creates a form of literary writing that hesitates to construct a literalist vision of the lived experience, for its aim trespasses its borders.

While historian Annette Wieviorka builds her theory of literary filiation by proceeding from Elie Wiesel to Primo Levi,[1] my study suggests the lack of a proper critical discourse about women's literary expressions[2] and their relationship to regeneration/filiation. The Levi-Wiesel line, certainly appropriate in Wierviorka's work, merely reaffirms the fact that the evaluation of survivors' literary sources is applied in order to sustain historiographical categories; this process remains a closed system and delays the integration of women's literary works into a broader, more complete understanding of the Shoah. Her model raises the question of the study of the specifically feminine historiographical discourse perceived as mere marginalia, debated not only before but also after the advent of contemporary gender studies. Wierviorka does not consider the possibility that women authors are worthy of mention and that they could be treated as complementary models to famous male witnesses/writers. Indeed, if it is true that first-period memoirs attest to a writing that is "simultaneously an act of revenge and an instrument of struggle against what, at that time, was not yet called negationism" (Mengaldo, *La vendetta* 54), there remains today a widespread sense of denial toward those survivors/authors whose artistic endeavors are informed by their gender perspective. In what follows, I discuss Edith Bruck's and Liana Millu's writings as different yet complementary paths that incorporate testimony as a literary genre while moving Shoah writing toward more conventional literary fiction. Millu's scarcely researched *I ponti di Schwerin* as well as Bruck's essayistic works center their discussion around the concept of dignity as a quality that can be recovered after Auschwitz and it is in turn this recoverable dignity that informs the attitude and empathy of both authors' narrators toward their fictional characters.

Fact versus Fiction

Passing from the factual to the fictional expression raises a multitude of problems. In Levi's time, for instance, only Jewish or half-Jewish authors dealt with issues pertaining to the Shoah. This phenomenon seems a tacit confirmation that "authority appears to be conferred on a writer if they can be shown to have a connection with the events they are describing" (Vice 4). This acts as a partial justification for critical resistance to Holocaust fiction, and yet what Vice writes is quite appropriate, especially when we realize that testimony is a genre in itself, and not devoid of fictional characteristics that often impede historians' seemingly

documentarian efforts. On the other hand, one should consider why we discriminate against making facts the subject of literary writing. Authors' strategies for representing the Shoah cannot be limited by their biographical circumstances. The sense of belonging to the tragedy, out of which some writers compose works based on the Holocaust, does not mean that their strategies are less authentic, nor is their purpose of speaking about human nature. Genres differ in their function, and the controversy created by Roberto Benigni's movie *La vita è bella* about the use of humor in Holocaust fiction (Gilman; Viano; Marcus), is one of the most relevant examples of the many difficulties of narrating and representing the Shoah. It must be remembered that Adorno's initial position of nonrepresentability significantly dismissed a fictional, thus also somewhat imaginary, rendition of events.

Given the lack of critical consensus around the very notion of poetic representability of the Shoah (shaded as it is with the issue of fragmentation of memory) the idea of a gendered representation would only present a further challenge to the myth of the Shoah as one indivisible universal memory. Developing an idea of a novel (or film) on the Shoah gendered in the feminine required time and effort on the part of the women involved in the process. In fact, gendered writing and its reception shares many comments to the general reception of Shoah representations, succinctly put by Efraim Sicher in terms of "a history of impact in delay and appropriation or mediation in Western popular culture" (*Holocaust Novelists* xix). Late appropriation also reveals the special status of the Holocaust novel as that concerned with a double death, that of the physical man and that of the ethics of humanity (Rosenfeld 1–25). In abandoning the traditional form of analysis without betraying the sense of the past, the plasticity of language invoked by Iser in his *The Fictive and the Imaginary* provides new ways of crossing boundaries that limit the ability to speak of those who are no longer here.

The same criteria that define the Holocaust, both as a historical fact and as its literary rendition, hence determine many of its representational limits. As Lawrence Langer argues, the historical fact resists the displacement that literary interpretation creates, and places limits on authorial creativity. If literature universalizes human experience, historical events related to the Holocaust severely limit the possibilities of the use of language tools, especially those rhetorical ones found in writings produced from an aesthetic intent. The factual data generates, and at the same time restricts, the fictional datum (Langer 117–19). Aware that I am operating within a context in which "the mere use of the word fiction sounds fairly offensive," (Cavaglion, "Ebraismo" 179), I believe that the issue of literary representations should be considered as a problem of cultural

policy which, if not yet fully resolved, nevertheless, significantly impacts artistic outcomes. Some artists have been shown to maintain an ethical balance between the two elements that make up a text in which the invention of history as a historical event places a substantial weight on history as narrative. The lifelike representation of reality does not invalidate the thesis of literary elaboration of the topic in a *fabula*—especially if composed by those who lived through these events.

Taking advantage of that slight fissure between memory and fact, an author feels the need to affirm and witness more than historical facts. She bases the organization and the success of her *fabula* and its narrated themes on her gender specificity, a choice that subsequently leads to the construction of images drawn from the recesses of her lived experience. Literary elaboration promises, and opens, new horizons of interpretation. The interpretation of the facts—thanks to their rendition by means of a "fallacious memory"—can thereby be useful to the act of remembrance as well as to the perpetuation of memory. This is so not so much for the achievement of a documentary precision of the event, but rather for the ability to bring severity to its eternal warning. The interpretive act associated with the composition of fictional works does not detract from the accuracy of the details included in the work; rather it ensures their ethical weight. The gap between the two elements, the factual and the fictional, can produce an understanding of the event, expressed and realized using techniques and strategies that go beyond testimony. This is to say that, starting from the trajectory that begins with the fact, temporal logic is not conclusive. This logic is related to the linearity (taken for granted by the historiographical process) by which fictional elaboration must follow testimony (which presumptively only yields truthful and indisputable facts). How can a woman describe something that, no matter how precise the testimony, can never be considered fairly accurate by others who have experienced the same fact? How can one talk about something that does not satisfy what one really feels, as its elusive details do not do justice to the desire for a correct verbal representation of facts? In other words, how can one fill this *lapsus verborum* that always exists between the lived and retold, to use one's own experiences (after that period that Levi defines as the "process of decanting") in the definition and creation of a possible aesthetic place? The stylized portrait of a lost moment may be more fruitful than an original long-term testimony.

The narratives constructed by written and oral testimonies exercise meaning at all levels (fictional, nonfictional, journalistic) and in a variety of contexts. Narrative discourse grants the novel an amazing verifying authority over facts and allows for the expansion of meaning showing how an "entirely invented novel can be a document and writing of

testimony" (Beer 607). For these reasons, the literary word is confirmed as a tool that, if one cannot say everything, at least allows one to say that which cannot be said:

> One must concede to art and writing that they cannot escape this requirement of being new, of "bringing on" something new, because it is under the cover of this misprision that art and writing—by redirecting the meaning of "new," by turning the new, as the always repeated future-present of the culture market, toward the impossible newness of the more ancient, always new because always forgotten—can still have an audience for ears deafened by bustling [...] Art and writing can make this silence heard, in the noise and by means of it; they can make this noise, the multiplication and neutralization of words, because it is already a silence, attest to the other silence, the inaudible one. (Lyotard 48)

The literary representation of the Holocaust, in particular, involves a constriction created by a sense of loyalty sympathetic to the historical representation that coincides with the achievement of goals challenging emotional "amnesia" (49). Pluralism inherent in the body of testimony suggests an antagonism between testimony and the concept of limitation, as if, as Berel Lang writes, testimony's most common function is to limit the restriction of alternatives to speech (301). In the analysis of texts based on historical facts lived by the authors and then transfigured into fiction, nuance and grey areas create zones of ambiguity for, when it comes to something that has been declared "unspeakable" by Adorno's famous reflections and yet that has been seen, the author must also practice *an-aisthesis* (Lyotard 38) for *aesthesis* can only repress the truth of *pathos* (34). The problem is not to determine whether the event is the real subject of the narrative but, rather, to discern whether its representation as a subject crosses its representative limits: when a text goes beyond the search for beauty and reaches the formation of representations. In this shift, from written testimony devoid of a clear literary purpose to what it holds and might instead claim for itself, it is important to assess the possible violations of the so-called factual truth caused by the transformation of the testimony into a specifically literary text. Perhaps originally conceived and written without "the project of writing a book [...] and the drive to get rid of some elements of their experience and to find, thanks to these considerations, their identity" (A. Wieviorka 59), these writings are made possible by way of a sedimentation occurring over time and the author's subsequent act of distillation. The status of these texts shifts then, for no story is just the simple transcription of a fragment of life. This is even so when the concept of gender separation is taken into

account as a constituent of self-knowledge. The survivor, belonging to the modernity of different social approaches that form a plurality of community and diverse collective contexts, has multiple identities and multiple relationships that make it anachronistic to label such textual productions as (auto)biography. This particular kind of writing—emerging from what Lyotard calls "the agony of rhetorics and poetics" (37)—turns out to be a writing of survival, what survives of thought despite itself.

The initial desire to speak of the camps, their *lasciare traccia* (leaving a trace), generates for Liana Millu and Edith Bruck (registered respectively as A 5384 and A 11152) the reason for writing after and of their existence after Auschwitz. Testimony becomes a lifelong literary occasion and Millu and Bruck emblematize the ways in which the witness becomes *un reduce di mestiere* (survivor by profession). Primo Levi's reflection that "[l]eaving pain behind was a delight for only a few fortunate beings, or only for a few instants, or for very simple souls; almost always it coincided with a phase of anguish," (*Drowned* 71) defines Millu's and Bruck's existential condition and awareness that their "phase of anguish" would be ceaseless, continuing as long as they lived, as long as they retold of Auschwitz. This retelling would become a project of life based on, and in, language.

Liana Millu and Edith Bruck cross the threshold of testimonial memory in different but equally complex ways. Their writings are some of the most dramatic Italian works written against the backdrop of the Holocaust. Symbolically used as subtitle of Bruck's *Signora Auschwitz*, the expression *dono della parola* (gift of the word) remains essential for the survival of both authors, even if clouded by doubts of its effective therapeutic validity (A.Wieviorka 101; Affinati, *Campo* 11–12). Though deported for different reasons (Millu, political and Bruck, racial) many similarities exist between the two survivors. Specifically, Millu and Bruck could offer no biological connection to future generations: their most corporeal offering—their filiation—is their testimony as defined through their writing. The camp, which the two arrive to at different ages, becomes a space for their analyses of the human condition. Within the place of the camp, their texts continue to develop. Millu's and Bruck's filiations gain physicality and meaning through their bodies of writing. It is Bruck in *Signora Auschwitz* who conceives of an exact similarity between writing and procreation: the testimony is treated as an "infinita gravidanza" (16; "infinite pregnancy"): a necessary and painful process, through which we may surmise the birth of "un mostro" (16; "a monster"). But the permanent expelling of this monster from the body becomes an infinite exercise, because, in actuality, the act of ridding oneself of the monster is forbidden; "[w]ho has Auschwitz inside herself as a devastating tenant

will never get rid of it by writing and talking, but by nourishing it. How to shoot it out, to get rid of that boulder?" (16).

Filiation is hence defined as a continuous process, its physicality finds its expression in the description of a life project conducted in constant pain, an expulsion desired and yet impossible. While the metaphor of procreation is abstractly connected to works of art, women directly connect it to the *pragma* of their own body, to their corporality that can also create art. Giacoma Limentani mentions that only a woman can understand the truth that "certain offenses to the viscera kill the soul" ("Donna fra donne" 94). While this can be refuted, for rape is not exclusive of gender, in Millu's and Bruck's writings, female sexuality exemplifies the offense of Auschwitz in its biological specificity: linked to the act of procreation as in that of a carnal birth. Blood trickling down a woman's body is emblematic of a (verbal and literary) delivery that will not cease even when the memory of offense seems to have faded. Albeit with disparate values and ideas, these women who call themselves "rami secchi" (Limentani, "Donna fra donne" 94; "dry branches") engage in a gestation/development/labor process without end. An endless *racconto* could grant the only real delivery. But if this endless delivery does not produce linguistic liberation, then artists' work must come to the termination of any process because the "son-monster," "the devastating fetus," (Bruck, *Signora* 16–17) reproduces itself constantly. The writer does not have time to say that the will to speak will assail her, again. Bruck's promise to abandon testimony (16–17) offers no solution to her anguish. The desired conclusive testimony—the arrival at a coveted just and reasonable mourning—does not materialize. What then, is the solution, if not salvation? (Millu affirms several times that one is not allowed to believe in the practice of hope.) The circle of testimony and creative expression is a cycle from which Millu and Bruck will never escape.

Signora Auschwitz: Edith Bruck

Chi ti ama così (CA) (Who Loves You Like This [WL]), written in Italian between 1958 and 1959, is the Bruck text that most closely mirrors conventional Shoah memoirs. Perhaps due to differences of age (Bruck is 18 years younger than Millu), or those of language (Bruck's knowledge of Italian at that time is quite different from native speaker and journalist Millu), their literary paths are quite dissimilar. For biographical reasons, their writing processes, as related to the paths of memory, are inverted. While Millu will have her *Tagebuch*, her first and most autobiographical text (published posthumously), Bruck will slowly develop her novelistic

style beginning with the writing of her most openly autobiographical text.

Bruck's topoi include conventional survivors' stories and testimonies. The theme that dominates, however, is the eternal sense of the unrecoverable loss of her mother, her innocence, and a now defunct homeland. The journey toward the return to civilian life is never completed and her period of mourning is never fully elaborated. A landscape quite different from Italy frames the initial pages of *Chi ti ama così*. The bucolic peasant world of Ditke, the book's young protagonist and first-person narrator, stands in great contrast to the terrible reality of the camp.

The pure simplicity of family life—a father's notion of what is good and right, a mother's attentiveness to her duties—is radically different from the miserable experience Ditke shares with her sister after the liberation of the camps. The transition from the agrarian world of the Hungarian countryside to the camp universe exemplifies the emotions of a child brutally forced into such horror, and the life experiences that await her after her time in the lager are no less difficult. The images that Bruck presents in the first chapter, set in 1944, are those of a poor peasant childhood, a life regulated by the cyclical rhythms of agriculture and brightened by the arrival of the circus and the country fair. These images also convey the smell of her mother's bread (a woman to whom the book is dedicated), the warnings and advice given by her father, and the gypsies considered Others by the militarist regime of Admiral Horthy, who allied with Hitler and who will contribute to the process of elimination of Jews and the gypsies from the country. It was a country so poor that even the gendarmes, humble soldiers, were called excellence. Yet, a sense of longing forever ties her to this world, the little Hungarian town of Tiszakarad. These brief descriptions of a simple poverty precede the details of the arrest and the journey to the camp in 1944. Based in that town, where the child was born on May 3, 1932, and her father was "il macellaio e commerciante" (CA 7; "the butcher and merchant" WL 7) the book also focuses on the difficult, if familiar economic situation of this family. However, within the social space in which they live, there is sense of honesty, independent of class. A sense of personal dignity pushes the protagonist of the story to select only rich neighbors for her thievery, crimes that are dictated by pure hunger and nothing more. In the poverty of the country, however, there were class distinctions that are constantly underlined. According to Ditke's father, Hungarian Romas and Jews shared the same class as they were both poor, different, hated by everybody and without "un posto che gli appartenga" (CA 10; "place that belongs to them" WL 7). A poor Jewish childhood and widespread and vicious Hungarian anti-Semitism are strongly underscored in the author's memories (CA 13).[3] The second

chapter hosts the more conventionally testimonial pages that detail the deportation, which took place during the Passover of 1944. Geographically close to the village that was once the home of Elie Wiesel, Bruck's child is also close to him in age: Ditke is 12 years old when her family is deported. Similar images recur in both authors' works, including the visionary aspect of Jewish women, a constant in Shoah narratives that also recurs in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* with the characters of Vilma and Ida. Ditke's mother dreams of seeing people burning (17–18) following a path parallel to Wiesel's Madame Schächter in *Night* (25). In both cases, listeners will never believe these women's hallucination-fueled speeches.

The evening of that particular Passover is spent as a "veglia funebre" (CA 18; "funeral" WL 18). The premonition of Ditke's mother will prove to be accurate. At dawn Horthy's gendarmes arrive to take the Jews of the village away. The parting from the others occurs without words. In the synagogue, the dehumanization of the Jews began even before their arrival at the camp in the form of the desecration of their spiritual and physical bodies, which were exposed to the abuses of the gendarmes that "ficcarono i loro diti in tutti i buchi che una bestia può avere" (CA 20; "poked their fingers in all the holes an animal has" WL 21): the "wake" takes place upon arrival at the local synagogue and from that moment on, the protagonist is no longer a child (CA 21; WL 21).

For five weeks Ditke would remain in the ghetto of Satoraljaujhely, before her separation from everything she knew by the voyage to an unknown place; the horror of the camp presents its macabre stage before her eyes: "[l]e madri urlavano e non volevano lasciare i loro figli e i tedeschi bestemmiavano orrendamente" (CA 24; "[m]others were screaming that they did not want to leave their children, and the Germans were swearing horribly" WL 27). When the time for the first selection comes, her mother is to her left and Ditke is thrown to the right by a magnanimous soldier who saves Ditke by pushing her mother away from her with the butt of his rifle.[4] In saving her, the soldier condemns the mother as the absurd law of the camp is enacted before Ditke's eyes. Her own (purely fortuitous) salvation will later turn into eternal guilt from having abandoned her mother. Ditke will never see her again: after Auschwitz, she is sent on to the Kaufering work camps. She is then deported to Dachau where she witnesses the death of a father and daughter enveloped in a final fatal embrace among high voltage cables. The images of Ditke's suffering are dramatically recounted through the eyes of a little girl who only later will fully understand the magnitude of what she saw. Similarly to Millu's narrator, Ditke remembers women bartering over a piece of bread, for some lipstick, or for a piece of mirror to look at themselves and comb their "ridicoli capelli" (CA 32; "ridiculous hair" WL 36). In another

camp, Christianstadt, everything from theft to sexual bartering become quite normal for, even accepted by, the protagonist. Moral degradation is a brutally pragmatic consequence of the camp (as it is for another unforgettable character of the Shoah strikingly similar to Ditke, Pontecorvo's young kapo Edith).[5] For Ditke the only thing that is important is to survive; the notion of dignity remains extraneous to her system of values.

Ditke's last camp is Bergen-Belsen where her work consisted of "legare uno straccio intorno ai piedi dei morti e nel trascinarli fino al camion che li portava via" (CA 43; "[tying] a rag around the feet of the dead and drag[ging] them to a truck that carried them away" WL 49). For number A 11152, formerly known as Ditke, managing to turn 13 in those conditions seems an unexpected achievement. However, even after she manages to avoid Mengele's selection, "benefiting from a moment of distraction" (*Signora* 29), and is liberated from Bergen-Belsen with the arrival of the Americans on April 15, 1945, Ditke's suffering and trauma over the loss of the mother will not cease. Her mother's bread, fragrant and good, is transformed as it becomes an eternal metaphor for loss.

The remainder of the book traces the existential path of this young girl, animated by the just and humane desire to forget "l'odore del crematorio" (CA 29; "the odor of the crematorium" WL 31). She is a young girl whose intentions are misunderstood, even by other Jews, whose words will not fail to hurt her during the train ride to Hungary. Seen in the company of Catholic soldiers, the other Jews will address her with contempt for being the kind of girl who has forgotten what happened too quickly (CA 52; WL 59). Ditke and her sister are starving for affection, no matter its provenance. And yet, the grotesque irony of reality shapes the text, suggesting the lack of empathy these young people were afforded for their suffering, exacerbating further the hardship of the return (as Beccaria Rolfi and Paganini Mori have aptly stated). Contrary to Labbé's statements about the relative lack of creativity observed in testimonies (48)—she notes the list of almost canonical progressive stages presented in each story—*Chi ti ama così* offers variations on the standard tropes of the genre. For instance, both the before and the after of the camp are narrated. Deportation cannot be understood as only a dramatic interlude in the life of the survivor; rather, deportation determines the understanding of the difficult turn of the girl's existence. Ditke's story becomes a coming-of-age story going awry as it unfolds in the shadow of the Shoah. At 13, little Ditke has no home, no longer has parents, and everybody asks her if she has seen her loved ones. She offers no answer, lest she admit a laconic "via [era] tanto difficile," (CA 55; "life [that] was extremely difficult," WL 64) even back in Hungary, at their sister Margo's. Moral suffering will not cease to torment Ditke: it has only just begun.

Moreover, she must fight against the amnesia that seems to afflict some of her compatriots. Similarly to the Italian Fascists, the Hungarians "[n]egavano di aver commesso le atrocità contro di noi, oppure dicevano che erano stati obbligati a farlo e che ora potevamo essere amici come prima" (CA 60; "denied ever having committed atrocities against us, or they said that they had been forced to do so and that now we could be friends as before" WL 70). But what is even more distressing is what happens in Debrecen, as the two girls witness their own sister Leila's rancor toward them: "[t]u e tua sorella, tornando dalla Germania, mi avete tolto dieci anni di vita" (CA 62; "[b]y coming back from Germany, you and your sister have taken ten years off my life" WL 73). Staying in Hungary becomes impossible. After many wanderings that seem to mirror Ditke's painful stays in the various camps, after the humiliation of an abortion in Prague thanks to a complacent doctor, after having been psychologically and emotionally hurt by her cousin-boyfriend Tibi, Ditke arrives in the Promised Land. Once there, Ditke rethinks the ardor with which her mother spoke to her children of this land (CA 88–89; WL 107–08), as life in the kibbutz of Pardes-Chana presents itself as a cacophony, a babel of languages. Ditke feels as if she is not part of this life. She does not possess the strength of *Sabres*, those who are born in Israel. She, like others arrived from the camps, is hoping for a life of reparation but—just as was the case for many other survivors—the camp is forever. Israel cannot be her new motherland. Later, Italy becomes her adopted home (but never her motherland) and Italian her adopted language.

The oscillation between the "return to their childhood shattered and the biography of a present of helplessness and uprooting" (Bruck, *Francoforte* 147) constantly offers survivors new possibilities for self-reflection. The somatization of her moral suffering creates the metaphor of retelling Auschwitz as a painful pregnancy, its memory reincarnated every time in the construction of her novels' protagonists. The juxtaposition between the voices of the author and the character narrating the story periodically fluctuates in Edith Bruck's writing. Bruck makes frequent forays into the novelistic genre as it offers modal variations to her articulation of the pathological conditions of her fictional characters. However, the writing matrix remains intact in autobiographical novels and essayistic writings such as *Lettera da Francoforte* (*Letter from Frankfurt*), *Signora Auschwitz: Il dono della parola* (*Signora Auschwitz: The Gift of the Word*), and *Lettera alla madre* (*Letter to My Mother*). In the novels *Andremo in città* (*We Will Go to Town*), *L'attrice* (*The Actress*), and *Nuda proprietà* (*Bare Ownership*) we instead experience direct fictional approaches that feature the Shoah as their background.

Lettera da Francoforte

The Shoah does not substantiate mere memory; rather, it constructs a monstrous vision which, over time, has been metamorphosing into a tumor, a life praxis. Tracing the complexity of our own existence in this destructive dialogue with the monster is Bruck's inevitable affliction and urgency. The sense of the uselessness of suffering (the origin of the evils of the author) translates into a grotesque situation in *Lettera da Francoforte*. The protagonist reveals an ongoing attempt to undermine the dignity of survivors, as she must respond to absurd requests probing her time in concentration camps in order to keep her survivors' pension. Because of complicated bureaucracies, an unknown individual writing from Frankfurt (known as Tarshawsky) requires visible evidence of her suffering so that she might continue to receive minimal financial compensation. A Kafka aphorism—"The true way goes over a rope which is not stretched at the top, but shot low. It seems made more for tripping than to be traveled"—is used as an epigraph for *Lettera da Francoforte*, and this becomes an appropriate key for understanding the bureaucratic nonsense to which the woman subjects herself, not so much to receive her pension, but rather to maintain her dignity as a survivor. Taking her pension amounts to negating the only public and tangible form left of her official status as a survivor. Because of the power granted by today's society to money, any pain can be commodified and is only understood in such terms. Her survivor's pension grants her irrefutable proof to the world of what happened to her. Any missteps made in asserting her rights as an ex-interned, affecting her claim to compensation for her time camp would amount to the double victory of the German bureaucracy. The Kafkan "rope" is not aimed at the top but hovers near the ground. It is a rope that makes one trip, it becomes obsessive, and the attempt to skip over is useless, because one is never really compensated for a life that has been lost.

Attempts to obtain compensation, and thereby proof of her pain, articulate the pathetic story of a woman who, 60 years after the camp, must demonstrate "[d]ocumentary proof of the Persecution Suffered. Testimonies are not sufficient" (Bruck, *Francoforte* 11; English original) for her request to be valid. How can "Vera Stein married Castelli" (12), find a "documented proof" of her suffering except through her own body and writing? How can one label the testimony of a survivor as insufficient? The letter seems to be another absurd joke of German bureaucracy, a morose farce set up by a constantly adverse destiny. What can she bring as conclusive evidence for her suffering? "Il loro rifiuto—secondo l'opinione del fratello che ormai da tempo vive negli Stati Uniti—è come

la negazione di quel vissuto. È per questo che hai ricominciato la lotta?" (68; "Their refusal—according to the opinion of the brother who has long been living in the United States—is like the denial of that experience. That is why you started the fight?"). The answer, needless to say, comes in the affirmative from the woman who has, by this point, absorbed the pain of an entire people. Like Sisyphus, however, the woman continues to repeat her explanations, to rework the existence of the evidence of her suffering. It is never enough, yet, like Sisyphus, she goes on.

Her reluctance to probe her suffering is generated by a feeling of losing the status that belongs to her by definition, her state of surviving. An official has the power to turn Vera again into "un'orfana anonima" (93; "an anonymous orphan"). The pain that she experienced was hence endured in vain and reveals itself instead to be a double defeat. Her stubborn refusal to surrender to the official's requests to probe her suffering shows how her identity is now composed by the very statute of illness: she cannot explain any further because remembrances "aprono in [lei] una voragine di dolore" (94; "open in [her] an abyss of grief"), for which no remedy can be found. Her existence is that illness that now requires evidence in order to be believed. Proof of suffering requires more than just words—the testimonies are not enough—because their vulnerability to counterfeiting does not make them easily verifiable. The bureaucracy needs tangible things such as wounds or scars; the pain must be seen by others on her body, must be inscribed on her limbs, in her flesh. Illness, in this survivor's representation of her condition, is what Susan Sontag defines as the "night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship" (3). While pregnancy often becomes a metaphor for the endless gestation of testimony and memory, Vera's illness is devoid of any such metaphorical sense: it constitutes her second "citizenship" for it is her identity. Against this absurd necessity of proving her suffering, Vera Stein opposes absolute values. "La giustizia non dovrebbe mai costare ma semplicemente essere in certi casi un valore assoluto. La verità anche. I documenti autentici non possono passare per falsi e magari quelli falsi per veri. Non si può permettere che tutto sia possibile senza diventare complici di Tarshawsky e dei suoi simili" (Bruck, *Francoforte* 52; "Justice should never cost but simply be in some cases an absolute value. The truth also. Authentic documents may not pass as false and maybe those fake ones turn true. One cannot allow that anything is possible without becoming complicit with Tarshawsky and his like").

In her reply to Tarshawsky, Vera reports her status as a witness to those who "ci hanno affidato il loro messaggio al mondo; raccontate se sopravviverete poi un nome, un luogo d'origine, uno Shema Israel" (54; "have entrusted us with their message to the world; tell if you survive, then a

name, place of origin, one Shema Israel"). In a stroke of horrible irony, Vera will discover how the clerk was actually a Jew, tattooed exactly like her. Without mercy, Vera juxtaposes his unknown image to the unforgivable one of the kapo who sold himself to the Nazis. They both amount to a "Caino sopravvissuto" (149; "Survived Cain") "[che] ha caineggiato sui deportati e caineggia sui sopravvissuti perché ha perso i suoi, perché è rimasto quel subumano a cui è stato ridotto, schiavo che non diventerà mai più un uomo ma un fantasma che danneggia i vivi" (149; "[who] has acted beastly with his own lot and acts beastly now on survivors because he lost his lot, because he has remained the subhuman to which he has been reduced, a slave who will no longer become a man but a ghost who damages the living"). The grey area that the camp established by taking advantage of the psychological features inherent to human beings allows the camp to extend beyond its physical and temporal boundaries. It extends to Tarshawsky who acts in such vile and insidious way outside the ostensible perimeter of the camp. Vera Stein does not hesitate to call him a Cain. If evidence of her status is discussed, Vera reaffirms her identity as a Jew who has also lived through Auschwitz, as in the case of Bruck herself in *Signora Auschwitz* (64).

In Bruck's fictional and nonfictional writings, the author's sense of displacement, one that endures regardless of time, is apparent. All cultural signs prior to her camp experience have been deleted along with the total deletion of her community, her language, and her culture. Yet her integration and assimilation into Italy appears to be unsettled. In what ways can the pleasure of living and the ability to identify with the identity and *telos* of a host community still be possible for Bruck? If specificity is established through the group to which an individual belongs, how can one then establish identity if, subject to the elimination of one's group and its very linguistic context, an individual feels a part of no group at all?

Coming Back to Write: Liana Millu, A 5384

If for Agamben, Primo Levi represents the "cartographer of this new *terra ethica*" (69) that has been conceptualized since Levi's arrest, Liana Millu's contribution to the same ethical map deserves recognition. Her literary path is shaped as a constant truce with the gnawings of her existence that only writing can afford her: a gendered poetics of life that shows how the camp and the truce can be subject to distinct modes of understanding and (literary) representation. Both a witness and writer by necessity, Millu is aware of three factors by which her identity is molded: being a woman, being Jewish, and being Italian.

Millu's body of work includes articles in the *Corriere del Popolo*, her posthumous impressionistic *Tagebuch*, the six *racconti* of *Il fumo di Birkenau* and those of *La camicia di Josepha*, her novel *I ponti di Schwerin*,[6] *Campo di betulle,* and her numerous interviews and testimonies published in several journals. Along with Primo Levi, Millu stands as the most important exponent of the literature of return in Italian Shoah studies. Her creative trajectory shows how mediation between autobiographical traits and fictional expression can be actualized without infringing any pact with the truth or distorting the memory of people upon which fictional characters are modeled. It is unquestionable that Millu presents her personal and subjective rendition of lived experience as facts, not applicable to a specific form of existentialism. Paraphrasing Levi, facts do represent, however, means for investigating the human condition. The postcamp degradation, described by many in terms of shame and guilt for having survived, does not concern Millu. Neither victims, nor those who returned home are sanctified in her works. Instead, what most characterizes Millu's work is a pervasive sense of devastating solitude, derived from her resistance to any form of social behavior expected from an Italian woman in her time. Independence has a price, which amounts to something beyond suffering in the camps. The space between the camp and civil life is just a moment of reprieve in her solitary existence.

Both in fictional and nonfictional writings, Millu identifies three elements of women's resistance to the programmatic dismantling of femininity: pragmatism, frivolity, and fantasy. French women are the only ones who preserve their dignity in the camp, never renouncing the care of their bodies. Sergeant Steinlauf warns Primo Levi's narrating protagonist of *Se questo è un uomo* (*Survival in Auschwitz*) to always observe the rules of hygiene, for ascribing importance to them in a place like the camp signifies a confirmation of one's dignity. Setting rules for oneself in a place where rules work against human logic means not acquiescing to a condition that is imposed, rather than chosen. Being clean means to "force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization" (Levi, *Survival* 41). Hygiene is conceived as bodily attempt toward cleanliness, translated into purity of spirit, a mode of resisting one's present condition. Millu shares the sense of justness of this principle, and explores its peculiarity for the female gender. Aside from the effort of hygiene, the decorum associated with attention for beauty and care is conveyed by all of Millu's narrators. Taking care of one's body and beauty in the camp is an act of resistance to its inherent death logic, for it implies the desire to go back to a normal life. The desire to go on with life is expressed through the actions of Millu's French friend, Jeannette, (a character in Millu's fictional works as well); just like other French prisoners, Jeannette

"would pass margarine with her hand over the eye area as wrinkle cream" ("All'ombra" 132). Millu sees this apparently frivolous gesture as one of strength: it is a gesture of resistance for it means that Jeannette has no doubts about her return home as well as of the triumph of civil society over the abjection of the camp. A civil life does not welcome wrinkles—symbols of pain and sorrow—in a young unmarried woman. Applying the last slivers of fat under the eyes, Jeannette rules against dehumanization. She rebels against the camp logic in which a woman, (and particularly a Jewish prisoner woman) has no face for she is a nonwoman. In their scramble to try to smooth wrinkles off their face, which has been unnaturally marked by life in the camp, these women's behavior is consonant with the Western-style sociocultural construction of the French or Italian societies that in turn inform the female gender. Millu speaks with admiration, in fact, of the natural ways in which French women take care of themselves (Tono, "Storia" 17). This is not mere smugness. These women claimed their consonance with what the word woman meant in their respective societies and counter it to the concept of nonwoman in the camp. The feminine aspect of being a woman—a distinction that the camp tried to, but could not entirely erase—addresses the ways in which these women could preserve their body and beauty at the cost of a piece of bread bartered for a piece of broken mirror. To oppose the camp's forced dehumanization in this form of resistance and commitment meant avoiding the total ablation of a gendered identity—and in this way, human dignity can be asserted.

Although automatically associated with the execrated Mussolini regime and therefore hated by the other prisoners, Italian women rebel and instead yearn for a point of cohesion with the French prisoners, who instill in them the courage to respond against passive acceptance of the law imposed by the kapos. If the political situation does not afford dignity to Italian women, it is with the French (who are, at first, hostile to them) that the Italians later find the ability to engage in a meaningful relation with their sisters beyond the Alps. Millu finds a point of commonality in the discomfort created by the confusion of politics, nationalities, and ideologies that accompany the prisoners in the camp: the sense of beauty and self-preservation inherent in many women sets itself against the oppression of insulted dignity. "[W]hat lies at the core of the Lager system [. . .] is essentially aimed at fabricating a victim, insensitive by now to the *vulnus*, in whom the human dignity of the defenseless degenerates into a caricature of itself" (Cavarero 36). Against such apparent psychological threat, the desire to go on living survives in the rituals of daily care. Millu's pages are characterized by both parataxis and the absence of any rhetorical distance from the offense explored in the narrative. She never gives in to

the pathetic: the description of the amputation of her breast becomes a "fact"—a thing to tell without melodramatics (Millu, "Nel campo" 15). She speaks of a "fatalistic resignation" that shapes her "wisdom of the camp" (Millu, *Tagebuch* 82). And it is through the "wisdom of the camp" that she finds comfort and courage.

Smoke Over Birkenau

In his foreword to its fourth edition, Primo Levi calls Millu's collection of six short stories *Il fumo di Birkenau* (FB) (*Smoke Over Birkenau* [SB]) the "most affecting among Italian accounts" ("Foreword" 7). The "specifically feminine aspects of the prisoners' wretched and minimal lives," their conditions of life and work "a good deal worse than that of men," and "the agonies of disrupted families" captivated Levi's attention (7). Death threads together these six *tableaux vivants* that examine women's conditions in Birkenau, the female subcamp of Auschwitz. The women's barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau were built around the crematoria, and their chimneys, relentlessly producing ungodly smoke, constituted the inescapable image that would remind women of their impending deaths. *Il fumo*'s six stories each illustrates different examples of how a woman meets death in the camp: jealousy, rivalry in love, a hidden pregnancy, and motherly love. A somber voice narrates these parables of grief, which all relate to how love and procreation become fatal threats to a woman's life in the camp. Despite his admiration for Millu's writing, Levi speaks of "testimony" in his foreword, rather than referring the texts as literary works. In the view of Gudrun Jäger's (Millu's German translator), Levi fails to understand the literary elements that structure the stories: she fears that such a limitation of genre would prove to be at the very least, misleading. Since we know that, for Levi, the story of a survivor belongs, in fact, to a true literary genre ("Prefazione" [Bravo and Jalla] 9), his omission only confirms how fraught with difficulties the incorporation of testimony within a larger literary work can be. Rather than "autobiographical testimonies," Millu builds veritable "literary elaborations" of the "camp experience" in *Il fumo* (Jäger 20–21). Considering testimony as a literary genre amplifies its modal potential to compose stories, such as those in which Millu's vocation emerges more freely and directs the oscillatory movement of her *racconti,* suspended as they are between imagination and direct experience. The description of the world turned on its head in Auschwitz-Birkenau becomes a reason for Millu to study narrative possibilities (aside from those of journalism) regarding this strange citadel whose inhabitants had meaning and were continuously counted,

numbered, and registered, paradoxically only because they were destined to die. The process would repeat itself until the prisoners' entrance to heaven (*Himmelkommando* was the name for groups sent to the showers). The tensions intrinsic to the Birkenau blocks' micro-universe of women fully reveal the extent of the distortion of human and ethical values in the camp. In her dry and merciless self-reflection, the narrator projects case studies of possible reasons for death she saw around herself.

The first story, "Lili Marlene," bears the same title as a famous song that, with another song, *Rosamunda*, have become the audible epitome of the Holocaust. The inadequacy felt by Italian women with respect to the physical energy exhibited by Eastern Jewish women recurs frequently, along with a renewed sense of awareness of the discrimination of the Italians within the camp (FB 9). Thrown into the ranks of another command, the Italian girl acting as the first-person narrator looks around with dismay as she realizes that her prison-mates are all Hungarians, "donne forti e resistenti con le quali bisogna faticare senza lamentarsi" (FB 10; "tough, resilient women who had no patience with anyone who complained about the drudgery" SB 14). One of them, the extremely young Lily, shares with the Italian girl memories of her life in Budapest and reveals how the camp has taken any joy away from her (FB 20–21). However, Lily's sweetness hides a secret that, in civilian life, would be a pleasant topic for two girls to converse on: being in love. The reverse logic of the camp forbids love; it is a universe in which every *good* feeling means weakness; the camp instills and extols only *negative* affects. Feelings like love thereby constitute a burden, one that Lily cannot suppress and which will ultimately determine her fate. Likewise, the notion that a prisoner could fall in love with her persecutor falls into the same perverse reverse logic of the camp. Seventeen-year-old Lily does not calculate the risk of being courted by the kapo's *kochany* (lover), for love is a sentiment that defies reason. What our narrator tells us is that it is her youth that makes her uncontrollably attracted to the Nazi man. Did the beautiful Hungarian girl perhaps delude herself, convincing herself that love was possible even in the camp (FB 27; SB 33)? Made savvy by wisdom learned well before entering the camp, the narrator is able to intuit Lily's sad fate. Lily's shy smile arouses jealousy in the kapo who, after submitting Lily to a job impossible for her to perform on her own, mentions Lily's alleged state of physical incapacity to Doctor Mengele. Selection will do the rest. One can die of jealousy in the camp, a place in which the meaning of good seems to escape life.

The state of exception becomes the norm of this beastly existence. And in the end comes madness. Millu reifies madness over the death of a daughter in the character of the aging Adela in "La clandestina" ("Under

Cover of Darkness"). Adela's daughter went straight to the crematorium because she was pregnant upon her arrival at the camp. In this story, it is Hanukkah and the block celebrates it, placing "gli otto lucignoli della resistenza e della vittoria" (FB 56; "the eight slender candles symbolizing resistance and victory" SB 68–69) on a white linen tablecloth, and chanting ancient prayers. The *blockowa* directs the rite, and the women start to implore "il Signore potente e terribile di conservare accesa eternamente la fiamma della loro fede, traverso ogni dolore, ogni distruzione e persecuzione, nei secoli dei secoli" (FB 57; "the fearful and almighty God to keep the flame of their faith eternally lit through century after century of grief, destruction, and persecution" SB 69). In direct juxtaposition to the flames of the crematoria, these women oppose death with their religion. Maria, a pregnant woman from Moravia, approaches the altar. "Allora capii che voleva immaginare l'anno prossimo, quando si sarebbe avvicinata all'antichissima lampada con in braccio la piccola Erika e un po' impacciata dal suo peso, avrebbe salutato il lume simbolico, ricordando come un sogno oscuro e lontano la triste baracca di Birkenau" (FB 57; "I knew she was envisioning next year, when she would stand in front of her ancient menorah holding little Erika in her arms, straining a bit under her weight, and give thanks for the emblematic light; the dismal barrack at Birkenau would be but a shadowy, long-gone dream" SB 69). Seven months into her pregnancy, Maria does everything in her power to keep her baby alive. She hopes to leave the camp with her baby who will in turn grow up and read the books written by that Italian girl in her block. Mad Adela, the one who sleeps between Maria and the Italian, instead reveals the pregnancy to the kapo (FB 63; SB 75). The narrator records the reversal of sisterhood in action: madness takes over everything that is not a natural instinct. In a strange twist (normal within the logic system of the camp) Adela then helps Maria give birth. In her madness, Adela mechanically repeats archaic gestures associated with womanhood, and obeys the laws of nature that regulate femaleness. The child's sex will remain unknown to readers, meant to signify that, just like Maria, the newborn is doomed. Empathic women participate in the delivery for they all participate in that "attesa quasi mistica, l'attesa vibrante di misteriosa deferenza che invade religiosamente coloro che assistono al rito sanguinante della maternità" (FB 72–73; "quasi-mystical anticipation, the hushed, spiritual awe that attends the bloody rites of maternity" SB 87). Elation for the miracle of birth, however, dies in a "rigagnolo di sangue" (FB 73; "stream of red" SB 88) that stains the Italian aspiring writer's feet. With the blood by which Maria has given birth to her only act of resistance (her baby), her moment has seeped forever in the ethical mud of Birkenau. The next hard day of the camp begins in the same way as every day for all women, except for

Maria. Life goes on without anyone even taking time to grieve for Maria and her child. The crematoria at the center of the women's camp welcome other innocent victims; this time though, it's hard to remain impassive before death, for it is Maria and her child who will become ashes.

As Millu's intent in composing *Il fumo* is more than that of the direct witness, the author enjoys a certain degree of freedom to develop memories that, in turn, foster a writing disconnected from truth and veracity, the parameters conventionally demanded of testimony. For instance, Millu exercises artistic freedom in extracting and moving elements related to her real experience in the Malchow prison and shifting them to the setting of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The third story, "Alta tensione" ("High Tension") tells of an imagined event and refers spatially to Malchow rather than Auschwitz. Its protagonists, Italians Bruna and her 13-year-old son Pinin recall the Christian iconography of the *pietà*, as an Italian mother and a son are caught in their last embrace, with "la testa della madre posava su quella del figlio come volesse proteggerne il sonno" (FB 96; "the mother resting her head on the son's, as if to watch over his sleep" SB 116). With this image of a *pietà* in the camp, ekphrastically specular to Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture *Mother with Her Dead Son*, the narrator shapes women's particular form of resistance. Rather than surviving her own son, Bruna decides to die with him, for resisting means ownership of an identity worth fighting for, and Bruna's identity as a mother is stronger than anything else. Women's power, the one that Millu reaffirms as the most valuable in the camp because "the powerful vital instinct of women makers of life produced antibodies" ("All'ombra" 130), appears expressed in the negative in the stories of *Il fumo* for, in the reversed logic of the camp, giving life signifies losing your own.

Tagebuch: a Truce Is Never Possible

On May 3, 1945, shortly after liberation, Millu finds a blank notebook and on May 10 she begins the diary of her journey back to Italy. Her final entry in this diary dates back to September 1, 1945. The writer entrusted her precious diary of this six-month journey to Italy to Piero Stefani, who promised to read and publish it only after her death (Stefani 17). While Stefani states that only the last part of *Tagebuch: Diario del ritorno dal campo* (*Tagebuch: The Diary of Return from the Camp*) is "slightly adapted" (14),[7] Millu's entire corpus should be understood as a fictional and expanded rewriting. An initial assessment of Millu as an author endowed with a stoic personality, an impression that is afforded by the readings of the *racconti* of *Il fumo*, crumbles, in fact, upon reading her

diary. *Tagebuch*—Millu's most sincere, self-reflexive, and impressionistic testimony of the Shoah—is indeed a key to understanding the experiences recounted in *Il fumo*, published in 1946. The issues raised in each of *Il fumo*'s stories find solutions that denote a literary approach that adds a different dimension to the truth of experiential testimony without ever trespassing the limits of veridical representation (hence Levi's possible confusion in his assessment). Only a parallel reading of *Il fumo* and *Tagebuch*—texts composed within approximately the same temporal frame—can exact the literariness of the earlier in comparison to the latter.

A correct reading of Millu's fictional texts should begin with a consideration of *Tagebuch*. Less stylistically nuanced, composed as a *zibaldone* (Baiardi 309), *Tagebuch* reveals the merciless skeleton of a period in the author's life that Levi called "the truce." However, unlike Levi's *La tregua* (*The Reawakening*), Millu's notebook's syntax and composition divide the body of the diary into fragments that assemble their materials into a rather incoherent hodgepodge of thoughts (if it were not for the entries to mark the progression of time). *Tagebuch*'s hybrid content hence exacerbates a process of denarrativization. Life does not flow: the existential journey proceeds shockingly in a way that Millu mimetically reproduces by inserting thoughts, poems, and comments on her condition. No obvious literary intent can be inferred from Millu's considerations of her status as a Jewish Italian woman during, and after the war. The spiritual companions of her truce between the camp and the return to civil life include French writer Victor Hugo and his character Gavroche (to whom Millu compares herself), Carducci, Pascoli, and Guglielminetti, but also Nietzsche and Céline.

Tagebuch reveals Millu's existential angst; the 65 pages that comprise this slim book are wrenched with despair. They reflect a narration devoid of any of the stoicism for which Millu would be best known. Rather than literary, the sense in which *Tagebuch* reveals Millu's process of return to civil life is literal, and similarly to testimony, every word should accordingly be taken for almost face value. With a pencil stub that she later sent to Primo Levi (Millu, *Dopo il fumo* 76–77), Millu marks moments of bitter reflection about the camp and return home. "Da un certo lato non desidero mica di tornare in Italia. Mi vergogno di lei e la bandiera che un tempo mi riempiva di amore ora mi lascia del tutto indifferente. [...] Dunque, amor di Patria, zero" (*Tagebuch* 34–35; "On the one hand, I am not crazy about returning to Italy. I am ashamed of her and the flag that once filled me with love now leaves me completely indifferent. [...] So, love for the country, zero"). Her French peers' pride for victory triggers a

scorn for and disappointment in her homeland that can only find a match in her personal sense of displacement: she has lost possession of those essential coordinates that turn an individual into a member of a social group.

In response to the difficulty of speaking of one's homeland in the wake of the Shoah, the content in *Tagebuch* accordingly pains to orient itself linguistically. Ligurian dialect mingles with the French words spoken by Millu's companions while the sad refrain of the motto she learned in the camp, *Scheissegal*, suggests her indifference to going back home: the babel of Auschwitz stays with Millu. Alone as she is, the narrator (Millu *ipse*) rejects the conventions that mark conformity to Italian life: after the camp, they have been rendered even less important than they had been before. Millu opposes the rules of life learned in the camp, but the *saggezza del campo* (the wisdom of the camp) must be acknowledged even outside its space. Without either hope or fear (*nec spes nec metu*), she embraces her state, "[u]na comes solitude" (*Tagebuch* 29; "my only friend solitude"). Her fatalistic approach to life and death leads to creativity as the only viable path toward serenity. Combined with the desire to understand the categories governing human existence, solitude compels her to write. While deeply convinced of the creative value of independence, she also inquires into her condition as an unattached woman. Independence and solitude hold two rather different meanings of which she—like many other women—is only too aware:

> Io sono sola, sola, sento quasi tangibile la mia solitudine e il mio destino. [. . .] Il disgusto di una vita mancata, di una vita dolorosa, piena di malvagità e di errori coscienti mi riempie di amarezza. Signore, Segnur: salvami. Fa' che io possa rifarmi una vita, una vita chiara, diritta e onesta! Padre nostro, perdona! Subito la parola mi brucia; come oso chiedere il perdono? Padre nostro pietà. (*Tagebuch* 37–38)
>
> I am alone, alone, I feel almost tangibly my loneliness and my destiny. [. . .] The disgust of a missed life, a painful life, full of evil and conscious errors fills me with bitterness. Lord, Segnur save me. Let me start a new life, a clear, straight and honest life! Our Lord, forgive! Immediately the word burns me, how dare I ask for forgiveness? Mercy, our Lord.

Despite her professed atheism, she revindicates the inalienable right to pray so that her body will receive its proper burial in a cool cemetery by the sea. She pleads for her *humanitas* not to become ashes for fertilizing the fields. She claims the right to lie quietly in the shade of a tree that recognizes the honor that being a human provides the body. The echo of the prayer to the Lord comes unceasingly. Her best-known poem describes a

life still young and yet already suffering from grief resulting from having lived a life worse than death. Acknowledging her atheism, she still recites a prayer modeled after the *Pater Noster* (Lord's Prayer):

> Fa', o Signore, che io non divenga fumo in gri-
> Gio cielo straniero,
> ma ch'io riposi laggiù
> nel mio piccolo cimitero.
> [. . .]
> E sotto la pietra il sole mi scalderà
> il mare mi bagnerà
> il vento mi porterà
> tutti i fiori della riviera.
> E sarà la pace. (*Tagebuch* 47–48)
> O Lord, make it I do not become smoke
> in a grey foreign sky
> but that I rest down there
> in my small cemetery.
> [. . .]
> And under the stone the sun will warm me up
> the sea will wash me
> the wind will bring me
> all the flowers of the Riviera.
> And it will be peace.

The prayer that paces *Tagebuch* (a recurring counterpoint to *Scheissegal*, and one that dispels any claim of Millu's indifference), artfully suffused with a few lines of the *Pater Noster*, is her prayer to a personal god in which—like many other Italian Jews—she reverts to only after the camp experience (Pettinaroli 60). Reasoning about the existence of a god means providing a space for its presence in what is an otherwise atheist and nihilistic text: *Tagebuch* is filled with quotes from Nietzsche and Céline. As an atheist, Millu prays that, if there is a god, he is just, one who must see, who must force people to recognize the ethical resistance on faces of the seemingly ignored.[8] Millu's is a god who must cut out evil and racism at their roots and soothe the lonely and righteous like her.

Piero Stefani added other two writings by Millu to *Tagebuch*. In the 2006 edition of *Tagebuch*, "Quel mozzicone di matita" (23–26; "That Pencil Stub of Mecklenburg") and "Il ritorno dai Lager" (95–102; "Return from the Camps") function respectively as prologue and epilogue to the actual diary. In the former we learn about the discovery of the stub and the notebook with blank pages in a Mecklenburg farm while the later tells us of Millu's firm intention of remaining silent about the event. The

effect of the camp on Millu's voice is unambiguous as she states: "mai ho parlato del mio ritorno dai Lager, e dopo oggi, *mai più ne parlerò*" (95; emphasis added; "I never spoke to my return from the camps, and after today, *I will speak no more*"). We know that this statement is far from the truth, but it reflects how Millu felt at the time. Arrested by Fascist Republicans in Venice "il 4 o il 5 marzo 1944" (95; "on March 4 or 5 1944"), she returns to that city and she faces punishment for traveling without a train ticket. Conducted in an office of the police station, to avoid arousing compassion and empathy for her emaciated appearance, the woman is judged with contempt. In addition, the fact that the woman came from Germany was insufficient justification for her omission: "Germania non Germania, qui eravamo in Italia e il biglietto dovevo pagarlo. Cosa erano quelle pretese? Dei Lager, lui, se ne fregava!" (96; "Germany or not, here we were in Italy and I had to pay the ticket. What were those claims? Of the camps, he did not care!"). Ultimately the recognition of her gender finally ensues, as the three men consider her dirty shirt, so painfully made with three handkerchiefs remedied in the Dörverden camp. The journey from Venice to Genoa is if possible, even more painful. The most grotesque scene takes place at the assistance counter for the displaced of the Genoa City Hall. Morbid curiosity about the tattoo and rude remarks are all that welcome her home. "Dite che nei Lager era un macello. Ma a vedere quanti vengono qui a beccarsi le 500 lire, mica si direbbe. Altro che sterminio! (97; "You say that the camps were a shambles. But to see those who come here to peck the 500 lire, one would not think so. Go figure, this extermination!")

Tagebuch remains secret until after Millu's death perhaps for reasons related to the indifference of many to Millu's lonely existence. Back in Pisa, her hometown which she left years earlier visits in the absurd hope of finding affection, her aunt overlaps her own memories when Millu attempts to tell her about the camp. Millu quickly comes to the realization that "la gente non poteva capire" (98; "people could not understand"), or, rather, they did not want to.[9] Visiting her aunt and cousin in Pisa evidences what is perhaps the final challenge to reject any form of shame for having survived. Her cousin remarks: "Sei tornata tu. *Sei tornata tu che non hai genitori, non hai un marito, hai sempre dato dispiaceri alla famiglia*" (99; emphasis added; "You're back. *You're back, you who do not have parents, you who do not have a husband, you who have always given grief to the family*"). While her cousin's daughter never returned from the camp, others believe that Liana is undeservingly living in her stead. What are the reasons for such undeserving return? Liana is a woman with no husband and no children; she is officially divested of a clear social connotation, for she is nobody's wife, daughter, or mother. In addition to this

lack of a blood-based connection to anyone, she has "always given grief to the family." So, if there is a family in Liana's picture, it is only because she has meant trouble and grief for them. In the hierarchy of social values, the life of a girl who abides by the rules set by society acquires far more importance than the life of a young, single, independent woman. We are, after all, in Italy. Devoid of any status, the woman is openly considered less worthy of salvation in the eyes of the aunt who does not understand how her God, the Jewish God of justice and not of forgiveness, has made such a blunder, to restore their rebel niece into society rather than their mild and judicious daughter, who was already a mother, and so much more useful to society than the undisciplined Liana. As it is for Bassani's character Geo Josz who unequivocally defines the vain hope of a return to normal life, so is for Millu. In a grotesque twist, when Liana tries to get back to work, her sole refuge from melancholy; her forced absence from work makes her reinstatement into her previous position impossible. The Kafkaesque accusation of her having been away relates metonymically to the pain and the shame (Belpoliti 80–97) she could not confess later to her students. It is hard to encourage younger generations to fight for a more honorable society when, in fact, one's own relatives show such contempt for an individual. For Millu, the inalienable right to attempt to reenter life is only achievable through testimony.

I ponti di Schwerin

The bitterness of *Tagebuch* lies as a foundational element for one the best Italian novels of return, Millu's 1978 autobiographical *I ponti di Schwerin* (PS). In his introduction, Francesco De Nicola states that "the novel by Liana Millu does not belong—unlike what is erroneously indicated in the *Bibliografia della deportazione nei campi nazisti*, edited by Teo Ducci [. . .] to the memoirs genre and only to a hasty reading may seem a kind of fictionalized autobiography" ("Introduzione" 18). Indeed, the hasty categorization with which many survivors' writings have been grouped together results more often than not in an impediment to their more accurate cataloging. A taxonomic assimilation has occurred too hastily, without taking the time to fully assess (or justify) the categorical consolidation of all autobiographical writings and works in which aesthetic transfiguration defines conceptualization and composition. Millu's authorial intent in composing *I ponti* holds a creative statute: by virtue of the pact that factual fiction assumes with historical facts, her novel does not infringe into the domain of the factual; rather, if anything, it affirms their truthfulness while revisiting them in this other form. The novel indicates a

mode of writing that is less restrictive than full-fledged testimony, and is characterized by the insertion of reflections into the many interstices left ajar by the main narrative of the text. Its main narrative concerns the difficult journey home of Elmina, the protagonist. This is a journey that is generated by (and comments upon) the author's moral choices about the fictional representation of her experience. The feeling of degradation postcamp analyzed by Primo Levi in *La tregua* emerges, possibly even stronger: in the hellish system described by Levi and Millu, the victims are never sanctified. Millu speaks of what many female survivors try to convey in their testimony: the loneliness felt by a woman upon her return. The protagonist's acute sense of displacement must be attributed to an accumulation of types of loneliness that she must come to terms with. The longed-for truce is not just that of a break from the pain of the camp, but also an existential break from the pain of her loneliness after such devastating experience. The return from the camp is configured as a parenthesis to the bleak loneliness forming Elmina's existence. Isolation looms large especially after the camp. "Ero sola e andavo al ponte di Schwerin perché italianka. Che venissi da un lager, mi sembrava chiaro" (PS 120; "I was alone and went to the Schwerin bridge because I was italianka. That I was coming from a camp seemed obvious to me").

This sentence sums up the larger sense of the novel, for the ending of Elmina's journey means also the beginning of her story. What was left of this young elementary school teacher with literary ambitions on her way back from Auschwitz? The narrative time of the novel protracts the week that it actually took Millu to make her way back home into a time sufficient for the narrative of events prior and after the actual journey. This expansion of narrative time is crucial, for it indicates Elmina's inner time. Temporal focalization on a particular week of one's existence signifies gaining a perspective that concerns not merely that generative moment, but gives occasion also for the memory of one's entire existence to arise. By virtue of this temporal dilation, Elmina examines the last existential bridge between her life before the camps and her life to come. The life to come will be a life without dreams, without family, without any hope, each and all abandoned in the camp.

A shifting narrator appoints herself at once Elmina's "spettatrice, il giudice, l'erede" (PS 35; "her spectator, her judge, her heir"). Two routes lead to the end of Elmina's journey: the actual journey to the bridge of Schwerin, and a parallel voyage constructed through a programmatic retrieval of her life's most significant events. This programmatic retrieval of recollections constructs a path for self-reflection. In the novel's division into two parallel main narratives, the past and the present oppose one another in a rhapsodic rhythm. Cutting across Elmina's complex

story, the alternation of these two narratives conveys her attempt to bridge parts of her life. A bridge is by its very nature an element of connection, support, and control of elements, pointing to an end on each of its sides. In the town of Schwerin, the protagonist finds herself in front of just a thin and fragile "passerella" (PS 206; "footbridge"). At Schwerin there is nothing physical, concrete, material, to climb over to return to the world before the camp: the border between the existence of the concentration camps and civilian life is only mental, a slender catwalk.

Experiential concordances are defined within a perspective shift that marks the attempt to evaluate Elmina's actions and mistakes from a stoic, rational point of view. *Il fumo*'s use of stoicism was relatively uncomplicated—with the notable exception of Maria's death in childbirth—for it concerned mostly other characters; however, in *I ponti*, Elmina is Millu's alibi. As such, stoicism can do little to soften the grief that emerges from self-referential, self-reflexive passages.

In the incipit, readers find Elmina in an abandoned farm near Malchow with Jeannette, her French friend. Hidden there, they await the Red Cross. A French man, Gilbert, arrives and starts speaking in patois with Jeannette, leaving Elmina outside their conversation. Their comments prompt Elmina's reflections about the lack of absolute justice, the same vantage invoked by Bruck: just like truth, justice should be an absolute value. Feeling discriminated against even outside the camp, punished for crimes she never committed, her country scorned, Elmina thinks back to her entire life as one characterized by discrimination. As her dignity has been offended to that point of degradation that Levi calls *Entwürdigung* (*Drowned* 129), Elmina reacts to the accusations of Gilbert and Jeannette. A matter of justice, one might say, brings her to defend her countrymen, to show the good side of the Italian *Macaroni* to the two Frenchmen.

Gilbert knows nothing of what Italy was, the reality of the Jews, Elmina's reality prior to the camp. The alternate sequences reveal their structural efficiency in that they help to clarify the moments of the protagonist's existence upon which the anamnestic mechanism rests. From the verbal injustice Gilbert inflicts upon Elmina, unexpected and perhaps even more painful than the verbal and physical abuse of the camp, from the segregation suffered from belonging to a country like Italy that could hardly claim any moral good if not through the stories of individual generosity and strength—from this jumble of reasons Elmina's most important recollection emerges. Her existence is not defined by a confusing welter of trauma and injustice; rather her original sin was being Jewish. "Mi avevano dato la caccia e ingabbiata in lager affermando che non ero italiana. Inquinavo l'Italia con la mia presenza: questa era una colpa da punire con Birkenau e le sue agonie. E ora?" (PS 33–34; "I had been hunted and

caged in a concentration camp by saying that I was not Italian. I polluted Italy with my presence: this was a crime punishable with Birkenau and its agonies. And now?"). Guilty for being Jewish, guilty for being Italian: guilty always. Accusations of crimes thrown at her indifferently, merely because of her nationality, only reinforce her awareness of being born to a "destino avverso" (PS 34; "adverse destiny"). Prejudice, the same enemy she fought against in Italy, is now present in the isolated farm. Engaged in a debate actually more with herself than with Gilbert, Elmina feels the weight of his prejudice and is unable to erase it. "Man cannot live without prejudice" especially "because such a total lack of prejudice would require a *superhuman alertness*" (Arendt, "Introduction" 99; emphasis added). No one can answer Arendt's request, Elmina much less than others.

Elmina touches upon a common feeling of resentment toward the demoplutogiudaic conspiracy—that is, democratic states, plutocracies, and Jews working together—accused by Mussolini's propaganda of plotting against the regime. Adding to the problem of being a *Macaroni*, as Gilbert does not fail to address her, Elmina carries with her all the prejudices tied to the figure of the Jew, the one who for centuries practiced usury and was always rumored to harbor hidden riches (PS 34). But for Elmina, wealth corresponds to an abstract concept that hardly enters the equation of her life. Having chosen to be a schoolteacher as a way to free herself economically as well as socially from her family, she is chronically poor. Disavowing stereotypes and disproving prejudices become the objectives of Elmina's personal war against hypocrisy and small-mindedness. Being poor and a Jew in a country that made prosperity a quintessential asset of racist persecution is paradoxical. But Elmina knows that not all Italian Jews were rich and hid their wealth. And ultimately, she wants to relinquish herself from any constraint that prejudice, be it from Gilbert or back in Italy, inevitably brings with it. She wants neither to be labeled as Jew nor as capitalist nor as Italian. In particular, Elmina feels that, to be Jewish, one needs to feel "circoncis[a] nell'anima" (PS 34; "circumcised in the soul") which is tantamount to falling within the rules and limitations imposed first by the Jews upon themselves and then by society toward them. Gilbert's verbal aggression spurs Elmina's recollection of the episodes and courage that led her to never be mentally "circumcised."

What lies behind such a statement? Diversity—being Jewish in an overwhelmingly Catholic country such as Italy—represents a basis of discrimination similar to those of gender and race. If only negative qualities such as imperfection can be attributed to her diversity, she then rejects her origin; she does not want to be circumcised. The childhood injustices she suffered are described as the first examples in a long list of discriminations that would follow. She first recalls the exemption from prayer, an

exemption that her parents asked for and which made her stand out from the rest of the other girls at the school that she loved so much. Elmina wonders if the motivation for her agnosticism dates back to that day, in a Freudian connection to the trauma experienced at school. Being *judim* meant it was impossible to be like the rest of the children. Being exempt, and thereby excluded, from the recitation of prayers with her classmates signified her diversity, and the exemption from the slotted time for practicing religion was nothing if not the official ratification of this diversity. For many reasons that can be traced back to her childhood, Elmina feels the absence of a clear identity that could sustain her in front of Gilbert's accusations.

After the camp, talking about herself means constantly mediating between the world of the dead and her own life. *I ponti*'s recurring structural-thematic image of a binary opposition (time of narration and time of events, Elmina as Millu's poetic *alibi*, journey to Schwerin and journey into Elmina's past) is also presented in a double structure linked to the concept of near-death, of a life she no longer possesses as advanced by Maurice Blanchot in *L'instant de ma mort* (The Instant of My Death). As in shots of a private photo collection, dead and alive, prominent figures appear in such double structure in Elmina's memory. Personal and impersonal at the same time, death is relentless in its presence, is imminent in all life as we begin to die from our birth. Similarly, we read of Elmina's slow approaching the moment of death since her birth. Elma Michela Misdrachim was born under an unlucky star: right before her delivery, Leontina—the maid who assisted in her birth—dreams of her brother dying in war, bloodied while calling her name aloud. The oneiric dimension of Leontina's narrative relies on its function as connector to and catalyst of other memories and current events in Elmina's narrative of the journey to Schwerin. In the farm near Malchow, another uncanny but real event takes place. That aspect of reality that is hard to grasp—the Freudian Uncanny—takes shape in the form of a man's corpse hidden in the cellar of the farm. Only its unbearable stench can be discerned, because it is a stench that has now become familiar. Just like Leontina's uncanny dream introduced Elmina to life, the unknown of her life after Auschwitz lies hidden under a blanket in the basement. The discovery of the cadaver connects to Leontina's dream in both its perturbing presence as well as the alienating, dream-like sense of being in that farm-island in the German countryside, denoting the importance of the space for reveries and dreams in the construction of the novel. The time spent on the farm evokes an oneiric and disquieting setting: in this suspended time and space, the haunted and dilapidated farm provides the relief of an island or free zone that separates Elmina (to the extent that such is

possible) from the rest of the human consortium. This created locale is a metaphorical marker for the limbo-like situation in which Elmina lives for a short time.

Her temporary estrangement from the world means slowly accepting the presence of the uncanny within herself just as she senses the presence of the cadaver in the farm's cellar. *I ponti di Schwerin*'s protagonist watches herself through different stages of her changed subjectivity. Already at the onset of the novel Elmina faces a real physical object, an unknown dead body that dispels in her mind any possibility of future salvation from the nightmare that she lived (Farnetti 46–56). The Uncanny unearthed in Leontina's dream combines with the family's disappointment over the birth of a female and generates the reasons for Elmina's excentric existence as an independent, agnostic Jewish Italian woman. Within the Jewish community women generally took care of various precepts concerning the maintenance of the home and children while the man handled the family's education and economic welfare. Italian Jewry almost completely adapted their way of life to the prevailing and similar Italian bourgeois model. Elmina is not intended for such comforting clarity, nor does she seem inclined to actively search for such a life. Her sense of otherness precedes the camp, and her resistance to familial and societal rules is an integral component of a life that ultimately led to her arrest and transport.

Of Jewish Mothers

Elmina's life does not hold many certainties, and her relationship with her mother is a particularly striking omission. The maternal figure's conspicuous absence from the novel distinguishes Millu's novel from the works of Edith Bruck. In Millu's novel (as in all her other works) we perceive neither a strong maternal attachment nor, indeed, an antagonistic relationship between mother and daughter. The mother figure is not dead, but is also not present. This absence indicates the nonpresence of a mother, while such a gap when expressed by Bruck indicates an eternal longing for the mother's past presence and the daughter's relationship with her. Of all the possible relationships between mother and daughter, Elmina does not describe any. Simply, Elmina's mother disappears from the existence of the daughter and the text, to never resurface following the cutting of the baby's umbilical cord. We do not meet Elmina's mother ever again after the necessary moment of her presence at the child's birth under an unlucky star, a cameo necessary to depict the scene of delivery. After the woman's complete satisfaction of the reproductive requirements

imposed on her by the social construction of a genre that requires all female humans to be wives and mothers, as well as the Jewish culture that wants the woman as a stronghold of faith and rules of life, Elmina's mother will never reappear in her daughter's narrative. It is so, in part, that Millu can define the coordinates for our correct interpretation of the protagonist. Free in every possible way: free, above all, to make mistakes. She is a character without reference models, without DNA transfer to ensure her family that tradition is handed down matrilinearly, as *judim* do. Perhaps, what is truly in her heart is the desire for readers to understand that "to remain Jews, after all, will be a vital issue, of *blood*, and not a mere hybridization of identity" (Tenuta 165; emphasis original).

Just like Gilbert's attack against Italians, the dead stranger in the cellar also becomes for Elmina an opportunity and incentive to continue the analysis of her past. Her experiences, even negative, create the episteme that makes the whole project of writing the only way to gain self-awareness, to build one's own history and know oneself. The heroine of a novel modulated according to the presence of the perturbing elements marking her life finally sees the fullness of her powers and becomes able to live her own destiny and understand and act on her own desires. For Elmina, the uncanny becomes the key to understanding the future, for without self-awareness she could not continue in the complete solitude that characterizes her life after the camp, a solitude that—we realize here—has been carefully construed both as an interpretation of past events as well as a form of warning for those who are not as strong as Elmina.

When she was in the camp, things were different: she would not give time or energy to thoroughly examine things all the way to their ends. In the camp, the monsters were all too apparent, and a throbbing need to survive was instinctual and dominant. But her nightmares should be related, for they compose the sum of her capacity to experience horror and fear. The stranger in the cellar has become an allegory of the horrors of the camp. "L'addestramento dei lager rendeva indifferenti alla morte. Talvolta alla propria, sempre a quella altrui. Cos'era un morto? Una cosa. Una cosa dura: un pezzo di legno, una pietra" (PS 41; "The training of lager made us indifferent to death, sometimes to one's own, always to that of others. What was a dead man? A thing. A hard thing: a piece of wood, a stone"). Yet, the two young women are unable to leave the farm for a little while longer. Bonding in the camp had been relatively easy, for each sane prisoner tried to think of her fellow inmates (Bettelheim, "Surviving" 295–300). But now, both Elmina and Jeannette are afraid that their friendship will dissolve like snow in the sun, perhaps because "ognuna personificava nell'altra il ricordo di tutte le umiliazioni e le pene passate" (PS 48; "each personified in the other memory of all the past

humiliations and sorrows"). Sadly, the image of each other reflected in their eyes provided a constant reminder of what both they had seen and lived through. Their image reflected for each other the faces they had left in the camp. Hence, "impossibile era sentirci libere finché si continuava a vederci" (PS 48; "[it was] impossible to feel free as long as we continued to see each other"). The image of the death in the camp still binds Elmina to Jeannette. The stench of human death in the cellar, despite the harshness of Elmina's words, incites disgust and another negative emotion: fear. After all the corpses she had seen in the camp, feeling disgust for this body—feeling something after the indifference with which she would stare at corpses in the camp—rescinds any hope that her past will really be put behind her. Avoidance of that corpse puts distance between herself and the surroundings (Mcginn 6), a distance that engenders a sense of loneliness and disorientation. "Non sapevo dov'ero" (PS 50; "I did not know where I was"). Such is the beginning of her new existence.

Elmina flees from two different types of captivity: that of her origins and that of the camp.[10] The alternating structure of the novel establishes a moral and ethical equivalence to events by granting them equal weight (and space) in the text. After a lifetime of hard-won victories, the storyteller does not give in when facing the fear of present loneliness nor the (presumed) guilt of the survivor, but instead expresses fears that are founded in the combinatorial narrative system chosen by the author of the text. A system made up of two parts, specularly reminiscent of the twins Elmina aborted as a younger woman, shortly after her suicide attempt. As in most common in myths, Elmina explores the territory of death, crossing the threshold of small death (suicide attempt) in order to be reborn and understand, once and for all, the matter of which our lives are composed.

In the novels of women, discourse often revolves around the examination of the violence suffered by the individual writer and the possibility of affirmation in spite of injuries sustained in various ages. Discrimination, the lack of a real voice, indeed women's aphasia, finds space in the writing, which can function as a place for reflection on the lack of individual subjectivity and forced subjugation to societal laws. Beautiful myths hide a history of mankind socially structured by sexual difference and the power that makes women both vulnerable and mute. Since the beginning of the Western tradition, there exists what Higgins and Silver identify as a "paradigm of sexual violence (rape) and silence [that] go together" (5). Divorcing the poetics of gender from the politics of gender becomes problematic for an unconsciously feminist writer such as Millu. Free from unnecessary sentimentality, the novel offers an utterly concrete representation of sexual politics. Millu describes all of Elmina's sexual acts, whether her defloration as a young girl or her rape in the farm by Malchow, in very realistic

and matter-of-fact words. In doing so, Millu demystifies the pursuit of beauty as well as the pursuit of the aesthetic as traditionally bestowed in artistic representations of mythical rapes. While traditionally presented as an example of perfect balance between pleasure and pragmatic motivation (e.g., founding myths of cities, countries, continents), the myth of rape (the rape of Europe, for instance) instead exposes the perennial state of female subalternity that is unequivocally linked to a definition of beauty. Although sexual violence is not limited to women, the fact remains that the vast majority of cases are perpetuated against women, both in war as well as in peace, by strangers as well as family and friends. The rhetorical strategy by which Millu presents Elmina's defilement on the farm, so similar to the way her family's friend had deflowered her at a young age, reverses any idea of justice linked to the patriarchal myths of birth and foundation. The lack of conventionality in Millu's rhetoric allows us to see the true meaning behind a myth: that of an act of violence. The specificity of the feminine gaze makes violence lose any added connotation of a cognitive metaphor for rape. It is a family friend, Armando, who initially defiles young Elmina. Armando abuses, first of all, the evident thirst for affection of the girl. (Like many victims of domestic violence Elmina will blame him forever for this.) The 50-year-old "padre di famiglia uso ad afferrare a volo ogni avventura che non mettesse in difficoltà l'equilibrio della sua vita" (PS 149; "family father, used to grabbing immediately any affair that did not endanger the balance of his life") acted quickly and without remorse. This defloration—described as an awkward act between the girl and the old family friend—stresses that the particular act is not nearly as magic as the verses of Catullus. In an instant, everything "[e]ra finito. Tristemente cercò di spostarsi e pensò che ormai era una donna" (81; "was finished. Sadly she tried to move, and thought that by then she was a woman"). That was before the war.

In the novel, Elmina's recollection of her defloration appears alongside the silent sexual violence by an unknown soldier on the cot in the isolated farm: "due mani robuste la trovarono. La presero tenendola ferma; la distesero percorrendola tutta. In silenzio, un greve corpo massiccio la coprì, quasi soffocandola, e un fiato pesante le alitò sul collo" (74; "two strong hands found her. They took steadying her, they stretched her covering her all. In silence, a heavy solid body covered her, almost choking her, and heavy breath breathed on her neck"). The rhetorical strategy that Millu presents the second defloration (and so it is, for after the time in the camp Elmina has reached a renewed virginity) by letting hands, heaviness, and male body take over the description of the act, dismisses once and for all any idea of beauty and justness linked to the myths of birth and foundation. The matter-of-fact way of depicting the act divests it of any magic

that violence could decree upon it. Rather, it is Millu's lack of rhetorical conventionality that allows us to see rape for what it always is: violence. The specificity of the female gaze has the power to make violence lose any connotation of cognitive metaphor with which the sexual act is usually loaded. In the steps mentioned above, the misery of violence imposed on a woman reduced to nothing (as Elmina is on the farm) resonates louder than any possible description.

Since this act has, as its subject, a woman who proposes an act of resistance against the war—against a Holocaust as retold by, and for men—it is only fitting that she spoliates the act of rape from any aesthetic connotations. Even prior to that, Elmina resists a power that she does not feel is natural or institutional: the power of men. The maturity of Elmina's consciousness is made manifest when her desire for true emancipation is confronted by Jeannette's strict adherence to bourgeois values regarding virginity (she would do anything in order to remain a virgin). Elmina's resistance counters the French girl's desire to find her place again within the patriarchal discourse, one which sees, in the control of female sexuality, a system for the general monitoring of individual women. Elmina's position is antithetical to Jeannette's. In order to gain independence, Elmina must accept violence and eliminate this last shred of conformity with and acquiescence to the system imposed on her. Elmina's double deflowering confirms the sense of potential problems and rebirth in her return to Italy, a country that has been deflowered twice in her view, first by Fascism and then by the Nazis and the Allies.

Violence sculpts the female subject psychologically and physically. For women, violence is eternal, both before and after the camp. Interestingly, in Italian, there is no term similar to that of the English *rape*. *Ratto* means at once both the taking of a woman and also suggests her rape. The English term *rape* exclusively indicates an act of sexual violence. Implied in the act of *rapere* is the notion of dynamism—*ratto* means fast in Italian, as in "Amor gentile che al cor ratto s'apprende" (Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, V, 100; "Love, which is quickly kindled in the gentle heart")—which does not match the oppression of the woman and her body. What is similar is the term *victim* that derives from the past participle of *vincere* (to win), *victus* (defeated) The word *victus* underscores a woman's lack of control of, pronounces her impotence with respect to the situation; concurrently, it allows her to talk about the traumatic event. At the same time, the term victim perpetuates the myth that women are helpless and in need of protection, thus affirming the authority of the culture of male dominance over women. The term survivor ostensibly gives an individual power and control over life if they can bear such a label. But this term can also limit one's ability to discuss the trauma if and when necessary, precisely because the subject has lived

over others (*supervivere*). These paradoxes highlight the need to examine how women come to use some labels more than others, and whether or not they choose to do so at all (Young and Maguire 50). Millu resists using language related to the construction of both patriarchal sexual violence and the concepts of victim and survivor. After returning, life becomes increasingly difficult for Elmina who feels no "obblighi particolari" (PS 291; "specific obligations") despite her status as a single woman:

> Convinti da sempre che una donna solo perché non ha un marito da accudire e bambini da allevare, non abbia altra possibilità di realizzarsi che la dedizione a qualcuno o a qualcosa. Per la sua disponibilità di energia e d'amore, per secoli, c'erano state soltanto la famiglia e la chiesa. Ora, ci avevano aggiunto le riunioni di partito. (292)
>
> We are strongly convinced that a woman, simply because she does not have a husband to care for and raise children, has no option to realize that dedication to someone or something. Because of its availability of energy and love, for centuries, there had been only the family and the church. Now, we had added the party meetings.

War is perpetual for a woman like Elmina who does not want to live according to preconceived notions. Aside from her innate sense of freedom, dignity and justice, she endorses no special cause but the struggle against prejudice. Life has granted Elmina neither the time nor the opportunity to allow her to feel like a victim; self-victimization is not part of her system of beliefs. On the other hand, for Elmina, obstacles to happiness were manifold and not only dependent on her status as a woman, but on her status as different: a poor Jewish female schoolteacher.

Family had taught Elmina to respect all the exterior trappings of religious customs as well as many other stifling conventions of the society of the time, for she remembers that "[s]embrava che infiniti fossero i modi d'intaccare o di conservare la dignità" (95; "it seemed that infinite were the ways to corrode or to preserve their dignity"). Elmina will regain her dignity, which was corroded in the camp, in her final, moving encounter with her cousin Dodi (nicknamed for obvious reasons the *Fascistone*) in Pisa after her return. Elmina's silence about the double death of Marcolino, Dodi's son's, reveals how responsibility to and empathy for those for whom one continues to bear witness are possible on the written page. She cannot speak of anything she actually saw and remains silent about Marcolino's double wound of degradation and abjection. Elmina will never speak of her meeting Marcolino in the camp as the "ancestral fear of satanic dogs" (Magris 52) finds sad confirmation in Marcolino's being devouring before Elmina's eyes. His terrible death is witnessed through literature and his tale testified to readers. In declining to relate this to

Dodi, survivor Elmina embodies the dignity that many believed to have been lost in the camp. Perhaps, contrary to what Agamben states (69) an ethics of dignity is still possible after the camp through the word of (or its omission by) the witness. Dehumanization and abandonment of values are not mechanical and irreversible states. Elmina defeats the immoral legacy of her persecutors by revealing how limits that the written text can transverse cannot be crossed in actual life. She does not tear dignity away from those who cannot be here to defend themselves; instead, Elmina seems to say that the act of testimony is right, but if it regards the pain of others and not your own, it must come coupled with dignity toward those others who are not here to tell their stories.

Elmina crosses that symbolic bridge that human evil and the tragic negligence of Nature transform into myth and thereby make inaccessible with dignity. If, during the time spent in the camp, one can see the individual reduced to bare life, the only standard of a suppressed ethics is survival. But what is survival? Bettelheim's notion of survivor is as positive as that of Terrence Des Pres, but points to feelings that make people better and not simply stronger ("Surviving" 274–85). In depicting Elmina as the deliverer by discernment of testimony, Millu makes her a human survivor in Bettelheim's understanding of the word. If, in the camp, decency was difficult, Millu has come to understand how "the humanitarianism of the oppressed is not a gift from Heaven but a significant and tiring achievement" (Bravo and Jalla, "Introduzione" 41). Her Elmina retains a chance to regain her own dignity out of love and respect for those who did not survive. Shoah does not mean immolation, but destruction.

In the novel, evil occurs without a clear beginning or end. The author opposes the meaning of the novel's impregnable structure with the dry prose that the narrator uses to relate stories and facts. There is no quiet, and one existential battle opposes another of equal intensity. The future still exists, "ormai c'erano solo cose da ricostruire: erano tante" (PS 244–45; "now there were just things to rebuild: there were so many"). The ethical value resides in everything we are told: to never disregard the value of human dignity; to never give in to the temptation of giving up. "Finalmente. Prese la borsa, il giornale. Tranquilla, col suo lungo passo deciso, si avviò verso il nuovo ponte di Schwerin della sua vita" (325; "Finally. She took the bag, the newspaper. Quiet, with her long stride, she walked towards the new Schwerin bridge of her life").

In the case of Liana Millu and Edith Bruck, their narratives indicate a momentous event—their experiences in the camps—from which they are never free. The duty to testify, the last "unlivable masochistic duty" (Bruck, *Signora Auschwitz* 55) underscores the paradox of the eternal witness: to speak to ensure that everyone knows. *Zachòr*—remembering—is a duty.

4

Inside the D and Out of the Ghetto with the *Bambine* of Rome: Lia Levi, Rosetta Loy, and Giacoma Limentani

For a complete understanding of Italian representations of the memory and testimony of the Shoah, we must take into consideration literary renditions of the discrimination endured by the Italian Jewish community during the period of time leading up to their deportation, from the early autumn of 1943 through the beginning of 1945. Writers of the Shoah widen the temporal horizon to effectively present how the progressive loss of rights and marginalization affected and weakened discriminated Jews (by then no longer Italian citizens, as a result of the racial laws), and stunted their capacities to resist camp conditions. This particular group of writings represents the impact of the period leading to the tragedy on Italian soil and also partly explains the Jewish participation in the struggle in an effort to take on another national identity, first the Zionist and later the Israeli. Focused entirely on texts that depict the Shoah as lived by women in Italy, this chapter discusses the theme of these women's coexistence with the rest of the Italian population.

The racial laws had produced, in the majority of the Italian Jews, a progressive disillusionment with a society that had, at first, declared its full and complete acceptance of the minority group, only to later abandon them. After being declared eligible to enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship by the then-young Italian nation, Italian Jews lived for almost 50 years in a state of presumed assimilation that they would also enjoy in the early years of Mussolini's dictatorship. In the wake of the Race Manifesto, many older Jews, partly unaware of the unfolding tragedy, urged their offspring to comply with the norms of Italian Gentile society

in hopes for a better tomorrow. However, Jewish youth were divided: some would join Zionist forces in Israel while others, beleaguered by a sort of unconcern that (as depicted in Bassani's literary representations) prevented them from rebelling against the unjust racial laws, remained at home. Perhaps it was because these Jews were existentially convinced of the ineffectiveness of the laws that they continued to hope they would not be implemented, that certain things would not happen in Italy. What we witness here is the crumbling of what had been an apparently serene form of coexistence between the Jews and the Gentiles. It dissolves over a very short time with the reemergence of acute forms of anti-Semitism and prejudice that, when combined with Fascist propaganda, create the conditions for the silence with which Italians at large accepted these notorious decrees.

The violence of totalitarianism did not spare those who remained at home. Girls, so frequently the silent victims of the war, find their voices through literature. Three Roman writers, girls at that time, Rosetta Loy, Lia Levi, and Giacoma Limentani, portray the dramatic (and grotesque) aspects of this epochal event in their works. Their portrait of a country and a youth left to their own devices vividly mirrors what Italians really shared in those years: an extreme state of confusion and ignorance that led them to the complete indifference, the direct result of which was the estimated deaths of over 7,500 Italian Jews. The visage of the three writers is chiefly directed—albeit with different goals, particularly in the case of Loy—toward the Shoah, observing and interpreting those events that marked their childhood. The progressive loss of human dignity perpetuated by the racial laws, which even prevented Jews from legally owning canaries, would tragically end in the camps.

Italian literary texts dealing with Judaism and the question of the Jews, as well as their difficult relationship with the Gentiles prior to the deportations, have only recently begun to emerge with greater clarity and frequency (Beer 596). Yet, if modern Italian literature, as expressed in the case of the emblematic texts of the Roman girls is to attest to the full weight of a temporal and gradual discrimination that led to the fate of many Italian Jews, we must address the underestimation of this literature by foreign historians when analyzing the Italy of those years. As historian Enzo Collotti often criticizes, in the literature more pertinent to the camps, there exists a tendency to overlook the serious ethical and moral ambiguity of the process that led to the Italian Jews' official discrimination and persecution (14). Discrimination laws endangered the freedoms of thought and action that Italian Jews had long wished for and believed in. Moreover, the edicts revealed the ephemeral (however real) moment of emancipation from which Italian Jews benefited after the Albertine royal

decree of 1848. The underestimation of the important facts recorded in the period before the deportations allowed the international historiography, until the end of the 1980s, to advance a stereotypical claim of goodwill on the part of the Italians. Such works partly legitimize and endorse the theory regarding the Italians' minor role, especially when juxtaposed to the impetus of the racist Nazi power, in the implementation of the Holocaust in Italy.

Foreign Historiography

Among the many examples of historiography advancing a strongly ideological methodology, Meir Michaelis's otherwise invaluable chapter in *The Holocaust and History*, titled "The Holocaust in Italy: Areas of Inquiry" (439–62), represents a case in point of the pernicious interpretative strategies used to read Italy's collusion with Nazi Germany before the armistice of 1943. His explanation of the particular form in which anti-Judaism paved its way into the Italian Fascist culture notwithstanding, Michaelis's analysis does not properly take into account the varied forms of Italian anti-Semitism preceding the racial laws and deportation. Michaelis looks at Mussolini's position as a statesman/weak ally of Hitler as one of the leading factors explaining what led to the deportations; he also argues that Fascist anti-Semitism was further derived from the attitude of the Catholic Church (which, in turn, became instrumental in shaping Pius XII's lack of a clear, unambiguous response to, and castigation of, Nazi atrocities[1]). However, an ancestral form of anti-Semitism also shaped the primary contradiction that allowed the Italian masses to engage in relative passivity about the treatment of the Jews, while in the territories occupied by the Germans from 1941 to 1943 the Italian army vocalized a strong resistance to the deportations.

Michaelis also addresses the respective roles of the Germans and Italians in the implementation of the Final Solution in Italian territory. Despite all the issues raised in his introduction, Michealis stresses the nonexistence of a "Jewish Question in Italy" (439) until 1936. He goes so far as to state that "it is no exaggeration saying that until 1936 there was less antisemitism in Italy than in any of the Western democracies" (439). This statement echoes, (albeit for different reasons), what Alberto Cavaglion convincingly argues to be the opinion of writer and survivor Primo Levi. Convinced of the high degree of assimilation of Jews in Italy, Levi was wary of foreign models of moral systems being accepted in their totality (Cavaglion, "Primo Levi" 721). A profound reader of Manzoni, Levi believed that "the troubled history of Italy would have encouraged

the development of a kind of collective vanity mired to swallow the rigid moral systems of others, toning down the extremes. Not the willingness to compromise [...] but a form of superior wisdom, disguised as arrogance: a virtue-vice" (Cavaglion, "Primo Levi" 721).[2] These opinions—the products of different reasons and mindsets—contributed to undermining of the relevance of the events triggering the deportations of 1943.

Judaism and Discrimination during Fascism

As archival sources reveal, Mussolini, motivated primarily by utilitarian consideration, had at first sought to assimilate the Jews into the population with a very public condemnation of anti-Semitism (Michaelis 440). However, the historical record makes equally clear that, beginning in the early 1930s, the Italian social fabric had been properly prepared for the arrival of the racial laws. The robust campaign of denigration organized by various organs of the press in Rome as well as in the provinces played a large role in ensuring the long-term effort to defame the Jews. Meanwhile, *La difesa della razza*'s director Telesio Interlandi was building a frame for collective racial intolerance that characterized the domestic problem concerning the Jews as similar to concerns abroad for the subjects of the African colonies of the so-called *quarta sponda* (fourth shore).[3] Publications—considered at the time to be scientific—oriented public opinion toward a widespread racism that would encourage the majority of Italians to accept the publication of the *Manifesto della razza* (*Manifesto of Race*) in 1938. These included Paolo Orano's *Gli ebrei in Italia* (*Jews in Italy*) and the apocryphal *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion,* which introduced the invented stereotype of the Judeo-Masonry conspiracy in Italian racial consciousness.[4] The year 1938 is fundamental to understanding later events on the peninsula; on the one hand, it represents the peak of a successful campaign of a well-crafted racist policy launched by some of the most radical members of the *Partito Fascista Italiano* (Italian Fascist Party) who had already in the 1920s prevented Italian Jews from holding certain public posts by issuing decrees in which the *razza bianca* (white race) was specifically mentioned as a criteria for holding a post. On the other hand, 1938 epitomizes the fundamental absence of *utilità* (usefulness) of the Jews in the Italian political sphere. The concept of a public utility of the Italian Jews and their reconfimed unity was one that was developed by Angelo Sacerdoti long before the racial laws at the end of the 1920s (Sarfatti, *Gli Ebrei in Italia* 99–102). Many were the Italian Jews who sent a letter to Mussolini asking for *re-discrimination*. Those letters asking for clemency on the basis of the

special merits of some Italian Jewish former citizens, now deprived of all rights, demonstrate the pervasive myth of Mussolini. Honest Italians of Jewish race could only think of a conspiracy, of a dark enemy threatening the Duce, a man whose free will and great magnanimity would lead to the process of re-discrimination of those Jews (Frandini). The re-discrimination process permitted by law n. 1024 of July 13, 1939, while leaving the restrictions against the discriminated Jews, constructed yet another set of figures of the Italian Jew: the "Aryanized" and the "re-discriminated." Special permits exempted these favored Jews from the discriminatory actions taken against the rest of the Jewish populace (Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei in Italia* 150–60). In short, with this decree, while allowing for discrimination by and large, Mussolini managed to appear as a magnanimous benefactor who would help the (so-called deserving) Italian Jews with special exemptions from discriminatory laws (hence the term re-discrimination) despite the horrific laws imposed by his German allies. The ongoing narrative of Mussolini being a victim of the German anti-Semitism (also a function of the absence of anti-Semitism from any Italian political party's platform) was difficult to eradicate from the minds of many Italians.

However, the essays collected in Alberto Burgio's edited volume *Nel nome della razza: Per la storia del razzismo in Italia* (In the Name of the Race. For a History of Racism in Italy), make us aware of the preexisting circumstances that anticipated and facilitated the seemingly sudden state of racism. Different forms of xenophobia converged into the hatred for the Jew. The most important form of racism was that borne out of the traditional prejudices of religious nature concerning the Jews' deicide, perpetually reinforced by recurrent expression in Catholic rituals. To this was added a more recent anti-Semitism, borne out of a purely biological form of colonial racism with roots in nineteenth-century positivist scientism. Concurrently, we also have a political racism in the form of Jewish conspiracy theories and an economic racism that forced the Jew to be the capitalist beholder of mysterious powers linked to a global network. All of these hate-fueled roles became useful to the attack launched against Jews in those years (Catalan 265–77; Cialente; Nettini 293–38). Studies that address scientific and social racism reveal how claims of objectivity and subsequent immunity from accusations of racism in the name of science in fact presented the most dangerous instance of xenophobia. Several studies implicate the legacy of positivist science immediately following Italian Unification, including those of Paolo Mantegazza, Cesare Lombroso, and Salvatore Niceforo. In Burgio's volume, Delia Frigessi provides a careful analysis of the exploitation of the not yet authoritative voice of Antonio Gramsci. The Sardinian intellectual denied the existence of a Jewish question in Italy in the name of an Italian identity *tout court*, itself part of the formation of national consciousness (Frigessi 247–64).

Italians did not remain immune from a millennial rhetoric against Jews, a rhetoric that partially and unfortunately facilitated their speechlessness as the condition of moral apathy that the regime inflicted on many forced everyone into silence (Zuccotti 22–27). In this cloud of well-orchestrated amnesia—of an inability to define the parameters by which events were taking shape—the silence of the majority decreed the solitude of the Jews, who were abandoned to their fate, and to their communities who tried to protect themselves as best as they could from racial law.

Was it the regime that sentenced the Jews to their fate or does such an attribution hide the cultural anti-Semitism entrenched in the psyche of many Italians? The argument for the direct influence of the Germans is not based in fact or supported by any document in the archives, and offers poor justification of the racial laws and the deportation of the Jews in the Italian territory. This argument fails to provide a valid historical narrative of the events that preceded the Holocaust in Italy. Ruth Ben-Ghiat intervenes in the international debate to clarify some misconceptions that exist about the position of the Italians with respect to racism and racial laws. Ben-Ghiat investigates the possible reasons for the propaganda of international historiography, which had always considered the Italians less "bad" than the Germans—that, despite their actions, they were, after all, *brava gente* (good people). The logical consequence of all this was an opportunity to think of Fascism as a lesser evil than Nazism, redefining deportations carried out in Italy as accidents (due to the presence of logs of citizens dating back to the 1938 census of Semites even after the signing of 1943 armistice, etc.). Ben-Ghiat identifies the reference points for this mystifying belief, already evident during the first decade of the Fascist era in which carefully drawn distinctions between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism were issued through propaganda. Distinctions were made between the two by invoking classic stereotypes associated with the Mediterranean people who were tolerant and not as rigid as Northern Europeans; German racism was deeply biological, while the Italian was dictated largely by spiritual and religious motives.

The myth expressed by Filippo Focardi's term "the bad German and good Italian," adequately summarizes the goals of this propaganda: to segregate German racism from that of the Italians. This myth grew into an entitlement to exculpatory feelings for many Italians—especially during the German occupation—because it corresponded to a feeling quite common in the military caste, as illustrated in the critical works of Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi. German occupation rekindled such long-held beliefs of their superiority while simultaneously obscuring the true culpability of the Italians in Italy's persecution of its Jewish citizens. The notion of a

negative sublime linked to the image of Nazism gains value even when this concept is manifested in all its negativity, because the power of the Germans could not but outshine the weak Italians (Ben-Ghiat 143). In a sense, this myth also prevailed in the divisions of the roles of power as conceptualized by historians that, once again, fall in line with the stereotype regarding German supremacy. The juridical oblivion which afflicted Italians helped to create a selective public memory of the event. The "Missing Italian Nuremberg," as Battini calls the failed process of coming to terms of the Italians with respect to their own role in the persecution of the Jews, was made possible by the production of a "selective and partial public memory" that "was developed, based on exclusively attributing the crimes against humanity to the Germans" (*Missing* 26).

As suggested by the studies of Battini, Ben-Ghiat, and Focardi, the portrait of the self-justifying Italian is developed over time. The old staple of Italians as "good people"—as mentioned in the title of Angelo Del Boca's well-known study—persists partly because of an insufficiently introspective look into the origins and development of Italian totalitarianism. The myth determines, among other things, the construction of a pernicious collective memory. The indifference shown for the tragedies experienced by the Jews after the liberation stemmed from the same widespread apathy and self-justification that had allowed the implementation of the laws in the first place. As Limentani comments, at that time,

> those who first did not want to see or understand, still did not see and do not understand. [...] Italy was rebuilt, thus, without sweeping away the rubble and indeed often recycling it. And on top of the common graves maybe aesthetically prestigious memorials were erected, but which did not derive from a purifying and uplifting elaboration of mourning. ("Tempi" 10–11)

According to a common collective image, Italians were incapable of delation on other Italians. Yet, it certainly happened. The example of Pantera's lover, aka Celeste Di Porto, the female informer who made the roundup of the Rome ghetto possible is quite telling. Common clichés identified her lover with a Nazi only to discover after archival research that he was, in fact, an Italian Fascist (Procaccia, "Le memorie italiane" 185). Writing about the danger of oral history and recollection, historian Micaela Procaccia recalls a Roman vaudeville song collected by oral historian Sandro Portelli whose lyrics are emblematic of how widespread amnesia was in Rome with respect to the immediate past. "In 1922 / there was' no government, 'No longer *m'aricordo* / there was' a march 'no more *m'aricordo* where / which was called,' No longer *m'aricordo* what. / and for

'twenty years we were settled by many wars, / No longer *m'aricordo*. / But a beautiful day we were freed / By whom, however, no longer *m'aricordo*" (Procaccia, "Intervento" 220). It is timely that Procaccia notes, in the song passed down by oral Roman culture, there is "a widespread situation, largely favored and caused by a conscious political attitude, which transmitted a ritual, aseptic and, indeed, de-historicized memory of Fascism (220). Constructions of the "German invader" and the Italian "good people" live in close proximity within a collective memory. Their very existence as types is based on a lack of data; they are "suspended in thin air and a past that is fortunately passed, without cause and without a reason. What emerges over time is a 'no memory'" (220). In short, we witness a state of ethical and moral oblivion with grave consequences. For a long time, as these constructions demonstrate, the desire to forget strongly impacted the development of Italian historical research on this period.

The scenario, as lived and suffered by children and early adolescents (which officially opens in Italy with the promulgation of the racial laws in November 1938 and ends with the liberation from the Fascists and the Nazi power on April 25, 1945) imposes a serious warning to all those who, even today, underestimate the severity of the racial laws of 1938 and the racism of the period that directly preceded it. That year formalizes anti-Semitism in Italy: 1938 marks the public input, diffusion, and agreement to anti-Semitism that, it can be argued, had existed for centuries, and had never really been eradicated despite the aforementioned sense of assimilation and legal designation of rights. As Sarfatti makes clear, the state-sanctioned or accepted anti-Semitism occurred via the persecution of the rights of the Jews, which "[...] violated men and women, their identities, their consciences, their social relations, their loves" (*La Shoah* 94).

Roman writers Lia Levi, Rosetta Loy, and Giacoma Limentani present in their respective novelistic outputs a kind of childhood equipped with all the classic elements of Italian bourgeois childhood. The setting is that of a family life marked by bourgeois habits and consolidated by the opening of the ghettos, first in 1848 in the Piedmont kingdom and after 1870 in the former Papal States. Their fathers were doctors, engineers, educated men of great wisdom, shrewd and capable of great actions and their mothers who were diligent and judicious. Their families were united in love and respect for religion; lived lives marked by decency and rigor, solid friendships, the nannies, and walks in the center, or in the parks of Rome, Villa Borghese, Villa Sciarra, the gardens of Valle Giulia. These elements depict a shared setting in which the peaceful existence

of these girls should take place. The children, so loved by their parents were, unfortunately to bear the consequences of a moral and political legacy that will prompt them later to revisit their past. In Loy, Levi, and Limentani's narratives, reflections on integration and diversity appear in the thread of their childhood memories: a childhood very different from the one hoped for them by their parents, a childhood at once pervaded with both expectations for a true renewal of Italian society and, at the same time, a fatalistic attitude. The notion of one coherent and homogenous Italy, as stereotypically depicted by some scholars, appears deconstructed in all its pernicious fallacy while the difficult and binary formulation of the Jew, vis-à-vis the "Other," indelibly marks the memories of these women.

Their childhood is dismembered, composed of a series of fractures, wounds, and moral privations perceived as deviations from the common course of human development. In the time of their composition, now-adult Levi, Loy and Limentani retrace parts of their personal life and childhood inextricably linked to the public history of Italy as a way to find an answer to that ontological riddle that beguiled their existence and motivated their authorial intentions. They advance a sense of responsibility for themselves, one that is charged with an ethical and moral imperative. As often happens with literary texts set against the background of historical events, the strong autobiographical component of these texts—that *autos*—misleads some readers to the point that they label such texts as autobiographies *tout court.* These texts also lead readers to mistakenly analyze their characters by assigning the authors' name to them nonchalantly.[5] The factual elements of the texts, however, should not impede our understanding of the evident authorial intention to construct a message which requires the readers' full (ethical) involvement.

If rabbinical tradition states that all Jews warrant for each other and that each Jew "whether aware or not" (Carucci Viterbi in Calò 6) is responsible for the other, Loy, Levi, and Limentani take charge of a moral burden that moves beyond the boundaries of their individual, personal *divenire* (becoming). Theirs appears to be an existential process that claims at once both the private and public spheres, as their narratives speak on behalf of those little girls and boys with whom *le bambine* shared games, only to see them, later, disappear before their eyes. The absence of these youth from contemporary Italian society alone is enough to impel one to write. In dedicating their writings to all the innocent youth who suffered the moral and physical violence of the Shoah, the writers claim that responsibility involves all members of Italian society, not necessarily exclusively composed of *brava gente*.

Rosetta Loy

> E la sera del 16 ottobre, l'allieva di seconda media che corrisponde all'autrice di queste righe, chiamata per recitare il rosario, aveva sbuffato di noia come tutte le altre sere lasciando che le palpebre le calassero giù nel cantilenare delle ave marie e dei paternoster; senza che le passasse per la mente di supplicare il suo Dio, che era poi quello dei Levi e Della Seta, perché mandasse in loro soccorso l'Angelo Sterminatore. Senza avvertire alcun impulso di gridare, di fare qualcosa per quel ragazzo dallo sguardo allegro che suonava alla porta [...]. I pensieri di quella bambina non più bambina [...] non sono in quella sera di ottobre molto diversi dal solito, in massima parte occupati dai bigliettini che attraverso un sistema di carrucole e di spaghi si scambia attraverso il balcone con le bambine Calcagno al piano di sotto. (PE 136–37)
>
> And on the evening of October 16, the student this writer once was, recites the rosary, sighing with boredom as she does every evening, letting 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, focused 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. (FW 163)

Loy denounces her own indifference as well as that of other Italians who, in those years of discrimination and persecution, should have condemned rather than underestimated the importance of the racial laws against their neighbors deprived of work and rights on the basis of religion. Loy is not a camp survivor but she is, nevertheless, a Holocaust survivor. Her unbearable legacy is that of the extremely loud silence of those years; hers is the realization of her own society allowing people to be deported to camps who, until the day before, were Italians, just like her. Loy's account of how her personal time was spent on that tragic October 16, 1943, records in somber tones her unawareness that impeded her from supplicating "her God" to save her neighbors Della Seta, or the boy Giorgio with his beautiful bicycle. Along with her novel *Cioccolata da Hanselmann* (*Hot Chocolate at Hanselmann's*) and the overtly autobiographical *La porta dell'acqua* (*The Water Door*), *La parola ebreo* (*First Words*) is Loy's most famous work. *La parola ebreo* threads historical facts along with Loy's personal experiences as a privileged Catholic Italian child. The work appropriately combines autobiographical, fictional, and reportage genres in a hybridized form of narration that brings the reader

back to the author's childhood while understanding at once its ethical and cognitive intent. Its ambitious aim, in fact, is to shed light on the fatalistic attitude of Catholic Italians and their inability to admit their responsibility toward victims of the Holocaust for their failure to resist the German and Italian post-1943 implementation of the 1938 racial laws. Further, her writing is a constant admonition of Christians who are aware of their complicity and moral responsibility in the Jewish annihilation. Utilizing all hues and shades of narrative, Loy pursues an important scope: that of pointing out Italians' indifference to the treatment of Italian Jewry, particularly in undeserved moments of reprieve. Virtually each of Loy's books refers to the indifference of Catholic Italians to the Shoah, but they also reflect the underlying notion of a private trauma that the author seeks to work through in her writings. The jacket sleeve of *First Words* reads: "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 for marketing purposes, because, in fact, if we read Loy's overtly autobiographical *La porta dell'acqua*, it is clear that her childhood was far from a happy one. It was secure and safe; it was wealthy, with vacations in the mountains and at the beach, but not happy. In fact, a sense of loneliness denominates all her autobiographical writings.

In a way, it would be impossible to read *La parola ebreo* without considering the importance of Loy's unresolved childhood trauma because it is the latency of that trauma—its long-lasting, unseen effects—that motivated her to write. This trauma stems partly from the repressed, unspoken but equally strong sense of diversity in a world rigidly divided by those who were Jewish and those who were not. It all begins in that conformist, bigoted world that her Tyrolese governess—to whom Loy's absent mother has entrusted her youngest child—accepts without reservation. For the young girl, the little nursery where Annemarie tells her stories of Grimm's *Paulinchen*, signifies that world. "Se vado indietro nel tempo e penso a come la parola «ebreo» è entrata nella mia vita, mi vedo seduta su una seggiolina azzurra nella camera dei bambini" (PE 3; "If I go back in time and think of when I first heard the word *Jew*, I see myself sitting on a little blue chair in the nursery" FW 3). For Loy, to "go back in time" signifies a return to her private space of privileged child, to that sad but mythicized Proustian *vert paradis des amours enfantines* that the nursery still embodies for her.

However, in a location so effused with innocence, she observes actions occurring in the apartment whose windows face the street across from her own. They appear at least as mysterious as the horrifying fairy tales

Annemarie tells her. Her memory leads to a confrontation of everyday childhood that is reprocessed within a broader context of the historical period in which Loy places her private childhood, one which was unaware of the customs of their neighbors. The connection between private and public is already set by the proximity of the two worlds—divided by only two windows—inhabiting two apartments near the Flaminio neighborhood. There is no *shtetl* for the Roman Jewish family living across the street from little Rosetta, for they represent a family unit whose lifestyle was specular to Loy's, prior to the racial laws. Annemarie's clear sense of the incurable opposition between who is right and who is wrong defines the terms in which she recounts the scene Rosetta is witnessing. The stain of deicide—the blood of which Jews covered themselves with when they killed the savior—saturates her story just like the gore-filled Grimm's tales she tells the little girl:

> Sono ebrei aggiunge accennando col mento al di là della finestra, loro i bambini non li battezzano, li circoncidono. Ha detto "bechschneiden" con una smorfia di disgusto. La parola è incomprensibile ma contiene quello «schneiden» che conosco bene. Cosa? Mormoro incredula. Gli tagliano via un pezzettino di carne, risponde sbrigativa. "Mit die scheren…?" mormoro. Vedo il sangue, un mare di sangue che bagna il porte-enfant. La spiegazione è vaga ma agghiacciante, Annemarie accenna a qualcosa sul corpo che non capisco mentre il suo sguardo scruta severo attraverso i vetri. […] "Sind Juden" lei ripete; e lo sguardo dei suoi begli occhi color cielo si fissa severo su una cameriera che va in giro con un vassoio. Forse nascosto tra le tazze del tè c'è il pezzetto tagliato via a quel neonato. Un ditino, un lembo di pelle. (PE 3–4)[6]
>
> "They are Jews," she adds, gesturing toward the window with her chin. "They don't baptize their babies, they circumcise them," she explains, using the German, *beschneiden*, with a grimace of disgust. I haven't learned the word, but I know part of it, *schneiden*, to cut.
>
> "What?" I say, not believing her.
>
> "Yes, they cut off a piece of the flesh," She tells me matter of factly.
>
> "With scissors?" I picture the blood, a sea of red washing over the bassinet. Annemarie's explanation is vague but chilling. She indicates some part of the body as she peers out of the window with a severe look on her face, but I don't understand her gesture.
>
> […] "They are Jews," Annemarie says again, and her beautiful sky-blue eyes turn hash as her gaze rests on a maid walking through the room with a tray in her hands. Perhaps there among the teacups is the piece that was cut off the new baby, a lump of skin or even a whole finger. (FW 3–4)

The beginning of *La parola ebreo* is marked by the mystery of circumcision that the Tyrolean nanny explains to the child while emphasizing the

superiority of the Aryans over a people so cruel as to maintain such a brutal initiation rite to life. Notwithstanding the estranging effect created by Annemarie's German, details of the torn flaps of skin are juxtaposed to those of the fairy tales, of the skin young Konrad cut from his fingers with scissors. In the text, the poignant love for the Tyrolean nanny is treated extensively and, paradoxically, is accompanied by the fear that the Grimm stories—narrated with educational intent—instill in the child. There is an unbridgeable fissure between this tender and insecure child and her nanny who, too intimately convinced of belonging to a privileged race (linked to the future of the Aryan Roman Catholic Apostolic), cannot understand the fear, or even the reluctance of the child to listen to the (apparently) harmless evening fairy tales of abominable cruelty that she has now come to associate with the events occurring in the apartment across the street.

A sense of loneliness emerges from the pages of *La parola ebreo*. The little girl who will later become a writer learns to juxtapose her own present security—sheltered from knowledge of the events—against the world that ignored the fate of her friend, Regina, whose life is marked forever by the Star of David on her chest. She questions that security now. Hers is not a happy childhood at all. Rather, it is one defined by an awareness of a profound fracture in the society in which she lives, one marred by the indifference of the good toward the tragedy that was taking its course. Loy's reminiscence frames a period in which the two religions live within close proximity in Rome. The assimilation of the Jews led to disbelief when the first racial laws were implemented precisely because, in Rome, Jews and Gentiles shared a community. How could two families living in the same building—on the same floor—have a different destiny, merely because one was Christian, the other Jewish? "How could this happen?" is a question that often resonates in the Italian fictions of the Holocaust from Giorgio Bassani's *Finzi-Contini's Garden* onward. There is no temporal barrier between past and today. The personal story of the girl is revealed through the gashes left open by the oppressing historical events of World War II, and the hidden war, Hitler's persecution of Jews. It is an ongoing past, like in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Rosetta Loy writes in afterword to the 2000 edition of *La porta dell'acqua*, about her unawareness "dei colori lividi che dividono la felicita dall'infelicità" ("Nota" 101; "of the livid colors that divide happiness from unhappiness").

The second edition of *La porta dell'acqua* takes place after the publication of *La parola ebreo*, for the composition of which Loy did not hesitate "to loot" the 1976 text ("Nota" 102). While a cursory reading might reveal almost identical texts, *La porta dell'acqua* and *La parola ebreo*

point to two entirely different authorial projects that, in turn, determine the structural differences between them. In the first, the author coincides with the narrator and reconstructs her environment, returning, via memory, to her childhood (Loy's most Proustian technique). In the second, the separation between passages in which memory constructs the text and those in which the writer reflects upon the Fascist years determines the shifts between the narrating "I" and the omniscient third-person narrator. In *La parola ebreo*, Loy reverses the values of her private life as depicted in *La porta dell'acqua*, and looks at her family's ambiguous behavior in terms not dissimilar from Primo Levi's "grey area." If it is true, in fact, that her "famiglia non è fascista e neanche razzista" (PE 10; "family is neither Fascist nor even racist" FW 12), their attitude does nothing but attest to a socially shared behavior of nonbelligerence toward the dramatic consequences of the racial laws devised by the Fascist regime. In short, the abovementioned tendency to abhor strong systems of belief that Levi liked so much about Italians—that "vizio-virtù"—turns out to be one of the strongest deterrents to any firm individual stance on the matter. Her family did not take a position in response to the racial laws, which affected not only strangers (even this, of course, would be no excuse) but also friends and acquaintances they knew and held in high esteem. Understanding the reasons for the family's apathy toward everything that was happening in Rome generates *La parola ebreo*, a book whose genre fluctuates between essay and fiction (Loy, "Nota" 149), as autobiography necessarily gives way to essayism. A book that assumes that style and structure define the *scrittura di frontiera*:

> This autobiographical memoir is neither an essay nor a fictional account: it calls specifically upon facts and episodes that have really happened. I found myself in the necessity to submit my narration to constant verification out of duty and philological integrity, but especially to give a service to the reader. I limit myself to give notice of the main texts from which are drawn informations concerning the events narrated, and I signal their most important documents. (Loy, "Nota"149)

The author needs to find new answers and the hospitable space of literature provides them. In *La parola ebreo* those same incidents narrated in the first edition of *La porta dell'acqua* need to be reread in accordance with the information now available to the protagonist of that childhood. What is needed, above all, is a system of documents that validate—as far as possible—the impressions gathered by the child that now wants to confess (to herself and to readers) the plight of other children in those years that remains a puzzle that she cannot solve, and yet must recognize. A

confession made after many years, according to David Bidussa, implies the use of "a genre that stems from the gap between knowing what is the truth and the awareness that all the same the story does not redeem but deepens the wound [. . . in which] the memory doesn't merely represent the condition in which the losers of history, the victims find their dimension, but also the 'technique' with which they propose the centrality of their own events" ("La parola"). In the footsteps of St. Augustine and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bidussa reaffirms how the sense of a confession is aimed at reassembling an event retold as an integral component of the new life of the individual speaking out. This is also Loy's motivation for her hybrid text in which confession plays an ethical role. Moreover, the Latin root of the word "confession"—*recognition, be aware*—only confirms how this author's particular text could fall, albeit in an unconventional form, within the confessional genre, as an educated meditation on history, literature, and trauma. Further, *La parola ebreo* is a text entirely assimilable to a literary meditation. The essay genre is seen in terms of personal criticism and then tied to the frame of personal narrative that constructs the time of history, necessarily shifting from past tense to present. The confession of the child of affluent Roman society struggles with the ambiguous situations she witnesses. The conventions of the confessional genre are also evident in the philosophical underpinnings of the text: autobiography, personal criticism, and public denunciation are elements that characterize what could be expressed as fiction.

In *La parola ebreo* the sense of common and collective responsibility focuses on two particularly emblematic characters: the briefly sketched but unforgettable child Regina and the adolescent Giorgio. After Giorgio disappears and Regina's visits to the gardens of Valle Giulia are suddenly terminated, the protagonist will never again see the Star of David on her little girlfriend's chest, that she envied her so much (PE 7; FW 8). Loy calls for a collective blame for the loss of these youth, who were children with her and suddenly disappeared. Loy exposes the Italian reality that adheres with Dan Diner's tenets regarding the "Otherness as such" that Jews historically represented for Christianity's personal consciousness. Diner posits:

> The more a group of victims affect the identity of other collective consciousness, the more extensive seems to be the space that it occupies in memory. Since the Jews and the myth connected to them in some way hold constitutive importance for the Christian religious memory, everything makes it seem that the extermination, in addition to having killed Jews, has also deeply affected the Christian self or the self forged by Christianity. (*Raccontare* 178)

Loy turns Diner's considerations into a text of rare and suggestive beauty, one where the narrator's point of view resonates with a wide readership. The Holocaust "becomes something more than a genocide among other genocides," Dan Diner claims (177), because the Christians' identity (also the secular) is shaped by that of the Jew and the myth of deicide. The Jew's otherness is of peculiar "constitutional significance" (177) precisely because it affects the Christian community whether in its presence or in its absence, the later determined in twentieth century by the *Hurbn*. The awareness of "compromising of the Christian Self," writes Diner (178) that exasperated and erroneous Italians attributed to their Christianity, is reflected in the then-recently converted Giovanni Papini's works *Storia di Cristo* (*History of Christ*) and *Gog*, a text imbued with religious racism. Loy's conquered awareness of a wrongful interpretation of one's own religion (that forced Christians to constantly see Jews as the Other) constitutes a consecutive step dictated by her maturity, which, just as in the case of the survivors discussed in the earlier chapters, can only take place after a latency period. The fear of compromising their religion and identity has in turn jeopardized the possibility of getting away from the problems of war and discrimination as Catholics. The "Christian Self" is affected, the stain remains—judging by Loy's writing—ineffaceable, as the Christian memory can only declare its responsibility to the weight of history. The founding myth that made crimes possible (such as discrimination, persecution, and finally the destruction of the Della Seta family and many others) is born within religion. Christianity forms the foundation of what will lead Loy's family to their fatalistic attitude.

Among all of Loy's memories, those of her mother weigh particularly heavily; the mark left on the church kneeler from her mother's soft, round knee during the rite of Holy Thursday merely reveals our own vulnerability to sin, and amounts to a superficial sign of devotion to the form without communing an authentic feeling. It's that knee—as a part representing the whole—that disturbs the child, now an adult recollecting a mother's body that was always distant, a woman who knew nothing and explained nothing, leaving the duty to educate Rosetta up to the ignorant bigot nanny. Her mother cares only for appearances; she avoids using certain offensive terms, such as "giudei" (Judeans), for it is "volgare. Si possono offendere" (Loy, PE 80–81; "vulgar. Someone might get offended" FW 96). Politically correct, we would say today, the mother only plays a superficial role in the rather unhappy childhood of the author. Still—and always—superficial, external appearances prevail over all; the word must not be offensive and must be used according to the conventions of bourgeois speaking, so the proper word "Jew" (*ebreo*) must replace the label used in accepted Roman dialect, *giudio*. This requires a political

correctness that simulates respect and imposes hypocritical necessities on a child as part of the social milieu. With the same formal correctness that leads her mother to engage in empty spiritual exercises, good form requires bourgeois Italians to demand the application of hypocrisy of language and word choice from the girl. She has to say *ebreo* and not *giudio* while referring to her *dirimpettai*, but their uses are never explained to her except for with descriptions that remind Catholics of the Jews' deicide. Yet, the proximity to someone who she knows and sees quite often, solicits thoughts and curiosity in the little girl. How can one teach respect through language if language impels the child to build a series of conjectures about these "Jews" and the possible motivations behind their Easter? How can she respect the Della Setas when external pressures force the girl to think of them as God killers? "Ma allora che razza di Pasqua è, cosa festeggiano? Certo non la Resurrezione, visto che Cristo l'hanno ucciso loro! Madre Immaculée non l'ha detto, l'ho detto io; e sono fiera del mio acume" (PE 82; "Well, what kind of Easter do they celebrate? Certainly not the Resurrection, since they're the ones who killed Christ! Mother Immaculée doesn't say that, I do. And I'm proud of my cleverness" FW 98). Left to her own reflections, the child slowly moves away from her world to decipher that of the Jews who are so close to her and yet are unknown. She makes a transition from thinking about the Catholic Easter to reflecting on the Jewish one. Yet, her childhood remains crystallized with that loud silence originating from her family. The sins of parents who, at some point, cultivate social contacts with people involved in the regime, seem to fall eternally upon the writer who remembers how the only exception in the family was her brother who was serving in the Army of National Liberation. ""Lui, solo fra noi, ha sentito l'impulso di mettere in gioco se stesso. Ci ha provato: chiudendosi silenzioso la porta alle spalle mentre fuori pioveva a dirotto [...] (PE 119; He was the only one of us who felt the impulse to put himself on the line. He tried, closing the door silently behind him as the rain poured outside [...]" FW 142–43)." In the temporary suspension of disquiet given to her by childhood memories, a question remains, pounding:

> Cosa si aspettavano da noi i Della Seta? L'ingegnere Levi e quel ragazzo che amava suonare Chopin? Non avevano capito che l'inconcepibile poteva diventare realtà perché riguardava, oscuramente, fatalmente, solo *loro*. I colpevoli senza colpa. Avrebbero dovuto sapere che nelle trattative diplomatiche del Vaticano per cercare di sottrarre ai tedeschi parte del loro bottino umano, ogni sforzo si era concentrato in favore di chi aveva riconosciuto il *deicidio* e si era *lavato dalla colpa*, chinando il capo sotto l'acqua del battesimo. Che gli ebrei che si ostinavano a non convertirsi

> sarebbero prima o poi diventati vittima del loro orgoglio e della loro perseveranza nell'errore. Un doloroso e ineluttabile destino li separava da *noi*. (PE 130–31; emphasis original)
>
> What did they expect from us, the Della Seta, engineer Levi, and that boy who loved to play Chopin? They did not understand that the unconceivable could become reality because it concerned, fatally, *only* them? They were guilty without guilt. They should have known that the Vatican's diplomatic maneuvers to persuade the Germans to give up some of their human booty favored those who had owned up to the deicide, those who had washed away their guilt by bending their heads under the waters of baptism. The Jews who stubbornly refused to convert would sooner or later become victims of their pride and perseverance in error. A painful and ineluctable destiny separated them from *us*. (FW 156)

The memory of Giorgio Levi, the young man at the door who the Fascist doorkeeper prohibits from putting his bike in the elevator, is locked in Loy's adulthood. Readers learn to know and love Giorgio and discover his fate; and his pointless death becomes an emblematic case for all Italian Jews who went to the death camps. Giorgio becomes a synecdoche for what remains a reminder, for the continuing witness and ethical commitment of Loy:

> Brucia dirlo, ma un orlo nero segna i nostri giorni incolpevoli, senza memoria e senza storia. E se i Levi non si sono difesi e non sono riusciti a immaginare l'inconcepibile, è anche perché si consideravano, al pari degli altri romani, partecipi di quella garanzia che faceva di Roma una "città aperta". Per troppo tempo avevano condiviso con *noi* giornate tristi e felici. Erano saliti e scesi per le medesime scale, avevano bevuto lo stesso tè [. . .] parlando la medesima lingua: in senso lessicale, ma anche nel senso dei sentimenti. Troppo tempo, per sentirsi *altri*. Come immaginare quella mostruosa solitudine davanti alle SS, a quegli ordini che senza inflessione nella voce, nello spazio di venti minuti, li cancellavano dall'*Humano genere*? (PE 135–36; emphasis original)
>
> There is a black border around those guiltless days of ours. If the Levis did not defend themselves and were unable to imagine the inconceivable, surely it is not least because they considered themselves, like all other Romans, beneficiaries of certain guarantees. For too long they had shared with us happy days and sad, fears, cowardice, hopes. Going up and down the same stairs, drinking the same tea [. . .] they had spoken the same language, in the lexical sense but also in the emotional sense, for far too long to think of themselves as *other*. How to imagine that monstrous sense of isolation they must have felt in the grip of the SS and their orders, which, within twenty minutes, eliminated them from the human race? (FW 162)

Loy offers many moral questions including those concerning the hidden encyclical, the mysterious *Humani Generis Unitas* drawn by John La Farge, the American religious author of *Interracial Justice,* at the request of Pius XI. It is hard not to agree with Guido Fink when, in his review of Loy's book, he wonders, "whether that encyclical could really change the fate of millions of Jews" (5). Loy speaks in plain tones of Passelecq's and Suchecky's frantic research of the *encyclique cachée* that the future Pope Pius XII would declare missing only to later release (after censoring the parts related to the Jews and the Nazis) a few of its passages related to the suffering of the Polish people. *La parola ebreo* constitutes an important reading as it demonstrates, via the author's questioning of her own behavior, how the author blames herself for the same reasons that she would censure Italians for having shirked their moral obligations during this era. "Brucia dirlo" (PE 135)[7]—a phrase whose verb evokes the title of Pope Pius XI's encyclical to German bishops, *Mit Brennender Sorge*—represents the moral malaise of which some Catholics who, like Loy, live as a result of the consequences of the racial laws as well as of those whose lethargy offered little help to those who lived on Italy's own soil. The sense of guilt, then, is born of an act of omission, one of the worst sins that a Catholic can commit. In response to Sergio Romano's then recently published book *Lettera a un amico*, Rosetta Loy criticizes Romano for trying too hard to break free from Italian stereotypes about Jews and for defining the unresolved issue of the Shoah as "counterproductive" (Loewenthal; Minerbi; Neiger). Romano's hypothesis, that "the Shoah has become for the Westerners a permanent blackmail" (Loy, "Caro" 52) is rejected by Loy as she contends that a very basic distinction that needs to be made between Israel's political use of the genocide (particularly within the country to justify anti-Arab paranoia) and the silence and indifference that has instead enveloped the issue in Europe, where the genocide took place. Loy states:

> [L]ike 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 he only one who could revenge a screening of its own behavior. What does it mean that the Jewish genocide is "encumbering". Encumbering for whom? ("Caro" 52)

According to Loy, a series of questions have long remained unanswered. A silence resulted in the failure to hold accountable the small number of individuals who profited from the Jewish persecution in Italy, and Europe more in general. Posing these questions has become a "tumor inside the body of Europe" (53), and the recurring sentence by which the issue is

dismissed—"the historical context of Auschwitz no longer exists" (53)—is not, in Loy's view, an answer, but merely an 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" (53). In contrast to Romano's theories of archiving the "encumbering" Holocaust, Loy recognizes the "right to justice" of the Jewish people, the collective character of this particular type of responsibility (53). Loy's analysis also addresses the stereotyping of Jews as a population that is neither prone to reaction nor aggression. She completely rejects such a stereotype in her fiction. In *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' submission to events is morally wrong and fiction, as in many other instances, has the duty to present such moral issues to the readership. Loy's work emblematizes how, in the Christian consciousness, a hierarchy of victims has been established—one that does not, as Diner states correspond to the value of the human beings put to death, but, rather, to their presence in individual memories (*Raccontare* 178).

Una bambina e basta? Lia Levi

In *La parola ebreo*, Loy describes the ways in which Catholic education molded her childhood. In addition to Annemarie, Loy recalls the self-righteous teachings of the French nuns. In those confusing years, unknown little girls would suddenly appear in her class at her French convent school (Loy, PE 99; FW 117). The memory of one of these girls, who confesses to having to study Catechism for First Communion is particularly impressed upon Loy's memory. These girls disappear from the school as soon as they arrive,

> Anche se la mia fuggevole e aristocratica compagna di banco è sicuramente ariana, è comunque la prima di una serie di fugaci apparizioni che si intensificheranno l'anno seguente per poi toccare il culmine nell'inverno 1943–44, quando allieve *dai nomi di fantasia* verranno ad animare il grigiore e il freddo delle ore scolastiche." (PE 100; emphasis added)
>
> Although my aristocratic and ephemeral former bench mate is undoubtely Aryan, she is only the first of a series of fleeting apparitions that will multiply the following year and reach their peak during the winter of 1943–44, when students with *invented names* will enliven the cold gray atmosphere of the school day. (FW 119; emphasis added)

Levi's narrator tells of the dangerous and temporary asylum provided by the nuns of a convent near Rome. The confusion between physically indistinguishable girls, separated only by the crosses and Stars of David hanging from their necklaces, leads Loy's character to comment on the basic fate that made her a Catholic rather than a Jew. "Come si fa a essere sicuri, veramente sicuri, che non ci sia stato uno sbaglio e solo per errore sono stata lasciata davanti alla porta con la targhetta di ottone appena bombata che Italia lucida ogni sabato pomeriggio, su cui splende il nome di papà?" (PE 59–60; "How was I be sure, really sure, that there wasn't some mistake and it wasn't just by error that I was left in front of the door with the slightly rounded brass plate and Papa's name shining on it that Italia polishes every Saturday afternoon?" FW 71–72). The doubt that troubled Loy's childhood is partially confirmed by the sudden discrimination of other girls who, until then, thought of themselves to have been part of an Italian society free from racial divisions, devoid of distinctions due to their professed faith. If by virtue of the 1929 Lateran Treaties, Fascist Italy recognized Catholicism to be the dominant faith in the country, Mussolini's regime had until then recognized the right to worship of other religious minorities, including Jews and Waldensians. The total chance that Loy sees in her being deposited by an angel at her parents' door rather than in front of the Della Setas, reveals the lack of a foundation that justifies racism, all the more so when individuals are devoid of clear of physical distinction. The Jewish playmate suddenly becomes the Other, faceless, devoid of physiognomy, unwanted, disposable (Lévinas, *Totality* 184).

By reading the story of Lia Levi's child-protagonist we learn of one possible felicitous outcome if an angel had indeed mistakenly left the bundle with Loy's Catholic child on a different family's doorway. If we look at the human atlas forming that eternally fleeting urban agglomeration called Rome, a situation specular to yet reversed from Loy's narratives emerges from Lia Levi's: upon reaching adulthood, some of those indiscriminate girls remembered by Loy in *La parola ebreo* process the memories of a childhood tainted by racism. Among all the girls of Rome, Levi remains more faithful to the many traditional motifs found in Shoah fiction. In an interesting path oscillating between the autobiographical and fictional, her *Una bambina e basta* leans decidedly toward the former. We are offered an unforgettable fresco of those months of fear: the peregrination to which she was subjected along with her family, her father's job loss, and most of all, the memory of her aunt sacrificed to the Nazi totalitarian machine. The reality of what happened to everyday Romans during the Nazi occupation appears conjugated in the feminine in a fictional text

that contains strongly autobiographical material and depicts a way of life in which it is not difficult to identify oneself. Lia, the little girl described in the novel, emblematizes the body of all those girls mentioned by Loy. She is a child whose real name—Levi —is far too obvious not to be changed, not one of those Jewish Italian surnames that many do not even recognize as Jewish. For her own salvation in the convent, Levi's name is replaced with a Catholic name: Maria Cristina Cataldi (BB 75).

Arriving from Turin after a short stay in Milan, the Levis live in Monteverde, a Roman neighborhood where, like the neighborhood of Prati, many Jews moved after the opening of the ghetto in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Levi girls play at Villa Sciarra in Monteverde. They participate in school plays and lead a relatively peaceful life. At Villa Sciarra, October 1943 comes and coronation ceremony for the statues of the months sees far fewer children than usual: the ghetto children, who would usually come up to Monteverde to play, are now missing. They cannot be there to crown "la polputa statua di ottobre" (47; "the fleshy statue of October"). Even in the eyes of other children, usually so easily distracted, the absence of their little friends from the Portico d'Ottavia is conspicuous. This absence appears in all its gravity in the memory of a tradition that, without their friends, no longer holds any function for the children. Lia's little girlfriend Jolanda is no longer there.

> Qualcuno ci ha gettati via, ci ha dispersi con un gesto largo come di seminatore. E quando, dopo tanto tempo, siamo ritornate e la tempesta era finita, Jolanda non è più venuta. Dal Portico era sparita verso pianure lontane con tutta la sua famiglia, abbandonando forse da qualche parte il suo fiocco di farfalla. (47)
>
> Someone has thrown us away, dispersed with a sweeping gesture like that of a seed sower. And when, after a long time, we went back and the storm was over, Jolanda did not come anymore. She disappeared from the Portico going off with her entire family towards distant plains, perhaps leaving behind somewhere her butterfly bow.

In a simile of reversed meaning, if the seed is always a symbol of fertility, those children disappeared from the coronation of the statue representing the month of October are compared to the seeds sown by the sower. These seeds, unfortunately, are not destined to germinate, as the children like Jolanda are taken away from the shaded peace of Villa Sciarra and thrown in the train of the convoy that, on October 18, departed from Tiburtina Station. The game for the child who has remained resides in being able to survive such absences. To do so, the child must be like all the others, not the *Other*. Once she has found refuge in a convent, little Lia wants to be a child who receives communion, who reads the same prayers that all other children read, who does not have to fear any torment in

addition to the one that war brings to all. If the arrangement between her mother with the nuns was to not impose the church with all its rites upon her daughters, the child remembers that there "tutto è chiesa" (80; "everything is church"). Catholic prayers overlap their *Shema*, while the nuns, regardless of the orders of the Mother Superior, impose their little flowers (sacrifices) upon the little Jewish girls who cannot successfully carry them out. These sisters who see the conversion of these Jewish girls as the ultimate goal of their mission and practice a forced proselytism (certainly not uncommon in Italy and France), remain unaware of the profound grief that arises from such verbal abuse. To the child, in that convent, the name of Maria Cristina Cataldi amounts to a lifelong sentence and she must suffer it well, lest her own life be in danger: "Il più difficile è riuscire a girarsi subito quando qualcuno ti chiama all'improvviso da lontano con il tuo nome finto. Diventiamo bravissime, si sa, nel gioco siamo allenate a vincere" (75–76; "The most difficult thing is to immediately turn around when suddenly someone calls you from a distance with your made-up name. We become very good at it, you know, we are trained to win the game").

She was just a little girl, but a little girl who was part of that group defined by the pronoun *them*: those who were different, or so it was decreed by the Christian religious memory and equally demarcated by the racial laws. Racially based dictates came from both the church and state: the two greatest powers. In a society plagued by anti-Semitism, when diversity faces the existence of children it becomes a burden, for homologation is the common denominator of childhood. These simple and fanatic nuns do nothing but further confuse the small girl, whose sensitive nature (she claims "mi sto sbriciolando" 85; "I am crumbling") is made even more so by the historical contingency that forces her to be Maria Cristina Cataldi. Little Lia is flattered by the new religion that she, in spite of her mother's efforts, is beginning to learn. She likes the mystery of those mystical sacrifices the two nuns request her to perform. The reward for her sacrifices, that "frutto zuccherino di quella religione che era lì pronta ad avvolger[la] come un compiacente caldo mantello" (81; "sweet fruit of that religion which was there ready to envelop for her as a complacent warm cloak") amounts to a very important gift: possible acceptance by the Christian girls. The glimmer of a reachable conformity with the other girls makes Lia feel that even her conversion can be possible. She avidly begins to read hagiographies as assigned to her by the nuns. She is shocked by the truths in St. Augustine's *Confessions* (86). In her timid attempt to rationalize her situation in the convent, she wonders, "'Che colpa posso avere io se ebrea ci sono nata?' buttavo lì debolmente di fronte a qualche suora che si disperava per noi… Andare al limbo? Solo perché uno è nato in un modo invece che in un altro, senza poterci fare

niente…Mi smarrivo nei miei ragionamenti" (83–84; "'What fault is it of mine if I am born a Jew?' Weakly I would utter there in front of some nun who was in despair for us…Go to limbo? Just because one is born in one way rather than another, without being able to do anything…I would lose myself in my reasoning").

The confusion about an identity of which one has been made guilty, even by those who are supposed to protect us from a terrible fate, causes the child to create an image of herself as a Christian girl: she is innocent and she doesn't deserve to go to limbo. She is led to believe that the best way is to be like that little girl, described in *La parola ebreo,* who lives in Via Flaminio at number 21. The exaltation and despair of a sense of otherness (of which she has not become fully aware, but *feels* as a result of the gaze of others') are such that the Jewish child imagines that she is touched by the grace of vocation. She speaks with a nun, imagines herself to be "circondata da schiere di angeli che planano al suono di campanellini celesti, con in mezzo la [sua] protettrice e guida che è lì per accoglier[la] piangendo fra le sue braccia" (87; "surrounded by a host of angels gliding to the sound of the bells of Heaven, in the middle of which is [her] protector and guide who is there to receive [her] crying in her arms"). In the novel, this passage corresponds to her deliverance from any attempt to reach conformity with the rest of the girls and puts an end to Lia's fleeting dreams of conversion. Her mother discovers the weak side of her offspring—the understandable wish of a young girl to be neither more nor less than the others that surround her, and reacts promptly and decisively to the subtle lure of the nuns and their talks of conversion. For her part, Lia will in the present of her writing keep alive the memory of her mother's transformation in those terrible moments into a tigress ready to defend as much her child's identity as the religion of their ancestors. If the mother had hitherto resembled the stereotype of the quiet middle-class lady, the wife of a Turinese doctor, in her daughter's narrative, she now assumes the role of an *Ur*-Jewish mother, indomitable holder of Jewish traditions, ready to defend her child in her right to exercise faith, the one true God that Christians have been trying to usurp for thousands of years (90–91).

To use a Morante expression, in such illogical algebra, made up by the summation of fears of abuse defining racial discrimination and persecution, the child momentarily loses sight of the values with which she grew up. If it is true, as Aristotle argues, that imitation in children is the spring that makes them become adults, the mimetic desire that fundamentally guides and monitors our actions from birth takes her over. It is a desire that has, if only momentarily, led to her perceiving the serenity of being like any other "Maria Cristina Cataldi" as possible and attainable. While the child's desire to convert is forgivable, as it represents a dream

of approval, the action exerted by the nuns certainly is not. Offended by the nuns' exploitation of her children in that moment of extreme vulnerability, Lia's mother reacts, forgetting that she is jeopardizing the very existence of the beloved daughters. Judaism is inherited through the maternal line; it is no coincidence, then, that the defense of that religion and identity triggers such a powerful reaction in the mother. They have to protect their children: that is why Jewish mothers have no room in their lives for books or synagogues. In contrast, Lia's memory of her father is that of a man for whom the fate of the culture was his fate as well—his life no longer has any meaning; all events have shown the apparent vanity of reason. To the girls, including the little Lia, strength cannot, therefore, come from him as he is

> l'eterno uomo ebreo che si ferma smarrito quando quello che da tanto si portava dietro, quello che la sua mente aveva disegnato in ogni più minuta piega, è lì, improvvisamente reale di fronte a lui. Non è capace di vivere la vita, ha già faticato tanto a conoscerla. Il suo cuore ha una stanchezza antica, ogni suo gesto ha il peso di mille anni, non sa battersi per sopravvivere perché quando suo padre, suo nonno, il suo bisnonno hanno lottato, hanno via via consumato anche le sue forze. (52)
>
> the eternal Jew who halts at a loss when what he brought with him for so long, when what his mind had drawn in every smallest crease is there, suddenly real in front of him. He is not able to live life, has already worked so hard to know. His heart carries an ancient fatigue, his every gesture has the weight of a thousand years, he does not know how to fight to survive because when his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather fought, have gradually consumed his strength.

The child blames her father for not talking to her about the traditions that she knew and loved, and that would have helped her understand lofty concepts, if only he would have divested them of abstractions that would render the little girl's understanding (and application) challenging. She wonders about her father's fundamentally pointless (if beautiful) abstract thinking, "Papà, cosa fai? Da dove è sbucato fuori questo 'teismo'? Perché non mi parli della 'religione dei padri' e non mi dici che 'potrò scegliere da grande'?" (91; "Dad, what are you doing? Where did this 'theism' come out? Why don't you talk to me about the 'religion of the fathers,' and don't say to me that 'I can choose when I am older'?"). It would have been, perhaps, enough to talk to Lia of the faith of the fathers, remind her of the value of the Seder, a value that defines her identity just like her hair:

> Sì, per me l'essere ebrea, meno quella volta che avevo avuto voglia del paradiso dei cristiani, è come avere questa faccia, questo vestito o questo

> colore di capelli. È una cosa che mi è capitata così. Ma il Seder di Pasqua no, il Seder è la nostra personale stella cometa. Mio nonno era un patriarca e ad ogni Pesach aveva attorno al suo tavolo grandissimo più di cinquanta persone, almeno così mi ha raccontato la mamma. Da noi, dopo, siamo stati molti di meno, sempre un po' pochini, ma azzime, «caroseth» ed erba amara li aspettavamo tutto l'anno. (102–03)
>
> Yes, for me, being a Jew, minus the time I felt like entering the paradise of the Christians, it's like having this face, this dress or this hair color. It's something that just happened to me. But not so the Passover Seder, for the Seder is our personal comet. My grandfather was a patriarch and every Pesach had more than fifty people around his huge table, so I was told by my mother. At our house, afterwards, we were far fewer, always just a few, but we would, nevertheless, await our unleavened bread, charoset and bitter herb the entire year.

Only after the unexpected maternal scene, only after trying to conquer "the paradise of the Christians," to become really just a little girl in the eyes of other girls and nuns, the protagonist understands how this alleged vocation cannot transform what makes her "una bambina e basta" (105; "a little girl and nothing else"). Although her mother suggests that she delete the adjective "Jewish" that qualifies her in the letter she sends to the national radio (and that her mother shreds in a thousand pieces), only now does she realize, that she cannot simply be "just a girl."

This girl unfortunately pays for this realization, the consequence of a story that imposes differences because of the adjective Jew. From that moment on, the mother will treat her as "se fosse più adulta" (98; "as if she was more adult"), making her a part of some of the events that were leading to the liberation of the country, telling her of the American landing at Anzio, of Celeste Di Porto's arrest. Talking to Lia as if she were an adult is a decision that the mother makes because she is, confusedly, convinced that the child has committed an act of initiation into adulthood. The child has understood that the way to remain what she is from birth is to perform an act of respect, toward her family but above all to herself. Going back to normal life after the rupture of the Shoah, the child sees the closing parenthesis in that phrase of her mother, who repeats that she is a just a girl and that's it. But the *bambina* knows she is not just a girl. Lia wrote a letter to the radio identifying herself as a "Jewish child" and she knows that this is something that will be true forever.

Guilty by Proxy: Giacoma Limentani's *In contumacia*

The importance of the family, already the most important theme in the novelistic genre, is multiplied in intensity in the novels of Giacoma

Limentani. The tone of intimacy of her prose echoes what Luca De Angelis states on how, "[L]iterary Judaism can only be determined from historical-private reminiscences, reactivating atavistic behaviors. In this way the Jew, always man of the ghetto, in every place he goes will continue to carry internalized its cramped spaces, all that warm and cozy intimacy of which the ghetto is the kingdom, even long after the removal of the gates" ("Qualcosa" 164–65). And for Carlo Tenuta:

> What we witness investigating Jewish literary writing is the continuous and incessant osmosis of all those profound realities that, in a sort of translation of the experience into intimacy and intellectual and cultural traits, typically internalized by the Jews and applied to narrative and, more generally, to the communicative matter, re-emerge in the literary act and ask in it their voice, often finding it at its fullest, and finally become style and figure of reminiscent writing [. . .] the result of centuries-old Jewish presence in a story of exile and dispersion and minority issues in a memory that ends up by constituting the biographical narration as with the building of fiction. (89)

What De Angelis and Tenuta define as the intimacy of the Jewish literary artifact is composed of the many stories of collective exile and racism that are imbued with personal memories, stories of empathy and close connection. It is an intimacy made of the life inside, and of the ghetto, of the family and the tribe to which one belongs: this is the fabric of Giacoma Limentani's autobiographical trilogy: *In contumacia* (*In Absentia* 1967), *Dentro la D* (*Inside the D* 1992), and *La spirale della tigre* (*The Tigress' Spiral* 2003). The three novels create an important legacy for the Roman Jewish world, one which depicts the freedom to leave the ghetto and live freely in any district of Rome from 1870 onward—that is, until the racial laws and deportations of 1943 and 1944 destroyed the Roman Jews' desire for freedom and trust for neighbors. The Roman Jews, with their world within a world (whose physical proximity to the headquarters of the Apostolic Roman Church had heightened the burden of prejudice borne by these people for thousands of years) had an added peculiarity compared to their Turinese or Ferrara compatriot: the peculiarity of being Roman and then later of being Italian Jews. The core element of their identity is to be Roman, but yet *giudii* using the word Jew in the most commonly Roman fashion. Paraphrasing the title of Alessandro Piperno's 2005 novel, Limentani shows her Rome with all her best intentions.

Limentani's Midrash practice reveals the narrative tension in showing her magical and yet difficult world, where the eternal values of the rabbinic teachings of her grandfather marry with her courageous father's ideals of freedom and justice. Such love for the Midrash happily echoes

across her use of several different genres of writing. The sense of intimacy that is so evident in all her writings, although cleverly superimposed on brilliant readings of the Bible, appears worded unequivocally by a female voice that belongs to a cultured Italian woman. Suspended between the immanent and the transcendent, this voice sketches aspects of Rome's Jewish society that are not easily translated into fictional writing, particularly due to a lack of an endogenous tradition, as Rome is not the city of cultured Jews.

A prismatic and muted perspective shapes Limentani's project. She describes events that happened to her community on the Italian side of the border. Notwithstanding their physical distance from the reality of the camps, the women of her family have, like her, experienced firsthand the violence and trauma of the war and the Shoah. Limentani's fictional alter ego makes manifest how the Shoah has "raped anyone who is made beautiful or proud to be a social conscience and not contaminated by the indifference of selfishness" ("Tempi" 14). For the author, being a Jew and being able to write about her Jewishness means a continuous, but serene search for her roots. As Mirna Cicioni argues in "Redefining Subjects," Limentani appears determined to recover the past in spite of, or because of, the apparent contradictions in a hybrid culture like the Italian Jewish one. Roots denied and often truncated reemerge in the meaningful map she draws in her texts, both in her more imaginative writings as well as in her Midrash essays.

But it is thanks to her autobiographical trilogy that one can fully grasp how, indeed, the memory works to construct both a biographical narration and a fictional account of women's resistance to persecution in their own homes, in their own town. The images spatially linked to the places of Roman Judaism serving as the backdrop of *Dentro la D* consist of the ghetto that extends from the fountain of the turtles in Piazzetta Mattei to Palazzo Cenci, of those familiar paths between the Portico d'Ottavia and the Temple, from the Via Catalana, where one can almost hear the footsteps of the protagonist's mother (who was never fully accepted because she was from Provence) walking with her head high in the ghetto "verso via del Tempio come se fosse stata l'unico essere umano degno di calpestare la terra" (DD 23; "to the Temple Street as if she were the only human being worthy of treading the earth"). Ignoring whether "era ancora il caso di chiamare patria un paese che cominciava col cacciarle dalle sue scuole e si era alleato con chi da tempo stava facendo ben di peggio" (25; "its was still the case of calling motherland a country that was beginning to throw them out of its schools and was allied with who was doing for a long time even worse") the little girl keeps her head high like her mother throughout the years of persecution.

Our attention turns to the use of time and how the narrator of *In contumacia* collapses the time of the survivors' return from Auschwitz—framed by the passage of the gathering of the Jewish community in the Temple—with what the war had brought (to her personally) and taken away (from her community):

> Nell'atrio del tempio tutti sono presenti. I presenti e gli assenti. Gli assenti sono i più presenti. Impongono il silenzio. La gente si ritrova. Si abbraccia. Si saluta. Domande mute. Chi c'è ancora? Chi non c'è più? Si ammicca verso abiti neri. C'è chi è rimasto solo. Chi si stringe intorno una famiglia intera. Chi si stringe intorno un *talèth* vuoto. Chi sotto il *talèth* nasconde ciò che non si vedrà più di una famiglia intera. Nessuno parla. È strano questo silenzio in gente avvezza alle grida. È la cognizione del lutto. L'unica possibile comunicazione del dolore. (Limentani, IC 150)
>
> Everybody is there in the temple hall. The present as well as the absent. The absent are the most present. They impose silence. People gather. They embrace each other. They greet each other. Silent questions. Who is left? Who is gone? People nod toward black clothes. Some people are left alone. Some hold on to a whole family. Some gather around an empty *talèth*. Under the *talèth* some hide something of a family that is no longer together. No one speaks. This silence is so strange for people accustomed to screaming. It is the knowledge of mourning. The only possible communication of grief.

This passage, taking place in the Great Synagogue in the ghetto of Rome and placed in the final pages of *In contumacia*, is one of the most representative images of the Shoah in Italy. The silence—a suffered but necessary silence as if things of which one does not speak cannot materialize—builds the entire epistemological field of *In contumacia*. In many ways, this scene marks the apex of such silence. It also forms a noble counterpoint to the better known scene in Giorgio Bassani's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*Opere* 344; *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* 24). In this passage, Bruno remembers looking at Micol as she and her brother are being blessed by Prof. Finzi-Contini's *talèth* during Passover and Kippur in the Via Mazzini's temple in Ferrara. Bruno's glance is born of feelings of both jealousy and tenderness while signaling the condition of a world to come, overflowing with nostalgia for a time now gone forever. However, in the Bassani passage, the *talèth* is remembered as being placed over the head of the boys before Micol Finzi-Contini and her family were swept away from Ferrara the horror of the Shoah. As the symbolic demonstration of paternal love, in Limentani's novel, the *talèth* remains largely an empty act: the horror has already seen its course. The temple is a physical space for everyone to see what the Shoah has done to their community: those

present record the absences of those who were well known, but are now deceased. The seeds spread in the wind of Lia Levi's sower have already upset the order of the generations of the Roman ghetto:

> Tiles, all of a reality now perceived as ungrammatical, broken, fragmented even by the end of the traditional Jewish stronghold, the ghetto, in an ancestral universe in which the temple is the result of a long history: the silent task of the Jewish writer is to restore order [. . .]. (Tenuta 115)

But what order can the pen of a writer restore to these scattered seeds if the horrible designs of history have haphazardly thrown them about via the chimneys of the ovens? In *Dentro la D*, the narrating protagonist speaks of the Roman tribe. She attempts to reconstruct family trees, tries to draw maps for all those who are gone. Recalling the ghetto's endogenous eccentrics that everyone still recalled with affection, Limentani rearranges these figures, giving them an order that had been lost to the clamor of war. In an affirmation of the female gift of caregiving, she builds houses of paper and ink. She fills in those gaps left blank with her memory. She who was thrown away with that "sweeping gesture of the sower" regains dignity thanks to her words. The polyphony of the ghetto can be understood in many ways, but Limentani's narrator, never overshadowing the rest of the chorus, respects all those who are absent from the Temple: the simpletons who have disappeared along with the intelligent, for

> Tutti costoro fanno parte della nostra tribù. Se non sottopongo anche ad essi il mio questionario, è perché per la loro natura sono sempre stati ininfluenti. Ciò non toglie che siano stati anche sempre presenti, che siano sempre esistiti come esemplari poveri di spirito all'interno della vantata intelligenza ebraica, e che tutti abbiamo molto pianto quando alcuni di essi sono svaniti come nuvole di fumo. [. . .] È invece quel fumo rimasto negli occhi e nei polmoni anche di chi come me ad Auschwitz non c'è stato, a fare di noi sopravvissuti ai suoi giorni, degli insonni o dei catalettici, degli anoressici o degli insaziabili, senza vie di mezzo perché davanti ai nostri occhi è stato cancellato il sentiero mediano fra Caino e Abele. (DD 69–70)
>
> All these are part of our tribe. If I do not submit my questionnaire also to them, it is because they have always been irrelevant by their own nature. This does not mean that they were also always present, that they have always existed as simpletons within the vaunted Jewish intelligence, and we all cried when some of them vanished like clouds of smoke. [. . .] Instead, the smoke that remained in the eyes and in the lungs also of people like me who was not there in Auschwitz, to make us survivors in to its days, to turn us into restless or cataleptic beings, into anorexic or insatiable beings, with

> no way in between because before our eyes the middle path between Cain and Abel has been deleted.

The absence of those who were submerged in the universe of the concentration camp becomes the matter of that thunderous silence felt by one who remembers them well in that temple anchored to the ghetto, in "the house that calls you when you are away, protects you when you return, and uncovers, shows its walls so that you refrain from crossing them" (Tenuta 125). Inside the ghetto, in the temple, the silence speaks of their pain, for silence signals the "cognizione del lutto" (IC 150; "awareness of mourning"). To Limentani, silence amounts always and again, to "l'unica possibile comunicazione del dolore" (150; "the only possible communication of pain").

> Io inseguo la vita che mi sfugge. Il mio silenzio è una cancrena. Il rumore sibila. Delimita la mia solitudine. La mia solitudine è chiusa in un confine angusto e senza dimensioni. Il *Baal Schem* tace. Il padrone del Nome è stato ucciso. Il Saggio dei Saggi è morto. L'*alef* è un miraggio. I vivi condannano i morti in contumacia. (156)
>
> I chase the life that eludes me. My silence is a [symptom of] gangrene. The hissing noise. It narrows my loneliness. My loneliness is closed in a narrow border and has no dimension. The *Baal Shem* is silent. The owner of the Name has been killed. The Sage of Sages is dead. The *alef* is a mirage. The living ones condemn the dead in absentia.

The return to the Temple, to be again protected under Rabbi Panzieri's *talèth*, signifies a return to civilian life for Mina, the protagonist, after the trauma of the Shoah. The ghetto becomes a metaphor for her own body, for "[i]n times of contempt and hate each person considered different finds the ghetto of himself in his own body: a place of one's innermost identity, where anyone can release lust, envy and delusions of power. I know that. I tried at twelve" (Limentani, "Donna fra donne" 93). The writing of this moment of union between the absent and present preserves, in Lyotard's words, what "must remain unrepresentable" (26). The writing of the absence of those who are no longer there to live is braided along with the writing of the events Mina personally experienced during her childhood. Accompanied by a haunting silence emblematic of that in the space of the ghetto, all figures appear isolated, disconnected from one other: there is no possible communication between them, for grammar needs to be recomposed after Auschwitz. Fragments of life are disconnected as the characters try to bear the weight of unbearable pain.

In the *Bildungsroman*, the return to childhood is a privileged time chiefly because it is the only one that can be analyzed—from a clear temporal distance—at the desk. Such temporal lapse allows for the freedom to recreate one's own life narrative, to delete from the fictional the real details we do not want as part of our contemporary world. Finally, the return to childhood is a time in which the ludic regard for language and the pleasure of the narrating game relieves us from actual grief. Returning to childhood does not mean regression, but rather the application of a mature visage and close attention to those episodes long-term memory does not allow us to erase. The challenge is to eliminate that annoying and intangible dust—that *pulviscolo*—that occludes those facts that often give rise to existential *Angst*. That dust, Mina complains, "confonde qualsiasi immagine" (IC 10; "blurs any image") where the "realtà si sconvolge sovrapponendo strati e strati sconnessi" (10; "reality is upset by overlapping and uneven layers upon layers").

Among its many meanings, the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, D for *dàlet*, means "four." Four is the number of the Roman Fascists who violate the 12-year-old girl Mina who naively opens up the door in her parents' absence, "—Se non ci dici dov'è lo condanniamo in contumacia.—Che cosa vuol dire in contumacia?" (9; "—If you do not tell us where, we condemn him in absentia.—What does in absentia mean?"). The child asks this question to herself incessantly, while the only witness present in the house at the time of her rape, her grandmother, is old and sick, suffering from cataracts that leave her nearly blind. Ironically, the only one present at the defilement of a 12-year-old girl is a woman who sees nothing, as if her grandmother's cataracts were obscuring the child's world. But the meaning of the word *contumacia* also suddenly sets a "polvere" that "confonde qualsiasi immagine. La realtà è presente in un confuso scambiarsi di valori" (10; "dust" that "confuses any image. Reality is presented in a confused exchange of values"). Violence appears, unpronounceable and unuttered. One phrase, spoken by one of the four thugs, denounces it, "Ci hai guadagnato tanto a non parlare. Così impari" (10; "You've gained so much by not talking. That'll teach you"). Mina remains proud—still today—for not revealing where her father was hidden. The memory of not having betrayed her father is stronger than the pain the memory of her own rape brings to her. And this is what counts for her, aware that, in war, they seek only men, not women, or so she thought. Mina knows one of her rapists, a regular at her house because he periodically gave castor oil to her dad (11). It is unthinkable for Mina's grandmother that her granddaughter could speak of her rape. "Ce la farai a non dirlo a nessuno?—chiede la

nonna.—Come ti senti?" (11; "Can you manage to not tell anyone?—her grandmother asks.—How do you feel?"). Nightmares overlap with memories. In the present of recollection, adult Mina's marriage bed is filled with oil. The *Baal Shem*, that worker of miracles, Master of the Name, the only one who could bring about some healing for Mina, has been killed on that day full of dust, vomit, and urine. The grandmother urges the little girl to clean herself, for the ritual of everyday life must go on, her mother and sister are on their way home, Mina must pretend. Pretend what? We do not know. Her grandmother warns that no one should know. The violence and physical pain experienced by Mina construct a negative flower whose four petals represent the Fascists who "vogliono sapere dov'è papà. Mi tengono per terra. Loro fanno il dolore. Loro sono morti. Il dolore è vivo" (13; "want to know where Dad is. They keep me on the ground. They make pain. They are dead. The pain is alive"). Mina does not want the pain. "Una cosa non esiste se nessuno la sa" (14; "A thing does not exist if nobody knows it").

References to Mina's menstrual cycle are accompanied by the precise evocation of her father, his anti-Fascism, as well as her own daughterly devotion to him. The rape that made her an adult intrinsically connects them. Mina cannot tell anyone what has happened to her as a result of defending him. "Mio padre non deve sapere che mi hanno messo un nastro di sangue. Potrebbe fare una pazzia. La mamma farebbe una tragedia. Lo direbbe a tutti" (20; "My father does not know that they have put a stream of blood inside me. He could do something crazy. My mother would make a tragedy. She would tell everyone"). Bodily fluids that might instill a sort of atavistic pride about being a woman—procreator, fertile element of the world—instead become mournful liquids, a dirty stickiness to be ashamed of. Yet, Limentani grants a position of incredible strength to her female subject. She moves away from the rhetorical depiction of the violated woman as a historically passive accomplice (historically aware of their role in an act of violence; the victim) to an act traditionally accepted and transmitted as a male. Mina's strenuous defense of the name of her father—in his *contumacia*—is an equivalent act of force against what the four Fascists have imposed. Violence against women, a long history, "[è] tutta una cosa col centro nel centro. Tante parti di un'unica violenza" (13; "[i]t's a whole thing with the center in the center. Many parts of a single violence").

In Limentani's *In contumacia*, the father's forced absence from home causes the violence that Mina suffers. His nonpresence also becomes the most powerful motivator for her autobiographical trilogy. The horrible normality of the fathers of families, "good Italians," that were capable

of acts of violence against a 12-year-old girl, is opposed by Mina's act of strength in defending her own father. Fathers who Mina will see again on the street after the fall of the regime are a constant reminder of the banality of evil. The Jewish idea handed down from the *Book of Esther* is connected to Mina's father's handling milk by which he saved a little girl. In the *Book,* this miracle shows how also men can look after the most vulnerable beings such as children. While vile Fascists violated his daughter, Mina's father did not hesitate to find the milk to nurse little Anja. Mina's father is a father worthy of his own *mitzvot*, as is the protagonist of the *Book of Esther*, who, "secondo il *Midrash* si fa venire il latte per pietà e amore" (DD 53; "according to the Midrash makes milk come out of his body out of pity and love"). The will of love fills the pages of *Dentro la D*, a book that, in the writer's reached wisdom, becomes a counterpoint to *In contumacia*.

Simone Weil writes that it's hard to think evil because evil is not thought, but rather the absence of it. What leads us to the second condition necessary for the implementation of evil is the lack of attention, the antithesis of what Weil recommends: "actions should cause only *indirectly* the satisfaction of needs, but its intermediaries should remain few in number so as to make evident this relationship of cause and effect, even if indirectly. [. . .] Purpose: to find "the conditions of existence IN WHICH WE CAN PERCEIVE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE" (*Cahiers* Vol.1, 128; capital letters original). If this remains unfulfilled, imagination does not realize anything. "The irreparable character of actions insignificant" becomes in fact a deadly act (261). Weil tells us that, when we are deprived of vivid empathy and emptied out of the conditions for which we can perceive as much as possible, attention is lacking. Its corollary is a lack of interpersonal consideration. This suggests that, when the conditions for attention to understand reality, as exposed by Weil, are impossible, imagination alone cannot realize anything. Without direct perception, the philosopher says, nothing can hold its meaning. Later, in fact, Weil specifies how "the irreparable nature of insignificant actions" (261) becomes deadly because a lack of attention leads to the perceptive indifference to the pain of others. This lack of attention corresponds to what Hannah Arendt defines as the absence of thought. The Weilian *dérealiser le monde*, then, becomes the negative diktat for all those who, like the four men who shatter Mina's innocence, erode the possibility of human good. The four men have followed, without reason, the ideology of discrimination, the ideology of terror.

It is this way, that this chapter's third Roman girl becomes an adult. Hers is a draining coming of age, as her eternal trauma permeates

throughout the writer's experience of being in the world. How can we, however, speak of Mina's experience in terms of the *Bildungsroman* if, as Franco Moretti states, such subgenre has disappeared with the advent of World War I? Moreover, if the hero is always, almost by definition, a young man of means, how can the experience that gives rise to the fictional matter in the *Bildungsroman* mesh effectively with the experience of the female body? Thanks to the merits of feminist critical thinking, beginning with the studies of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Laura Bono and Paola Fortini advance the idea of conceiving the *Bildungsroman* in the feminine mode, as writing related to the body of the writers as sexed and gendered female individuals. Bono and Fortini begin by questioning the possibility of inserting women's writing into the vein designed by the *Bildungsroman*, asking "if the novel of formation aims to build the ego, what is this determined in that I 'that I'm a woman?' [. . .] how we can speak of a possible world in which happiness represented by women coincides with their being in the world starting from itself?" ("Introduzione" 10).

Only after we have afforded a "freedom from cultural and literary norms" to women's writings can we finally analyze the existence of a model of identity construction that is predicated on fixed rules of play and the role between the individual and society that becomes fluid and floating in "stories of becoming," or better, as claimed by Bono and Fortini, in stories about the future of a woman (11). These stories are characterized by a constantly repeated incipit, an assessment of themselves in the years to come, years in which writing finds its reason as a moment of personal enlightenment as well as an ordering element in the writer's existence.

Yet, the need to appeal to tradition to define our experiences, so often dictated by men, becomes overbearing in Limentani's autobiographical trilogy of heartfelt father-daughter love written in defense of the paternal values, the values for which she had to suffer a type of violence linked to the dynamics of the war between men and whose consequences children must live with. But Mina's *Bildungsroman* poses other questions. Is there a denouement? Is there really an epilogue to which the formation of a woman can be considered truly finished, finally accomplished? Does it tell the protagonist what follows from this novel of initiation, in this history of female experience, primarily related to the male components of society such as war? Looking at Limentani's three novels, it appears that the texts are informed by very few of the attributes theorized by Fortini and Bono. The ink with which Limentani writes is not white like milk, nor can it be. It remains red, the color of blood, of the pure and the impure

mentioned by the writer with precognizant consciousness of postfeminism theoretical tenets. The body remains at the heart of pain, and from this pain arises Mina's meditation. Her pain is inextricably linked with that of her people, those present in the temple in that day in 1945 as well as those who were physically absent.

Limentani's novels show that in extreme situations, such as war and the Holocaust, the "becoming" of a woman may be determined by a series of valiant acts. The novel of becoming can then take into account the weight of the ethical and moral choice-to-write; only the surface is veiled by a certain authorial narcissism. But the core of such novels is characterized by the moral necessity to take charge of the Other, a necessity for an almost Aristotelian "good life" in the polis. Contrary to Todorov's claim of a lack of ethics in contemporary Western society, a sense of ethics remains steadfast in Limentani's novels, which fortunately still defines one of the essential dimensions of the intersubjective world (ethics). Limentani's is a morality that makes us capable of heroic deeds in total silence, and for which indeed the vow of silence in defense of the father becomes the most heroic deed, the most important *mitzvah* of the protagonist's life. Mina's intense desire to participate in the life of a community and the history of that community resides within a story that is made of two overlapping narratives: the individual marked by an identity linked to racial difference, tied to a gender identity but also to the collective identity of her people.[8] In Limentani's case, the capacity for mental and physical survival and the maintenance of personal dignity do not unfold within the universe of the camps. It takes place in Rome.

Faced with the need to write about how the destinies of most people are the same and are intertwined with the context determinant of a historic crisis, each of the Roman girls (Loy, Limentani, and Levi) chose different approaches to their discussions of how to maintain a relationship with the their actual (or pro) Jewishness, as well as with the Italian nation. Their subjective gaze at the situation calls to mind Saul Meghnagi's words on Jews in society: "The Jews, in fact, do not exist as typological individuals. They are and live in history. Within society" ("Introduzione" xxxv). Jews live within the history of Italy and every Italian. Those hard years resonate in the writing of Loy, Levi, and Limentani, women offended both as individuals and as women. The visage of these three novelists points to those moments in their childhoods when they unknowingly lived through or observed Jewish Italians suffering in the tragic despair of diasporas, hiding, the camp, loss, and death. Their writings reveal their lived reality—different, but within the perimeters of the Italian capital—and give testimony to the Shoah. Their representations complement

survivor testimonials and memoirs in tracing Shoah representation in Italian literature. The literary prism developed around this event shows another aspect of the Shoah: the experience of racism and the war in Italy, as perceived by young girls whose voice into adulthood acquires awareness and legitimization by virtue of their craft.

Part II

"The World Must Be the Writer's Concern": La Storia According to Elsa Morante

5

Le Lacrime: Morante and Her Critics

Morante's famous statement that the writer is "*an individual whose concern must be everything that happens, except for literature*" ("Pro o contro" 97; emphasis original) reflects her intention in the composition of her 1974 anti-illusionist historical novel *La Storia: Romanzo* (*History: A Novel*). A canonical retelling of the horrors of the twentieth century—an epoch that Bernard Brunetau dubbed as "the century of genocides"—*La Storia* embodies the ideal literary work whose programmatic content molds its form without overshadowing it. In its novelistic format, *La Storia* organizes the topic of social exclusion by means of power: the ideas, themes, and linguistic images of the novel become an emblematic container for the private story of the powerless characters to whom Elsa Morante lends her voice. *La Storia* illustrates the artist's unease with a lasting history that tantalizes the subaltern and justifies the use of war as instrument for prevarication (i.e., the concept of *just war*). It also creates a precedent in its undertaking of a task that, until then, had until not been frequently engaged in by Italian writers: making Hitler and Nazism integral parts of the novel (Prosperi, in Garboli 237–39). In its awareness of commenting upon a century that is the site of a "passaggio drammatico" ("Sul romanzo" 64; "dramatic passage") *La Storia* sets a precedent in Italian literature that is still today difficult to parallel.

The pluralism of contemporary theory and criticism affords our thesis a window into understanding the significance of Morante's work, specifically her infrequently noted intention to testify and to give voice to the victims of the Shoah. In what follows, I examine how the author constructs this thematic path in a novel that Ferdinando Camon defined as the "Kolossal Morante" (187) and examine why the composition of this novel exacts an "instantly explosive necessity."[1] I lay out evidence that an overarching ethical and moral imperative toward the untold victims of

the Shoah served as Morante's driving inspiration. This epic novel wants to "parlare a tutti" (back flap *La Storia* 1974; "to speak to everybody"). It lends a voice to the subaltern and assesses the mechanisms of oppressive politics in totalitarian regimes that, in turn, lead to astounding examples of antihumanistic aberration. The fictional mode allows Morante to elucidate how there can be nothing less political than a tyrant insofar as his eventual domination marks the dissolution of action, which is antithetical to the political sphere. Totalitarianism and its byproducts (in the terms discussed by Arendt) represent the closest form to Morante's own concept of *male assoluto* (absolute evil). In the novel, Useppe, Ida's second child, the illiterate happy young boy, the consequence of a war rape, will not survive. Morante's *pietas* toward her characters reveals a gendered empathy that criticizes any theoretical neutrality with respect to individual values of history in which *ab-usare*—using people and taking advantage of them—remains the norm. Morante's own voice emerges powerful and crystalline in her effort to make sense of the paradoxical coexistence of atrocity and beauty that comprise the world as we know it.

Morante's purely ideological necessity to address the destiny of the disenfranchised was not the only motive that drove the creation of *La Storia*. An intensely private aim was tied to her general intentions: by bringing together literary paths she had previously followed in intellectual isolation, she sought to investigate the roots of her own Jewishness. She was led by an intimate need to come to terms with her own, until then, buried Jewish extraction—her *Hebräitude*. Her personal reflection consists partly of coming to understand her mother's suppressed Jewish identity. Although an integral component of her existence—she was indeed a full Jew—Irma Poggibonzi always rejected group identification with the Italian Jewish minority for fear that her own family would subsequently fail at the process of integrating into mainstream Italian society. She knew her daughter's talent and ambition and accordingly shielded Elsa from any possible exclusion from the literary world of Rome. Baptized Catholic, with an illustrious godmother, Marchesa Gonzaga, Morante was always described as a devout Catholic by her husband, Alberto Moravia (Elkann and Moravia 112). Notwithstanding such authoritative claim, Morante's works reveal a strong interest in Jewish religion and religious discrimination. Morante's literary representation of the Roman Jews of the ghetto (*ghettaroli*) begins as early as 1935 with her short story "Il ladro dei lumi."[2] With respect to Morante's interest for the Roman Jewish community, the narration of facts pertinent to the life in the Rome ghetto—like the story of Jusvin, the guardian who steals oil for the dead in the *Tempio maggiore* (the Great Synagogue of Rome)

and dies of cancer—is particularly telling. With the notable exception of Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943* (*October 16, 1943*), this particular Roman neighborhood appears fully described in Italian literature only with *La Storia* (LS 324).

Despite the prominence that the ghetto holds in the mapping of Morante's Rome—despite the clear demarcation between her Rome and the eternal and glamorous Rome—the space of the Jewish neighborhood remains a physical location that critics have long overlooked. *La Storia* succinctly uses the geographical space of the Roman ghetto to draw a picture of Jewish emancipation in post-Papal Rome, the consequences of the 1938 Italian racial laws, and the persecution, deportation, and annihilation of the Jews. Through the characters and their wandering, occurring in a space that is so close to and yet so removed from the seat of power, Morante depicts discrimination and the psychological consequences of persecution from an Italian perspective. Humble teacher Ida Ramundo, the offspring of an intermarriage (just like Morante herself), and Davide Segre, son of a Jewish family from Mantua exterminated in the camps, lead the cast of Jewish characters in the novel, but they are not alone. Ida represents a little-known type of Italian Jewry: the hapless Roman lower-class woman, daughter of two internal immigrants, Nora from Modena and Giuseppe from Calabria. Within Ida, Morante merges two distinct typologies of post-Unification Italian society: a somewhat acculturated teacher from the North and a Southern anarchist. Ida's parents embody the Italians who changed their social status through Fascism and moved to Rome to form the rising petite bourgeoisie that would crowd new neighborhoods like Garbatella and Montesacro. Davide, instead, is of the conventionally affluent Jewish bourgeoisie of Northern Italy. However, the concept of sacrifice intrinsic for discriminated groups (i.e., Jews) is to be found in the notion of sacrifice that the word Holocaust (rather than "Shoah") implies; this concept is reified into a deconstructed and reconceived Christian-Judaic perspective through the figure of Ida's child, Giuseppe Felice Angiolino. A child's death is never a Holocaust: it cannot be a sacrifice for the good of humanity; rather, it can only be a tragedy. Similarly and opposite to the Savior, the *grande male* (great evil) annihilates Useppe to the point that his messianic role does not satisfy any redemption. Related to the notion of the Jew as the Other, *La Storia*'s narratives also recall Arendt's notion that prejudice forms a large component of the self-destructive desire of mankind. Similarly to Benjamin's historiographer, Morante tries to appropriate elided memories that are valenced to everybody; by retrieving and producing collective memory, universal significance is bestowed upon her words.

Le Lacrime

In 1974, critics' overreactions to *La Storia*'s were laden with political implications. Notwithstanding its lampooning for its Neorealist elements and melodramatic tones, such a violent critique did not stain *La Storia*'s positive reception by the general public. Forty years later, the sensitivities for which Renato Barilli took a strong position against Morante's "anachronistic" novel ("Lacrime" 10; "La Storia" 105–10)—even stronger than the one taken by Nanni Balestrini, Elisabetta Rasy, Letizia Paolozzi and Umberto Silva in their infamous letter in *Il Manifesto* "Contro il romanzone della Morante": "[o]ltre che dai decretoni, cominciamo a difenderci anche dai romanzoni" (3; "[a]side from long decrees, we must defend ourselves also from long novels")—no longer exist. The authorial intentions behind *La Storia* can now be better grasped for, aside from the effect time always affords to sincere and unbiased appreciation of artistic works, new paths of looking at literature grant more subtlety to the interpretation of the author's techniques. This chapter examines parts of the novel's troubled critical history, in particular those related to *La Storia*'s deliberate transgressions against the subgenre of the historical novel. Barilli's labeling of *La Storia* as "anachronistic" ("Lacrime" 10) in the mid-1970s refers to its seemingly Neorealist apparatus: succinctly put, a member of *Gruppo '63* like Barilli passed judgment to the detriment of *La Storia*, but his understanding had only scratched the surface of Morante's reappropriation and recovery of Neorealistic styles and themes. Like many critics of this era, Barilli failed to understand the reasoning behind such choices, and hence labeled the text anachronistic. Morante indeed resumed Neorealist forms, but only to deconstruct them into a web of narratives bearing her own distinctive mark. What were the thematic, stylistic, and expressive criteria Morante used to provide an aesthetic value to a moral question as compelling (and yet so little frequented by the Italian literature of the time) as the Shoah—as well as the oppression and persecution of Italy's own minority of Jews—that turned her novel into the subject of blatant and seditious misunderstandings?

Morante needed evidence of life, testimonial and nonfictional elements, to express herself, as the unconceivable reality of human existence at times pushes the Holocaust novel, which "stands as an object of study for its relation to realism, problems of experimentation, and the artistic imagining of human experience, to the limits" (Sicher, "Introduction" xv). Largely concerned with the depiction of human misery as caused by forces that are part of what she defines as the Unreality, *La Storia* adopts the novel genre in order to overthrow its presuppositions and to elicit how Neorealism (and all the -isms) are insufficient to describe the complexities

of the world. Exhibiting evidence of life as it is helped Neorealist artists scratch the surface of atavistic ignorance, and permitted passivity from postwar Italians, but was not sufficient as such for Morante. At the core of its aesthetic project, a work of art hosts philosophical and moral meanings that reassess the rigid distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical (Perniola 55). Morante reinterprets Neorealism and recovers images, historical sources, and musical motifs in vogue at the time of the facts narrated: they all partly coincide with a practice of writing that, for lack of a better term, was called, like its cinematic counterpart, Neorealist. In her writing, Morante deployed intra-, inter-, and hypertextual references to her own works and in general to Neorealist Italian arts to concretely render the whole of that period while simultaneously ideologically reversing the conventional reading of those events (not least Ida's rape scene). Morante resisted any trend, and falling back into this presumed Neorealist mode was only a means to her end. Interrogatives of an ethical nature are raised, "first of all that of the history recounted" (C. Wardi 7); ethics, however, do not relate only to the declaration of truth *stricto sensu* but also to the moral truth of that work that carries aesthetic meaning. Reworking elements of the uncanny Unreality of the war and the Shoah by strategically deploying Neorealist elements to create the truth of her own novel should seem neither against the times nor outside time (*ana-Chronos*). Literature holds mimetic qualities that are present even when reality seems to reject representation if attempted according to naturalistic techniques.

An Outmoded Reception

Despite the careful launch of her book with Einaudi and her choice to politically impose a 2,000 *lire* price and paperback edition, Morante's failed political alignment was problematic and affected a correct hermeneutics of her novel.[3] In 1974, violating contemporary aesthetic conventions put the novel at the mercy of experimentalist artists like Nanni Balestrini who, along with others, denounced *La Storia* as a *romanzone* (roughly translatable as a populist, consumerist work) and subsequently cautioned would-be readers. Morante is labeled as a "mediocre scrittrice" (in Lucente 233; mediocre writer). Yet two issues of *Fiera letteraria* show contradictory comments on *La Storia*. Barilli defines Morante as an artist ready to undertake anything in order to create a *melò* effect and "wrench warm tears" ("Lacrime" 9). Such a reiteration suggests that Morante's project—her division of the chapters into "official history" and "private history," the emphasis given to the legibility of the text, the linguistic

variations of a plain and mimetic Italian, and, last but not least, the choice of everyday humble characters—had deceived critics who thought they were dealing with a historical novel with a conventional structure. Morante had long understood instead that "esoteric forms of writing had by then lost any transgressive charge" (Rosa, *Cattedrali* 209) and realized how a different kind of historical novel was needed to describe the world in its historical changes. One dissident voice is Italo Calvino's; in a letter addressed to Morante, the author of the 1946 Neorealist novel *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Spiders' Nests*) wonders in what ways can we consider *La Storia* a "contemporary" novel:

> [T]he value of your book for me is in beginning with post-war Italian literature taken as collective epos, and in providing this matter with a *novelistic* construction, i.e. with the mythical force that the novel form brings with it from its onset [...] But in my view the most remarkable result is that you have provided the novel with an *encyclopedic* completeness, with all the voices of that [Neorealist] literature re-created and included in the web of ramifications of the main story [...] My point of view remains that of those who participated at that time in that literature and has lived its exhaustion and crisis and now, in front of this book, feel the crisis, its own crisis, opening up again. And my questions while reading it were: What makes this book a contemporary one, and not one of that time? In what is an impossible book back then but makes possible something of the writing of back then that got lost? What makes it a book that can solve problems of representation or communication or knowledge that we can ask ourselves today? (Calvino 1246; italics original)

In 1991, Giulio Ferroni, who did not spare critiques to the novel (559), included Morante in his *Storia della letteratura italiana* and, in our time, Morante's oeuvre is regularly studied. Still, an embarrassing scholarly void remains with respect to the thematic *diramazione* (ramification) Calvino discusses in his letter: "the vast and most beautiful fresco on the sufferings of the Jews" (Petrocchi 12). The story of the suffering of Jews as retold by an empathetic narrator—the discrimination which for centuries composes what Nora, Ida's mother, defines as the eternal predestination of the Jews to suffer "[l]'odio vendicativo di tutti gli altri popoli" (LS 281; "the vindictive hatred of all other peoples" HIS 23)—was a topic previously neglected in Italian literature. It would appear that even this "predestination" had fallen victim to general amnesia. No one mentioned the subject in literature or in historiography. Italians in general, did not feel they were accountable for their intolerance to diversity, for the hushed anti-Semitism whose negative outcome would become public during World War II. Italian general acquiescence, paradoxically, finds

its complement in the *ghettaroli*'s "passività ostinata" (LS 361; "stubborn passivity" HIS 100).[4] Ignorance of even the possibility that persecution could occur in Italy as in other countries finds its counterpart in critics' lack of interest in reading *La Storia* as a story of the Roman Jews and Morante's own buried Jewishness.

Intellectual solitude is concomitant with the publication of *La Storia*.[5] Morante's solitude can be traced back to a political cause: the eschewing of responsibility by her critics. Italian intellectuals were afflicted—albeit for different reasons—by the dangerous amnesia of the postwar period and by the incubation period in which domestic terrorism came to be in the *anni di piombo* (lead years). Too many Italians were intellectually monopolized by the narrative of Italian communism and Resistance and neglected their responsibilities toward the Italian Jewish community. *La Storia* was an uncomfortable work for leftist critics because it was conceived of as a text against intellectual oblivion in all directions. It was a text that intuited the danger of a possible debacle of ethics in the will of Italian artists to set aside the tragedy of the deportation and consider extermination of Italian Jews as irrelevant during the period Italian sociologists normally refer to as a period characterized by *la lotta contro i padri* (the struggle against the fathers). The topic of Shoah remained thus virtually unexplored by Italian writers. The process by which many intellectuals condemned the Fascist regime led them to unwittingly forget that artistic works engage with projects of intellectual empowerment that go well beyond the boundaries of established political narratives.

That decanting process of memories auspicated by Primo Levi can progress in different ways. For Morante, these memories refer to factual events, but she applies the same method also to aesthetics in her conviction that world and true art are interchangeable elements. Following her logic, the artistic/literary artifact then owes its birth both to the memory of events lived both by the author as well as by others of which she heard/read, and to the recovery of aesthetic means to express the truth of her work (Morante, "Sul romanzo" 66–68). This is a woman artist scarred by the Shoah; she thusly considered herself a victim/survivor akin to her characters. That *La Storia* was written after a temporal lapse is both intratextual with Elisa's story in *Menzogna e sortilegio* (*House of Liars*) and is also consonant with most trauma theories (Herman; Caruth). Like many survivors, Morante let her memories decant for over 30 years and, with her attentive mind, lived, read, and heard many of the episodes that will afterwards comprise her historical novel. It is as if the artist would metaphorically prepare herself to leave her Elysian room of *Menzogna e sortilegio*—through the intermediate step of *L'isola di Arturo* and *Lo scialle andaluso*—to become a *narratrice* (narratress) external to the stories she

tells, which are also her own. If she doesn't tell stories in the first person it is because her empathy toward characters (she lives nearby them, and claims to have met Ida and Useppe on the street) hinders any self-reflective temptation. She is them. She speaks of the reality of a generational trauma, albeit through "a democratic affabulation" for language submits itself to the thing, producing in turn "multilingualism" (Mengaldo, "Spunti" 11). The product is a polyphony that serves the author in a project that is neither Neorealist nor avant-garde but simply—and as always—her own.

Testimony by Proxy

Partly due to general Italian amnesia, and to what Manuela Consonni refers to as "timidezza" (91; "a form of shyness"),[6] Italian Jews did not make any specific demand for a particular kind of memory that was at once collective—sanctioned by Italian society in the whole—and private, that of their minority community. For some time, Italian narratives addressing the Shoah were linked to those regarding political deportation, thus circumventing the real problems of alterity and the intolerance behind Jewish persecution. Italians appear apathetic and unwilling to become aware of their role and actual responsibility in the *Hurbn*. It is easy to find psychological parallels between the inability of both critics to understand Morante's intentions in writing *La Storia* and Italian and foreign historiographers to grapple with Italian responsibilities not only for the Shoah, but also for the conditions that preceded it in Italy that thereby made it possible. Reluctance to reevaluate metastasized into the outright erasure of the Italians' role in the persecution of the Jews; instead, there was only a desire for reconstruction and an end of war.[7] Just as Giorgio Bassani's narrator explains for the Ferrara community, "[S]ociety, shuttered by the war, was trying to pick up again. Life was resuming.[8] And when it does, of course, it pays no attention to anyone" (68). By default, we witness the elision of the theme from literary representations. But that which is not dealt with does not disappear. Because of the lack of willingness to establish psychoanalytic categories for the sake of working through their immediate past, untold *racconti* at once govern the historiographic and literary narratives of the war and of the Shoah.

In Italian literature, Morante is the bearer of a collective memory that not many wanted to either awaken or encourage. In its encyclopedism, *La Storia* fills ample pockets of Italian postwar history with untold *racconti* left out by Neorealism. Morante collects the memory of events deposited *sul fondo* (on the bottom) and narrates to Italians the story of the Shoah as situated in the geographical space of the Roman ghetto. The Shoah is a historical fact that, until 1974 was neglected by public opinion,

intellectuals and the masses for a "nexus" with the "Resistance canon" (Battini, *Socialismo* 200); Morante's book was now finally speaking directly to all these people. *La Storia* had to construct a comprehensible plot of a personal trauma as well as a collective trauma, one suffered while living a history whose indelible impact on Morante as the author will color the entire novel. Although an involuntary witness to some of the horrors, Morante will never be an impartial witness to the disaster that History delivers to the masses. She presents evil in a similar fashion to Arendt, who posits:

> It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is "thought-defying" as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality." Only the good has depth and can be radical. (Arendt, "A Daughter" 396)

Aware of the "banal" essence of evil, Morante unveils its composition: a heap of elements made up of the same fungal substance that Arendt identifies. Arendt's assertion that "[e]vil expands *like* a fungus" is consonant with Morante's own ideas. Thus the inanity of evil imposed on the powerless Roman *ghettaroli* poisons even their return to a so-called normal life:

> *Erano figure spettrali come i numeri negativi, al di sotto di ogni veduta naturale, e impossibili perfino alla comune simpatia. La gente voleva rimuoverli dalle proprie giornate come dalle famiglie normali si rimuove la presenza dei pazzi, o dei morti.* E cosí, assieme alle figure illeggibili brulicanti nelle loro orbite nere, molte voci accompagnavano le solitarie passeggiatine dei giudii, riecheggiando enormi dentro i loro cervelli in una fuga a spirale, al di sotto della soglia comune dell'udibile. (LS, 696–97; emphasis added)
>
> *They were spectral figures like negative numbers, beneath all natural sight, inconceivable even for common friendliness. People wanted to censor them from their days as normal families remove the mad or the dead.* And so, along with the illegible visions swarming in their black eye sockets, many voices accompanied the lonely walks of the Jews, echoing vastly in their brains, in a fugue, below the ordinary threshold of the audible. (HIS 422; emphasis added)

An attentive listener—like Elisa, narrator of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, with her parental *morts-vivants* who crowd her nun's room, devoted to the

religion of writing—"Elsa ipse" (Garboli 188) has learnt through the years to carefully analyze evil's productions, including the tragedy of those stories the *poveri giudii* would try to tell and that no one wanted to listen to. While we know that Auschwitz survivors were only 16, Settimia Spizzichino being the only woman of the group that returned, Morante's narrator aggrandizes the number of the Jews who came back, and depicts them like, "spectral figures like negative numbers," refractory to any "common friendliness," without glory or destiny. They represent a different kind of returning member of a community: they are not returning home victors like Ulysses to Ithaca (LS 697; HIS 422).

Morante narrates the abyss her characters have ended up in, one that only exists because of discrimination and racial hatred. Out of a sense of eternal justice, ethical reasons, and blood intimacy she affirms the shortcomings of ethics with respect to the Shoah and addresses the role of progress in the twentieth century, with its history of destruction that only by way of such so-called progress could inaugurate "such unprecedented history of human experimentation" (Natoli 21). Despite the identification of the Shoah's historical circumstances, Agamben maintains the impossibility of its current political and ethical significance because "almost none of the ethical principles our age believed it could recognize as valid have stood the decisive test, that of an *Ethica more Auschwitz demonstrata*" (13; emphasis original). The lack of a response turns into "the deafening" and yet "loud" silence" of Western philosophy" (Grob 1) as the Holocaust becomes tangible evidence of the instrumentalization of an ethics that can be "perverted into pseudo-ethics" (Roth, "Ethics" xv). A fictitious world (such as the one that *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* delivered worldwide) underscores the fictional yet all too real world created by dictators (Arendt, *Origins* 362–63). Once the mendacious machine of propaganda was set in motion, it was impossible to stop. The lie by which the legend of the worldwide conspiracy (coinciding with Jews' emancipation) became the central element of the Nazi reality made it possible for the Nazis to actually believe that the Jews dominated the world. They had to pursue a path of annihilating the *Untermensch*. Arendt claims that totalitarian propaganda does not allow for opinions, and as such becomes for the populace an "element of their daily life no less real and untouchable than arithmetic rules" (*Origins* 365). In short, thanks to the power of *mendacio* one witnesses the formation of what Dan Diner calls "the racist Weltanschauung" (*Raccontare* 169). It is from this perverted ethical vision of the world that it was possible to choose a group predestined to die as a necessity for carrying on the totalitarian fiction. The plutocratic Bolshevik Jews, although not considered a national minority, nevertheless carried with them stigmas tied to the indelible

imprint of their origin; it was hence uncomplicated to select them as the *Unterrasse*, a reason for which they were forced to meet the same destiny as their fellow Jews (163–69).

In this way, the individual loses all the elements that connote her as she is subsumed within the totality of the group. The corollary of totalitarian propaganda becomes the public declaration of the victims as "a whole" doomed to death against which the totalitarian society displays all the destructive forces of racist Weltanschauung (Grob 10). In the footsteps of Arendt, such considerations afford some thoughts to the necessity of a repositioning of post-Shoah ethics. All the more, ethics must be taken into consideration in the discussion of *La Storia*'s nonpolitical but moral and spiritual guidelines to the issue of intolerance. Morante's ethical approach—in tackling the complex theme of how the Shoah became possible, and simultaneously denying affirmative power to the process of development and progress in the twentieth century—partly sets the tone for the readers' reception. It is difficult to imagine an act of reading/interpreting *La Storia* that is not guided by Morante's aim. She signs a pact of truthfulness to events from an ethical standpoint, while her aesthetic imagination completes the sense of reality that the novel conveys. Reception proceeds along these lines because the literary text has recomposed the narrative of reality within the parameters of an aesthetic project that allows for the reassessment of facts in accordance with the principles of the author's vision.

6

History and Stories: Historical Novels and the Danger of Disintegration

La Storia's preparatory drafts do not confirm whether Morante had initially decided by that time to implement the typographic gap between official history and private history as seen in the published version of the text; as such it is possible that this somewhat mystifying element, key to the interpretation of the novel, took place later. Precise divisions of the narrated matter are, however, already present in the drafts (Cives 58–59). The front of the sheets composing Morante's notebooks records the progression of the narrative while on their reverse side are recorded notes and quotes from historiographical texts.[1] D'Angeli speaks of four possible treatments of the presence of time in the novel:

> the official time of history handed down by history books [...] the time parallel in the history of the common people (the "victims of the scandal") [...] the time of the story of Ida and Useppe [...] and the time occupied by the internal registration of external events—the way, that is, in which imagination, emotions, and psyche as a whole in short [...] intervene in the elaboration and subjective and interior appropriation of the facts of reality. ("Il paradiso" 216–17)

It is the latter that provides Morante's novel with its "omnitemporal" dimension (217). The typographic gap between the part of the chapter dealing with the chronicle of events and the fictional story of her characters deters the critic from grasping the sense of Morante's construction: in all actuality, she constructs a collective memory that incorporates everything that followed World War II. *La Storia* revisits history as the history of all compiled stories told during the Neorealist period of Italian literature; as such, Morante exercises the artist's right to examine how such

history has been handed down. Aside from the memory of the Resistance of Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Spiders' Nests*), and aside from the disillusioned mode of Carlo Levi's *L'Orologio* (*The Watch*), she constructs a unique memory to be inserted into Diner's "canon of memories" (*Raccontare* 188). After *L'isola di Arturo*, a text in which the war theme looms as an imperious setting for the unfolding of Arturo's personal drama, *La Storia*'s novelistic transfiguration of truth and historical facts becomes the next step in revealing the colossal deception that is history: a perverted ethics of discrimination controlled by a system of ideological forces manufacturing a tragic deceit.

Morante problematizes the aesthetic categories relevant to the historical novel to reenergize its ethical dimension: form and content must coincide with the point of view of the writer who lived through the events described and use her "experience" to outline the world as it exists at the core of her concern. To articulate her cultural project and struggle against incumbent barbarity, Morante shows how her rethinking of the historical novel stands opposite to the failure of the 1968 revolution (see her *pastiche Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (*The World Saved by the Children*). Symbolic of Morante's apparent disillusionment, *La Storia* is a Gramscian people's novel: a novel that, at its generative core, presents its author as an organic member of the disenfranchised anonymous majority. In short, free from the constraints of the intellectual elite, Morante's *modus operandi* shows a definite disengagement from current literary trends by first choosing the historical genre for her message and then deconstructing it.

Both Cristina Della Coletta and Ruth Glynn have previously investigated *La Storia*'s appropriation of the historical novel. While the former claims a direct parallel and problematization of structure and binary opposition in *La Storia*—as seen in Alessandro Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) (Della Coletta 117–51)—the latter claims a more general deconstruction of its generic premises. Through an approach to emplotment advanced by Paul Ricoeur's theories and through an authorial subjectivity that is aware of its gender specificity, *La Storia* is assessed today in all its transgressive power. Both aforementioned scholars, in fact, contend that Morante challenges the classic Aristotelian opposition between *poiesis* and praxis, between political and ethical spheres. The two scholars independently conclude that a new understanding of historical discourse in the novel is bound to emerge with *La Storia* due to its radical differences from a conventional conceptualization and the praxis of the historical genre. Both scholars interpret Morante's disruption of the techniques of historical fiction as a sort of shaking of the bourgeois genre from the inside. The strategies by which Morante reinvents the genre define a

desire for a nonunderstanding of history in the conventional terms of official history. To this end *La Storia* transforms both the discourse that occurs between history and fiction, as well as the expressive and stylistic categories deployed in support of Morante's superordinate philosophy.

Evolutionary and revolutionary models appear interwoven in a dialectic oscillation: we can apply the idea of a literary work as the product of dialectic between genres to Morante's deliberate intertwinement of these models. The ruling element in a work can be the synthesis of all the generic conventions, justifying the claim of appurtenance by that given work to a certain type of realism (White, "Anomalies" 597–617). Rather than Morante blending novelistic conventions, I advance the hypothesis of a reversal: she initiates a *mutamento* (change) of the generic paradigm, upon which the founding system of relations of *La Storia* rests. This transition marks the passage of Morante's novel from the *Familienroman* to the neohistorical novel. According to Giovanna Rosa, the recovery of the historical narrative in *La Storia* is supported by the same pedagogical-didactic intent that motivated the founders of the genre. Also, Manzoni in fact conceived his *Promessi sposi* from the desire to "neglect the 'enterprises of Princes, Potentates' and privilege, instead, facts about the 'gente meccanica, e di piccolo affare'" (in Rosa, *Cattedrali* 215; "mechanical people, and of little means"). The twentieth-century character of *La Storia* must be sought "in the internal corrosion of the structural system and declaratory underlying the 'genere misto'" (Manzoni in Rosa, *Cattedrali* 216; "mixed genre"). As the title shows, in the initial opposition of its two terms that never overlap—*La Storia: Romanzo*—the more Morante shows faithfulness to the nineteenth-century canon, the greater is her resolution to reverse the rules of composition (Rosa, *Cattedrali* 216). It is within the folds of this process of generic corrosion that we partly understand the logic behind the retrieval of Neorealist elements. In order to give voice and literary dignity to the oppressed, Morante imbues their characterization with Neorealist traits juxtaposed to those offered by the conventional historical novel. Morante applies these paradoxical and yet logical juxtapositions to her text to reveal their *raison d'être* insofar as narrative represents an alternative mode of representation in which the diachronic facet of reality takes place in discourse (White, "Anomalies" 612). Revisiting then Calvino's question regarding the agents of *La Storia*'s contemporaneity (1246), I believe that the answer lies in Morante's unwillingness to justify historical events as inexorable; in turn, her unwillingness prompts transgression of the generic conventions of the historical novel and rereads elements of Neorealism.

Time does not coincide with a fixed entity. Rather it is a subjective present in which we locate our presence in the world. The relationship

between time of history and time of discourse exhibits a nondialectical incongruence, for time of history denies any individual growth to the characters, or any diachronic development. As Benjamin states in his fourteenth thesis on the philosophy of history, "history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (261; emphasis original). *Jeztzeit* is the moment that cuts through history and breaks open its continuum; thereby, it contradicts the claimed completeness of the story. Maurizia Boscagli elaborates the hypothesis of a possible identity of thought between Morante and Benjamin through the revision of historiography. This identity anticipates both Michel Foucault's as well as Hayden White's discourses, in which they posit that history is materialized first from the narration of the facts. Prior to historiographical theory, historiographical discourse is found in a "cultural practice that is formed in the territory already colonized [by] the language, that is, the story is a form of knowledge produced and governed by power" (Boscagli 164). Through Jewish messianism, Benjamin demonstrates the fallacy of Western philosophy in regards to both idealism and Marxism (similarly to Simone Weil's statements in "Méditations sur un cadavre" 324–27), while Morante perceives realism as a bourgeois narrative path through a non-Orthodox religious discourse. According to Boscagli, this moment of the destruction of history, as generally understood, results in an inclusion of the history of the Other from the space outside (i.e., invisible space granted to the oppressed to compress their story), which in turn constitutes the basis for the conceptualization of *La Storia*'s narrative (165–67). All formal and expressive authorial decisions are undertaken to shield humanity from the danger of the disintegration of a pure and incorruptible reality, now yielding to the power of the beast of unreality.

The complex relationship between a historiographical text and a literary one (that, by definition, contemplates the use of fiction) is further problematized by the creative writer's basic mistrust of the very sense of history as *historia res gestae*, upon which rests "the politicians' stubborn faith in progress" (Benjamin 258) and which stymies possible alternative readings of the past. Gérard Genette reminds us that literature is chiefly art, and art of language, but the mere use of words and phrases is not sufficient to produce what we consider to be literature (12). It is the literariness of the text—the writerly practice as well as its awareness of its ethical action—that declares the aesthetic essence of a work. Literary works deal with how historical events subvert the lives of those humans who construct a tense relationship with official history, which, in turn, proves history's inability to speak of humans endowed with individual characteristics (humanistic); official history sees human beings as an indistinct

mass (humanity) to be examined all together. An ethical conflict thereby emerges between the need for a narrative of individuals impacted by historical facts and the way in which facts are assembled *a posteriori*. The narrative effect of official historiographical discourse proves to be insufficient, and its failure to narrate individual human beings elicits the need for a narrative sustained by ethical premises different from and yet based on these very same facts. This need means coming to terms with the values that have facilitated the construction of history as a byproduct of power. Puppets of power, poor 17-year-old *soldatucci* harmless teachers, easy preys of Fascist *mediocritas*, Morante's pre-Animal Studies speaking animals (like Bella): all are presented as powerless before quotidian horrors. And yet, these are the innocent characters who seem to comply with the tenets of Walter Benjamin's idea of marginal history, they risk "not to be seen depending on who constructs and directs the circulation of memory" (Boscagli 167). In his ninth thesis, Benjamin describes Paul Klee's angel with his face turned toward the past, looking at the disaster for which he would like to make amends. The more the angel tries to repair the past, the stronger the wind of the storm prevents him in his effort. "This storm," Benjamin writes, "is what we call progress" (258). This is the storm that sweeps Morante's characters away. The inadequacy of historiography to reconstruct the sense of the past, coupled with the problem of the existence of something we can safely call a "correct memory" (Robin 146), reside in the nature and scope of these characters: the writing of the *historia rerum gestarum* does not allow for the transmission of intimate feelings for it is a product of execrated power.

Disintegration: Theory and Praxis

In her "Introduction *into* Politics," Hannah Arendt examines the conditions essential for the existence of politics. Since there is no political action in isolation, the first element is a world in which human affairs can take place. Human affairs "are the result of the fact that human beings produce what they themselves are not—that is, things- and that even the so-called psychological or intellectual realms become permanent realities in which people can live and move only to the extent that these realms are present as things, as a world of things" (Arendt, "Introduction" 106–07). Morante's statement about the artist's concern needs to be read in light of Arendt's statement: we realize the political sense of Morante's statement, because the artist's humanism concerns the world as the space into which human beings come to interact and produce things. In Morante's view, oppressive politics—disguised as historical forces masked by words

like "progress"—determines the destiny of minorities who are impeded by the world of things. Morante utilizes the term "Power" as a linguistic signifier—a sort of umbrella term—encompassing all the disastrous consequences of progressive history, understood according to Arendt as a byproduct of politics. The word "Power" projects the image of a perverse totalitarian and self-destructive humanity—that is, an aberration of nature. In Morante's writing, "Power" functions as a lexical *fil rouge*, a perversely negative tantric word enveloping all of humanity's ills, and her reflections therein are reified into the characters of *La Storia*. Morante's use of anthropomorphism (in André Bazin's sense of this term) proves crucial to our identification and understanding of her characters, and allows us to experience several perspectives at once. We become Useppe, Ida, Ninnuzzu, and Bella as the novel proceeds in its story. Animals speak, for they all belong to this world of human affairs where realms become permanent realities without which people could not act.

"Every novel, hence, could be interpreted by an attentive and intelligent reader, [...] as an essay and 'work of thought'" (Morante, "Sul romanzo" 47). Morante's essayistic and fictional writings predating and molding *La Storia* constitute the novel's philosophical backbone for they support its physical structure as well as its style. My argument is chiefly anchored to three points. The first addresses the coherence of Morante's discourse with respect to the role of the artist/poet. Whether in her introduction to the catalogue of Beato Angelico, "Il beato propagandista dell'universo" ("The Blessed Promoter of the Universe"), her answers in the interview "Nove domande sul romanzo" ("Nine Questions on the Novel"), her "Piccolo manifesto dei comunisti (senza classe e senza partito)" ("Little Manifesto of the Communists [with no class or party]"), or her "Intervention" following the Spanish publication and censorship of *La Storia*, Morante never deviates from her original take on history, power, the subaltern classes and the role of the artist/poet who must explain the world to himself and for others who cannot explain it themselves. The second point is Morante's Benjaminian notion of progress: exploration of the tragic outcomes of the word progress can be found in the author's essayistic writing as far back as 1965, when she delivered "Pro o contro la bomba atomica" ("For or against the atomic bomb"), a seminal lecture on the atomic bomb and its detriment to humanity at the Carignano Theater in Turin. Finally, I argue for the cognitive consistency of Morante's ideological stances on Power, war and human evil. The unreality of evil is elaborated and expressed in all her literary works (short stories, novels, poems). Love for anarchy (as extolled by Francesco De Salvi's inebriated tirades in the inn in Morante's 1948 *House of Liars* and the threat of useless war as advanced in her 1957 *Arturo's Island*) are instances that point

at an ideological path that she will never renounce but that will instead culminate in the successful paperback publication of *La Storia*.

Of the Futility of War: Abating Power

Deconstruction of the Neorealist matrix is already evident in Morante 1957 *L'isola di Arturo* (*Arturo's Island*). The novel's chronotope is no longer unfocused, as was the case over the 700 pages of *Menzogna e sortilegio*. In Arturo's bitter fairy tale, the moment of his farewell from Procida (his perceived and forever longed Eden) is temporally marked by the outset of the colonial wars, as we follow his life from 1938 to December 1940. For Arturo, to reach adulthood means leaving the island, and the only honorable way for a 16-year-old boy to do so is to enroll in the army and go to war. Knowledge of sex and knowledge of war remain the keys to the threshold that determines the end of childhood and the beginning of adult age. The kind of war that is taking place is dreamt of by Arturo in his long afternoon readings of Norman cavaliers and myths, but is concretely real and paradoxically produced by the unreality of Powers. This is a war whose only positive consequence will be that of leading Arturo to the African prison camp from where he is most likely writing his memoirs as the reader engages the text. His childhood is written while Death lurks just off stage in the shadows because, in his romantic view, it is only in death that we can escape the prosthetics of subjectivity (Wolfe 187). Silvestro, Arturo's old nurse, returns to Arturo's home on the boy's sixteenth birthday. Although elated that Arturo is about to abandon the haunted *Casa de' Guaglioni*, Silvestro regrets the boy's decision to go to war and warns him against the mystique inherent to the rhetoric of war. It is here that Silvestro explains the difference between "le guerre antiche" and "le guerre moderne" (IA 1357; "ancient wars" and "modern wars" AI 340) to Arturo. To distract him from the love for the war they shared when Arturo was little (for he had a romantic idea of war), Silvestro reverts to his original role as a guide for the orphan. Silvestro discerns the reasons one enters a war between the noble ones, the sort of which books often romanticize, and those more utilitarian ones. Myth and reality, dream and destruction are presented in their dangerous diversity:

> Egli m'andava spiegando che, nonostante una recente intesa di pace firmata con cerimonie grandiose dalle Potenze (dovevano essere stati questi, ora lo capivo, i famosi *eventi internazionali* cui Stella alludeva, origine dell'amnistia, e della sua libertà), la guerra mondiale, in realtà, era imminente, senza rimedio. Poteva prorompere da un mese all'altro, forse da un

> giorno all'altro. E anche chi era contrario, come lui, ci andava di mezzo, in questo imbroglio demoniaco! (IA 1356; emphasis original)
>
> He went on explaining to me that in spite of a recent peace pact, grandly signed by the Powers (these must be, I now realized, the famous *international events* that Stella had meant, which had brought about the amnesty and his freedom), the World War was properly and hopelessly upon us. It might break out from one month to the next, even from one day to the next. And even those who were against it, like him, were going to get involved in the whole hellish business. (AI 340; emphasis original)

According to Silvestro, modern war, "era tutta un macchinario di macelleria, e un orrendo formicaio di sfaceli, senza nessun merito di valore autentico" (IA 1357; "was nothing but mechanized butchery, a loathsome ant heap of destruction and not a matter of courage" AI 340–41). War holds no authentic value. As an *imbroglio*, it has no real plot for no specific sense can be traced in it. In short, war defined in contemporary terms was like "cantare gratuito con una spina in gola. *Un disastro senza nessun compenso*" (IA 1357; emphasis added; "singing with a thorn in your throat, a disaster, *with nothing to be said for it*" AI 340–41; emphasis added). The images of war offered by Silvestro to his beloved Arturo—"imbroglio demoniaco" ("hellish business"), "macchinario di macelleria" ("mechanized butchery"), "formicaio di sfaceli" ("ant heap")—define the terms in which powers and their politics take human beings into consideration: they systematically dehumanize them. War, the state of war, "suspends morality," for "[i]t divests the eternal institutions and eternal obligations of their eternity and rescinds ad interim the unconditional imperatives. In advance its shadow falls over the actions of men. The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the exercise of reason," but Lévinas states "[p]olitics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïveté" (*Totality* 21). Further, when Arendt's expression "multiplicity of men" is lexically substituted ("melted," Arendt writes) with the clustering word "humanity," we face the hard fact that humanistic values—distinct fates of the individual—cease to exist when one uses a collective noun, that is, humanity ("Introduction" 95). As a consequence, semantics—with the use of different terms to distinguish different wars—makes us realize the linguistic hypocrisy inherent to society. By explaining the differences between the kinds of wars to Arturo, Silvestro voices what Lévinas considers as the "hypocrisy inherent in society" (*Totality* 21).

There is no such thing as a noble war, no matter the reasons that propelled it. War is a mechanism that tears man away from the desire for humanism as *pietas*, epitomized by the search for the good and the beautiful. Instead, war throws man into an "imbroglio demoniaco" (IA 1356;

"hellish business" AI 340) for war is the daughter of history. As Hannah Arendt states:

> The West's solution for escaping from the impossibility of politics within the Western creation myth is to transform politics into history, or to substitute history for politics. In the idea of world history, the multiplicity of men is melted into *one* human individual, which is then also called humanity. This is the source of the monstrous and inhuman aspect of history, which first accomplishes its full and brutal end in politics. ("Introduction" 95)

L'isola di Arturo introduces a public aspect of society—war—into the very intimate private story of its protagonist, an orphan. Lexical ties between *L'isola di Arturo* and Morante's "Pro o contro la bomba atomica" further exemplify her position regarding politicians' constant deception of the crowds and the idea of war as an *imbroglio*. Her critique of the progression of the events in conventional historical novels scrutinizes the ways in which, in "any given society there seems to be always a group exercising folly and a crowd enduring it" (Morante in Rosa, *Cattedrali* 216):

> In a *crowd subject to a scam*, the presence of even one individual who does not let himself be cheated, can already provide a first point of advantage. But that point, then multiplies itself by a thousand and a hundred thousand if that *one* happens to be a writer (meaning a poet). Even without realizing it, out of instinct, the poet *is intended to expose the cheating*. And a poem, once started, it will not stop; but it will run and multiply itself, coming from all sides, as far as not even the poet himself would have expected. ("Pro o contro" 105; emphasis added)

Unveiling the impostures that human beings are subjected to: this is the task of the poet. Instead of the *scriventi* (writers)—those who are imprisoned by the business of writing within the system, and whose rooms "can be considered like *small branches of real nuclear power plants*" ("Pro o contro" 111; emphasis added)—true poets appear to be *a priori* and unconditionally the only possible champions of reality. Devoid of the *scrivente*'s ambition, the poet prefers the dominated classes over the dominant ones because the desire to dominate is the synthesis of the unjustified complacency that afflicts the *scriventi* and further, is "arguably the most serious vice of unreality" (114). In a world ideally devoid of such unreality, the altruistic gesture of describing the world turned on its head of the Shoah and race persecution draws attention toward Simone Weil's precepts concerning the abolition of political parties. Such a gesture would lead to a possible cessation of hypocrisy as criticized by Lévinas and permitted and

maintained by hegemonic, authoritarian language (*Totality* 21). Poetry becomes the sole possibility for a *vita activa* (active life) for the poet, as it builds the only real interaction with the Other: "attention, honesty and selflessness" are the three attributes necessary to the poet's work, for only through them can the gaze be limpid and unbiased by Power ("Pro o contro" 117). Power, in fact, removes the capacity to stoke the good that is within each of us. Art and the world coincide for Morante's poet: as such, these three attributes compose the most vital assets to her activity.

The position taken publicly by Morante on the atomic bomb is another important element in her conception of history. Similar to the positions artists took on the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 (Scarpa), the discovery and use of the atomic bomb unquestionably produced a series of innovations in terms of genre and reflections on the positive/negative outcome of progress of science in the twentieth century. As Pierpaolo Antonello notes, "[i]n Italy the image of the bomb will engage the general criticism of the idea of progress and issues of alienation and falsification imposed by capitalism and by the scientific-technical enterprise, as its *longa manus*, even exasperated by the apocalyptic tones assumed by many writers and intellectuals." The relationship between knowledge and manipulation of the real escalates in a controversy between the proponents and detractors of this discovery and potential use. There are few artists (Enrico Baj of the 1952 "Manifesto della pittura nucleare") who see atomic explosion similarly to how, 50 years before, the Futurists had considered the machine and the engine of war as a veritable explosion of visual creativity (Baj 17). Morante undoubtedly belongs to the category of those who, however, did not find any vitalistic stimulus behind this scientific discovery. The writer emphasizes instead the ethical and aesthetic danger unleashed by the invention of the bomb. In her Turin speech, Morante advances a judgment on the same events that Primo Levi will comment some 20 years later:

> Up to the moment at which I am writing, and notwithstanding the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shame of the Gulags, the useless and bloody Vietnam war, the Cambodian self-genocide, the *desaparecidos* of Argentina, and the many atrocious and stupid wars we have seen since, the Nazi concentration camp system still remains a *unicum*, both in its extent and quality. (*Drowned* 9–10; emphasis original)

Rather than declaring the uniqueness of the Nazi concentration camp system as supported by Primo Levi, Morante seems to connect the ideological matrix of the German concentration camps to its own final product, its even more deadly and feral derivation: the bomb. The

flower-bomb, as Elsa Morante will term it, reads almost as a direct correlative of another form of Power, abhorred nevertheless. Similarly, Morante rejects the bitter sarcasm with respect to the uselessness of the novel as a tool to represent truth. Modernity has charged the arts to renew their energy to compose poetry after the unspeakable atrocity of the camps. Can we actually reject such task? Morante does not stand for the sharp refusal of the Faustian novel by Carlo Levi's Casorin:

> Che romanzi volete che ci siano, dopo Auschwitz e Buchenwald? Avete visto le fotografie di quelle donne che seppelliscono piangendo dei pezzi di sapone fatti col corpo dei loro mariti e dei loro figli? Cosí è andata a finire la confusione: l'individuo scambiato col tutto. Eccola, la vostra *tranche de vie*: un pezzo di sapone. (*L'Orologio* 70; emphasis original)
>
> What, you want novels that there are after Auschwitz and Buchenwald? Have you seen the pictures of those women crying burying the pieces of soap made with the body of their husbands and their children? So it ended up the confusion: the individual exchanged with everything. Here it is, your *slice of life*: a bar of soap. (*The Watch* 56)

Carlo Levi's passage advocates Leonard Grob's reflection that "the Jews [. . .] viewed in terms of racial categories applied to them *as a whole*" (10; emphasis original) amounts to the exchange of the individual for the whole. Morante does not surrender to this bitter realization. For her, the camps, just like the bomb, find their origin in that *mediocritas* fuelled by totalitarian systems. Rather than dismantling the value of the novel, she digs further into the genre in opposition to mediocrity. *La Storia* was intended as a novel for everyone because, from within the work of art, Morante imposes a narrative space for investigation that, in turn, will reveal/unveil the motives behind the existence of evil, be it of the camps or of the bomb. The poet, it has been said, must unveil the beast of unreality. Far from being unable to produce a new lexicon and syntax designed to illustrate and comment on reality and unreality, the poet must assume for himself the evangelical task of becoming a guide for the masses who cannot see, those who live on the bottom. Far from accepting Casorin's fatalistic take on the novel (for which reality, the body and soul of a man, fades into a piece of soap) the poet must write about the *imbroglio* for the poor crowd at all times, especially if the very notion of humanity that brings human beings together has been turned into soap, and human beings know it. The poet is only such when she knows her own predestination "to expose the cheating" (Morante, "Pro o contro" 105). "The confrontation with History," Morante states, "is another necessary evidence that the *presence* in the world requires artists and the religious when they

are meant to act" ("Il beato" 136; emphasis original).[2] A poet must be a martyr, a word whose Greek etymon (*μάρτυς*) means witness. Once again, it is poets who testify to what we have not fully experienced, for they share with us the grief of those events. Art, according to Morante, holds on to this ethical value, and she accordingly does not hesitate to denounce all parties in her Turin speech. She exposes those who believe in Power as sold under the false pretense of progress with the fervor of a martyr. She also clarifies the threat behind the adjective atomic. Still misleadingly tied to its original meaning indicating a minuscule element, the adjective appears to be underestimated and misunderstood in its cataclysmic importance in the course of the twentieth century. The motivations leading science to invent the atomic bomb and its birth right in that historical period appear not to be dictated by the sheer happenstance of the progress of science but rather because this discovery complies with the needs of the Powers:

> No: everybody knows by now that in the collective history (as in the individual one) also the seeming chances are almost invariably unconscious wills (which, if one wants, they can be called *destiny*), in short, choices. Our bomb *is the flower, the natural expression of our contemporary society*, just like Plato's dialogues are to the Greek city; the Coliseum to Roman imperials; Raphael's Madonnas to Italian Humanism; gondolas to Venetian aristocracy; tarantella of some Southern rural populaces; and *the extermination camps* of the petit-bourgeois bureaucratic culture already infected by *a rage of atomic suicide*. We don't need to explain, of course, that by *petit-bourgeois culture* we signify the culture of the leading classes, represented by bourgeoisie (or bourgeois spirit) in all its degrees. In conclusion, in few and by now abused words: one could say that contemporary human beings feel *the hidden temptation of disintegrating themselves*. (Morante, "Pro o contro" 98–99; emphasis added except for "*destino*" and "*cultura piccolo-borghese*")

Morante formulates a clear equation between the Nazi extermination camps and the atomic bomb; she describes them as the Baudelairian "negative flowers"—natural expressions—of humanity (a semantic cluster devoid of meaning as far as she is concerned) and progress (another term used in a negative meaning). Arendt makes a distinction between the extermination camps and the nuclear bomb that Morante brings together instead. For Arendt, twentieth-century totalitarian governments and the "emergence within politics of the possibility of absolute physical annihilation" have managed to "threaten the very thing that, according to modern opinion, provides its ultimate justification – that is, the basic possibility of life for all of humanity" ("Introduction" 110). In theory, politics would

not give way to human self-annihilation. And yet, this it what appears to have happened under totalitarian regimes. The artist exposes an undeniable process: humanity is confronted by the (not so) "hidden temptation of disintegrating themselves" (Morante, "Pro o contro" 99), with the progressive elimination of politics intended as freedom but understood, rather, in terms of an administrative machine devoid of tasks other than bureaucracy and exercise of force against the Other. This politics is a machine that uses history as its means to keep disintegrating. The state of nirvana that petite bourgeoisie manages to reach is achieved by that very process, one that Morante calls a "disintegration of conscience" that inevitably takes place at the expense of the Other (100). For "[t]he fear of each himself, in his own mortality, does not succeed in absorbing the scandal of indifference toward the suffering of the other" (Lévinas, *On Thinking* 192). The path toward the disintegration of our conscience that allows things to destroy human beings, is defined "by organized injustice and dementia, by degrading myths, by ferocious and convulse boredom" (Morante, "Pro o contro" 100). What Morante exposes is the fact that "the bombs, the 'ogress whales' [...] are not the potential cause of disintegration, but the necessary manifestation of this disaster, already active in our conscience" (100). In speaking of things, Arendt identifies the atomic bomb as yet another thing produced by human beings that brings catastrophe rather than betterment to the world:

> We can also imagine that nuclear war, if it leaves any human life at all in its wake, could precipitate such a catastrophe by destroying the entire world. The reason human beings will then perish, however, is not themselves, but, as always, the world, or better, the course of the world over which they no longer have mastery, from which they *are so alienated* that the automatic forces inherent in every process can proceed unchecked. ("Introduction" 107; emphasis added)

If it is, as Lévinas argues, relatively unquestionable that the process of disintegration takes place at the expense of the Other, one could further argue that it also occurs at one's own expense, for human beings no longer hold a mastery of the course of the world. What Arendt calls "the monstrous development of modern means of destruction over which states have a monopoly" ("Introduction" 109) further defines Morante's distrust of Power and its calamitous productions. The world without human beings would be a contradiction in terms (Arendt, "Introduction" 108). Due to all the repercussions that this definitive annihilating tool can generate, the thing produced (the atomic bomb, that is) constitutes, for Morante's analysis of the world and Power, the ideal ideological conduit

for philosophical reflections about human beings and their apparent desire for self-destruction.

Circa 1970, Morante drafts her "Piccolo manifesto dei comunisti," containing 13 points protesting against the political situation of the time fraught by the *lotta contro i padre* and desire for social renewal. Points 3 and 4 in particular help constitute (to paraphrase the youthful Arturo) Morante's own "certezze assolute" (absolute certainties): "3. The dishonor of Man is Power; 4. The honor of Man is the freedom of the spirit (…) [understood as] the complete, true and natural state of man" (*Piccolo* 7). *La Storia*'s epigraph (one of two) represents the ideal synthesis of concept and language:

> Non c'è parola, in nessun linguaggio umano,
> capace di consolare le cavie che non sanno il
> perché della loro morte.
> (Un sopravvissuto di Hiroscima). (LS 257)
>
> There is no word in the human language capable
> of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know
> the reason for their death.
> *A survivor of Hiroshima*[3] (HIS nonnumbered page; emphasis original)

This epigraph points directly at the atomic bomb as the focus of much of the matter to come in the novel, for the words are excerpted from the oral testimony of a Hiroshima survivor. The epigraph, however, states also the impossibility of speaking—or explaining—in any "human language" (thus also eliminating the possibility of any linguistic supremacy over others) what constitutes the cause that leads humans to destroy themselves and their conscience (self-annihilation) while simultaneously terminating the Other (adding one more layer to Lévinas' understanding of the problem). Powers and ideological forces dispose of individuals' destinies as if they were wordless and speechless—but this is not quite true. Morante the poet finds the voices of the voiceless, as she approaches her task "scientifically."[4] It is hence the artists who speak for individuals, for artists can unsay stated things,[5] say unstated ones, and finally grasp how every human facet is a prosthetic element of some sort (language being the first according to Jacques Derrida). The epigraph hence synthesizes Morante's authorial intentions and sets forth much of her projectuality in the writing of this novel.

A Fundamental Uncertainty: The Narrator's Voice

La Storia artfully juxtaposes parallel subnarratives that compose a narrative transfiguration of Morante's own coming to terms with, and

understanding of, the Holocaust; the experience of the racial laws; the 1943 deportation of the Roman Jews from the Ghetto; and finally, the ultimate literal and metaphoric disintegration of human beings and their conscience via the atomic bomb. *La Storia* is a novel in which the vicissitudes Morante experienced during World War II become visible in their fundamental connection to those of the millions of faceless victims of power games. Ferdinando Camon claims that, rather than dealing with history as byproduct of politics, Morante deals with history as if it were "an extra-historical or at the most, purely biological phenomenon" (187). Ida's story is, in Camon's view, emblematic of the assimilation of history into the biological realm of hereditary illness. History is about living human beings' bio-history. But reversing Camon's statement, one could also say that racial intolerance is yet another instance of the absence of *pietas*. Evil is the Holocaust, evil "is the failure of medical science or science per se, the prelude of death, the victory of History over nature" (Camon 191). The scientificity of the annihilation of the Jews speaks to the lack of affection for the Other that starts with a self disengaged from the whole, utterly alienated.

In contrast to a clear comparison with the sense of providence Manzoni grants to his characters, devoid of shades between good and evil, Morante proposes a grey area for victims and perpetrators that finds justification in the impracticality of specific responsibilities. When even Mussolini and Hitler are inserted into the second part of the chapter *19*…, devoted to the story of the victims, and become "falliti e dei servi" (LS 307; "failures and serfs" HIS 47), we see how history's implacable forces bend every category, even those seemingly absolute ones that the two dictators should represent. In the chronicle parts of each chapter, Hitler and Mussolini are portrayed as victims of a "metahistorical situation" (Camon 191) and perform actions determined by "un sentimento vendicativo d'inferiorità" (LS 307; "a vindictive feeling of inferiority" HIS 47) equal to a biographical defect that the chronicler likens to the "ferocia del roditore incessante" (LS 307; "ferocity of a tireless rodent" HIS 47). History is an aberrant body like the great evil discussed; an evil that "sussiste sulla terra, perché questa non è che una stazione inferiore del Cosmo; anzi, ne è la penultima bassura, giacché subito sotto di essa, si trova l'Inferno" (Morante, "Il beato propagandista" 125; "survives on earth, for this is but a lower station of the Cosmos, and it is indeed its penultimate lowland, since immediately below it, is Hell").

History is made when the pity-based bond created between human beings breaks "for a moral deformation" (Camon 193). Life without history is an idyll between nature and human beings. When history breaks the cyclical and natural relationships that ensure continuity to humans,

evil unfolds in all its destructive force because the individual has lost her conscience. Only "when man truly approaches the Other [is he] uprooted from history" (Lévinas, *Totality* 52). Morante-the-narrator has lived in the *pragma* of all the historical events that form the backdrop to the novel. But we know that it is only after a temporal hiatus of 30 years that can she assume the ethical and intellectual responsibility needed to give voice to the victims of the now-infamous decisions made by those in Power. Rather than authoritarian, her voice is authoritative. This is the era of self-destruction: posthuman bodies speak through Elsa's outrage, decreeing the death of humanism as we know it. In Cary Wolfe's words, "we attend to the specificity of the human . . . acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'non human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is" (xxv). Already at the outset of the novel, in the part titled "19—," the omniscient narrator declares that, in 1900–05, "[l]e ultime scoperte scientifiche sulla struttura della materia segnano l'inizio del secolo atomico" (LS 263; "[t]he latest scientific discoveries concerning the structure of matter mark the beginning of the atomic century"; HIS 3). The atomic bomb and the extermination camps constantly refigure elements of self-annihilation (appropriate to totalitarian regimes) as both the bomb and the camps define the silencing spaces of death. In order to write of this horror, Morante needed to shift from the narrating voice she used in her previous works to the quasi-omniscient narrator of *La Storia*. Morante experienced the war along with her characters Ida and Useppe; the narrator-Elsa claims to have actually seen them while walking through the streets of Rome; Elsa felt a surge of her Jewish blood at the inception of the racial laws and upon hearing of the October 16th round up and October 18th deportation of the harmless *ghettaroli*. Particularly because of their fate, Elsa tries to give a charitable voice to her doomed characters. Despite accusations of Morante's dictatorial intentions and the effects therein on her readers—what Alberto Asor Rosa defines in terms of "monodirectionality of certain psychic reactions [. . .] whose only scope is that of moving the reader" (7)—her narrator is uncertain about many details. She is an unreliable witness insofar as the passage of time does not allow for precise recollection. An empathic mechanism prompts an emotive reaction from readers, but "moving the reader" was not Morante's explicit purpose. The personal involvement of Morante in the story of Ida, Useppe, Nino, and Davide is made palpable by those delicate remarks made by the narrator, her repeated references to having seen, having heard, those uncertain "if I remember correctly," "I am not sure," "it could be that. . . . " Elsa *ipse* is not afraid to express her own hesitation and insecurity, for these feelings—as

we know—are justified by reasons altogether different from the acidulous ones advanced by Asor Rosa. Morante is fully aware of her role as commentator and chronicler of her own time and world: "[O]ne should never forget that the novelist by his/her own nature is not only a sensitive term in the relationship between man and destiny, but also the scholar and the historian of this everlasting relationship" ("Sul romanzo" 68). Elsa *ipse* has lived through those events near her Ida and her Useppe, but she also knows that her memory—30 years later—can be fallacious.

In a period in which victims voicing their memories contributed to the shaping of historiographical discourse and diminished the superiority of history's winners; in a time in which the drowned appeared paradoxically to be the ones who were actually saved and spared by the ignominy of returning to a so-called normal life, Morante writes a novel that is most easily labeled a *romanzo delle vittime* (victims' novel). But among the victims, many are women. Several recent studies have discussed the appearance of gender and a peculiar form of feminism in *La Storia*. Drawing on the studies of historian Gianna Pomata, Cristina Della Coletta underscores the separation of sexual fields and identities that elicits the distinction between traditionally conceived historical facts pertaining to men and fiction pertaining to women. Della Coletta considers how the female component of humanity is invisible to the selective eye of the historian, omitted as women are systematically exiled from the official chronicle—an erudite history interested only in action, in failures of heads of state, leaders, ministers, and diplomats (121). In *La Storia*, the presence of women is also relevant to the problematization of the poem of history and its invention, because the narrator's statement of distrust toward historiography is pitted against a system that excludes victims, minorities, and women, hence questioning the important facts that will be transmitted to posterity. The presence of women is important because it questions authority through an authorial voice that is endowed with a precise sexual identity supported by contemporary feminist theories (Liimatta 281).

Women become the main characters and narrators of *La Storia*. They speak for the entire mass of the nonwitnessed. As it often happens in stories spoken by female voices (authors and/or narrators), the mechanism of de-legitimizing recorded history starts with the process of eliminating the authority conferred on the conventional narrative voice. In fact, if characters need (in order to exist in this narrative) to aid the *raccontatrice*, the latter will never take advantage of their unconditional trust. In extradiegetic narratives in the third person, the so-called omniscient narrator occupies an imaginary space. It is an imaginary locale in the sense that her space is not in any way implicated in the plot: she tells us

what happens to the characters of a story in which she does not appear as an actor/actress and is thusly not engaged in the actantial diagram. The creation of this role becomes a stylization, a kind of free rhetorical zone in which the narrator recounts events, actions, emotions, as if they had been duly observed, but not lived. Her account gains importance without a precise spatial axis in which to place such an unreliable, though omniscient, witness/narrator of events.

A consequence of both contemporary alienation and the legacy of the nineteenth-century novel is that we are actually willing to believe what the witness says in his omniscience, which is authoritative for the duration of the story. When we speak properly of fictional narrative, and not of a mere narration, the codification of narrative conventions reveals the narrator's own failure, as the implied author is himself a construction that fails to explain the practical act of writing—the author's involvement, that is, in the process of the story behind the novel and that partly distinguishes it from a more generally written narrative. If, as claimed by Hayden White, the role of the writer is, as for the historian, to tell stories, the diversity of their approaches lies in the sympathetic sharing of the writer versus the position of the historian. The impersonality of the writer proves to be practically unworkable: what is needed is "un *io* recitante che gli valga da alibi ("Sul romanzo" 54; "a playing *I* that might become the writer's alibi). With *alibi*—a word very dear to Morante—the reality the writer invents turns into a new truth. Morante dismantles the structure of credibility of the historical novel from this point of view as well. From the actual (or presumed) certainty of the events, the narrator does not inherit any definite information to disseminate, nor, for that matter, could she do otherwise because she rejects official history narratives. The voice in the novel emerges as a symbol of the uncertainty of the same writer, who is aware of intentions and credibility, putting this in this novel at risk. Meanwhile, *La Storia* has a female narrator, and her belonging to a specific gender—confirmed several times in the course of the novel—necessitates dismantling the binarism as outlined by Della Coletta.

The fundamental uncertainty of the narrator gives rise to doubts about the foundational fact of an extradiegetic narrative and to the postulated nonparticipation in the facts that an omniscient narrator recounts. Her recurring references to having seen, glimpsed, felt, heard, people, events, or popular songs mentioned in the *romanzo degli Altri* (novel of Others) suggest, in fact, the thesis of her emotional and sympathetic presence in the history of Ida and David. In the polyphony of the novel, with its carefully planned mix of voices and direct and indirect free speech of the various characters, the narrating voice does not tower over the others. The

ideological stance behind her voice (behind her entire project of writing, that is) makes her prone to sharing the destinies of her characters. Her voice both monitors and requires authority, yet remains flexible—almost humble—as it listens to those of the vanquished. Her voice is placed on equal footing with all others, making Nora's, Giuseppe's, or Davide's voice just as credible as hers. As a consequence of her empathy for her characters—all victims—an uncertain pace marks the progress of the narrative. When Useppe sees the explicit pictures from the camps (one of which depicts the experiments done to a young Jew) in an illustrated weekly, the unreliable narrator proceeds awkwardly in the narration of such traumatic event, "[*r*]*icordo* che quel giorno era domenica; e il mese, *mi pare* fosse giugno. Seguí, la mattina dopo un caso simile a quello antecedente dell'edicola, e che parve lì per lì, altrettanto insignificante e labile" (LS 690; emphasis added; "*I remember* that day was Sunday, and the month, *I think* it was June. He followed up the next morning, a case similar to that prior to the newsstand, and that seemed, for the moment, just as insignificant and ephemeral" HIS 416; emphasis added). The narrator admits her own lacuna, does not know what Useppe would have imagined upon seeing those images that depict an evil too great. The pornography of violence of those four images—carrying shoes, kippas, starving children's faces, little men reduced to "burattini" (puppets)—produces an effect that the narrator will never explain in full, doing so partly out of compassion for illiterate Useppe:

> Resterà per sempre *impossibile* sapere che cosa il povero analfabeta Useppe avrà potuto capire in quelle fotografie senza senso. Rientrando, pochi secondi appresso, Ida lo trovò che le fissava tutte insieme, come fossero una immagine sola; e credette di riconoscergli nelle pupille lo stesso orrore che gli aveva visto in quel mezzogiorno alla Stazione Tiburtina, circa venti mesi innanzi. All'accostarsi della madre, i suoi occhi si levarono a lei, vuoti e scolorati, come quelli di un ciecolino. E Ida ne risentí un tremito per il corpo, quasi che una grossa mano la scuotesse. Ma con una voce sottile e dolce per non inquietarlo, gli disse, al modo che si usa coi pupi ancora piú piccoli di lui:
>
> "Gettala via, quella cartaccia. È brutta!" (LS 692–93; emphasis added)

> It will be forever *impossible* to know what poor illiterate Useppe may have understood of those meaningless photographs. Coming home a few seconds later, Ida found him staring at them all together, as if they were a single image; and she thought she recognized in his pupils the same horror she had seen there that noon at the Tiburtina station, about twenty months earlier. At his mother's approach, he raised his eyes to her, drained and discolored, like a little blind child's. And Ide felt a shudder run through

> her whole body, as if a huge had were shaking he. But with a soft, gentle voice, so as not to upset him, she said, as you would have spoken to kids much younger than he:
>
> "Throw away that nasty paper. It's ugly!" (HIS 418; emphasis added)

The limitations of the narrating voice are confirmed by the declared impossibility (of which the narrator certainly makes no mystery) of comprehending the impact of those frames on Useppe. Her effort to portray (if nothing else) some motions of the child's soul and that of his mother, tense for the pain of her son, are moving; trying to tell everything does not necessarily mean succeeding in one's effort,[6] and Elsa *ipse* accomplishes the omniscient narrator's task without its conventional arrogance. The paradox of the absence of an effective narratorial omniscience—as outlined by John Brenkman in his "On Voice" (288)—is overlooked by many critics in their effort to impose schematic categories that disregard Morante's expressed wish to subvert the same element at the center of this novel: history as a monolithical and monological text. The limits of authorial knowledge/experience become constitutive elements of the characters, and consolidate the complicity between the narrative voice and the narrated characters. Irony and complicity put the empirical existence of the writer's communicative action and composition of the novel into the public realm. The pragmatism of the empathetic author defeats the rules of narrative theory. The sexual identity of the narrator of history is of strategic interest: what contemporary philosophy and history define in terms of empathy for the victims engenders the need for Morante as a writer (and as a mother of her children/characters) to reveal her love for Ida, Nora, even for Gunther, and maximally for Useppe. These motherly creations prompt her to build an empathic scaffold for the entire novel, supported especially through her narrating voice. The war appears to Gunther, a German Arturo, as "a sconclusionata algebra" (LS 276; "a vague algebra" HIS 16) with neither rules nor sense, but it is up to a sympathetic narrator to decide how to translate the growing confusion in the 17-year-old boy from Dachau. By virtue of the paradox Brenkman explains, the narrator cannot be "an omniscient and completely detached narrator ('biographically') from the narrated matter, whose source we are not told" (Ravanello 96). In fact, unlike what Barilli writes, it hardly seems that Morante "spoke from a really high culture and wealthy social condition" ("Lacrime" 9); rather, she embraces the disenfranchised.

The autobiographical nature of Elsa *ipse*'s narrative makes *La Storia* not simply a story (a chronicle of the events suffered by the characters) but, through the interstices left by the main narratives, it also constructs the story of an Italian woman of Jewish origins who is witness to a good

part of the very story she narrates. The indeterminacy of the ellipses by which the novel begins and ends determines a lack of temporality for its incipit (and ending): it is "without beginning" from this point of view (Ravanello 113) because the intent is to refer to a broader sense of history—that is, an endless story of discrimination. Between those two points we have the author and *raccontatrice* of six years of tragedies: Elsa becomes structurally coparticipant in a collective memory—a double focalization in Genette's terms—which she decides to vocalize, writing from a distance that assimilates the living with the dead. The text is thusly built, often playing on the antithesis between the thoughts of *La Storia's* characters, all dead, and the "truth" presented in official documents, such as the simple ad in a newspaper documenting the death of Nora, or the ads that address the national racial laws. The narrator's in-text comments confirm the close link between the author and the narrated matter. The position of a complex and anomic focalization system that forces the greatest mimetic effort coexists with a narrator which, in her statements of uncertainty, seems to lead in a direction opposite to that of declared confidence of the conventional extradiegetic narrator. For the treatment of this story, she advocates the antithesis of realism in defense of reality that only novelistic invention can offer—one in which the anthropological memory is shaped by the adoption of a point of view capable of controlling every event and character, but moveable by compassion.

If seen from this perspective, *La Storia* becomes a wide pseudodiegetic analepsis of the stories of various characters the narrator declares to (1) have actually seen (as in the case of Ida), (2) have never met but have heard about, or (3) to have known thanks to photos: "Conosco Nora solo da una sua fotografia" (LS 316; "Nora I know only from a photograph" HIS 55). In this way our narrator quickly sketches the character of Nora Almagià, the mother of Ida.[7] Of Nino's nightly vagaries she says, "[q]uesta, naturalmente, non è che una ricostruzione parziale dei misteriosi vagabondaggi di Ninnarieddu in quelle notti; né io saprei darne altre notizie" (LS 411; [t]his, naturally, is only a partial reconstruction of the mysterious wanderings of Ninnarieddu on those nights, nor can I give any further information" HIS 148). In a similar example the narrator concedes, "[n]on ho saputo controllare l'ubicazione precisa di quell'osteria" (LS 301; "I have been unable to discover the exact location of that tavern" HIS 41) with respect to an incident involving Giuseppe, Ida's father, when, on a given night, was not allowed to use the term "Jews" in one of his raving anarchist tirades. We are constantly presented with a storyteller extremely involved in the telling of stories that we can assimilate to Elsa, a Roman Jewish woman displaced during 1943, yet tenaciously attached to her city.

This monumental memory, the collective impetus to the perpetual remembrance of so much of the suffering that the narrator collects from the stories of her characters, is opposed to oblivion and forgetfulness, and seeks empathy for her characters so that Elsa's personal history is also not forgotten. She, too, participated in this *Zeitroman*, a story that is committed to clarify for its readers what was initially not clear to even those who performed the act of telling, a story which logically struggles against the logic of the conventional omniscient narrator. A return to Neorealism is impossible, just as it is impossible for *La Storia*'s narrator to retrieve nineteenth-century narratological models: the ensuing is a kind of reality that Elsa marks with her own distinctive voice.

The kindness of Elsa tries to create for us a portrait of real individuals, to capture Barthes' *punctum* that, in the photographs picks up the lives of those mothers and innocent children who died for reasons entirely unrelated to them. Despite the character Davide's proximity to Elsa for their shared love of storytelling, he is not synonymous with her. If anything, Davide is an object of observation, not a real interlocutor. Davide's is just one of the voices that the narrator subsumes as she interprets his alienation. Readers who encounter his otherwise unreadable misery would doom Davide to failure if it were not for the help of this merciful narrator. The narrator speaks in a participatory, equitable way of the voices that make up this crowd of unheard faceless individuals; she takes affectionate care of their aphasia.

Particularly in this respect, *La Storia* cultivates different ambitions than the chronicle found in Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943*. While Morante recognizes it as an important point of reference, its results are hardly comparable to those of her imposing narrative. Debenedetti's narrator in *16 ottobre 1943* tries to keep readers at a certain distance because Debenedetti aims to establish a lucid story, despite the immediacy with which the critic decided to publish it. In *La Storia*, the narrator instead becomes a willing accomplice and participant in everyone's existence, beginning with Ida and her blissful ignorance that does not allow her to defend herself against Gunther's awkward sexual attack. Only Elsa the narrator has the gift to unmask the beast of unreality. If for Rosa this narrator function is treated as a questionable form of arrogance and authorial exhibitionism ("La <<storia senza seguito>>" 32), I contend that our characters could hardly explain themselves except through and thanks to Elsa's gracious help—and herein lies the point of *La Storia*: the logic behind the action of the narrator depends on her being a witness and being perpetually responsible for her characters in a display of energy in which responsibility toward the Other comes before any other commitment.[8] Language is an ethical commitment that drives the self beyond

a humanistic kind of identity politics. Lévinas argues for a humanism disengaged from the traditional notion of the unitary subject that accepts a moral obligation. Subjectivity is thereby perceived as responsibility in the face the death of the Other.

In the course of *La Storia*'s narrative—the overtones of which become increasingly mournful and show little hope for the fate of all humanity as if to declare the end of humanism—the novel examines human existence in the absence of *pietas,* when humanity lives in the absence of a tangible asset and manifests the need for an ethics practiced by many and close to everyday individual. It is on this difficult ethical and aesthetic path that the omniscient narrator leads us to a territory wherein the art of the novel can sketch out the plot of an ethical understanding that never departs from what Arendt understood as political action. Morante's authorial choices recall, in part, the refusal to think about the Shoah as a sacrifice. Distant from the concept of community purification as it is understood by René Girard, such a catastrophe appears to the writer as something utterly useless, and therefore even more tragic; death can do nothing to purify society.

The exercise of earthly and human justice, flawed and relativizing, does not suffice in the case of Morante's disenfranchised, since the author's work of attempted mediation is targeted toward an imperative: to imagine what happened, to infer how the Holocaust had affected those who could not speak of this tragedy despite the fact that some physically survived it. Morante appeals to a sense of justice that is not of this world, but to which each of us should always aspire. Although the transformation of *historia rerum gestarum* develops according to the well- coordinated complex of binary oppositions, the narrator—we know—proposes an uncertain reading of her *intestimoniati* (unwitnessed) characters to which she lends her compassionate voice. Her own drowned are victims of their own genealogical trees (sinister forebodings of disintegration and annihilation—an intensely Morantian attribute) that decree membership (or a lack thereof) to the *Meisterrasse*. Thereby oppressed by public history as well as by their private ones, her drowned roam the streets of poor neighborhoods so proximate and yet so remote from the monumental glory of ancient Rome. The ghetto, Testaccio, San Lorenzo: these areas are adjacent to the center, and yet there is an unbridgeable spatial distance between the characters and the seat(s) of Power. Previous critical assessments of the novel often fail to record how *La Storia*'s rich texture hosts events and situations informed by the eeriness of racist Rome, palpable when Ida walks the streets of a ghetto from which she feels irresistibly drawn into a movement that is the mirror image of her mother Nora's desperate attempt to go to Palestine by crossing the sea (and drowning).

In this system of characters, two figures, Ida Ramundo and Davide Segre, are emblematic of the two main situations of Italian Jewish reality, the poor and the affluent. Halfway through the novel, harmless Ida will find the strength to whisper to Signora Di Segni, "*Io pure sono ebrea*" (LS 539; emphasis original; "*I am Jewish, too*" HIS 267; emphasis original). The narrator anchors the character of Ida to her state of subjection, whether she depicts her in her everyday humble life or in the oneiric dimension of her dreams/nightmares. Ida is victim of the entire system of Power, which has instilled in her fears and shame of being half-Jewish. Carlo Vivaldi, alias Davide Segre, comes to Rome attracted by the partisan struggle and by the anonymity possible in this city. To get to his basement residence, one has to pass under the *Porta Portese* where Antonio, the protagonist of Vittorio De Sica's 1948 *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*), stops an old man to inquire about the thief of his bicycle. Davide will die, undone by drugs: the modern era arrives with the scene of him lying on the floor of his Portuense basement. A *shlimazl*, a man undone by the events and with a delirious story of an experience in a factory, which he has completely made up to convince himself to be a part of the class for which he wanted to live and fight. In contrast to the Weilian model, Davide's experiment is reduced to a grotesque farce, like the one highlighted in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and its tragedy of the mechanization of labor. Davide is a victim, a figure perhaps even more tragic than Ida. Yet all of Morante's characters are victims of the tragic scandal called history: a scandal in which a man called Davide, like the star and like the King (just like Arturo), becomes a grotesque parody of what he could have become, had not the war swept away his family and, along with it, his very reason to exist.

Predestination of the Jews?

La Storia provides, among other things, details of the deportation of the Jews from the Roman ghetto. The narrator provides in great detail, elements of the disquieting concern that will lead Nora to madness in relation to her difference. Just like Elsa's mother, Nora lived away from her native town and did not recognize the importance of her faith. Yet, Nora's subconscious love for her religion will lead her down to the beach and to her drowning. Emblematic of the Jewish visionary tradition (akin to Vilma, the visionary whose warning will remain unheard in the ghetto and many others), Nora appears to also be indexed to a more general and equally threatening madness: the passive adhesion of the Italians to

the racial laws of 1938. These were laws anticipated by a systemic vacating of the everyday Italian citizen's ethical life while the Fascist regime would propose, in their stead, rallies and falsely prophetic speeches. As Ravanello points out, the ellipses in the opening of the novel constitute typographical evidence to advance the idea that the beginning of the narration can start at any date of the last ten thousand years (96–113). The beginning date of 1941 (albeit with those ellipsis) is a mere reference, for, in Ida's case, the point of chronological reference is to be dated (at least) to the advent of the racial laws. The violence suffered by Ida originates in the death of her mother Nora, in the announcement of the laws, and *then* in their enactment. As if to confirm the importance of those points in the novel's incipit, the declaration of the racial laws in November 1938 is extremely central and is discussed in the passages dedicated to Nora Almagià and to Ida's second pregnancy, both in the retelling of the deportation of the Roman ghetto and in the return of some of those deported citizens. Texts like Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943* and Robert Katz's *Black Sabbath* cannot constitute the principal axis of Morante's narrative as has been previously argued (Sodi, "Whose Story? 141–53) for Morante's concern is altogether different. A cursory reading of Morante's preparatory drafts reveals how the historical sources for the book construct a map far more complex than that outlined in Debenedetti's and Katz's texts. By granting the dignity of historical source to Debenedetti's chronicle, which aspired only to be a detailed recount of events (with gaps and inaccuracies), Morante confirms the importance that she bestowed upon literariness: that uncanny ability to unveil the lie. *La Storia* becomes a fusion of potential citations to put a face and give a voice to her unwitnessed. In fact, unlike Giacomo Debenedetti's reluctance to design characters in his chronicle sequencing the events that led to the deportation of October 16, 1943, Morante develops typologies of the unwitnessed. Morante's ability to resurrect the memory and the voices of the populace of the Roman ghetto in their Judeo-Roman pidgin, manifests an aesthetic accomplishment that goes beyond chronicle. Jewishness for Debenedetti was a private matter "of close intimacy" (*Otto ebrei* 80–81). Morante, on the other hand, considered her Jewishness alien to her own upbringing until she suddenly discovered it as an intrinsic element of her own being. It may be reasonable to think that a Morantian attempt to understand her own identity lurks within the muffled cry of Ida. Morante understands how the ghetto is everything for the Jews, representing physical protection from external attacks, which, paradoxically, lead to their exclusion, as Giacoma Limentani explains in her autobiographical novels.

The ambitious design behind the creation of *La Storia* aims to represent how to be Jews in Italy, how to fill the gap between an actual society that does not accept those who are different and one that considers itself, quite falsely, a tolerant society. This society is apathetic and negligent to the point of fatalistically accepting the racial laws and the various ordinances with which the Fascist police ordered the roundup of all the Jews. Elsa symbolically goes to Tiburtina station, as does the fictional character Ida on October 18, 1943. With Ida, Elsa picks up the note penned by Effrati, who was able to pass through the door of the carriage of cattle car, and, after some time, makes it to the door of the ghetto. For a long time Ida/Elsa does not care to look for the recipient of the note for "[r]iposto nella sua borsa" (LS 620; "[i]n her purse, there was still that note" HIS 346). Ida's fear of not finding Celeste Di Segni, or better, Ida's fear that Celeste Di Segni remembered what she had whispered in her ear (for being Jewish was the third and most terrible secret of her mother) marks the distance Elsa needs to cover to reconquer the ghetto. Thanks to Ida's declaration, Elsa can finally go to the ghetto.

In searching for Effrati, and wanting to deliver that almost illegible note, Ida/Elsa wants to testify, in writing, after a considerable period of time, both for those who have no longer returned as well as for the survivors. Similarly, back in 1935, the little girl pleads for the dead left without light in the temple. The dead of "Il ladro dei lumi" emerge from the walls of the temple to ask for the light of the memory of the living, while the narrator remembers having seen when she was six years old a man stealing the oil from the lamps to the dead: the mother who cursed her daughter in solemn Hebrew, "volgendo verso il Tempio quella faccia disfatta" ("Il ladro" 1, 1409; "turning that beaten face") in "Il ladro dei lumi" is none other than the Jewish Anna of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, who the French nuns will permanently exclude from their Catholic world. No paradise is promised to her. With the sacrament of communion, little Elisa is officially separated from her mother Anna who, marred by the original sin, "giaceva fra i reprobi, in compagnia delle donne barbare e delle giudee" (*Menzogna e sortilegio* 586; "would lay with the reprobates, in the company of barbaric women and of the Jewesses").[9] Anna will never be able to teach her daughter the comforts of religion. Such is the curse of Elsa's lineage. "E quella ragazzina fui io, o forse mia madre, o forse la madre di mia madre. [...] E quella ragazzina è sempre là, che interroga spaurita nel suo mondo incomprensibile, sotto l'ombra del giudice, fra i muti" ("Il ladro" 1, 1414; "And that little girl was me, or perhaps my mother, or perhaps the mother of my mother. [...] And that little girl is always there, frightened in her incomprehensible world, under the shadow of the judge, amongst the silent ones").

Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt: Ethics of *La Storia*

Criticism often considers Simone Weil's *Cahiers* as *La Storia's* philosophical backbone. The *Cahiers* represent for Morante an undeniable source of reflection, revealed particularly in the way the narrator molds Davide Segre's character through his monologues (specific intertextual instances expressed in discourse passages and emphasis). Segre's biographical elements as an affluent and assimilated Jew also carry striking similarities with Weil's biography. For D'Angeli, Weilian readings motivate the initiation of Jewish thought in the Roman writer. The ideological influence that Morante draws from Weil shapes her understanding of personal guilt and her intolerance for political systems, "that stubborn putting oneself in position of scapegoat for crimes that did not belong to her, but that she wanted to take upon herself [...] her notorious intolerance [...] for any system of institutional power, be it secular or religious of her anarchism in short," caused a rejection of "a moral kind" (D'Angeli, "La pietà di Omero" 83). However, I would like to mitigate the overt connection (almost a calque) between the French philosopher and Morante *via* Segre that D'Angeli proposes on the philological basis of the underlined passages of Morante's copies of Weil's *Cahiers*. Despite its relevance, Simone Weil's thought cannot autonomously support the entire weight of the ethical apparatus behind *La Storia*. Morante's charges against corrupt and totalitarian political systems that have forged the values of Western traditions also rely on Hannah Arendt's *Vita Activa* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. If the philosophy of Arendt seems to oppose that of Weil and to develop apparently opposite assessments about the concept of power as of the essence of totalitarianism, they nevertheless focus on similar issues in much of their writings. Arendt's attention to the racist economic bio-political ideology of National Socialism reveals the fundamental step forward taken from Weil, for whom the concentration camps appear like modern interpretations of the gladiatorial games in Rome (Weil, "Réflexions" 51). Arendt exposes the terms of one of the most misunderstood thinking processes of self-elimination of the masses within the totalitarian system: while many think that totalitarianism consists in inculcating convictions, the reality demonstrates that its scope is to specifically destroy the ability of forming of any (conviction). Her thought is strikingly similar to Morante's own representations of abused (and powerless) masses under Fascism. Those who think that totalitarianism consists in inculcating beliefs are mistaken, for Morante and Arendt both posit that what totalitarianism actually pursues is specifically the right to destroy the faculty of forming any beliefs at all. I argue the necessity of referring to Arendt's thought to better comprehend both Morante's

ethical impulse as well as the theoretical constraint put on her authorial voice by juxtaposing it (via Weil) to only Davide's voice.

Connecting Weil to Arendt in the philosophical structure of *La Storia* provides a complete understanding of Morante's intended message. The Weil-Arendt line illustrates how, for Morante, the persecution of the Jews in the camps constitutes a direct result of the all-encompassing power—indeed, a precise means and end—of modern society, and anticipates how, soon after, the atomic bomb would blossom into another negative flower of humanity. The annihilation of the Jews represents the most physical consequence of all totalitarianisms, for never before the camps was the denial of the presence of the Other so violently demonstrated: the camps stated once and for all the ablation of any historical-political matrix as a philosophy for accepting the proximity of the Other. For Arendt, thought is born from the events of lived experience, which guides ethical orientation and focuses it on the experience of the unacceptable. Finding forms of action for infinitely malleable human beings, so that they proceed toward a nontotalitarian world, is Arendt's main aim. Weil's inquiry points to the conditions necessary for a well-organized society, but they are narrower than Arendt's prescriptions. For Weil, civilized society is marked by the end of labor oppression first, and the locating of spirituality in labor later. Both thinkers base their observations in the criticism of society on the exploration of forms of human activity; the distinction between them, if anything, is created by the type of *activity* chosen: factory work in the Weilian system and its antithesis, social action in Arendt's system.

Regarding the concept of power, both Weil and Arendt share uncertainty in the face of the banality of evil. For Weil, work signifies the victory over the self: the substance of work concerns, in practice, the cancellation of the inessential ego, while in work Arendt sees only its constrictions: the limitations that work applies to the active process. Arendt's *laborans animal* gives himself to work out of strict necessity, without hope of spiritual enrichment: "[T]he activity of labor does not need the presence of others" (*Vita Activa* 182). The work distracts from the real business. Drawing from these differences, if we think of Davide Segre, we notice how Weilian thought is hardly sufficient to comment on his failure and complete alienation in his factory experiment. His example utterly refutes the possibility of an answer arising from the spiritual benefits of work: his is a thorough defeat. Hypostatizing then, as D'Angeli does—reading Davide's character as exclusively shaped by Weil's writings—is equivalent to denying Davide's responses to Weilian reflections on social constraints. I claim that, in his failure as a worker, Davide symbolizes not the stained and irreversible condition of the bourgeois class, but the theme of the undisputed ability of the Jew to think and to read. Davide

exemplifies the ability of the individual who, by compulsion and atavistic religious choice, makes the book their only real homeland. Devoid of a concrete approach to existence, Davide's circumstances appear strikingly similar to the Jewish fathers' inabilities to cope with real-life events as remembered by their daughters (Mina and Lia) in the chapter on the *bambine* of Rome. Physical work does not seem to be relevant to Davide's realm; it is contrary to the delirium of words in which he literally sinks deeper and deeper, until rising to the surface will no longer be possible, hence his suicide by overdose (of words).

Given the general nature of Arendt's observation that necessity is an intrusive moment in the system of human relationships, we can posit that she accords great value to action that opposes work, the latter being an element whose results are, ultimately, fairly predictable. Action remains the only activity that corresponds to the condition proper to human beings according to the Aristotelian dictates. In contrast to the Weilian work code, Arendt opposes the logic of action as the element solely responsible for social integration. For Arendt, action is creation (including also aesthetic creation) and not the mere application of rules. While action requires the word, work amounts to nothing but to a phase of a process. Interacting implies interlocution: action at once becomes practice and lexicon. The opposition between work and action is hence evaluated differently by the two philosophers. For Weil, not confronting one's own needs is a conduit for alienation, and thought is assimilated to knowledge and methodical reflection. This is contrary to the assimilation of the action that implies, instead, a methodical activity conducted by knowledge. For Arendt, the terms of discourse are practically reversed, because knowledge is different from action: to know does not mean thinking. If the human condition is a pluralistic one, in the existence of collectiveness thereby assumes great importance the faculty of judgment because it is in intersubjectivity that individuals (putting themselves in the place of another) find their representability. Like work, knowledge is instead a relationship conducted by force in solitude. If reasoning and work are characterized as expressions of necessity, action and judgment characterize the ability of the individual to appear and be someone only if situated in the midst of others. This is a situation that prohibits alienation; it is precisely the ability to think in the contingency that constructs Arendt's ethics.

Power is equivalent to its instruments and is endowed with instability: this is the instrumental conception of Weil's idea of a nonoppressive power. As such, under what conditions will political action finally be similar to work? This is what Robert Chenavier defines as the "paradoxe weilien" (155), which is a paradox to the extent that this unreliable

justification of politics as an art seems to contradict the terms of its end as sought by Weil. Should a power that is methodically exercised then not free us from oppression? (Chenavier 156). For Weil, "the fine art of the dictator [...] reveals the essence of politics" (Chenavier 156). This is a reason for which, not surprisingly, Weil praises Machiavelli. The fact that the Prince possessed such an army was, for him, a fact of life and played a role that was certainly not negligible in shaping the success of his actions.[10] Arendt operationalizes a distinction between power and domination, one in which power corresponds to the attitude of man ready to act in a concrete way. The political sphere differs from that of production because of the opposition between action and praxis applied to the material. Consequently, for Arendt, there is nothing less political than a tyrant, for his eventual domination marks the dissolution of the political sphere. Weil gives in to the lure of the theories of Machiavelli—in which contempt for human beings (as understood in a general sense) is a necessity inherent in the art of politics—without understanding the contingent factors that determined his words. Everything in Machiavelli's world could be considered transitory, something entrusted (out of convenience and tradition) to a *fortuna* that he refuses to unite to destiny, and compares, on the contrary, to a raging river that must, and can be corrected with the shorelines; the virtue of the Prince resides in the taming of this river. Arendt does not consider contempt for humans as essential to the art of government. Rather, the contempt is outlined as a sign of distrust toward action, as a will to prevent action from playing its role in human affairs. Methodical action is represented in its essence by the victory of difficulties by implementing solutions. If the art of governing would allow one to find effective solutions, then one would find perfection in action. But for Arendt perfection in action would mean the dissolution of all politics, since art is never the art of becoming masters of situations and human beings in the way that we become masters of nature. In contrast to Weil, who sees precursors of Hitler in Greek and Roman history, Arendt argues that totalitarianism started with the French revolution and represents a radical novelty in its extinction of the very essence of history, of innovation (Esposito 86). Totalitarian methods of domain crystallize elements already known by tradition as terror and extermination on the basis of a principle that exceeds imagination and defy analysis. But for Arendt, what is remarkable or innovative in totalitarianism is the feeling of futility of human beings within its system, a futility perennially symbolized by those bodies burned and their ashes used as fertilizer in Auschwitz. Arendt makes the difference between political action and politics as totalitarian violence quite clear: "[P]olitics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationship" ("Introduction" 95). Violence impedes the

process of exchange that constitutes the fabric of a political society and political action can have meaning only when it is not a concrete act. The sense of political action is thus intrinsic to the action itself; it happens while performing, almost like poetry. The origin of freedom for Arendt remains action, an action devoid of violence since true anarchy, according to the philosopher, and certainly according to Morante, can not admit violence. Accordingly, the negation of power is the purest anarchist idea, and power and violence are one and both against it. The argument behind *La Storia* then does not involve the collective sharing of power, but rather reveals the destructive nature of power. The novel as a whole shows how the political space sought by Arendt—a space that is possible but is currently corrupted by progress and science—is taken away forever from the "Felici Pochi" (Happy Few) of the *Mondo salvato dai ragazzini*. That space in which the Jewish emancipatory aspirations could merge with the desire for self-determination of the people in general (Arendt's thesis sometimes coincides with Gramsci's thesis on the emancipation of all Italians, Jews included) seems destined to unreality rather than fruition.

To conclude, the pervasive scandal of linear history compels Morante to create a voice for the voiceless. The point of view—another technical aspect of the novel—is carefully chosen to explain the impasse of having to defend individuals who never quite asked to be defended but that Elsa *ipse* felt needed to be. Morante's is a point of view that belongs to both herself as well as to the collectivity she represents. Her most arduous task was to build a comprehensible plot out of an unjustifiable trauma. It was a subjective, personal trauma with respect to what the author saw before her eyes, offended like Useppe by the war pictures at the newsstand. An artist, a witness, a profound listener of human dramas, Morante brings testimony to it: "More than a work of poetry (and thank God, this one is) my novel *La Storia* wants to be an accusation against all fascisms of the world. It is also a desperate and urgent question to everyone for a possible collective reawakening" ("Intervento" 731).

The fundamental convergence between Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt can be found in the concept of uprooting (*déracinement*). Deprived of a place in the world, human beings can be submitted to forced labor, deported, and treated as nonentities, as if their community had never existed. Once uprooted from both their humus and their habitat, oppression becomes a mere job to some. In Arendt's theory, *déracinement* constitutes the indispensable foundation of all totalitarianisms: unreality consumes all. In Useppe's case, the "orrore sterminato del suo sguardo" (LS 544; "endless horror of his gaze" HIS 272) reifies the horror of the train full of deportees from Rome, from which the sound of death was originating. Useppe's gaze transmits his physical response to this scene:

the beat of his little heart becomes so strong that his mother Ida mistakes it for the noise of the train.

If history is a human path and also part of the very nature of human beings, one then needs to find evidence of the innocence of Morante's characters. One needs "a reduction to the natural degree of all characters" (Camon 190) that can be useful to prove their innocence in a newly found human naiveté. In this perspective, if naiveté is the opposite of philosophy, as Lévinas states (*Totality* 21), we can assume that philosophical systems are enemies of Morante's characters because they force human existence into a pattern that are less natural than the biological. When Italo Calvino explains in his letter to Morante what he meant by "la contemporaneità" of her "encyclopedic" *La Storia* (1246), he aligns critical evidence to contrast Barilli's accusations of the novel's anachronism. Calvino understood Morante's ethical necessity to state the existence of something traumatic, perhaps unutterable, "unknown in our action and language" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4), and express it with a gesture of profound charity apt to comfort the others whose faces cannot be forgotten. Morante restitutes innocence to her characters: she burdens herself with the weight of knowledge and saves them from it.

In *La Storia*, the narrator reflects on the instinctive need of human beings to make sense of their surroundings. "Ogni individuo, pure il meno intelligente e l'infimo dei paria, fino da bambino si dà una qualche spiegazione del mondo. E in quella si adatta a vivere. E senza di quella, cadrebbe nella pazzia" (LS 758–59; "Every individual, even the least intelligent, the lowest of outcasts, from childhood on gives himself some explanation of the world. And with it he manages to live. And without it, he would sink into madness" HIS 482).The need to understand the world and one's place in it is what Morante has long considered the artist's duty. Literature constantly renews its innovative possibilities with respect to historiography because, while "[a]ll knowledge involves [...] a certain amount of molding and shaping of pre-existing material" (Korhonen 16), literature offers us patterns that makes us think in terms of if only we could have a role in the stories it depicts. Because of the relative freedom of the literary word, one should review the very use of the word fiction. The use of imagination in fiction does not mean an invention out of nothing—illusion, lie—since "all fiction selects and combines elements coming from the real world, and the reader fills in all the gaps that exist in all literary texts according to his or her own experiences in real life" (17). As a consequence, "there is no fiction that cannot be interpreted as an allegory of the world" (17). The artist's duty—if he or she truly cares for humanity—lies in making the difference between fiction as a lie (as

unreality) and fiction as poetry in speaking about the world. Only this can save us from the negative flowers we ourselves produce. Morante's portrayal of the subalterns as the just, and of the powerful as the harbingers of injustice, confirms her faith in the necessity of art for the betterment of society.

Part III

Helena Janeczek: Understanding Jewish Memory from *Lezioni di tenebra* to *Le rondini di Montecassino*

7

The Burden of Memory: *Lezioni di tenebra*

Born in 1964 in Germany to Polish Jewish parents, writer Helena Janeczek considers Italy in all respects to be her adopted country and her central point of cultural reference. Janeczek is an emblematic exponent of second-generation Holocaust writers in that her artistic and public engagement typifies the ways in which Shoah children's search for identity shapes itself: initially as a sociopsychological path of recovery and then moves onto larger epistemological venues. Examining her literary contribution to Shoah representation means also further investigating representative limits precisely because, by writing of the disaster, Janeczek presents aspects of writing the imagined.

In what follows, I examine the modalities of the aesthetic response that Janeczek offers to the challenges of Shoah representation in her 1997 *Lezioni di tenebra* (Lessons of Darkness); in her re-systematization of Jewish thought, drawn up at a conference held in Palermo in 2002; and, finally, in her novel that won the 2010 Premio Zerilli-Marimò, *Le rondini di Montecassino* (*The Swallows of Montecassino*). The partial (and painful) processing of the traumatic experience of a lifetime spent in the presence of a past that was not talked of fuels *Lezioni di tenebra*. *Lezioni* is a "novel" that threads the personal trauma of a mother to her daughter in a narrative paradigm seemingly common to second-generation survivors. For this epistemological path, Janeczek makes use of a dual memory: both her own and that of her mother, in her various identities of Nina, Franziska and Franciszka (LT 70). The process by which the daughter convinces her mother to reenact her trauma in a painful recollection informs the book. The mother's negative waves envelop her daughter, as in a domino effect that is unhinged and understood only by the retelling of her trauma, which in turn, affects both women. Janeczek's effort to render this agonizing set of Russian nesting dolls produces unique

stylistic features that subvert conventional forms of autobiographical and memorial writing.

Five years after *Lezioni di tenebra*, in a speech she gives in Palermo, Janeczek questions the identity of those parameters tied to the notion of Children of the Holocaust. Janeczek places this expression within a social context that is extended to the community and to public memory that remembers not only the Shoah but a message of joy that also exists in the history of the Jewish people as well. By gaining the wisdom necessary to reconnect oneself to the faith of the fathers, Janeczek crosses the chasm created by the Holocaust. She thus refuses the theoretical label Children of the Holocaust, because she feels it too restrictive and imposing; instead she prefers Children of Jewish memory. Janeczek's trajectory of work leads to her *Le rondini di Montecassino*. This novel represents one of the few Italian narrative works for which the term *global novel* can be appropriately applied. Departing from a purely autobiographical pattern, Janeczek inserts her personal story within that of World War II and weaves together an enthralling pattern (with her family firmly cased inside it) that brings together the epic of a war novel, the pathos of a psychological story, and the empathy that narratives of cruelty and suffering inevitably carry in tow.

A similar path of development shows that Janeczek fully belongs to second-generation Holocaust writers. As an heir by DNA and writer by imagination, Janeczek has sublimated the psychological burden of parental experience that comes coupled with a daughter's artistic talent. Janeczek's work is emblematic because the private of past family events that have become her known space and the public of a paradigm of literary understanding (as cultural enrichment) of the Shoah are placed on the same onto-epistemological level. This paradigm of literary understanding benefits from, and is embedded into, the synthesis of aesthetic experiences produced by postmodernism and now postcolonialism. If the generational label has ever meant anything for the critical study of literature, and for the novel as a genre in particular, Janeczek embodies this sensibility when it is at its best, for her writing moves beyond any stock rhetorical discourse on the Shoah and fully emblematizes her particular generation.

A Premise: Children of the Holocaust and the Writing of Trauma

A tension between "speaking out and silencing" (Giorgio and Cento Bull) characterized intergenerational relations in the 1970s more so than in other decades of the twentieth century. Younger generations protested against a

rigid family structure that oversaw all their activities and enforced well-defined roles while simultaneously objecting to the imposition of parental silence with respect to the experience of war and subsequent reconstruction. Children scrutinize their parents and impute to them a dogmatic and docile acquiescence to both societal *status quo* and political power in the polarized format as proposed by the Cold War. While a general invitation for intergenerational dialogue is accompanied by the necessity of unveiling parental past dramas, a more restricted number of young individuals search for actual knowledge of their parents' pasts: the children of Shoah survivors. Diner's notion of *Civilizationbruch* refers to that specific degree of disruption that history imposed upon both Shoah generations (parents and children) that is also observable in a private dimension; children's requests for dialogue implies a need to understand the mechanisms inhibiting their family relations, what lies behind the silence of their parents. This complex intergenerational relation of love and distance appears negatively structured by the trauma that parents have suffered and which their children, in turn, perceive without understanding/knowing. The unspeakable parental experience of the Shoah results in straining relations and in the exclusion of children from knowledge of family life that took place before they were born. For these children, the Holocaust is first a personal matter with larger and societal implications. These children take upon themselves the tasks of finding ways to transmute their personal suffering into a better collective understanding of the impact of the Shoah on contemporary society and developing representational forms of trauma recollection to better accomplish said goal.

American psychologist Helen Epstein became one of the strongest voices of her generation. Her 1979 seminal *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* organizes a narrative in which the interviews of all the young men and women she met create a polyphony of second-generation Holocaust survivors. Her work unveils some aspects of Epstein's own identity that were hidden to her before, while concurrently unearthing similar issues in other Children of the Holocaust whose relationships with their parents had been marked by shadows and laconic interaction (much like her own). Her process of self-discovery occurs at a time in which the cultural conceptualization of children of survivors was understandably still developing. For Epstein, to interview other children, "to find a group of people who, like [her], were possessed by a history they had never lived" was synonymous with the ability to "reach the most elusive part of [her]self" while keeping her parents in an "iron box" (14). Epstein's case stands as an individual search for identity that is articulated through the retrieval of collective data. Data represent collective elements, but their value and quality are not fed by

formal statistics. Epstein's reconstruction of the impact of the Holocaust on her generation finds its origin in a discourse acted out between multiple sets of parents and children, in a sharing of interests and ways of thinking. The impact of the Shoah on an entire generation is actualized by the text one daughter writes: still, it remains a work whose matter is collective. The recomposition of a collective past, through the individuals Epstein met (and whose interviews make up a substantial part of her book), satisfies an urgency of many that she felt impelling and inseparable from her own self-reflective path. It is as if it were impossible to get to the deepest part of her without discovering in others the impact of similar family dynamics. This procedure accounts for the notions that connect the members of this group, which stands ontologically and epistemologically separate from other groups who form yet other *cadres de definition* and with whom the children of the Holocaust do not share a concurrent view of the past. Moreover, Epstein's work is a Jewish American way of thinking that spread among the survivors' children whose common "physical topography" further encourages the role of collective memory in their testimony (Halbwachs, *Memoria collettiva* 236). The interest of all the Holocaust children was to speak freely of their own taboos and shared fears/nightmares with the group. The goal was to be able to address topics never dealt with by their parents and to understand—from within the Jewish American children's painfully reconstructed cultural homogeneity—those elements that made them feel different nonetheless. The epistemological praxis of these children, whose experience is restaged in Epstein's book (interspersed with chapters on Epstein's own existence and personal coming to terms with her encumbering legacy), bears striking resemblance to the epistemological praxis Halbwachs theorizes regarding the reconstruction of memory: it must "be done beginning with common data and common notions that are to be found within ourselves as much as within the others, because they move without interruption from us to them reciprocally [...] Only in this way can we comprehend how a memory can be simultaneously recognized and reconstructed" (*Memoria collettiva* 90).

By silencing their trauma, parents also denied their children a knowledge of their own roots, which creates another pressing need for the second generation, all the more so if their family had moved to a new country. Efraim Sicher notes how heavy, and generalized to all members of this generation, the burden of ignorance ("lack of knowledge") is that grieves the children, along with "the weight of collective and personal memory" ("Introduction" *Breaking* 3). In many narratives, the forcibly abandoned country of origin is often referred to with a laconic "there"—a part of the whole that means everything. Despite nostalgia and memories,

the country left behind remains one in which the effort of reconstruction after the process of physical erasure set in motion by the Shoah had left little of their family's original world. Children are eager to go back to a place they do not know and parents/survivors resist to this desire because their personal notion of what made up that place (objects, homes, music, and language) has been physically destroyed. Dealing with the emotional consequences brought on by the Shoah thus implies finding new ways to understand identity for the entire family, not just the children. The already intricate relations regulating dialogue between generations are now telescoped to form just two camps (Bauman, *The Art of Life* 64). The kind of violence experienced in these households does not manifest itself in a physical and concrete way, for it is the silence pervading these families' homes that represents the first marker of a tension created by distance and reticence. In an attempt to understand their parents' stubborn silence, children turn their attention to the remaining fragments of the fresco of what once was their family, but the more they try to recompose, the more the absence of certain parts reveals the rupture of the Shoah. Embarking on a new path of knowledge and awareness involves coming to terms with the many things left unsaid (perhaps only intuited) that construct one's own sense of home. Notably, it means understanding how to get survivors (which is to say, parents) to talk about their experiences with their children.

Understanding who each of these children really is because of the Shoah implies getting to the bottom of the elements founding the identity of each individual involved in the process: the author, the children, and the readers. As Epstein's work demonstrates, this search advances possibilities of collective awareness as children gather the missing parts of their family genealogy and sift through (and decipher) the meaning of a parental silence that is only specular to that of other survivors (and families). Survivors' children retrace a private culture that originates in, and intertwines with, that of the extinct members of their families. Each piece they restore also reconstructs the components of a larger, public culture of a by-now recessed society to which they feel they belong. This struggle for psychological survival—being someone's child, being an emigrant, being uprooted, being a Shoah survivor's child—casts shadows on their personality, partially as a result of their lack of acquaintance with their family's past. Unequipped with the correct tools, this generation cannot understand how to cope with present life and how to continue on with the burden of memory. Moreover, surges of rebellion against their parents come from the feeling that acceptance of the culture of the hosting (new) country is imposed upon children, who do not desire such hegemony. In the 1970s, these children felt that these cultures did not belong to them as

of yet, but were rather merely pressed upon them. Any society that receives them expects gratefulness from the children of the Holocaust. As Hannah Arendt famously wrote after her arrival to the United States, one feels one must always apologize for, and to some extent justify, the practice of the old rules that children did not want to disown upon arrival in the new country, but instead discover and appreciate. Similarly to what Arendt stated about her condition as refugee, a sense of rebellion is manifested in the children of survivors against attempts to accelerate the assimilative process (Arendt, "We Refugees" 110–11). Despite the parents' desire for the assimilation their children, the identity of the latter, in short, remains indelibly marked by the Shoah. It is as if the viscous ink of the Shoah had also been used to write their lives. It is this same viscous ink that writes the literature of the Shoah by second-generation survivors.

The Writing of the Children of the Holocaust

What, then, are the most popular themes and narrative modes used by the sons and daughters of survivors to support the literary representation of an event that has left so notably an imprint on their identities? The trauma of their parents—whether narrated or kept secret—nevertheless lurks below the surface of the lives of these children, issuing a ripple effect throughout the existence of these children. Without deleting the figurative parts of language from the text or limiting discourse to a literal and factual rendition of events, their narratives disseminate reflections and probe theses that address how the incumbent background of the Shoah has shaped (via their parents) their existence. Children's lack of direct experience does not imply lack of knowledge of direct suffering, for its deaf echo and somber tones permeate family life. These children remain the heirs of a heavy and nebulous parental legacy that is further afflicted by the inevitable wear and tear that memory undergoes with time, an added difficulty molding the dialogue between generations. In the literary output of this challenging interaction, children, out of love or necessity, examine the ways in which parents *stentano* (try with difficulty) to resume a life, even when the ethics and everyday practices of living fail to redeem them from constant psychological unrest. Children yearn for a poetic expression that does justice to the strenuous circumstances under which their own life training has taken place. Hidden, repressed details of the tragedy lead to lacerating tensions, for children feel the burden of their lack of knowledge.

There are three main contributing factors that turn the children of the Holocaust into displaced individuals. First, the absence of an extended

family, which often comes coupled with the absence of those comforting objects (rugs, paintings, knickknacks) that speak to an individual's membership to an ethnic and social group, and to a community for which one feels a sense of longing. Second, a sense of isolation and alienation felt with respect to the community in which children currently live. And lastly, these children feel a lack of belonging to any society from a linguistic point of view, for the language that they speak is not their mother tongue but an adopted one. The children are the repositories of the moral duty, which intervenes in their decisions to represent those problems not only connected to the trauma of the camp, but also of the return and reintegration/assimilation of their own parents. The development of a full self-reflexive understanding of the identity of these children depends on the more general ideological transformations typical of the 1970s. But it is also informed by the breadth of discoveries these children make about the race to which they belong, first and foremost within their own family. The distinctive quality of and temporal distance from such events force these children to transform their parents' emotions into the children's own stories (Laub and Allard 806).

Children/authors do not resubmit reality as their parents experienced it, nor is this possible. This is what the first generation, the direct witnesses, could actually do. While prominent exceptions such as Primo Levi constitute a particular type of Shoah interpreter (for their testimony holds not only historical but also indisputable artistic merit), survivors would in most cases retell of their (always singular) experience within the camps without artistic ambitions. After the retelling for interviews and producing oral testimonies of the incredible, when they find themselves in the private sphere of their family, witnesses withdraw into silence in an effort to defend their nucleus from the distress still produced by those memories. Children, in their writings, try to produce literary works that are often laden with compositional difficulties because the tragic experiences of their parents carry a psychological burden that is felt even in the task of speaking about the event. The moral task of understanding and representing family trauma involves a pact with readers, necessary to make their representation plausible and believable, for what children imagine, unlike the case of direct witnesses, is not a representation (however fictionalized) but, rather, a representation. These texts hold the meaning of a *Shema*: they are understood in a cultural, rather than religious sense, addressing both Jewish people in general as well as their families in particular. Again, children do not present facts; rather, they perform an act of representation for them. A desire to understand their parents' current behavior directs their search for the best lexical choice to imagine their parents' trauma. The biological children (and now grandchildren) of survivors

like Helena Janeczek or children by imagination like Eraldo Affinati, are committed to write the Shoah and to redesign the event according to patterns larger than those of the first testimonies, for they now incorporate at least two (if not three) generations of a family. The original experience of one individual becomes more complex and extends outward into other family relationships. In the expanded patterns of trauma representation, authors hence contribute to the formation of a new culture that comprehends their parents' (and now grandparents') experience and, to paraphrase Jonathan Safran Foer, illuminates everything. An enormous and serious message about humanity stems from the texts of the survivors. But the literary text speaks of a double problematic existence: that of the children and that of their parents (especially of those who did not speak by choice). The need to captivate the reader with strategies extrapolated from every possible genre and narrative model explains authorial choices, among which two figure most prominently: (1) the juxtaposition of children's and parents' speech, and (2) the use of a hybrid narrative form that is executed through an interesting *repêchage* of techniques that present the topic in a text that intertwines at least three genres: the novel, the testimony, and the autobiography.

Children's texts demonstrate the validity of Adorno's initial reservations about writing after Auschwitz. Considering the poetic word as it was before Auschwitz still valid to describe humanity is no longer possible, but humanity needs to create a new discourse that be just as powerful, just as effective. The necessity to write arises from the need to understand what both comprises and constitutes one's identity, just as much as the knowledge that only an exhaustive search for the word allows one to really speak. The unintentional fragmentariness of dialogue with parents oppresses the children, as is evident in their writings; form lacks of a sustained conventional flow and mimics an awkwardness of speech characteristic of this intergenerational relation. Children write in the posthumanist era of the post-Holocaust and educate a generation that is both first and last for this is the "first to be born after the Holocaust and the last to have a direct link with the experience of Eastern European Jews who were brutally annihilated" (Berger 99). Children's writings bear witness to the emotional legacy of the Shoah and demonstrate how trauma assumes a collective meaning. Their condition of otherness is derived from the otherness transmitted from their parents and is shared by others. If they refuse to engage their parents in what I call the search for the word, the process of speaking that Laub and Allard describe would not take place; hence it would leave the children without hope. Failure to search for the word signifies their "'wound without memory,' the empty circle that is transmitted without words, can take the place of the shape

of their lives [. . .] [they] may feel doomed to accept the delusional verdict of their inhumanity and fatedness in life and come to believe they would have no chance if they tried to fight it" (Laub and Allard 807). Searching for the word stands in as an act of love for their parents.

Lezioni di tenebra

Darkness and void, shadow and pain, tinge the pages of *Lezioni di tenebra,* the intense book that marks Janeczek's 1997 literary debut. A history of family love, tension, and resentment is defamiliarized when it is made public. Characters' silhouettes are magnified in the description of the blinding pain that informs the pacing of everyday existence; dialogues are replete with weighty words, and each reflection smacks of sarcasm. The personal lesson of darkness for women, and between women, bears the marks of a complex matrix of an autobiographical, lacerating mother-daughter relationship. It reveals the mechanism by which one can generate (the daughter) and the other be generated (the mother) without ever engaging in a meaningful dialogue. The darkness of unspoken words steeped in the mother's past will emerge only by virtue of her own daughter's traumatic—but salvific—act of writing. The daughter helps her mother by writing a memory that the latter had voluntarily suppressed for years, for the recollection therein meant necessarily reenacting the worst moment of her life. The traumas recounted by second-generation survivors in Shoah narratives have been clinically proven to indeed represent real psychological trauma and, as such, they belong to the realm of the real even when imagined through writing. These traumas are not desired, like those that characterize the postmodern and postcolonial condition, denoting an imperious desire to analyze both fictional representations and the prevaricating cognition of reality (Giglioli 57). Instead, these are actual wounds that affect a whole generation, leaving no need to imagine traumas.

The difficulty associated with drafting the reenactment of a family trauma problematizes narrative patterns because the complex relation between the writer and the written upon discards conventional autobiographical forms of writing/memory and looks for more flexible modes of expression. The content is not Janeczek's, and yet the experiences are too close to the author not to cause, as she states, her pain: there is no degree of separation between narrated matter and the internal milieu of the author. The apparent weight of the maternal trauma is seemingly transmitted to the daughter through the amniotic fluid. The author's self-perceived inability to adequately represent her mother's trauma stands

in opposition to this burden; their equilibrium depends on the deconstruction of outdated notions of realism and realistic representation. To that end, the daughter's most useful tool lies in both her awareness of her inability to speak of the trauma, and the knowledge that she must speak of it despite herself. She considers the genre of the novel, cognizant of the fact that some aesthetic categories have chipped edges and sag in the face of events that *dépassent the realité*, such as the ones she is about to narrate. Her eagerness to reconstruct a dual *tranche de vie*—hers as well as her mother's—enables her to undertake the complex task of breaking down barriers between the real and the fictional. It is useless and harmful (as well as relatively impossible) for the author to submit to strict codes and comply with generic forms after the fall of humanism, after Auschwitz. Yet, Janeczek's aesthetic attempt represents a victory over maternal silence.

Novel? Or So They Say . . .

Formal modifications in second-generation writing meet postmodernist criteria. These narratives reaffirm the disintegration of great narratives into rhizomatic fragments that recompose the picture as a whole, partly by virtue of irony (whose roots should be found in the Yiddish *Witz*) perceived as a rhetorical imperative. They reconfirm the meaning of writing in Roland Barthes' sense of the term: an *écriture* perceived "as the inscription of memory in all forms, including printed and visual texts, mixed media, popular culture, and autobiography" (Sicher, "Introduction" *Breaking* 6). Their authors' lack of belief in a linear history makes their understanding possible in both analeptic and proleptic ways. Hayden White rejects, however, a Barthesian notion of intransitive writing that is interpreted as the absolute ideological model for all post-Shoah works as in the terms expressed by Berel Lang ("Historical Emplotment" 47). White questions the concept of the middle voice—the internal voice of action—and understands it in a Derridean sense (49). White proposes the middle voice as a force opposed to theoretical absolutism. The historian problematizes the use of *écriture intransitive* and declares its efficacy to be a result of the changes in the conception of both history and realism (50). In short, White invokes the understanding that realist effects depend on experiential facts whose gravity and unicity prove the inadequacy of "older modes of representation" without adhering to other rigid rules (50). The middle voice (or possibly other formal techniques) can convey the experiential unicity of personal events that enter, nevertheless, the realm of history through new categories of narrative.

Lezioni di tenebra is a fit example of White's theoretical discussions on historical emplotment. The book confirms that the Shoah demands new forms of narrative, for it is a kind of historical event that transcends the realistic, or what we consider realistic modes of representing events. Representation is thus *internal* to its meaning; representation actually precedes it. Narrative representation mediates the mother-daughter experience and translates it in the text that the middle voice helps to produce. In the 1997 Mondadori edition of *Lezioni di tenebra*, paratextual elements (such as the book cover, as well as the generic label of novel) indicate an interpretive textual path that is all too clear. The cover shows two pictures: on the first plate we see the photo of a child, likely the author, on whose bare chest appears superimposed a Star of David. The counterpoint to this picture is found on the back page: a young and pretty woman, the adult writer. The first image is suggestive of the difficult heritage of the Star of David used to discriminate and persecute Jews centuries ago and reinstated by the Nuremberg Laws; the latter represents the artist today. While distasteful and unquestionably mass-oriented, the photo on the front cover offers an appropriate visual image for what to expect: it establishes the reader's horizon of expectations for the text to follow. In addition to this, if *Lezioni* is a testimony to the difficult *Erziehung* of survivors' children, its paratextual labeling as a novel disregards many of the elements that characterize Janeczek's undertaking.

Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra* hybridizes three different narrative forms; only questionable marketing reasons have enabled Mondadori to use the term novel to label this book.[1] However, its paratextual elements fail to explain the complexity of *Lezioni,* a book that Wu Ming inserts, instead, among his Unidentified Narrative Objects (UNO) (12), works not readily identifiable, for their generic boundaries are blurred. Their representative regime is also based on ambiguity and the perceptual uncertainty of both the person who wants to write about such things as well as her readers. Writers of such works often use the practice of autofiction (Wu Ming, 12). Ambiguity and perceptual uncertainty explain the choice for the title *Lezioni di tenebra* as rather suggestive and not misleading. Reaffirmed in its inspirational power in its epigraph, "*habitavit inter gentes, nec invenit requiem: omnes persecutores ejus apprehenderunt eam inter angustias*," *Lessons of Darkness* refers to a particular moment of the Catholic liturgy, the Holy Thursday *Office de ténèbres* (service of darkness). This rite concludes this day, as "the monks continued to sing as day actually broke, and the altar candles were extinguished one by one" (Beaussant 145). Janeczek draws inspiration from the name of this rite (a liturgy linked to the death of the Savior and tied to the memory of his sacrifices), using it to also refer to those children-candles who grew up in an atmosphere laden with sadness.

Form and content are tied together, because in Janeczek's hybrid writing the specter of death and the dramatic existence of her mother Nina coexist. One of the parallel narratives that forms *Lezioni di tenebra*, that of Nina, is the gift out of love from her daughter, Helena. The writing of her mother's memoir unearths the reasons why the constant echo of her traumas reoccurs—amplified and accompanied by constant nightmares ("sogni di persecuzione")—in Janeczek's life (LT 106). The artistic medium that allows for the rhetorical repetition of obsessions becomes a kind of therapy for Helena and turns her narrative of the events into an obscure chant of mourning that sets the reader's pace. A second added motif for the daughter's task of writing consists of relinquishing herself from the strains of a "straordinario senso di controllo" (LT 60; "extraordinary sense of control") that her mother had exercised upon her since childhood. In a sense, the author's search for a word sets into motion the whole economy of the gift between these two women, who are finally giving each other a sort of unsolicited yet much-needed reward for the sacrifices required of their relationship, and surveys the result of their processing through their respective traumas. Property is not a thing but a social relation: Helena's words become her gift to her mother. In turn, Nina will finally provide the daughter with the answers to all her unanswered questions. A critical authorial eye scrutinizes the mother for those "obsessions, depression, distrust of others and lack of interest in anything outside of work and home" (Prince 56). The daughter's writing reinstates a notion of cruelty when a narrative appropriates private understandings of the self (Rorty). Speaking for her mother, explaining her symptoms as her mother's "extraordinary degree of control" (Prince 60), the *d-auctor* speaks for other daughters of the Shoah. The Catholic rite of darkness in which candles are extinguished one by one is connected to the Jewish Sabbath rituals of Friday evening. This final set of images, one of the most important motifs of Shoah second-generation writing (Berger 101), envisions the oldest female of the house engaged in the act of lighting two candles to illuminate the darkness as she begins to speak the Shabbat prayers. Today the candles signify the children of the survivors: it is only fitting that Helena, the daughter of a female survivor, indicates to us in *Lezioni di tenebra* how each child of survivors may become a light and can be a memorial candle for the experience of their parents. But the beauty of this wonderful and recuperative message cannot be considered without noting the darkness that proceeds the illumination of the Sabbath.

The evocative title also reminds the reader of the difficult task of these children to grow up happy; as Janeczek and other children of the Holocaust argue (Weisel xix) they have to both personify the light for their parents, as well as serve as a memorial and warning for the memory

of the Shoah. The use of candles as metaphors for the children represents the author's twofold connection to her mother: the daughter illuminates her mother in more than one way. Janeczek's anxious search for modes of expression that can best represent the shades of this mother-daughter conflictual love leads to the construction of a book that is at once individual and collective; a book faithful to the idea of the human being who thinks of herself in her plea for societal inclusion only after experiencing a wide range of emotions. Seen from this perspective, it is possible to consider *Lezioni di tenebra* as a novel, as an experiential journey. However, if taking into account theoretical positions of Paul de Man and Gérard Genette on the flexible relationship between the novel and autobiography, *Lezioni di tenebra* must be defined as anything but a conventional novel. Of course, as Derrida states, every narrative can be a novel, and fiction can become autobiographical. But Wu Ming's apt definition of *Lezioni* as an example of a UNO dispels ambiguities and doubts about our decision against labeling the text with such a restrictive generic definition. To this end, we should analyze the main features of *Lezioni di tenebra*: its characters are not fictitious; the names of places and persons correspond to the life map of the real biological author. The text shapes itself as an autobiography more so than a novel does in the sense that it narrates crucial moments of the protagonist's existence with an accuracy of data distinctive of autobiographical writing, providing the exact name and date of birth of the protagonist narrator, as well as the precise location where she lives and has lived. Yet the reader is presented with abundant instances of dialogue between characters; speech about, and of the mother (a character that is clearly external to the author, thus making the notion of the text as purely autobiographical writing quite problematic) appears too prominently for *Lezioni* to be an actual autobiography, unless we want to think of it as a modernist attempt at the genre in the fashion of Alice B. Toklas's autobiography as signed by Gertrude Stein. One could try to extend one's reading beyond the limits of Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical novel, a novel based on the existence of the author. Alas, this, too, is insufficient, for the book incorporates multiple genres at once. We can legitimately advance the notion of autofiction in this case, because *Lezioni* is defined as "novel" (Darieussecq 369–80; Doubrovski 68–79; Giglioli 57; Kotin-Mortimer 128–66; Lecarme and Lecarme-Tabone 266–83; Lucamante, "Le scelte" 367–81; Ricciardi 1–21). The name and surname of the protagonist and narrator correspond to those of the real writer: Helena Janeczek writes about Helena Janeczek and the story of her mother and her mother's mother within a text that respects no generic conventions, be they of testimony, of autobiography, or of the novel. What reverses our notion of the elements governing the scaffolding of fiction ends up

being precisely the data one usually considers real: the name, precisely that authors' name that originally allowed critics to speak of *Lezioni* as an autobiographical work. In the narrator's life, the veil between the real and true is rather thin. In speaking of her mother, she states:

> Le sue domande sono spesso a trabocchetto, le conversazioni al telefono prendono l'aspetto di un terzo grado. Per lei ogni parola può trasformarsi all'improvviso in una possibile menzogna, le cose più comuni in indizi d'altro e le persone in qualcosa di più oscuro, una minaccia. In quei momenti tutto deve per forza essere diverso da come appare [...] Crede di poter strappare la maschera, che dietro un nome falso ce ne sia uno vero, e *dimentica che un nome falso è diventato il suo vero nome*. (LT 64–65; emphasis added)
>
> Her questions are often tricky, phone conversations take on the appearance of a third degree. For her, every word can suddenly turn into a possible lie, the most common things can turn into clues about something else and people can turn into something darker, a threat. In those moments, everything must necessarily be different from how it appears [...] She thinks she can tear the mask; that behind a false name there is a true one, and *forgets that a false name has become her real name*.

Likewise, the identity of the narrator of *Le rondini di Montecassino* coincides autofictionally with the writer's:

> Ma il nome falso di mio padre è il mio cognome. Con quello sono nata e cresciuta, ne ho spiegato mille volte l'origine, e finisco spesso per essere scambiata per immigrata, per badante, persino per donna facile perché in Italia, oggi, porto un cognome slavo. Come posso considerare falso qualcosa che mi ha impresso il suo marchio? Come può esserlo quel nome a cui mio padre deve la vita e io la mia? *Che cos'è una finzione quando si incarna, quando detiene il vero potere di modificare il corso della storia, quando agisce sulla realtà e ne viene trasformata a sua volta? Cosa diventa la menzogna quando è salvifica*? (RM 13; emphasis added)
>
> But the false name of my father is my last name. With that I was born and raised, I have explained the origin thousand times, and I end up often being mistaken for immigrant, for a *badante* [caregiver], even for a prostitute because in Italy, today, I carry a Slavic surname. How can I consider something fake that has left its mark on me? How can that name to which my father owes his life and I owe mine be false? *What is a fiction when it becomes matter, when it holds the real power to alter the course of history, when it acts on reality and is transformed in turn? What does a lie become when it is salvific?*

I use these two passages from Janeczek's two main works to prove my argument that discerning a pertinent genre ("novel") for a postmodernist

work such as *Lezioni di tenebra* is not necessarily a fruitful exercise. The two books are intimately connected, for they share the same narrator: Helena Janeczek. In both passages, the the author's name is a false one: this Slavic surname that hides the reality of her Rosenberg family legitimizes the statute of the novel for its use infers power of salvation to the lie of (auto)fiction. In fact, each narrated element dangerously approaches the author's actual story of parents and friends of parents, including Irka, a character who returns in *Le rondini di Montecassino*. While we are curious to know more about the names, places, dates, and numbers that build the scaffolding of the story in *Lezioni*, our curiosity exacts the fact that any reading can be unreliable: there is always more beneath the surface, as anybody could postmodernly be the narrating protagonist, "Helena Janeczek." *Lezioni's* text also evidences traits of memorial writing, but, in this case, the author has intentionally utilized technical elements typical of the novel (plot, dialogue, characters, time space) that end up confirming the marketing accomplishment of editorial decisions at Mondadori. Autofiction in *Lezioni di tenebra* forces readers to reconsider the historical reality described by the text, or rather, to reconsider the inevitability of history that becomes historic for the individual. Moreover, autofiction reconsiders the terms of *autos*. We accept the criterion of autobiography as autofiction's opposite genre, and accept the fact that a woman's personal narrative constitutes a fitting fictional tool to analyze real historical, literary, ethical, and psychological issues that relate to her own mother's personal narrative as well. In accepting the label of novel for Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra*, one might infer that this woman's private writing cannot capture a more public sphere of events and history. When labeled only as novel, the text loses an integral part of its significance as a moment of reflection and inclusion in the broader context of post-Holocaust writing. It becomes one of many possible texts that process the dynamics of the difficult relationship between a daughter and a mother without understanding the historical reasons that determine their reciprocal schizophrenia. By her own admission, *Lezioni*'s narrator coincides with the author and, by virtue of the salvific lie of her last name, stands as a repository that blends the fictional with reality. She has to unearth the darkest side of her mother's existence, something kept buried until they travel together in a traumatic trip to Auschwitz.

With her writing, Helena is revealed as the only one who can complete the puzzle of her family saga. Helena, the writer, is the only one who can find the missing pieces and fill the void. She "seeks to restore what she can to measure the depth of an abyss, not to plug it [...] It is important to be aware of this tangle of belonging and not belonging, because it is part of the constitution of any individual" (Janeczek, in Bregola 132).

In *Lezioni di tenebra,* matters of introspection focus on two of the possible themes that Heinemann identifies in Holocaust women's writing. The first revolves around the examination of the mother-daughter separation: interestingly, the separation is not between the child Helena and her mother, but it skips one generation and speaks of the tear between the writer's mother and her mother, Helena's grandmother whom she has never known. The second, more conventional, topic concerns the writer's consideration of a problematic mother-daughter relationship. Another hermeneutic layer is placed on this text when we consider it as a testimony made possible by the mother-daughter bond. *Lezioni* is an act of writing that finds its origin in this biological bond between generations that, in turn, promotes the initiation of the ethical artistic act: to talk about a generational trauma starting from the trauma of a single woman and her family means engaging with a social sense of ethics. It is an act of love toward her mother—a hymn to the life that she gave the daughter despite her guilt and her experience—but this narrative concerns more than two women. The Holocaust is not the historical background on which this so-called novel rests; it instead constitutes the source itself of this writing. The journey of the two women to the concentration camp—a classic element of second-generation writing—becomes a key moment because it will be the occasion that convinces Helena to write about her mother. As in an expressionist German painting, she situates the female figure of her mother sitting naked in a hotel room:

> Mia madre nella stanza marrone di un albergo a Varsavia, brutta e buia come sono le stanze di tutti gli alberghi molto alti e non nuovissimi, solo un po' più triste, un po' più buia, un po' più marroncina di quelle in Occidente. È la prima cosa che vediamo con calma in questo paese, lei *dopo* cinquant'anni esatti. (LT 14; emphasis added)
>
> My mother in the brown room of a hotel in Warsaw, ugly and dark as are the rooms of all very tall and not brand new hotels, just a little more sad, a bit darker, a little more brownish than those in the West. It's the first thing we see quietly in this country, she *after* exactly fifty years.

It's superfluous to say that that *dopo* (after) refers to Franciszka's escape from the ghetto. *Lezioni di tenebra* exists to prove the truism that the Shoah generates texts because talking about the event is imperative to *Zàchor*, or remembering. What happened *after* because of the *before* engenders the analysis of a difficult relationship, beginning from the genetic laws of consanguinity, then delving into dangerous and even inevitable allusions to the theories on the genetic inferiority of the Jews that burden the body of the women in this story. Both for Helena and her mother it has always been hard to come to terms with Franciszka-Nina's tragic past,

which, in turn, stymies their mother-daughter relationship. Their trip to Warsaw and Auschwitz forces them to face what has been only silenced for too long. The trip and the book work out an epistemology of the intergenerational relation. What Janeczek describes as that "continuously and automatically handing down of a sort of fall-out of that unspoken experience" (in Bregola 132) called Shoah, produces a writerly act only when Helena disrupts family silence and cruelly forces her mother to open up. Quietude is not useful, and at this point it would be even harmful. By narrating her mother's experience as a Polish Jewish woman who abandoned her own mother in the ghetto of Zawiercie, Helena lifts her mother from the burden of her stubborn amnesia and restores the thread of her genealogy ruptured by the Shoah.

Postmodernist hybridization sustains the writer/daughter's efforts, for it allows her to braid three different genres in *Lezioni di tenebra* in order to deliver all the complexity of the narrated matter: (1) autobiography, that of Helena; (2) a memoir, that of the author's mother Franziska as retold by Helena; and (3) the two combined as a public history of the extermination of the Polish Jews and their latest diaspora.[2] In the case of maternal memoir, the unraveling of her trauma shapes the subsequent writing. The anguish permeating the mother's entire recollection shares elements with the daughter's genetic fright:

> Sono nata che mia madre aveva quarantun anni, dopo una serie imprecisata (cinque? sei?) di gravidanze finite con l'aborto, dopo anni di tentativi andati a vuoto, dati gli effetti sull'apparato riproduttivo della sottoalimentazione, dell'astenia, dell'epatite virale, guarita non si sa come, dello stress e di *traumi inesistenti per i medici di allora*, e di chissà quant'altro. (LT 19; emphasis added)
>
> I was born when my mother was forty-one years old, after an unspecified series (five? six?) of pregnancies terminated in miscarriage, after years of failed attempts, given the reproductive effects of malnutrition, asthenia, of viral hepatitis. She was healed, we do not know how, from the stress and the *non-existent traumas for physicians back then*, and from who knows what else.

"Non-existent traumas for physicians back then": it is common knowledge that, until recently, medical discourse would identify the experience of Helena's mother in the Shoah and its medical consequences as "non-existent traumas" (Brown 100–12). Laura S. Brown explains the need to reconsider the definition of "human" and that of "trauma" as rather different from how they are usually operationalized by male doctors. Both medical and historiographical discourses had typically disregarded the peculiarities of gender, with the result of hampering scientific investigation

of the effects of trauma on women. We also know that female victims of the camps did not want to recognize the entirety of their traumas, for fear of being labeled as inept, and hence unable to return to their own lives or resume a normal family life after the camp. The problem of classifying trauma has more recently been studied, and the physical description of the efforts undertaken to conceive, carry, and give birth to Helena, the mentioning of the number of the abortions given with nonchalance ("Five? Six?") echo the trauma that produced in the mother a stubborn desire to generate a daughter-candle despite several failed attempts. The mother makes every possible effort to see her daughter born: she considers her birth a form of retribution for all that she endured prior to the child's birth, not the least for the hunger in the camp for which she now forces her daughter to eat obsessively. Just as obsessively, the daughter searches for food (specifically bread). Her teeth are already ruined by age 12, a direct result of her parents' undernourishment in the camp. They are filled with gold and would constitute "un bel bottino per eventuali nazisti" (LT 9; "a nice loot for eventual Nazis"). At night, caught as she is in nightmares for which she has no sound explanation, the daughter grinds her teeth so much that her jaw hurts. Nightmares lead her down an unknown, uncanny path.

Without the unbearable weight of her mother's "non-existent trauma," this text that meditates on the difficult dialogue between a mother and a daughter would have never been born. Or, rather, it would not have been generated along its present lines. "Non c'è niente che si possa spiegare con un massacre" (LT 9; "Nothing can be explained with a massacre"): the writer states in this way her refusal of media's easy instrumentalization of an event as dramatic as the Shoah. Likewise, we could think that the daughter behind the project of *Lezioni di tenebra* rejects the idea that her relationship with her mother could be a source of relief just by unveiling the latter's secrets about the Shoah. Neuroses such as the author's frantic love for order, hygiene, and precision at all costs must be attributed to her mother's traumas. Yet, as we have seen, the story sees its cathartic moment in that ugly Warsaw hotel where the two women finally face the reality of the unspeakable. Everything human can find its explanation in the unspeakable deeds behind the Shoah.

Language and Languages: Toward a Dialogue

Many foreign women writers have recently adopted Italian as linguistic medium, though few come from Northern and Eastern Europe. After Edith Bruck, we think of Helga Schneider who lives in Bologna, and

whose darkness in *Lasciami andare madre* reveals the reality of a mother who left her two children to volunteer as a guard in the concentration camps. Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra* is published in the Mondadori series dedicated to the "Italian writers." The unifying factor for this series is the language, and yet it is precisely the use of the Italian language that signals and signifies the author's displacement. Janeczek is a full-fledged "Italian writer" in the sense that her displacement could not be soothed until she approached a land and a language in which she felt safe: Italy, and Italian. Notwithstanding the fact that she has lived in Italy since 1983, Janeczek and her texts have, until recently, been labeled "diasporic" or "migrant" (Bregola 130). She is indeed diasporic—because she belongs to a history of diaspora (that of the Jews)—but she is not and never was a migrant writer. She lives in Italy and intends to stay here. The reasons for her initial displacement are chiefly those of a linguistic nature. The lack of a maternal tongue, a *Muttersprache*, to be employed as the structure sustaining the dialogue between her and her mother augments the writer's sense of displacement. She cannot effortlessly situate herself because German, the language of exchange of meaning between her and her mother, is a language that her mother learned; it does not define her origins, and it is later imposed on her daughter. Yiddish and Polish are not spoken at her home; the author only knows a few terms of endearment in those two languages, both of which are hence connected to rare moments of maternal affection. The prohibition of Yiddish and Polish in their home—the two languages that constitute the only remaining reference to their origin as Polish Jews—unveils a semiotic absence that clearly interferes with the writer's ability to construct a positive relationship with her mother. Language represents, from the start, an *impaccio* (hindrance) to their relationship; without the instrument of a shared mother tongue that provides human beings with the certainty of a well-uttered discourse, knowledge cannot be smoothly transmitted. Language is normally intended to be transferred as maternal verbal milk (*la lingua della nutrice*), and yet, because of the Shoah, Helena is not at ease speaking in the language(s) that her mother and her grandmother spoke. Italian, a chosen language for Helena, is the native tongue for neither Nina nor Helena. Dialogue is made difficult as a function of the most important vehicle for meaning: language. The *prove di valore* (value tests) to which Helena is constantly subjected and with which she must comply are also signified in her painful explanations, largely due to the difficulties she faces in writing in Italian.[3] In the maternal code, the daughter's fears "devono essere le sue, uguali e identiche. Non ammette che possa averne alcune in proprio" (LT 107; "must be hers, equal and identical. She won't admit that I can have of my own"). But the actual lesson the author learns from her mother

is in how to deal with the darkness of her mother's life: a suffering that has been transmitted from one woman's body to the other's, a body that has shaped itself by biologically assuming the pain and burden of the maternal experience. Helena's hunger that pushes her to perennially eat bread derives from the hunger her mother suffered in that place in which "non c'era niente da mangiare" (11; "there was nothing to eat"). The ellipsis stands for the unnamable place of Auschwitz, which in fact the mother never mentions. As it often happens, the name is hidden behind and replaced by rhetorical figures. One proceeds doing anything but naming Auschwitz as if, in saying that word, one will recall the tragedy lurking behind your present life. Another periphrasis hides the tragedy of "quello che è successo" (29; "that what happened") and for which the mother utters no words. A place in which the mother, "per puro caso o miracolo non è morta di fame o, più probabilmente, morta ammazzata per astenia da denutrimento, ammazzata col gas" (11; "by chance or miracle is not dead from starvation or, more likely, dead for undernourishment, killed with the gas"). While the mother is manically attentive to her own weight, the daughter's cruel eyes gaze at her in the moment in which she (perhaps) loves her mother less because of the paranoia she constantly ushers into her world:

> Io amo una madre sopravvissuta che raccoglie il pane per strada e molto meno l'altra che sale sulla bilancia tutte le mattine, e non riesco a metterle insieme, e so di avere a che fare con un mistero irrisolvibile, so che non riuscirò mai a conoscere mia madre e so anche che la conosco fin troppo bene e che tutte le nostre beghe non sono, né più né meno, che i soliti conflitti e le comuni follie familiari. (14)
>
> I love a survived mother who picks up bread on the street, and [I like] a lot less the one who goes on the scale every morning, and I can not put them together, and I know I have to deal with that unsolvable mystery, I know that I will never know my mother and I also know that I know her all too well, and that all our quarrels are nothing more nor less than the usual family conflicts and common follies.

Food does not only transmit love but also anxiety. Helena eats bread voraciously. In the present of her writing, she wonders if her mother has passed onto her "la sua fame da mezza morta per superare quella mezza morte e riconquistare il suo carattere, la personalità, la psicologia individuale di prima della fame" (12; "her derelict-like hunger to surmount that half death and re-conquer the character, personality, and individual psychology she had prior to that hunger"). Maternal anorexia is compensated for by daughterly bulimia. Everything Helena has ever done is to be equal and opposite to her mother-torturer; a mother who, despite

her immense love, would envelop her daughter into the darkness of her own past.

Lezioni di tenebra is not divided conventionally, with chapters; rather its content is grouped around different themes (hunger, sleep, health, and identity) apt to symbolizing the difficult steps requisite for these two women to reach a reciprocal knowledge. Identity and nationality are paradoxically issued to both of them by a German passport by virtue of a system of retribution. "Siamo tedesche, c'è scritto sul passaporto" (12; "We are Germans, it's written on our passport"). But Helena is only painfully aware (another of her lessons) that she is not German, the *Jus sanguinis* says otherwise. Although born and raised in Munich, from a very young age her parents have incessantly instructed her to always remember she was not German. The adjective German confirms the grotesque behind the juridical aspect of the Shoah. To Helena's ears, albeit for different reasons, the concept of *Patria* (fatherland) rings almost as empty as it does to Liana Millu. Robbed of her identity and language due to the Shoah, before her own birth, another country—*Heimat*—has been contradictorily imposed upon her: Germany. Of course, even this is not exactly as it seems. Her parents train her to remember she is not like the other kids, she is not German, she is not a *Yekke*, she cannot go out with German boys. Yet, in Munich everything is familiar to Helena, and still nothing means family to her. She is dis-placed, she belongs to that category of people defined "letteralmente 'persone spiazzate'" (23; "literally 'displaced people'"). The legacy of the Shoah amounts for her to not having a place to feel at home which, in turn, sanctions the need to understand her sense of the maternal legacy of darkness, its ramifications as seen in her own personality and in her private traumas. Helena, child of the Holocaust, never wished to be German, yet she holds German nationality. After spending her first 18 years in Germany, she decides to move to Italy and study Italian literature because she wants to live in the place she liked the most. Between two languages and cultures that are nevertheless not hers, German and Italian, the *s-piazzato* (dis-placed) is at least afforded the choice of which one to reject and which one to adopt.

Hence, the voyage to Auschwitz will be instrumental in establishing the missing pieces of this mother-daughter relation. Nina-Franziska-Franciszka—and the different languages that spell out her name differently—will finally retell her horrific secret to her daughter. She fled her ghetto of Zawiercie, knowing she was leaving her mother behind, prey to an ineluctable destiny (15). On August 26, 1993, Nina finally emits a loud cry: "mamma, mamma" (14; "mother, mother"). Now she begs her daughter to put everything in writing; now she wants her secret to be revealed. From the daughter's desire to understand originates the mother's desire

to speak. In speaking of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Hayden White states that the history of the Holocaust that is narrated in this text finds its frame in a story of how the story is narrated ("Historical Emplotment" 41). In this sense, then, we should understand the adherence to *autofiction* of *Lezioni di tenebra*. By definition a hospitable genre, *autofiction* goes beyond autobiography because it allows Helena to narrate a story that is not only her mother's memoir, but a crucial conflation of strata composing each personal (Nina's as Helena's) identity. Reacting to reality with fiction is a gift that only literature can bestow upon us. The daughter has become her mother's mother; Helena has become the mother of her mother's book of memories that her own autobiographical need (understanding her nightmares, her phobias, her fears) impels her to write. Without Helena's literary/fictional procreation, there would be no survivors' confession. Helena finally sees her mother as an individual forced by events to become the strong and stoic woman she knows, a mother demanding to the point of being comparable to a marine glimpsed in the training of his soldiers. As a character in a short story by Susanna Tamaro says, for these two particular generations, "[h]orror is slowly diluted in the fibers, is transmitted to children, children transmit it to grandchildren and so on generation by generation" (181). While *Lezioni di tenebra* is in no way an obvious choice as a model for the writing of historical events, it is a useful one because the dimension of epistemological accuracy or truth (and even truthfulness) is alien to the genre to which it belongs; the book hence provides an opportunity for looking at the formal aspects of representation without constant interruption by referential debate. What is highlighted throughout *Lezioni di tenebra* is the daughter's acknowledgment of her own people's suffering via her mother's experience. From the particular of her mother Nina's difficult decision to leave her own mother, Helena develops thoughts that extend to her own people more generally. Coming to understand that an extermination camp is the negation of a cemetery, Janeczek will slowly reconsider her own identity and put it in relation to a larger conceptualization of being Jewish (LT 156).

8

Tips against "Numbness" for New Generations: For a Collective Useful Memory of the Shoah and a Global Novel: Janeczek's Postcolonial Thought

Helen Epstein's *Children of the Holocaust* shares with Helena Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra* many parameters of investigation used for the retrieval of memory of the event and the significance of this retrieval for the survivors' children. These are the parameters Maurice Halbwachs points at as central for the process of formation of collective memory in his eponymous study. Such metrics exact the notion of a living history whose contours are rather different from those defined by the historical memory (or history *tout court*). Living history is a history in constant renegotiation with itself, that finds material in individual notions, in information exchange, and reflections that go well beyond data and statistics. To the point, statistics is the first element that Epstein considers superfluous: "I did not need to know the statistics when I was a child. I knew my parents had crossed over a chasm, and that each of them had crossed it alone" (12–13). Emerging from the abyss, her parents found in their daughter "their first companion, a new leaf" which "had to be pure life":

> This leaf was as different from death as good was from evil and the present from the past. It was evidence of the power of life over the power of destruction. It was proof that they had not died themselves. The door that led to that special room was secret; the place had to be protected. (13)

The metaphor of the leaf reveals its appropriateness in that it evokes the idea of turning the pages of the book of life. It brings Epstein's parents to a new leaf, a new verve and a movement away from that history they do not want to recall. And yet, despite the joy connected with the knowledge of bringing new vitality to her parents, in order for the daughter to fully comprehend her parents' claims to a new life through her presence, she requests the restitution of what Halbwachs considers primary notions. To gain control means being able to understand the ways in which she could represent that life that was offered to her as a gift larger than the life given to children whose family history was not unhinged by the Holocaust. She is a leaf-daughter who is "as different from death as good was from evil and the present from the past" (Epstein 13). Her duty is to exist as "evidence of the power of life over the power of destruction" (13).

In today's cultural construction of the Shoah, the investigation of those primary notions shared by those who Epstein defines as Children of the Holocaust continues to redefine itself, similarly to other theoretical fields related to the Shoah. Today, some Children of the Shoah profess dissimilar objectives. Janeczek belongs to the association *Figli della Shoah*, an Italian group whose scope lies in protecting the memory of their parents' past. What strikes Janeczek's interest in the association is not so much the organization's goals as the denomination itself. For Janeczek, the expression Children of the Holocaust forces her generation and her own life experience to undergo forceful conditionings at least partly due to what the writer considers the semantic insufficiency embedded in the very expression. To fill the void of such insufficiency, Janeczek proposes an expression that is consistent with it, but is endowed with a larger reference: *Figli della memoria ebraica* (Children of the Jewish Memory).

Epstein's phrase Children of the Holocaust is thereby inadequate for another daughter of the Holocaust. The patrimony composing the identity of the children of the Shoah reveals the burden of a construction that needs—like all linguistic referents—constant rethinking. For Janeczek, the obstinacy cited by German poet Esther Dischereit regarding the search for one's identity as a Jew, and not merely as a Jewish daughter of survivors, for "writing becomes the possibility of being tied to the Others to whom one belongs" (74), becomes a life project that cannot be limited by the immediate past of her origin. Rather, it is a project of happiness and joy and life for the children to come who must want to feel members of the Jewish society. The association rightfully must exist—for "[s]/he who manifests himself/herself publicly, remains always present" (Dischereit 75)—but its linguistic connotation must be more expansive. Halbwachs's

notion of the construction of collective memory sustains the need for a new linguistic and overarching category as proposed by Janeczek in a talk in Palermo in 2002. Collective memory is not, in fact, resurrection or the revival of the past as such, for it entails a reconstruction of the past that is functional to our present. According to Halbwachs, "[t]he transformations of the image of the past are not accidental deformations, but the very law of the functioning of memory" because "the social framework of memory [. . .] is an instrument memory utilizes to recompose an image of the past that in every epoch lives in accordance to the thoughts dominating society" (*Collective Memory* 24). Janeczek refutes a Jewish culture interrupted by the Shoah.

The institution of the *Giornata della Memoria* (Day of Memory) represents both a chronological separation between *Lezioni di tenebra* and Janeczek's 2002 speech, and a threshold between her personal (even if indirect) memory of the event and the public acknowledgment of its importance. This day marks the collective significance of the legacy of the Shoah in Italy. Likewise, this day elicits the problems that the exercise of public memory brings with it. I argue that the institutionalization of the Day of Memory in Italy triggers many of Janeczek's 2002 reflections about the construction of her identity within a community that is larger than the frame given by Epstein's denomination. Janeczek accepts her own condition as internal to a public moment of collective self-understanding and, possibly, of a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. She is the exponent of a postmodern reality in which, in order to consider an identity as a truly individual and subjective construction, individual identity formation must prevail over the concept of the group and a sense of belonging to a shared body of ideas and values. Such individualism does not ignore the values that make Janeczek a member of the association. The burden of what has been remains, and partly shapes, the person she is. The shadow of the Shoah will forever stand as an ineluctable element of Janeczek-candle-leaf-daughter's identity, but that part of her past must be contained within a positive space: this is the only means of reconquering and transmitting a Jewish history and memory unmarred by the horror of dehumanization and racial hatred. To this end, Janeczek proposes paths that differ from Epstein's. Neither women limits their work to official and conventional historiography, and, in order to jettison what Epstein calls "the heavy ribbon" (13) that mentally blocks the survivors' children such as herself, Janeczek makes a semantic shift from the link children-Shoah that significantly limits her own ontology of being, to the overarching category children-memory of the Jewish people. In this way, the Children of the Holocaust no longer belong to the event but to the entire memory of the Jewish people. Aware of her

parents' experience, it is nevertheless an expansive memory of the Jewish people that Janeczek wants for all of us as we look with faith toward the near future. If we posit with Halbwachs that "each individual memory is a point of view on the collective memory" (*Collective Memory* 121); if we agree that "individual memory feeds always on a combination of influences that, all, are of a social nature" (121), we can also state that the writing of some children of the Shoah draws energy from cultural mutations that yearn for a change from the perceptions of Jewish culture. As White explains, narrative depends on a muted notion of reality and history. Collective memory allows for it. After the recognition of their status as children of survivors and after the realization of a strong element of cohesion that ties them to even indirect survivors, a Jewish culture that takes all of this into account is established, relying on the legacy of a millenary Jewish sensibility and moving forward, positively, beyond the chasm of the Shoah.

A problem arises, however, for this transformation in definition. How can one accept what Rita Calabrese calls "il condizionamento," "il peso dell'eredità di morte" ("Mosaici" 27; "the conditioning," "the weight of the legacy of death") and move on? How can one distance oneself from the "mortuary totem," as Janeczek calls her legacy ("Figli" 41)? She wants to set herself free from the image of this simulacrum, as defined by the collective group. Setting oneself free signifies constructing a collective memory for those who, like her, share the same fear of having their identity crystallized and confined by those two words, "children" and "Holocaust," and no longer "paying the price if we assume the identity of 'Children of the Shoah'" (37). Janeczek's fear partly originates in the very definition of the word Shoah today. While it stands as an "ineluctable point," the Shoah inspires in many of its Children the desire "to stand back and go away from it all, to shake off a ponderous, painful inheritance of death is recurrent" (Calabrese, "Mosaici" 27). Linguistically unfit to speak of "that iron box buried [inside her]" (Epstein 11), Janeczek grows metaphorically in the shadow of Auschwitz and its darkness, (as in the title of *Lezioni di tenebra*), with a Star of David across her heart. From her mother, Helena learns to live with the shadows of the past. But the hard training to which her mother had submitted her from a young age is not sufficient for the search of her larger Jewish identity. This search takes the form of writing—which discusses what is public and yet belongs to her—or, better yet, the distortion of public opinion in accordance with what seem to be the rules of mass-media information. *Lezioni* begins in fact with a phone call in which Janeczek discusses, with incredulous tones, a television program in which "una tizia sosteneva di essere la reincarnazione di una ragazza ebrea uccisa in un campo di

sterminio" (LT 9; "some unidentified woman claimed to be the reincarnation of a Jewish girl killed in an extermination camp"). The plot then takes into account the possibility of a morbid, deformed, and edulcorated representation of a past that belongs to Helena's life, via her parents. As a more specific note for the entire contemporary mass-media culture, Janeczek's scene takes into account the manipulation carried out "by the mass media idols" thanks to which it is possible to have "a history made up of perfectly and easily narratable subjects" (Todeschini 35). Thanks to this commoditization, it is possible, for instance, to manipulate the theoretical insistence of the unicity of the Shoah perceived by some as an attempt at "affirming the greater victimization of some over others" (Dean, "Recent French Discourses" 70). Neo-anti-Semitism (as carefully analyzed by Michel Wieviorka in *La tentation: Haine des juifs dans la France d'aujourd'hui*) relies heavily on the assistance of the mass media to lay the foundation for mass stereotypes (such as the inanity of the Jews), which are now reinforced more than ever. But aren't Israelis castigated for opposite reasons, invested with an opposing set of stereotypes? In today's world of media, constructing narratives based on hatred becomes a children's game. The most important tenet, as Dean ironizes, is that "'belonging' to the community of human sufferers requires that Jews not insist too much on their own" (73).

Mass Media and Talk Shows

Media scholar Astrid Erll discusses the construction of collective frameworks that constitute collective memory in our contemporary time and that are built through systems that she calls media managers. Questioning media and our resources to manipulate narratives of the past, Janeczek's reflections in her 2002 Palermo speech are rooted in a double rejection that defines *Lezioni di tenebra*'s incipit and takes into account collective frameworks. The protagonist considers what she sees and hears on television to be counterfeit, as insufficient to explain the extent of her family's loss as the succinct history book she says to have read right after watching the show, *The Calendar of Events* (*Kalendarium wydarzen w obozie Koncentracyjnynm Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939–1945)* by Danuta Czech (LT 16). One vehicle of information, the television, offers fraudulent and mystified narratives whereas the other, Danuta's *Calendar* provides only numbers and spare words to address the facts of August 27, 1944. August 27, 1944 is a crucial day for Janeczek, for it marks the date that her family was deported from the ghetto of Zawiercie, Poland. No conventional narrative can serve to explain the sense of a void in the protagonist that

comes as a result of these events. As such, communication media—television and books—cannot possibly reflect what has defined her life even before it began. Historical data do not translate the pain of a people for Janeczek, much in the same way that statistics do not express anything for Epstein; this is evident in the short reference to the consolidated text, which, written to inform and provide numbers, fails to provide more substantive connotations. The picture of Janeczek's family's past cannot but be an incomplete one and its memory becomes even more vilified by a trivial talk show. Just as there is a rift between the historic text, "il libro enorme" (LT 16; the "huge book") and the absence of her family from August 27, 1944 onwards that forever marks the lives of Janeczek and her cousins, there is an even larger chasm between what the event has signified for the author and its televised trivialization. The Shoah becomes a visual and aural merchandise at the benefit (or expense) of the collective, thus reifying what Jean Baudrillard provocatively wrote about television as being "the perpetuation [of Auschwitz] in a different guise [...] The same process of forgetting, of liquidation [...] the same absorption without a trace" (24). The spectacle of what constitutes Janeczek's own memory is being sold as merchandise on the television screen, which forces her to revaluate the terms by which her identity has been formed, and to think of possible ways to safeguard it against destructive mass-oriented discursive practices (LT 13).

In her 2002 Palermo speech, Janeczek reinvestigates the concern that informs the initial scene of *Lezioni di tenebra*. The construction of the cultural (collective) memory of the Shoah must take place in a more holistic way that leaves little room for Neo-anti-Semitism and embraces instead a millenary Jewish history. She wonders, "[w]hat does it mean to find the lowest common denominator of our identity in a historic event that is so entirely negative (such as the Shoah) to be absorbed from the culture in which we live, and not just from the Jewish, as a metahistoric event" ("Figli" 37)?

Janeczek wonders about the effects of "an event as incumbent as inaccessible even for us of the second generation' given that does not represent our own direct experience" (37). Her project must do without elements such as inherited fear, instead taking a position, against *la cultura della vittima* (the culture of the victim) and the pornography of suffering. In the shadow of the mortuary totem (41), the culture of the victim limits the project of an identity growth, connected as it is to only one tremendous moment of the history of the Jewish people. It prevents the children of the survivors from finding definitions for themselves other than those (mass) culturally accepted for their generation. Janeczek rejects the negative emphasis of the rift in her family created by Auschwitz. The elimination

of any "anti-idolatric thought by excellence" must take place in order to give Shoah back to Jewish history (40–41).

For Janeczek, to continue accepting her own identity as limited by the expression Children of the Shoah would amount "to the eternal victory of the past over present and future, the triumph of the big death over our small meager lives" (38). Though aware of her identity as an individual who fully deserves to enter the category of child of the Shoah—being an "Ashkenazi, European, fully lay and assimilated"—Janeczek "discovers today that she feels more at ease and perhaps it would be more appropriate to call herself simply 'daughter of the Jewish people'" (39). The phrase "daughter of the Jewish people" "does not take anything away" from other victims and, at "the same time, [she] do[es] not lose anything which has not already been lost" (39). Janeczek rejects a funerary identity, for it prevents her from reaching a persona that is not exclusively shaped by her family's past, noting that "[t]oday I prefer to call myself a 'daughter of the Jewish people,' precisely because I take for granted that this definition does not exhaust me, does not fix my identity" (44). She shies away from an oft-seen pattern of *fare memoria* (making memory) that is tied to the most negative aspects of *Giornata della Memoria*. Picciotto confirms Janeczek's opinion that such a view does not conform with Jewish tradition, and that "the Jewish people remember the Shoah as their enormous catastrophe, it feels it like a incurable wound, but not like a rupture in their own history" appears consonant with Janeczek's reflections (12). However, as Janeczek clarifies, it remains important to tell of individual histories and she observes that she herself is the "testimony of an irreversible uprooting caused by Shoah, as daughter of [her] parents, as grandchild of victims who had a name and a last name, as a person who, carrying all this with her, has lived her own life in Germany and Italy, and keeps doing so" ("Figli" 45).

How can we make memory then? Antonio Cavicchia Scalamonti comments on the difficulties experienced by some groups in absorbing memories of past events that concern their community. He attributes the possibility or inability to "metaboliz[e]" memories to the "relation between collective memory and identity," particularly because these memories are "so painful that they disturb the self-image one has so painfully built" ("Introduzione" xviii). He hypothesizes the same reaction to removing certain memories from individuals as in groups, when there is the threat of "a discontinuity in the identity they own" (xviii). As the identity of a minority group undergoes periodic changes also due to external forces (i.e., how others view them) a continuous intellectual, ethical, political, and anthropological rethinking connected to the identity of the members of such a group is necessary. Because of their

identity transformation, any event related to this group will not necessarily continue to signify indefinitely the same meaning. Seventy years from Auschwitz, to be tied to "same memories" means to go on thinking of what can no longer be mended within the logic of mourning. Contrary to what some thinkers and historians' claim (that once a mourning is elaborated, you are, in Freudian terms, "done" with it), Janeczek believes that this mourning must be explored and inserted into the memory of the Jewish people.

At this temporal juncture, the act of not wanting to limit her own Jewishness to the "link between her story with the Shoah and nothing else" ("Figli" 38) signifies the positive recovery of the Judaism that "was in the world before the Shoah" (45). Motivation to move forward must come from our past as well as from our present, from both the generations of the catastrophic Shoah, but also from the larger body of Jewish culture. The reasons for living and being better persons must come from the bed of the river that is Jewish culture. These reasons emerge from the river of this culture and indicate a time that precedes that of Janeczek and her mother:

> For a long time I have thought that that feeling myself more Jewish than anything else depended on the bond between my story and the Shoah and nothing else. Today, instead, I believe that something has come to me from my grandparents and perhaps from my ancestors through my parents, those parents who, having survived the Shoah, were born and raised, they formed themselves and met in a world *that preceded* the Shoah. (44; emphasis original)

The power bestowed upon family bonds is striking, partly as such power harkens back to previous generations, as grandparents constitute an element of connection with a distant and noncontingent past and as such are revealing for our own identities. Their silhouette, lost on that August 27, 1944, defines a place situated in a past where Janeczek wants to return to because the most impairing rupture is her lack of knowledge about her grandparents. She reconstructs the narrative of her personal loss because postmodernity asserts that her truth can be found in what she narrates. This absence/presence of her family constitutes one of the reasons why Janeczek wants to expand the formulation of Children of the Holocaust, why she wants to go beyond the rupture to reach that enormous deserted field she began to fill with the writing of *Lezioni di tenebra*. For Janeczek, it is preferable to "[r]econcile with a definition that brings us to a remote past and leads toward a future that is bigger than a symbolic belonging, that that sends us back to a more remote past and leads to a more open

future" ("Figli" 45). Such choice surely cannot exhaust one's own identity, one that is intrinsically tied to the Shoah and has shaped Janeczek's life choices in many ways, not least that of moving to Italy and writing in Italian. Notwithstanding her own past cultural awareness, Janeczek speaks of the destiny of other persecuted groups whose genocide has taken place after the Shoah. Janeczek takes us through an itinerary of genocides showing how the Shoah—despite its uniqueness—constitutes one stage, however problematic and difficult (she is witness to "an irreversible uprootedness caused by the Shoah") in the path of the Jewish people (45). Hence she posits that it is important to "give the Shoah back to Jewish history as well as to World History, a history that has continued and continues to produce 'ethnic cleansing' and genocides—Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, just to name a few—different crimes for intensity and volume" (39).

Janeczek further states how the historical events that followed the Shoah have also contributed to her identity today. For this reason she feels it important to "re-appropriate oneself of a title of belonging that is even more emblematic, but differently projected in the past and the future, even if this means a more disquieting future" (40). The "true problem of a massive and afflicting memory" (Picciotto 13) is that, despite the Shoah, marginalization and massacres have continued to occur. So, Picciotto wonders which tools are most correct to teach the Shoah in a world still plagued by racial hatred (13).

Although their interests concern the different fields of creative writing and history, respectively, both Janeczek and Picciotto nevertheless seem to agree that, even in its uniqueness, the Shoah has still managed to propound a negative model of collective existence, one which, as a character in Philip Roth's *Everyman* notes, has stained each and every day of the twentieth century and—in its horror—has cast a shadow over many other nations and peoples as a collective stain of shame. By expanding the definition for her generation into the Children of the Jewish people, Janeczek propounds a positive and joyous acceptation of her heritage, for a Jew "is made for joy and joy is made for the Jew" (Vogelmann 57). This form of Jewishness seeks to assist and aid in others undergoing racial intolerance in contemporary Italy. Janeczek's overarching category relieves us from thinking of what Barbie Zelizer (among many) calls "moral habituation to suffering" (214); it warns us against "disingenuous empathy as a mode of insufficient feeling" (Dean, *Fragility of Empathy* 9). Can we rid ourselves of the cultural commodification of victims as often seen as subject matter of television programs and mass-media representations? Lastly, can we avoid a market of memory without manipulating or, even worse, becoming accomplices of those

who define the collective memory of the Shoah "a hyperbolic rhetoric of victimization" (10)?

What is Janeczek trying to accomplish with her contradictory gesture of eliminating, only to later reaffirm, the cultural and historical statute of *unicum* from the burdensome ideological vocabulary connected to the Shoah? Is it perhaps because a personal path of ethical-artistic inscription in, and caused by, the history of her parents, that the awareness of being a Jew and a writer but not only a Jewish writer becomes an almost unbearable weight, such that Janeczek feels the necessity to expand her memory to not only the Shoah but also to the memory of other genocides? If for the Jews remembering is a duty, for the children of the Shoah memory remains fundamentally marked by absence. "The void, the oblivion of the father," notes Michele Cometa "is the space of the memory of the child. Paradoxically, Judaism saves its own past insisting, beyond any oblivion, on the eternity of the act of remembering, provided that it be aware that silence is more eloquent than any narrative, than any novel" (203–04). Halbwachs notes that

> history does not limit itself to reproducing a tale told by people contemporary with the events of the past, but rather refashions it from period to period not only because of other testimony that has become available, but also to adapt it to the mental habits and the type of representation of the past common with contemporaries. (*Collective Memory* 75)

Indeed, Blanchot's notion of "forgetful memory" could be useful for those who do not plan to live in an inert chasm. We could then aim for what for Picciotto identifies as "a correct pedagogy of the Shoah" (13)," one that would further itself from the deadly shadow of a "negative idol" as from that "mortuary totem" as rejected by Janeczek ("Figli" 42). The transformation of the self is a political process toward an identity that does not want to, and cannot, be either individual or individualistic, because "[s]ocial coercion is in this philosophy the emancipatory force, and the sole hope of freedom that a human may reasonably entertain" (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* 20).

The Maori of Montecassino and "A War That Contains Us All:" Helena Janeczek's Postcolonial Thought

From time to time, the belief that history paces itself only to the tune of war looms large in literature. Hegel's statements about the periods of happiness representing the empty pages of history (or Nietzsche's warning against the uses and misuses of history) frame a wider discourse of

what we believe history to actually be and the role of historiography in the construction of our society. There is no such thing as empty pages, periods of happiness, and misuses of history. History surrounds us but is also something of us, for it contains us and part of it begins from us: each individual story represents a moment worthy of retelling that makes a moment of history. How this moment is told partially distinguishes, of course, the way an artist tells a story from the way an historian recounts that same event. What matters are the ways in which the language of the artist resists the obviousness of a hegemonic rendition of a historic event and conjures up the aesthetic and ethic elements of literary retelling, engaging with forms of truth within the fictive act of writing. Public memory remains a space where different collective memories constantly confront each other. But what matters, once again, are the ways in which an artist can thread different memories together to construct a narrative that is an alternative to those hegemonic ones. In so doing, the artist revives one of her most ancient and noble roles: giving warning to a society by expressing personal theses that could hardly find their space within historiographical discourse and are firmly located in the realm of fiction.

The composite authorial intents shaping *Le rondini di Montecassino* display Janeczek's ambition to accomplish several tasks at once. The writer belongs to a group of individuals committed to interpreting the Shoah in its "universal meaning" (Berger 99), to improve society in general. However, her main intention was to reestablish her personal connection to the place from where she comes: the war and the Shoah. Janeczek wanted to connect her personal history "immaginaria e reale" (RM 146; "imaginary and real") with the one that "accaduta una sessantina d'anni fa a esseri umani in carne ed ossa" (146; "happened about sixty years ago to human beings in flesh and bones"). I underscore the importance of personal authorial decisions in the crafting of this innovatively historical novel as Janeczek aspires to find connections between her personal history and a public one within the space of World War II. After all, this war is her place of provenance. "Seconda guerra mondiale: da lì, databile attraverso un passaporto falso, traggo le mie origini. Seconda guerra mondiale: una sola e indivisibile" (15; "Second World War: from there, datable through a false passport, I derive my origin. Second World War: one, only, and indivisible").

Janeczek situates her perspective on World War II in a precise geographically privileged observatory: Montecassino's Benedictine abbey situated in an "imbuto di montagne" (15; "confluence of mountains") where an almost year-long battle between the Germans and the Allied forces took place. Her perspective differs drastically from more conventional

approaches in that others invariably privilege one narrative over the other. Janeczek instead embraces a postcolonial perspective that hinders any authoritarian or monological approach to World War II and creates one of the rare global novels present in Italian contemporary literature. By employing a complex web of connections among several individuals and their life trajectories, Janeczek warns readers against the hyper-instrumentalization of literature in the construction of national identities. She voluntarily gives up the idea of telling the whole story without the aid of the imaginary (and fictive), for it is "troppo vasta [. . .] troppo estranei i suoi attori" (15; "too vast [. . .] too foreign its actors"). Yet, the stories and the lives of these actors, corroded by collective oblivion, compel her to remain as faithful as possible to her actual source material. She knows that for fiction to be truthful it needs to take facts into consideration (Langer's factual fiction). It must be so particularly to honor those who have lived those events, like her father, one of the novel's dedicatees.

Janeczek is a daughter of the Shoah—a specific group—and yet she also finds herself and part of her history converging at a geographical point that "contiene tutti" (RM 15; "contains everybody"): she knows World War II—an event only too real—has also generated her. In *Le Rondini di Montecassino*, the convergence between what is imaginary and what is real is surprising, because what is fictional is the datum that one usually considers *real* and derives from events concerning the parents' existence. In Janeczek's case, however, the veil between the fictional and actual is thinner than what we expect. We know that her surname does not correspond to her father's original one, but to the one he adopted and that assured safety. A name forces the Jew, once again, to a dissimulation in order to affirm the truth of his existence. "Cosa diventa la menzogna quando è salvifica?" (13; "What does a lie become when it is salvific?"). This is a question that allows us to state that, if *Le rondini* draws its generic characteristics from a narrative discourse that informs autobiographical writing and respects experiential data, it is also true that everything that is fictional can also assume the value of a veritable thing. The history of each of our families is steeped in the globalism of Janeczek's postcolonial novel. Janeczek's family history begins with the ellipsis between the story of Maori Rapata Sullivan, grandchild of one of those soldiers fighting in Montecassino, and her mother's. In a visually effective passage, where Rapata's tattoos disappear, we see Janeczek's mother and her Auschwitz tattoo emerge. While Franciszka had the marking removed after the war (both as a form of acting out, as well as out of guilt for having survived), Helena received the Auschwitz tattoo in the form of her aforementioned constant hunger for bread. Helena constantly thinks about her mother's choice to remove that indelible scar. Each narrative meditates on diasporas

and persecution—the Shoah behind Helena's family and Rapata's story of his grandfather—and the Auschwitz scar stays on Helena's skin just like Rapata's Maori tattoos that were not impressed on him as a child, but that he elected to have done after finishing his degree in postcolonial studies as an expression of his pride in belonging to a subaltern and oppressed race. While Rapata's tattoos write a map necessary to understanding future on his body, Helena's mother's tattoo leads her to investigate the past of her people and to incorporate this history into a wider project for a more serene, coexistential future.

For Janeczek to interrogate the past "di me perduta e ritrovata" (RM 15; "of myself lost and found again"), she needs a place. Montecassino, despite the importance of the battle bearing its name, rarely appears in novels on World War II; and it curiously constitutes the epicenter of her novel. This "luogo che ci contiene tutti" (15; "a place that contains us all") also signifies her novel, for it is the ideal container for each and every person and each and every form of narrative that contributes to the construction of a collective memory that goes beyond World War II, that goes beyond the Shoah—the chasm that generated her 1997 book *Lezioni di tenebra*—and embraces multiple people in the hope for a different future. Polyphony sets the tone for the entire novel, one in which each story constantly comingles with the notion of truth, one in which the importance of scientific documentation is often stressed but fiction becomes just as important. In this novel, one needs to understand what and where the truth means and lies. "Ma tu sei uno storico o stai scrivendo un romanzo? (RM 234; "Are you a historian or are you writing a novel?") the mother asks the writer. Janeczek reveals her system to be based on writing that relies on truth even when dealing with fiction (234).

The entire discourse of the novel orbits around the global diaspora, and the globalization of pain from which no one is exempt. The author assigns her characters the duty to save the memory of their respective racial and ethnic groups, of their extinguished families, of the place from which they come to make sure that—as Janeczek utopistically aspires toward—discrimination can one day become obsolete. In the dangerous process of cultural flattening moved by the wheels of that dominant concept that Negri and Hardt call "the republic of property" (9), it is important to understand why we are here now. Part of this change concerns the abating of racial intolerance by applying postcolonial and ecology-minded criticism to theme of global conflicts.[1] Whether you are a deer or a human being, suffering leads to only more suffering:

> Nessuno, in nessun angolo del mondo, ha più il diritto naturale di esistere al di fuori dai rapporti di forza e di profitto che si irradiano da un centro

> unico. Non esiste più natura, ma solo cittadinanza che va meritata e conquistata come una terra vergine che deve dare frutto, anche al costo della vita quando occorre (RM 141).
>
> No one, in any corner of the world, any longer holds the natural right to exist outside the relations of force and profit that radiate from a single center. Nature no longer exists, only citizenship that must be merited and conquered like a virgin land that must be fertile, even at the price of life when needed.

Moving from the strictly economic dimension of the word globalization, one must acknowledge that historical events like World War II represent, by definition, globalizing moments. As it temporally preceded current economic globalization, it also facilitated it, for the war constituted the ideal suture between nineteenth-century colonization and imperialism and the current forms into which they have morphed, which, in Negri and Hardt's theories, make the Commonwealth of the twenty-first century not only possible, but necessary to maintain current capitalism. Indeed, with all its multiple agents, races, and countries, World War II fully amounts to what Enzo Collotti describes as "a perfect polyphony" (14). World War II: an experience that marks our entrance into a new historical period in which wars progressively change the adjectives defining them (cold, preventive, humanitarian) in a pointless attempt to reframe the ideas of cruelty and basic intolerance embedded in the very concept of war. War is a space which ratifies the difference of the Other who, by definition, is our enemy. For Janeczek, the ideological tension must be understood in terms of a dialectics geared to a shared living of races and ethnic groups in which the concept of diversity can no longer motivate and coincide with racism or subalternity. As Giorgio Baratta states, "[d]emocracy implies cohabitation [. . .] *Humanism of cohabitation* is nothing but an ideology that counterpoises itself to today's hegemonic ideologies, all afflicted by fundamentalism" (34–35; emphasis original).

This ideology needs a praxis of democracy, and it is actually the "only praxis able to oppose resistance to the huge fluxes of facts and ideas advocated by the opposed fundamentalisms, bringers of violence, war, and terrorism" (Baratta 35). For instance, the Polish Italian Edoardo, in Montecassino, fights for the right to a citizenship unencumbered by prejudice, a goal which has nothing to do with his father's privileged world. He fights for the rights of the underprivileged immigrants who are abused in the same way as the Italian *meridionali*—a matter of latitude determined by poverty. The Polish pride of having a Polish Pope (which Janeczek does not fail to mention) recalls some passages of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (*Gomorrah* 2006). In Saviano's work, as in Janeczek's, there is a clear

connection between the underworld and laws regulating the global community. The *System*, as Saviano calls it, is just as global as World War II and the Catholic Church. What is the place of the poor *neo-comunitari* in such structure?

The image of polyphony that Enzo Collotti uses represents the concept at the core of the entire novel, in which each narrative, aside from the notion of the unicity of the Shoah, problematizes what we consider truthful. Polyphony then constructs both meaning and discourse of *Le rondini di Montecassino*: an event whose essence is already multicultural such as World War II justifies the use of different languages in those passages that Janeczek has chosen to leave not translated. Polish, Yiddish, German, English, Maori: characters' polyphony embodies the Babel of languages of the Nazi concentration camps, and is equally determined by the global scale of the war. The enormity of World War II engenders a global narrative made up by a complex web of private stories braiding into one epic in which the fragmentariness of the narrative coherence paradoxically warrants its truthfulness. This is polyphonic history as decomposed and (re) imagined by Janeczek: a history in which languages interweave and their glut does not construct barriers, but wealth. In her story, the *Xenos* is no longer negatively perceived as such: any language she speaks, whatever that might be, is now accepted.

As Iain Chambers notes, "rejection of the West does not necessarily imply sliding into historical oblivion and a cultural suicide" (45). She who tells the story must also be able to listen to, and grasp, the sense of a language that is challenging itself. Janeczek understands that, by connecting to the Maoris and their exploitation before and during the war, she can now also show the direct incidences of nineteenth-century colonial politics on the genocides and persecutions of the twentieth century. The concentrationary system reveals specific ties to slavery (Sarfatti, *La Shoah* 22), something that Primo Levi defines as the "retrieval of slavery economy" ("Prefazione" [Bravo and Jalla] 7).

The distinctive ethical force of literature presents us with many considerations at once. The reader is naturally called upon to understand the ethical dimension of this novel, "for it occurs as an *event* in the process of reading, not a theme to be registered, a thesis to be grasped, or an imperative to be followed or ignored" (Attridge 654; emphasis original). Likewise, *Le rondini* reminds "the reader forcibly of the conventionality of the fictional text and inhibit[s] any straightforward drawing of moral or political conclusions" (655). Racial alterity is combined with the alterity of the servant in the case of the Rapata, the young Maori man going into service and commemorating his grandfather in Montecassino. Since language plays a major role in producing (and simultaneously repressing)

the Other, it is within a language aware of its ideological effects, alert to its own capacity to impose silence as it speaks, that the force of the Other can be most strongly represented. The effect produces what Attridge calls a form of textual otherness "[. . .] or *textualterity*: a verbal artifact that estranges as it entices, that foregrounds the Symbolic as it exploits the Imaginary, that speaks while it says that it must remain silent—and in so doing stages the ethical as an event" (669; emphasis original). Janeczek asks her readers for an active praxis of reading; she wants those who read her novel to acquire the awareness that we need to want to know:

> Importa l'urgenza di conoscere che va oltre uno scopo, che non si illude di poter colmare i vuoti né tanto meno sostituirsi all'esperienza, ma è soprattutto un movimento verso, una tensione con cui cerchi di accorciare una distanza che non riguarda più soltanto quello che sai, ma quello che senti e immagini. (RM 138)
>
> Need for knowing must go beyond one purpose which is under no illusions of being able to fill the gaps nor, much less, a substitute for experience itself, but it is above all a movement toward a tension which seeks to shorten a distance that no longer concerns only what one knows, but also what one feels and imagines.

The place that contains us all, then, does not only lie between the folds of World War II, but in the space that the artist conceives (imagines) for her readers so that—through the act of reading—they become agents of a world to come. Janeczek's commitment to the ethical value of art reveals an engagement hardly detectable in her contemporaries, buried as they are in either what Andrea Cortellessa calls "the industries of cynicism" or an unhealthy form of anti-Berlusconi ideologies all entrenched in an ideological swamp whose ultimate effect is that of rarefying the meaning of literature. Such a lack of attention toward ethical problems renders even the most gifted among authors incapable of grasping other societal implications and its most palpable repercussion is our lack of preparation to face the danger of globalization.

I view Janeczek's writing as an ongoing process of testimony to the necessity for individuals to value a sense of history that is really social, and not merely related to the winds and wars of history. She succeeds at delivering her personal message by representing the Jewish people in an axis of continuity in which hope for healing can exist in the ontology of Jean-Luc Nancy's singular-plural being. Janeczek wishes for a past whose horizon does not end before commemorations, which, unless socioculturally rethought, risk becoming simulacra of evil or even exalting it. The development of identity is not an isolated heuristic for, "[o]ur being-with

as being-among-many is not fortuitous at all; [...] it constitutes instead the statute and the consistency proper and necessary of the original alterity as such. The plurality of the being is the foundation of the living being" (Genovese 28). Thanks to its dynamic nature, the social frameworks of memory can prevent stagnation if we listen to what our artists can say more loudly and more effectively than others about society.

Conclusions

Forging Shoah Memories approaches the study of women's literary representations of the Shoah with the conviction that "intellectual representations are the activity itself" (Said 20). The act of writing exacts the power of literary works to constantly review historical events. Literature of and about the Shoah historicizes in ways that lead to yet new understandings of the event. It produces verbal images for a memory that is at once personal and collective, as it reveals the ethical commitment of women who engaged in intellectual discourse. Literature demonstrates the inalienable right of the arts to infer alternative readings to reality as otherwise imposed by the writing of history: understanding—the etymon of *intelligere*—and representing human action is the activity of literature. By eliminating the cumbersome aura of unspeakability or absolute evil that might hinder events related to the Shoah, the power of literature can instill awareness in later generations.

By investigating contemporary literary and fictional works on the Shoah, I have taken position in the long-standing debate on whether this historical event should be recounted only by actual witnesses (and thereby destined to extinguish itself with their passing) or whether it deserves and needs the contribution of fiction to truly become a literary field representing a period that, should by now be compared for its import to *Rinascimento* or *Risorgimento* as Michele Sarfatti suggests (*La Shoah* 6). In my view, literary forms of writing constitute a hospitable space to remember (and constantly rediscuss) human nature and its behavior in extreme situations. The role of artists and intellectuals is to provide us with alternative aesthetic means to solicit a moral response from us. Sculptor Christian Boltanski almost exclusively creates works informed by the Shoah that are suggestive and not didactic; they are artistic visual reminders of those we lost to racial persecution 70 years ago. Boltanski's perpetual memento to them ensures that we never forget the victims, while going beyond simple testimony as a form of aesthetic representation. Art is a means for human self-explanation, as Iser emphatically states (xiii) and as such, it provides a wide space for reasoning and listening to other voices, as it incorporates the imaginary and the fictive into

the (in)-human dimension presented by historical facts. What remains questionable is whether literary narratives can actually create a space of resistance to the risk of crystallization of the rhetoric of the Shoah. Can literature of Otherness always resist opaque language and challenge artistic freedom of expression by ethically engaging with its readers?

Literary forms of writing—both the memorialistic as well as the more conventionally fictional—are witness to the representative problem of the Shoah of which bespeaks Primo Levi's character Hurbinek in *La tregua* (*The Reawakening*). The presence of this little child in the camp is emblematic. Son of the *Hurbn*, (Hebrew for disaster and persecution) Hurbinek, the death son, did not know the wonderful gift of the word. "Born perhaps in Auschwitz," Levi's narrator states, Hurbinek "had never seen a tree" (*Reawakening* 26). He could not speak, for he never saw anything but the camp of death where he died without uttering a word, and tried "to the last breath, to gain his entry into the world of men" (26). This complexity is not contained within a finite universe, one determined by historiographical discourse. Hurbinek "bears witness" through Levi's narrator (26). If *Forging Shoah Memories* partially and voluntarily juxtaposes historical and literary sources, it does so as a testament to the complexity of every social and historical event translated into collective memory, a process that by definition transcends generations. Characters like Hurbinek's stir our emotions and compel us to know more of the events leading to its creation. I agree with Marina Caffiero's warning against a grim "production of generic or divulgative type" that might quite literally "strangle scientific production strictu sensu" on the topic with "history" that is, labeled as "science" as in recent media productions based on the historical event ("Libertà di ricerca" 5). One must take into account, however, how literary discourse has lived and modeled itself on the same vicissitudes and problems of the historiographical, ethical, moral, and political discourse about which Caffiero writes. Threads of different discourses take different routes, but they do so by using interconnected roads. Images of the past, as Hayden White argues, are created and transmitted not only by historians but also by novelists ("Historical Discourse" 25), each group utilizing techniques belonging to forms of writing pertinent to their work, forms which, *ab origine*, were not separated. Literary writing, for instance, is not so easily discernible from memoir writing; for the latter is considered one of its subgenres.

With respect to twentieth-century Italian Judaism and the Shoah, an ample composite discourse (a flux of different genres and an exchange of affinities and interests) can benefit the critical examination of the assimilation of the Italian Jewish community into the country's larger social fabric. The communicating vessels of historiography and literary

criticism each shed light on facts and problems that, if generated in one field, in fact, spill over into the next and find an apt container for the expression—either individually or in the name of one's collectiveness—of the sentiments of a period. Since the very onset of the categories of historical and literary writing, the boundaries of these two genres have proven feeble because, if the very dimension of a literary work is defined and enriched through the reading and knowledge of historical facts and works, it is likewise vital for historians to organize an emplotment—a sequence of actions that makes sense and constructs a narrative. History described, interpreted, and considered in historical novels understood as fictional works exists in a muted form. Born out of the need to make sense of a history that becomes the subject—no longer a mere backdrop—of many a novel, historical novels hold on to their status as literary compositions. Critics then, not only work to scrutinize truthfulness and fidelity, but they also assess the elements of the historical event that artists incorporate into their work, and understand that, however based on history the work may be, the depiction of the event remains fictional. The power of literary writing lies in presenting counter-histories to the hegemonic narrative of given events. The realization of temporal parameters as generic ones becomes indispensable then while confronting our literary patrimony during the period in which racial persecutions led to the Shoah: For various reasons, such as the general amnesia from which Italian culture has long suffered, reluctance to accept the distinctive features of women's experience in the Shoah, and an ambiguous understanding of how discriminated Italian women felt in the camps, several texts by Italian women writers still await a reading that does justice to them.

"The statute of post-camp Italian stories," notes Domenico Scarpa "tends to impinge on the ghost-story: descending into a world extinguished by extermination, their statute oscillates equally between spectral autobiography and invention" (441). Searching for the right image elicits hybridization. This is necessary—even in Scarpa's definition of *oscillating mode*—to face the hardship that a creative process always generates. Writing per se constitutes a larger question: what form of writing can be the ideal container for all the categories and strategies needed to face themes that are distinctive of women caught in a historical event such as racial persecution and the Shoah? The problem of a genre to adopt for writing of these events inevitably leads to that of techniques and strategies to deploy, with the effect of producing almost per force narrative hybrids. The path of Bruck and Millu, two witnesses—writers by craft—reveals its role as a clarifier between the testimony intended in its conventional sense and the fictional literary writing that nevertheless brings testimony. Their intense activity is useful for studying both the discourse of testimony as well as

the treatment of the themes of the witness and return from the camp. Women writers like Bruck and Millu have created the important connection between direct testimonial literature and literature by imagination. What female survivors and writers of the Holocaust did is not an exercise in writing aimed at universalizing expressions of the event, but rather one that brings to the written page images and feelings that illustrate the peculiarity of the female visage (and experience). Women writers' distinctive traits (with all the variability of their stylistic choices) diversify, and contribute to, the multiplicity of experiences and expressions produced by writings on this epochal event. It took an incredible degree of strength for these women to be able to write of the Shoah; if women like Millu and Bruck had not freed themselves from societal conventions of women of their generation, their common and yet distinct path to freedom through writing would have probably been hampered.

Recent literary readings of the Shoah try to translate survivors' wish to forget, despite Levi's cautioning never to do so. More to the point, these readings try to translate the behaviors of parents into literary compositions, such that one can creatively imagine what might have happened and had been unimaginable to the previous generation. We recognize the worth of those who have read and heard of the horror and feel the weight of an ethical responsibility to study, write and analyze the Shoah, using the communicating vessels between history and literature—between memory and fiction—to craft a fictional product for the benefit of future generations. If coming from Gentiles—as in the case of Loy or even historian Battini—such a gesture is not only prompted, as Elena Loewenthal polemically states, by having a Jewish friend who constitutes "safe-conduct of believability," but because it is "rhetorically correct, when not indispensable" (10–11) to cultivate friendship with an Italian Jewess. Rather, literary productions are motivated by a sense of moral justice that knows not facile trends, but instead recognizes within our culture the *métissage* that has always distinguished the Italian Jewess against all Italian claims of assimilation and homogeneity. For some Italian intellectuals like Affinati, the role in analyzing historical events pertinent to the Shoah, while rewriting them in a fictional mode, has become an acknowledgment of an ethic-aesthetic responsibility in their cultural engagement ("Intervento" 219) that only mirrors Rosetta Loy's perpetual concern for the responsibility of Italian Catholics in the Shoah. More generally, instead of remaining silent on the subject and moving onto other discourses (Sullam Calimani 6), all the writers whose works validate my efforts in this book, show the ethical will to speak and write about the Shoah, which is at the core of my argument.

It is for reasons related to a desire for understanding that is not distant from a (personal) sense of justice that moves me to carry out the analysis of their texts. The literary representations of the Shoah by Italian women are still in search of apt readings, systematization, and definitions. I seek to construct a more malleable statute for literary products that often transcend previously established generic categories. The connection between survivors' writings, fictional representations, and writings of imagination that I have provided in my book exacts my paradigm on Italian women's writing on the Shoah. Means for aesthetic expression reach levels that require one to speak of a creative *an*-aesthetic processing. After the Shoah, art demonstrates its commitment by addressing the gravity of events that have completely unsettled the conventional way we were used to understand the path of history. History can be better grasped as an array of situations in which the individual is caught reconsidering humanity in jeopardy on its most intimate levels than a linear (and logical) construct of evolution and emancipation. If it is true that, in contrast to other biologically determined events in our own existence, the arts and historical discourse are ultimately the exclusive domain of the mind, to express an aesthetic understanding of the facts that tends to a purpose primarily ethical and epistemological, becomes a categorical imperative. It would be incorrect, however, to think about the artistic medium according to traditional criteria and styles. Anti-illusionist novels supplant conventional historical novels almost by necessity and I am not sure that this process is due to a "phase of recuperation" as J. Coetzee argues (27). It might signify instead that the historical novel as we knew it has undergone drastic changes because the historical events that are its concern are of a different nature from those with which the conventional historical novel would deal in the past.

One of the most visible legacies of the Holocaust is that it has necessarily changed the way we think about the expressive medium having artistic value. Texts are intended to illuminate the cultural and emotional commitment of their authors. In the case of the generation that lives after the Shoah, they are chasing a past in which their own role reveals uncertainty for the future, while simultaneously garnering their engagement. In their attempts to answer questions, children of the Shoah reveal oftentimes a subjective view of the event integral to the quest for their own identity that in turn transforms their narrative into an epistemological perspective whose horizon is much broader than the one offered by the writers of the Holocaust. It incorporates at once the narratives of the survivors as well as those of their children.

Understanding that *esile filo della memoria* (Beccaria Rolfi), that undeniably robust thread that connects women's narratives of the Shoah

to a more expansive representation, fills a void and gives back a voice to the face ablated by history, by criticism, and by general lack of interest with respect to what actually happened to the Jewish women and their families in Fascist Italy. It becomes important then to pause on the relationship between the writings of the Italian female deportees (testimonies and memoirs) and literary fictional output. Aside from a long overdue process of legitimizing their enterprise and endurance for telling a story "from the bottom," critics must look at a more apt investigation of women's treatments of established thematic categories of Shoah literature. Gender constructs writing paths with its own specificities. The same problem of the paucity of interest toward women victims of the Holocaust in historiographical discourse (as addressed by Anna Bravo) recurs and spreads to the literary. The obligation to speak, not merely *out of necessity*, leads to the uniqueness of texts, as they are the products of situations and moments that are geo-temporally distinct and belong to highly diverse individuals.

Second-generation writer Helena Janeczek interprets the past as shaped by a horizon that does not end with commemorations, which, unless rethought in their sociocultural logic, risk becoming representations of evil, potentially even lauding it. As Dan Diner, among many, writes ("La memoria" 101), the Holocaust is a constantly evolving cultural construction, both for the individual and for the community. We can safely state (in terms I borrow from Italian philosopher Rino Genovese) that identity is not an isolated path for, "[o]ur being-with as being-among-many is not fortuitous at all; [...] The plurality of the being is the foundation of the living being" (28). Thanks to its dynamic nature, the social framework of memory can prevent stasis, but only if we listen to the audible and effective productions of our artists. However, the redemptive aspect of composition observed in the writings of Janeczek, represents only one (however important) instance to scrutinize the severity of the trauma experienced and how it affects the public and private experience of these children whose voices participate in constructing the representational path of the Shoah. They are what remains of Auschwitz. The experience of the camps, the survival of death, and the process of dehumanization desired and then realized by the Nazis in various ways exists in a manner for the children of the Holocaust in same way that the atomic bomb continues to psychologically affect not only Japanese survivors, but also those who were born after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The kind of testimony that second-generation writings propose differs by necessity from what we find in Levi's *Drowned and the Saved*. This diversity finds its origin in a new kind of experience and knowledge of the facts by a third party (the children) and is revealed through the use

of narrative strategies that might produce what Wu Ming 1 has previously labeled "unidentified narrative objects" (12). In the introduction to the Italian version of Giacomo Debenedetti's brief chronicles *October 16, 1943* and *Eight Jews*, Ottavio Cecchi reflects on the importance of two issues: mourning the persecution and extermination of Jews in Italy and in Europe before and during World War II and what he calls "the positive significance of the Jewish people" (7). The calamities afflicting the Jewish people from time immemorial emerge in Cecchi's speech, which echoes, in turn, Maurice Blanchot's tenets of *Etre Juif* (Being Jewish). The full significance of being Jewish lies in its metaphysical import, which is just as important as the history of experienced disasters. Janeczek's warning echoes Cecchi's 1959 words: however important, the act of tracing the trauma of the Shoah is not sufficient to reconstruct the fresco of a destroyed community unless it comes equipped with the desire to recall the tragedy within a longer history of Judaism with all of its positive significance. Thus, regaining the wisdom of one's own people becomes imperative to developing a new logic of understanding the memory of the Shoah.

To conclude, Italian women's representations of the racial persecutions and the Shoah offer testimony and accept the ethical duty that the performative act of literature implies. We live in a complex epoch that would force us to forget even the most minimal values of humanity and remain impassive to the pain of others. But the diligent pursuit of goodness for the sake of others constitutes our dignity. In these writings, dignity moves on equal footing with the desire to express motions of the soul related to real-life experience; ethical needs to investigate the obscure areas of our collectiveness and history; the decision to extol the good of others, be they relatives or simply others considered parts of a collectivity that should no longer silence the voice of the (female) witness.

The peculiarities of each separate writer I have analyzed in my book surface in the light of what has often been said to be the ultimate social, historical, and personal need for such a corpus of writing: to never forget what happened and to learn from our own past by means of art. Fiction is not necessarily a synonym for novel, while testimony is not necessarily a substitution for historical research and authenticity. Every instrument can be a fallacious one but can also be deployed with the best intentions. In Cees Noteboom's *All Souls' Day*, a character speaks about contemporary indifference of events memorialized in history:

> [W]e' 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)

Millu, Bruck, Limentani, Morante, and Janeczek: these are few of the noteworthy writers who write of the Shoah to make sure that, even in times of blank pages (a relative concept, of course, since war is ongoing) racial persecution and what actually happened to women in Italy and in the camps do not go forgotten. While their techniques and style might vary, these authors all believe in the validity of transmitting History throughout the "retelling" of stories that they lived through or that their imagination has shaped in time. However "literary," their authenticity of intents remains unquestioned.

Notes

Introduction

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
2. Rossi-Doria draws different conclusions from those of Friedlander, and cites the distinctions he lists in his "Introduction" to the Italian edition of *La Germania nazista e gli ebrei* ("Memorie di Donne" 61 n6).
3. "The humiliation and worse of femininity is a phenomenon so renown of the concentrationary universe that one does not need to dwell on it, if not to remind that it was partly due to the direct action and ritual of the carcerieri (shaving of hair and pubic hair, nudity exposed…, up to sterilization), for another to the same material and psychological situation of the camp, which promoted first of all the interruption of the menstrual period, generalized because of the shock, undernourishment, etc. In testimonies, the desexualized image of the inmates is recurring" (Mengaldo, *La vendetta* 46).
4. Federica K. Clementi speaks rather explicitly of this unspoken forbiddance of women from critical and literary discourse (281–91).
5. For a discussion about critical exclusion of Italian women's work, *L'ebraismo nella letteratura italiana del Novecento,* the otherwise worthy collection of essays edited by Carlà and De Angelis, is particularly emblematic. None of the nine essays is dedicated to a female writer.
6. "Why estheticism? I reply, why is there art in the tomb? Estheticism. In this case, it means compassion" (Moravia, "Preface" 20).
7. See Lucamante, "The 'Indispensable' Legacy of Primo Levi: From Eraldo Affinati to Rosetta Loy between History and Fiction," for a treatment of literary representability of the Shoah by working on the example of Primo Levi, Rosetta Loy, and Eraldo Affinati.
8. See Hanna Serkowska's reflections on Alberto Cavaglion's article ("Edith Bruck" 165–81).
9. It comes perhaps not equipped with the strong economic components that mark what August Bebel defines the "socialism of the idiots," that stock of anti-Jewish anticapitalism on which Michele Battini reflects in his stimulating study *Il socialismo degli imbecilli. Propaganda, falsificazione, persecuzione degli ebrei.*

10. See Robert Gordon's *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*. Although admitting that "[g]ender in Holocaust writing is already at this early stage a defining terrain of distinction [...]" (53) the discussion on women writers of the Holocaust ends here.
11. For this topic, see Sabine Sellam's *L'écriture concentrationnaire, ou, La poétique de la résistance*.
12. For a further discussion of the main points of Adorno's theory, see Peter Haidu's "*The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification*," 279–84.

1 The Italian Shoah: Reception and Representation

1. While the terms Shoah and the Holocaust will be used with no distinction, I am aware of the restrictive significance of Shoah limited in its understanding "only to the Jewish world as if this crime only concerned Jews" (Cavaglion, "Nota," xxii).
2. See also Picchietti 573–78 and Marcus 142–44.
3. "The larger problem is, however, to explore the interaction between various dimensions of language use and its relation to practice, including the relationship between the 'constative' historical reconstruction and the 'performative' dialogic exchange with the past as well as between 'sublime' excess and normative limits that are necessary as controls in social and political life" (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 4).
4. For a discussion of Derrida's position on Marxism in *Spectres of Marx*, see Macdonald, 143–72.
5. According to Primo Levi, Italian Jews were and are by far the most assimilated ("Intervento," 99).
6. See also Maier 29–43.
7. Cavaglion also talks of a "general underestimation of the significance and relevance of the extermination accomplished by the Germans in the Italian peninsula often with the direct complicity of the Italians" ("Nota" xx).
8. "I, the nonbeliever, and even less of a believer after the season of Auschwitz, was a person touched by Grace, a save man. And why me?" (Levi, *Drowned* 82).
9. About Liliana Segre, see also Zuccala.
10. Elisabetta Nelsen investigates Sonnino's text, stressing how it exudes the concept of elegance in her family, despite all odds. Sonnino retrieves photos of her beautiful family that disappeared in the Holocaust. To their innate elegance, she opposes the blinding alienation of the camp and the constant attempt to forge individuals into *Untermenschen* (Nelsen 9–18).
11. Despite the fact that Alessandro Manzoni had later rejected his own important findings with respect to the hybrid literary composition of truth and fiction, the representation of the Milanese colonized and oppressed people in his work reveals still today a structure of power and usurpation of the

rights of the disadvantaged that little draws from chronicle-like precision. About the difficulty of a coexistence of truth and fiction in literature see, for instance, Cavaglion who, like me, favors the insertion of fiction into true ("Parola" 25–37).

12. To have a full idea of production based on this topos, of how the imagination of writers has been in this extremely fertile, it is interesting to look at the online list of works based on the Holocaust in the US Memorial Holocaust Museum. Elie Wiesel's rather intransigent position (*Un juif* 190) cannot do much to prevent the desire of knowledge of the fact that, unknown to some authors, moves them nevertheless to try to imagine what s/he does not know.
13. For Millicent Marcus, *Auschwitz* is more a synonym than a synecdoche in the case of Italians, for they almost all ended up in that camp (5).
14. About the rhetorical significance of Auschwitz, I refer not only to Agamben's study but also to Elaine Marks's "Cendres Juives. Jews Writing in French after Auschwitz" and the way Paola Di Cori presents the issue in her work (in Maida, *Un'etica* 11).
15. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' [Ranke]. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. [. . .] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin 255).

2 Not Only Memory: Narrating the Camp between Reality and Fiction

1. There are many essays on the turmoil that Ernst Nolte's article on the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* provoked in 1986. LaCapra's article "Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate" is perhaps still today one of the most lucid and apposite for our own study. In 1987, Gian Enrico Rusconi edited *Germania, un passato che non passa* in Italy, which also contains an article by Ernst Nolte.
2. In 1971 the volume *Un mondo fuori dal mondo* was published, and in 1986 the volume edited by Federico Cereja and Brunello Mantelli *La deportazione nei campi di sterminio. Storia vissuta: Dal dovere di raccontare alle testimonianze orali nell'insegnamento della storia della 2nda Guerra mondiale*, in turn follows Bravo and Jalla's volume.
3. In her preface to *Essere donne nei Lager*, Bravo specifies the number of texts—five—published by women in Italy between 1945 and 1947 ("Prefazione" 8). Judith Tydor Baumel notes how the many volumes on Resistance in the 1970s

would focus on the word "resistance" and not "women" or "family" thus deleting the issue of gender (39–41). It is interesting to note that, until then, Italian historiography did little to create connections between Resistance and Shoah. Saul Meghnagi notes how, "in the relationship between Resistance and Shoah one needs to underscore how until the end of the fifties, there was no awareness about the extermination of the Jews in concentration camps and instead would prevail the image of dead partisans, publicly exposed as a form of retaliation. Violence then has a different visibility that can partly explain the reason of a failed encounter between Resistance and Shoah" ("Introduzione" xxiii).

4. "In a unique way, Nazis doctrine created a society organized around 'natural' biological poles. In addition to serving specific needs of the state, this radical division vindicated a more general and thoroughgoing biological *Weltanschauung* based on race and sex as the immutable categories of human nature" (Koontz 5–6).
5. See Hedgepeth and Saidel, and Baer and Goldenberg, for new studies on violence against women in the Holocaust.
6. See Adam Jones's introductory essay to *Gender and Genocide* for studies on the ethnic cleansing policies accompanying genocides and gendercides in several countries. Jones elaborates a theory on preventive genocide that emphasizes latency and retribution, and touches upon the more than questionable role of medical doctors in the camp experiments (25–28).
7. In the first volume of the encyclopedia that she edited, *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*, Kremer draws up a general and limited map of Italians in which Liana Millu and Giuliana Tedeschi are mentioned (xxv) and a small entry on Millu by Judith Kelly appears (843–45). However, she gives prominence instead to Natalia Ginzburg (Vol. 1, 424–26), who contributed a valuable writing "The Jews" (*Opere* 2, 641–46).
8. An exception: chapters devoted to Tedeschi, Millu, and Morante in Risa Sodi's *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Writing (1944–1994)*.
9. "But Italy is not only a reservoir of prisoners; it hosts on its territory concentration and transit camps such as Borgo San Dalmazzo, Fossoli and Bolzano, and extermination camps such as Risiera of San Sabba: secondary camps, peripheral if you want, but sufficient to place Italy among the countries in which, aside from contributing victims, the extermination is also administered and implemented [...] The circumstances must therefore be searched for elsewhere, from the appearance of a war that is fought not only at the front and not only applies to regular troops, but progressively invests entire national territories and entire populations, giving the perception of individual and collective memory a new mark" (Bravo and Jalla, "Introduzione" 22–23).
10. "For many reasons, what has been called the 'Auschwitz event' nevertheless remains an emblematic case and, as it often said, a *unicum*. Any present-day reflection on horror must, sooner or later, come to terms with Auschwitz" (Cavarero 33–34).

11. "The work of horror does not concern imminent death from which one flees, trembling, but rather the effects of a violence that labors at slicing, at the undoing of the wounded body and then the corpse, at opening it up and dismembering it" (Cavarero 12).
12. Some parts of *Questo povero corpo* do not appear in the expanded version like the eponymous one from which I quote. I use my own translation for this part. Also, the name in Parks's translation is Giuliana Tedeschi Brunelli, not Fiorentino (her maiden name).
13. See Terrence Des Pres's letter in which he comments upon the effective quality of better survival skills of women in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück (in Heinemann 5).
14. Ruth Bondy speaks of the compulsory abortion for all the prisoners in Theresienstadt from July 1943 and how some of those who refused the treatment were immediately sent to the Eastern concentration camps (310–27).
15. Often, the entire family preferred the woman to keep her presence in the camp secret (Springer, *L'eco del silenzio* 43).
16. Different opinions about the existence of a choice different from Perechodnik's are expressed by John Roth ("Returning Home" 280–96) and David Hirsch (305–10).
17. Kremer stresses the inevitable centrality of man (in a solely masculine sense of the word) as a generalizing and universalizing element, to the detriment and marginalization of women (*Women's* 1).

3 The Power of Dignity, Or "Writers Out of Necessity": The Case of Liana Millu and Edith Bruck

1. Wiesel wants to be "at the same time witness and writer, and in that he can only be compared to Primo Levi" (A. Wiewiorka 61).
2. Similarly to Mengaldo, Alvin H. Rosenfeld maintains that readers shouldn't identify with Anne Frank because her story was "atypical" (9–13).
3. The different status of Eastern Jews is a topic Bruck tries to explain to Italian youth who used to think that all Jews are wealthy bankers and/or intellectuals (*Signora* 21).
4. This scene is repeated with equally compelling words in *Signora Auschwitz* (29).
5. Pontecorvo's 1960 film *Kapo* while initially lauded by critics, was highly contested for the kind of ethics of representation of the violence in the camp as O'Leary and Srivastava note (254). However, while they repeat that Pontecorvo was inspired by Primo Levi's testimony *Se questo è un uomo*, I contend that *Kapo*'s plot follows quite strikingly that of Bruck's book, of her initiation, even of the name of her Kapo, Alice.
6. *I ponti di Schwerin* was chosen as a finalist for the *Premio Campiello*, an annual Italian literary prize, in 1978.
7. For a more detailed recount about the notebook see Millu's *Dopo il fumo: "Sono il n. A 5384 di Auschwitz-Birkenau"* (76–77).

8. See also Catherine Chalier's *Lévinas: L'utopie de l'humain* for the connection between the ethical resistance of the human face and its power (91–94).
9. See also Guglielmo Petroni's *Il mondo è una prigione*.
10. She, like all other prisoners, was liberated from the second only because of the Allies, as Bettelheim stresses in "Surviving" (275–90).

4 *Inside the D* and Out of the Ghetto with the *Bambine* of Rome: Lia Levi, Rosetta Loy, and Giacoma Limentani

1. See Pawlikowski 551–65; Miccoli.
2. For this topic, see also by Cavaglion, "Deportazione e sterminio degli ebrei" 7–12.
3. About the construction of spatiality and corporeality in the *quarta sponda*, see Atkinson 56–79. Several covers of *La difesa della razza* representing the white man divided by a knife from the crooked-nosed Jew and the Negroid attest to the ideological link that Interlandi meant to spread in Italy with his magazine.
4. Arendt talks about the exploitation of this originally Russian text, especially the "plausibility of the non-public influence of the Jews in the past" (*Origins* 362).
5. See Aglaia Viviani's "La guerra con occhi di bambina. Autobiografie d'infanzia: Janina David, Giacoma Limentani e Hannele Zürndorfer" (145–47).
6. See *La porta dell'acqua* 15–16 for another version of the scene.
7. Not found in the English translation.
8. "The first strand, that of violence born out of racial intolerance, with the tremendous impact of the Shoah, tells of the dialectic between the canceling that collectivity (the mass) can cause to individual identity and the effort to keep the latter at the lowest and primitive levels, more 'abject'. The theme is certainly not that of the formation, but the most basic of maintaining one's personal dignity, a survival that is not only physical but mental" (Molfino 182).

5 *Le Lacrime*: Morante and Her Critics

1. "*La Storia* is not a type, but a unicum; it's not worth it to write books; it's not a result, but an instantly explosive necessity" (Raboni 177).
2. Gandolfo Cascio brilliantly shows how, in Morante's short story *Lo scialle andaluso*, Semitic physiognomy and Sicilian physical archetypes merge in the characters to almost emblematize Morante's hybrid origin.
3. Aside from Lucente's "*Scrivere o fare…o altro*: Social Commitment and Ideologies of Representation in the Debates over Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo* and Morante's *La Storia*," see also Giovanna Rosa's "La storia senza seguito,"

and Luigi De Angelis's "Il dibattito su *La Storia*: una versione necessariamente parziale."

4. In the first draft, the expression was "fatalistic passivity" (Fondo Morante V.E.1618/1.3, cartella 155).
5. It is also worth remembering Pier Paolo Pasolini's *stroncatura* to *La Storia,* first published in *Il tempo* (July 25 and August 1, 1974), then reprinted as "Elsa Morante: *La storia*," in *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, 2096–107.
6. Consonni analyzes this behavior with respect to the Eichmann trial. Despite the massive press coverage, the Italian public, save the Jewish community, hardly realized its own ignorance of such a recent historical period (97).
7. About the importance of Holocaust trials see Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, preceded by her "Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust" and Battini's *The Missing Italian Nuremberg*. Also very important is volume 23 of *The Journal of Israeli History* (Spring 2004), which is devoted to this topic: see Anita Shapiro's "The Eichmann Trial: Changing Perspectives" (1–23) and Consonni's "The Impact of the Eichmann Trial in Italy." Consonni reports the words of a Mauthausen survivor, Piero Caleffi: "In our country, right after liberation, came not only a kind of indulgence which could have seemed even noble, but an actual state of oblivion of what was and remains criminal" (91), an oblivion that Harald Weinrich traces to the holocaust of cultural memory committed by the Nazi and Fascist regime that he termed "memoricide" (185).
8. Missing in the English translation: "grazie a Dio" ("Thank God").

6 History and Stories: Historical Novels and the Danger of Disintegration

1. Some of the texts whose titles can be found in Morante's drafts are the Italian versions of Robert Katz's *Sabato nero;* Leon Poliakov's *Il nazismo e lo sterminio degli ebrei*; Gideon Hausner's *Sei milioni di accusatori: la relazione introduttiva del procuratore generale Gideon Hausner al processo Eichmann*; Domenico Tarizzo's *Ideologia della morte: documenti per un profilo del razzismo nazista e per una storia della resistenza europea*; Peter Weiss's *L'istruttoria*: *oratorio in undici canti* (*The Investigation*); Erwin Leiser (English), *A Pictorial History of Nazi Gemany*; Enzo Piscitelli's *Storia della Resistenza romana*; Pino Levi Cavaglione's *Guerriglia nei Castelli romani*, (especially for Davide's speech "In ciascuno di noi c'è un S.S"); Eucardio Momigliano's *Storia tragica e grottesca del nazismo* (sic) [*razzismo*] *fascista*; Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; Emanuele Artom's *Diari: gennaio 1940-febbraio 1944*; Renzo De Felice's *Storia degli Ebrei Italiani sotto il fascismo;* and Paolo Monelli, *Roma 1943*.

2. This is an ethical approach that Manzoni showed in his rebuttal of Parini's theory of aesthetic freedom in *La colonna infame* (*The Column of Infamy*) (160–70).
3. Strangely, in the Steerforth translation, this epigraph, as well as the one from Luke's Gospel, is physically distant from the beginning of the novel. The space taken by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison in between the two epigraphs and the novel itself is cumbersome for it severs Morante's work from its own epigraphs.
4. Her preparatory draft of *La Storia* carries this important adverb (Fondo Morante, V.E. 1618/I, *Il grande male*, c.1).
5. I am drawing from Emmanuel Lévinas' idea of language's performative quality of "continually undoing its phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said" (*Totality* 30).
6. "*Glimpse* and *inflection*—these terms suggestively affirm that the ultimate manifestation of the writer's presence in the novel, whether conceived as the attainment of irony or as the communication of intention, is partial, finite, even precarious, because it dwells in the empirical world of experience and communication" (Brenkman 291).
7. The Arturo-Morante identity can be seen once again in the utilization of photography as a means to reconstruct a past that escapes, or lacks details, as in *L'isola di Arturo*. In this novel, Arturo reconstructs the maternal figure through a photo. See M. Hirsch for relevant theoretical elaborations regarding the use of photography in recollection.
8. "The capacity of a being, and of consciousness, its correlate, is insufficient to contain the plot which forms in the face of another, trace, of an immemorial past, arousing a responsibility that comes from before and goes beyond what abides in the suspense of an époque" (Lévinas, *Otherwise* 97).
9. Translation mine. In the English translation, there is no mention of the Jewish women: "who belonged with the sinners, in the company of heathen women" (*House of Liars* 355).
10. Weil openly criticizes French socialists and especially Léon Blum's lack of political intelligence with which she opposes Machiavelli's acumen ("Méditations sur un cadavre" 327).

7 The Burden of Memory: *Lezioni di tenebra*

1. The Guanda 2013 edition flap softens this definition: "a novel nourished of autobiography."
2. Director Emmanuel Finkiel utilizes a similar technique in his film on three Shoah female survivors entitled *Voyages* (1999).
3. One consequence of her displacement is the lack of a mother tongue. The narrator constantly wishes to have a language she can call her own. "Sono convinta di avere una lingua madre che non conosco, ma vallo a spiegare a qualcuno" (LT 76; "I am convinced I have a mother tongue that I don't know, but go and explain it to someone").

8 Tips against "Numbness" for New Generations: For a Collective Useful Memory of the Shoah and a Global Novel: Janeczek's Postcolonial Thought

1. In *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg opposes a construction of noncompetitive memory between the Shoah and decolonization. This would be a multidirectional memory that encourages the dissolving of borders not merely among social and racial groups but among their memories as well (6).

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