



THE INGLORIOUS BASTARD

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There is a short, almost unnoticeable sentence in Sergio Luzzatto's *Partigia* which I will ruthlessly use to grant myself the right to approach the long lasting debate over his book from an outsider perspective : the perspective of a Polish non-historian, interested rather in Luzzatto's rhetoric and his place in the discussion than in the facts he reports. The fragment is as follows : "In Polonia, applicare punizioni inflessibili contro i maggiori criminali del Terzo Reich sfuggiti alla giustizia di Norimberga era anche un modo per mascherare le forme di contributo diretto o indiretto che le popolazioni polacche avevano prestato, sotto l'occupazione tedesca, alla soluzione finale del problema ebraico" (note A). My contribution to the debate over *Partigia* will not be about Poland, but these words are a nutshell representation of Luzzatto's method : his attempt to offer a deconstruction of heroic structures of thoughts and identity narratives as well as his ingeniously simplifying approach by means of which he comes to some generally uncontested conclusions. And – last but not least – the fact that when we read his *Partigia* we never know whether we are looking at a historical analysis or a quasi-autobiographical recount of one's vision of history.

As for the sentence itself : Luzzatto is, of course, right about the context of Polish trials on Nazis. Polish collaborationism is indeed a widely confirmed matter: from Barbara Engelking's *Szanowny Panie Gistapo* ("Dear Mr. Gistapo" – the title includes a deliberately preserved erroneous form of the epistolographic address in order to stress the popular involvement in the process of denunciation) to the latest publications by Jan Grabowski or Jan Tomasz Gross (see bibliography below). And, at the same time, he is very wrong about the whole thing. Because at the other hand, the situation is far more complex than this short sentence would show (cf. Tomasz Majewski 2009) : Luzzatto does not take into account such elements as the Soviet control over the trials, the masses of Polish ex-prisoners of various labor and death camps demanding revenge, which in the form of the trials was given to them as a sort of "panem at circenses" (or rather: pane instead of circenses) in order to control this threatening, hungry crowd (see Bohdan Czeszko's *Kłopoty władzy* ["Troubling power"]) etc. And he obviously cannot take them into account, because *Partigia* is – obviously – not a book about Poland. But less obvious fact is that the book is not really about Resistenza; it is not really about Primo Levi either. It's about Luzzatto who – just as in the case of Polish trials – makes a convincing point related to the Italian post-war identity basing on a rather crude oversimplification. Luzzatto is equally right and wrong about the things he focuses on – Primo Levi and Resistenza – as he is about those which are marginal to him, i.e. the Polish trials on Nazis.

To say that when we write, we are always writing about ourselves, is to employ a kind of an academic cliché : a narrative is always a de-facement – a distorted autorepresentation (as Paul de Man taught us). In this case however it's more than a generalization of the contemporary general ontology of text : in the case of Luzzatto this cliché becomes a quasi-anthropological point of departure, a structure founding his whole narrative. Luzzatto seems to be aware, just as Bronisław Malinowski was (cf. [Geertz 1988](#)), that one's gaze at any phenomenon – be it the everyday life of a Triobrand village or the history of “Resistenza” – does influence the phenomenon itself because there's no such thing as a non-subjective point of view. A “divine” perspective simply does not exist.

The trouble however is that Luzzatto appears unaware of what he seems to be aware of. He knows that what he shows us is his own anthropological “walking historical tour” (“la storia va percorsa a piedi, oltreché letta, va frequentata in loco oltreché nelle pagine dei libri o nelle buste degli archivi”[note B]), but he forgets it as soon as he is trying to prove his point. Which is that the thing with the Italian resistance movement (and, more importantly : with Primo Levi) is not as neat as we thought it was.

So the main problem with this book is not really that he presents a somewhat biased version of the story (is there any other?) but that this approach is somewhat selective. Some of the critics seem however to be holding this autoreflexive stance against Luzzatto “en grosse”, i.e. not because he does not persist in being “autobiographical” but because he is “autobiographical” in the first place (I would like to thank prof. Fabio Levi and dott.ssa Christina Zuccaro of Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi for sharing with me a complete bibliography of critical texts, comments and press releases concerning *Partigia*). It's enough to say that one of the first critical voices in the debate, that of Gad Lerner, focuses on Luzzatto's admitted “‘obsession’, ‘curiosity’, ‘passion’ for the Resistenza”. According to him these feelings are precisely the reason for the fact that “[a Luzzatto] risultassero troppo stretti i panni dello storico per addentrarsi nei misteri della natura umana” (Lerner 2013; note C) – and that is why, according to Lerner, the author choses to get so personal and personally obsessive about it. The thread of the autobiographical critique is even observable here, on this portal : earlier in 2013 Alberto Cavaglion accused Luzzatto of trying to cause a cheap scandal by attacking Levi and he backed up his argument by a biographical ironic remark : “on trouve ici probablement la cause du fait qu'il ait quitté l'étude du XVIII^e siècle et de la Révolution française pour le champ de l'histoire contemporaine”. Marcello Flores defended the author against this and many other accusations (marginally and bitterly noting a very telling and a widespread phenomenon – somehow suggested earlier also by Francesco Borgonovo, cf. [Borgonovo 2013](#)) – that some of the critics did not even bother to read the book : “Tout en reconnaissant qu'ils ne l'avaient pas encore lu, certains historiens ont immédiatement critiqué le livre”) but it appears that at least in this aspect the book needs no further defense. The article published by Isabelle Ullern here at “Usages publics du passé” (to which my text is but a humble follow-up) finally steers this thread of the discussion away from the Scylla of the “autobiographical” critique and the Charybdis of a patronizing praise. She states that in fact “le choix discursif de l'historien-écrivain Luzzatto, précisément, consiste à s'auto-présenter à travers des masques, des personnages types, de la même façon qu'il présente les acteurs du passé. En cela, il n'est pas incohérent, il est rigoureusement superficiel, ce qui permet aussi d'esquiver la contradiction adverse.” And that's what allows us to neither critique nor praise Luzzatto but to read his book – as a testimony.

In effect Ullern presents a Luzzatto-witness, giving a testimony backed up – not contradicted – by its meandric logics (the book is indeed a very complex structure with threads interlacing in a sometimes hard to follow manner), inconsistencies etc. It is precisely that personal approach, the numerous marginal notes, the mistakes, the simplifications (like the ones about Poland) etc. that make it an interesting book. We should read *Partigia* rather as a testimony than as an analysis of a historical and cultural phenomenon. After all, doesn't it start with the characteristic, testimonial and so often mocked scene of a young Luzzatto listening to his mom reading to him *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza* – “dans une scène que l'on dirait tirée d'un roman édifiant du XIX^e siècle” (Cavaglio 2013) ?

And even in case of that ironic remark there may be more to it than just a sarcastic mockery of Luzzatto's “obsessive” personalization of the story. Maybe there really is something more connecting it to the tradition of the modern writing which according to Terry Eagleton can be characterized by a very peculiar structure: “in the common plot characters, we say, 'discover' who they are, not by learning something about their past but by acting in such a way that they *become* what then turns out, in some sense, to have been their ‘nature’” (Eagleton 2012). In the contemporary Western culture reading a literary text is almost always like reading an autobiography. And in this case not only Ullern teaches us that we can or maybe even should read Luzzatto's text as literary but even Luzzatto himself makes a more or less conscious gesture of “fictionalization” by starting the reader off with a tragedy-like list of “Personaggi principali (first characters)”. It is indeed an autobiographical story of *becoming* an Italian inheriting the proud memory of resistance. And fighting it.

This fight, this resistance to accept the heroic black and white narrative of “La Resistenza”, is focused on the “brutto segreto (dirty secret)” of Primo Levi to which the author of *Se questo è un uomo*, *Sistema periodico* and rarely commented stories such as *La fine del Marinese* never fully confessed: the execution of two partisans – Fulvio Oppezzo and Luciano Zabaldano – conducted by his colleagues. The “dirty secret” is aimed not only to erode the myth of heroic partisans but, along with it, of the wider myth of “italiani brava gente” (Italians, good folks). Alberto Cavaglio has already pointed out that the former has already been widely discussed in Italian historiography. As for the latter – the myth of morally accurate behavior of Italian people during the war – it also has been as vividly questioned during the last few decades as it has been strongly affirmed before. Not only several authors have pointed to the 19th century colonial Italian atrocities in Africa as to a prelude to later racism and anti-Semitism (e.g. Del Boca 2005), but the very source of the WWII myth of the “good folk”, has been exposed as a very specific way of dealing with the fascist past by means of conceptual separating the German Nazism from the Italian Fascism (Sarfatti 2000; in fact, Luzzatto insists on using the term “nazifascisti” – although in a more ambiguous way – cf. : “nazifascisti, tedeschi o italiani che fossero [nazifascists, both Italians and Germans]”). In effect the notion of “italiani brava gente” has become a shibboleth of the post-war Italian identity in the way the Jewish-Polish, Jewish-French etc. relations have become a codeword for other national memory-residues. The major debates in that field have even been ignited in an analogous, textual venue (albeit in various time frames) : the Polish discussion has taken its present shape with the publication of Jan Błoński's essay *Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*, the French debate over the Holocaust has been influenced (although with a substantial delay) by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* and, finally, the Italian passeist self-image has been distorted by a text written by David Bidussa, somewhat similar to the other two. Author of *Il mito del bravo italiano* presents the refute to

accept the Italian commitment to the Nazi persecutions as a result of the nation's inner conflict between antiquity and modernity (cf. also [Fogu 2003](#)), i.e. between belief in traditional human values and aspiration to the progressive (and, in retrospective: destructive) ideology – just as Sartre argued for the supposedly typically French bizarre mixture of philo- and anti-Semitism or Błoński for the Polish conflicted identity of a victim and an oppressor.

And as in the case of the contemporary debate in Italy, also the Polish one experiences some more or less scandalous revisions. One of them is related to *Kamienie na szaniec* ("Stones for the rampart") which has been lately deconstructed by Elżbieta Janicka (author of *Festung Warschau*, a book about the remnants of the war-period Warsaw in the contemporary city) in the name of virtues similar to those set as a goal by Luzzatto – to demythologize a founding myth of a nation (cf. [Smoleński 2013](#)). *Kamienie na szaniec*, a book about young Polish boys fighting and dying in urban anti-Nazi guerilla in Warsaw, first published in 1943, has become a cornerstone of Polish heroism and as such has been accused by Janicka of encouraging a thoughtless, unreflexive patriotism. It is supposed to have created an image of a romantic, unrealistic death directing thousands of young people to a sure, pointless death – the Warsaw Uprising (as I am writing these words the sound of the sirens commemorating the heroism of "victis" make the annual Polish duet with the voice of Władysław Bartoszewski, one of the Warsaw Uprising survivors, calling for a sobering of the deafening "hurra-patriotic" tide). More than that, just as Luzzatto, Janicka claims that because of the monumental role the book has played in Polish identity-making process after the war, it has never been properly interpreted. And if it were, on a closer inspection the narrative can be read as a good piece of gay prose – which has ever been done because of the immobilizing structure of a heroic tale put on this book. Other examples are many – apart from Janicka's revelations there's the movie by Władysław Pasikowski *Pokłosie* (translated as *Consequences*) in which the story focuses on the Polish involvement in the mass killings of Jews in rural areas or the debates over alleged murders of AK members (Armia Krajowa – partisan National Army) on their Jewish colleagues as soon as their Jewish identity has been discovered (cf. [Skibińska and Tokarska Bakir 2011](#)) but the main point of these facts is that apparently now more than ever both Poland and Italy demand a re-reading of their national myths, demystification of half-truths and deconstruction of ready-made historical plots.

This demand goes along a process of rethinking of the status of a witness. He is no longer subject to a postulate to be a black and white adamant figure, giving a concise, factual and depersonified, "scientific" testimony. We now tend to believe he is more of a "superstes" than "testis", the one who survived what he saw but who also let the things he saw and lived through influence and maybe even distort his version of the facts. As such the version however does not become any less valuable than an "uncontestable" data (cf. [Jay 2005](#) on the creation of the figure of factual, numerical etc. authenticity). Now, contrary to the years following the war, when the impulse to do justice influenced the model of a witness (used by the line of defense of Adolf Eichmann and many other Nazi officials during the Nurnberg trials; the inability of the law to cope with the complex guilt of the Nazis trialed in Nurnberg are yet another reason why Luzzatto's statements such as the one quoted at the beginning of this text – "la giustizia di Norimberga" – are an example of an oversimplification) supposed to be able to recount his experience in a sober manner, the witness has the right to be erroneous and to be uncertain of the events he participated in (cf. the famous controversy concerning the number of crematorium chimneys blown up during the

Auschwitz uprising – cf. Felman and Laub 1991). He has the right to be – in Ullern’s words (who refers, among others, to the concept of a witness by Avishai Margalit) – “rigorously superficial”.

And that is precisely what Luzzatto is doing : he bares witness to a specific state of the Italian mind and by that he is re-interpreting the role of the resistance movement, re-examining the status of Levi’s literature and tracing some of its less heroic aspects. And he is doing that as a person somehow involved in that kind of testimony, e.g. as an Italian inheriting the burden of the black-and-white heroic past. As such the book reads as a great piece of prose. The problem is that if we read it as a historian’s work, we cannot but notice a crucial inner contradiction : he is doing it against his own method, or, as I stated before – he is doing it unaware of the fact that he is doing it.

That is why *Partigia* should not be read as a book in which Luzzatto tells us something about Primo Levi, but it is Levi as presented in this book who tells us something about Luzzatto – and, *per extensum*, about the state of the Italian debate over the post-war identity of the nation. While inspecting the testimony of Primo Levi in the “processo Cagni” (who is, as pointedly noted by one of the critics, more of a protagonist of this book than Levi) Luzzatto writes :

“Di Primo Levi, i cancellieri misero agli atti una deposizione concisa, quasi telegrafica: ‘Io sono stato prelevato e ad Aosta fui interrogato da Cagni. Io sono stato segnalato da Meoli (De Ceglie) il quale ha fornito ogni informazione sulla nostra banda e C.I.N.’” (note D).

And he adds :

“Mi è servito tempo per capire che la forza storica di questa scena sta proprio nella sua asciuttezza. Sta nel vorticoso ricambio dei testimoni davanti alla Corte straordinaria. (...) La forza della scena deriva non da ciò che Levi ebbe modo di dichiarare, ma dalla sua scelta di esserci : con il suo cognome così inconfondibilmente ebraico da non poter essere storpiato neppure dal cancelliere più impreciso, con la sua matricola chiaramente leggibile per quanto presumibilmente nascosta dalla manica della giacca, lui ‘già’ sommers[o]’ – aveva scritto in una tra le poesie ‘concise e sanguinose’ del ’46 – e lui poi salvato forse anche per questo, per comparire al processo Cagni, lui numero 174.517, lui corpo del reato.” (note E)

The Primo Levi who talks to us from this fragment is the well known mythological Levi, the one who was needed in the Italian as well as in the general public postwar debate so much in the 50s and later on: a sober witness, “a ‘simple’ chemist who brought the same kind of ‘weighing and measuring’ procedures to his depiction of life in the Lager that he utilized in the research labs of the paint company for which he worked” (White 2006). Today we all (and that includes Luzzatto !) already know that Levi is a scientist-as-writer, not the other way around (cf. Ferrero 2007 or Cavaglion 2006). It’s the public discourse and the mythological structures governing it – the very same ones Luzzatto fights against – that made him a writer-scientist claiming and claimed to be a scientist-writer. It took us some time to get around it – after all, before becoming a canonic Holocaust novel *If This is a Man* came out twice as a stunningly impartial, almost-scientific research report on a death camp: both of the first editions of *Se questo è un uomo* were published in the series of analytical dissertations : “Biblioteca Leone Ginzburg” (“Documenti e studi per la storia contemporanea”) and “Saggi” and the book did not appear as part of a “literary” collection until 1963 (“Coralli” and later “Nuovi Coralli”). So we do know now that Levi is above all a great writer, not a diligent, sober scientist and a Sunday writer who

wrote his books almost part-time, “on the train from Turin to Avigliana, (...) at night, (...) during lunch breaks” (Greer 1997). Nevertheless his “scientific” role in the debate over the Holocaust, La Resistenza etc. marked him to the extent that still today he remains a witness testifying in the “scientific” manner – even after his death. In 1987, the year of Levi’s suicide, “La Repubblica” wrote: “Aging, Levi achieved the state of a final perfection, noticeable in his face, glasses, grey hair, clothes. Everything was in its place. (...) [He] concentrated in him all the precision, lucidity and justice” (Bocca 1987). Apparently as a photograph, Levi was still telling the story of his life as a scholar, even though, as Hayden White has proved, the Levi we know, the author of *The Truce*, *The Drowned and The Saved*, *If Not Now, When ?* and, last but not least, *If This Is a Man*, was really a writer – writing, rewriting and modifying his literary testimony. And a human, trying to cope with his testimony, giving it to us in the way we all do : remembering and forgetting, interpreting and misinterpreting, noticing some facts and neglecting – willfully or not – others. And although Luzzatto is well aware that people work that way in general (he gives, for example, some of the witnesses of the events in Col de Joux the right to forget or at least not to want to remember: “A decenni di distanza dagli eventi, non è forse un loro diritto trincerarsi dietro i ‘non ricordo’? E poi, la memoria non è forse quello strumento meraviglioso ma fallace?” [note F]), he does not consider Levi such “people”. For him, as for so many of us, Levi is not a person, not even a witness, but THE witness who is supposed to confirm the facts, to back them up with his witnessing body, instead of facts serving as a context for his testimony. He seems to hold against Levi the very same thing he considered natural in the case of witnesses and bystanders from Col de Joux : “Ricostruzione, quella di Levi, che non corrisponde però a quanto documentato dalle carte d’archivio” (note G). Levi-person, unlike other people, is supposed to be identical with Levi-text, be it literary, juridical or any other.

But Luzzatto not only falls prey to this adamant figure of Levi who, like the photograph in Bocca’s press note, is the embodiment of a clear minded witness of history. Other than demanding him to be the witness of history he employs him as a witness of morality : “Il chimico Primo Levi funziona da reagente etico per questa storia della Resistenza” (note H). To put it briefly : Primo Levi, the chemist, is the background on which all the hidden stories, like the one involving the tragic (and let’s agree: still, even after 300 pages of *Partigia*, equivocal at best) fate of Oppezzo and Zabaldano, should present themselves in a sheer light of obvious facts.

Such Levi tells us, as I mentioned before, more about Luzzatto than Luzzatto tells us about Levi. By making him a litmus paper of the Italian morality, by wondering how come Levi never openly deconstructed an important Italian myth of a heroic, untainted partisan struggle against the “nazifascisti” Luzzatto wants Levi to be the coherent, complete and integral figure we all know he cannot be and never was – and who all of us want him to be. This way Levi really is a litmus paper – but not of partisan morality, but of the state of the Italian identity.

The trouble with his book is not therefore that Luzzatto “attacks” Primo Levi or La Resistenza or that he does not do justice to the one or the other. The trouble is in fact that by being a witness to a certain state of the Italian mind and by allowing some of his informants to be witnesses with all the shaky contexts of such a role (“E poi, la memoria non è forse quello strumento meraviglioso ma fallace?”), he denies Levi the right to be one. In this book, against the declaration made explicitly by Luzzatto himself Levi has only two options : or to be an aseptic “reagente etico per questa storia della Resistenza” or to fall from grace and become an inglorious bastard.

I invoke the title of a Quarantino movie *The Inglorious Basterds* (that's the odd orthography of the 2009 movie, slightly different from Enzo Castellari's 1978 partly pastiched original *The Inglorious Bastards*) not by accident. It plays on our most common stereotypes concerning WWII : sophisticated Nazis and brave French peasants protecting their Jewish neighbors, decadence of Third Reich's officials and sober bravery of "La Resistance" etc. At the same time, the movie transforms many of these stereotypes, including that of Jewish victimizing passivity – the title *Inglorious Bastards* (or *Basterds*), a group of Jewish Nazi-hunters, are nothing like the malnourished Jewish victims visual culture got us used to. Luzzato's goal in *Partigia* seems to be very similar : to tell an out-of-the box story of *Resistenza*, to make us think of the history as of a trace which urges us to deconstruct it (Mondadori's series in which the book appeared is precisely this : "Le scie"). The trouble is that instead of doing this, or maybe rather – along with doing this, he contributes to the further consolidation of the monumental role of Primo Levi : not a witness, but a immovable discursive figure.

Appendice

A : "In Poland, punishing sternly the Third Reich principle criminals who escaped the Nuremberg justice was also conceived as way to conceal the direct or indirect contributions that Polish population provided to the final solution of the Jewish question during the German occupation".

B : "Besides being read, history must be walked through. Beyond books pages and archive files, history must be known in its own territory".

C : "[Luzzato] felt himself tight into historian shoes when he attempted to fathom the secrets of human nature".

D : "Clerks of the court took note put on record of a pithy, almost telegraphic, statement testimony released by Primo Levi : 'I've been collected in Aosta and questioned by Cagni. Meoli (De Ceglie) denounced me and he reported all the information about our group and the C.I.N.'".

E : "It took me too much time to understand that the historic intensity of that scene lies in its sobriety; it lies in the whirling turnover of witnesses facing the special Court. (...) The strength of the scene doesn't originate from Levi's declarations, but from his choice of being there: with his unmistakable Jewish family name, which even the worst chancellor could not miss, with his matriculation number clearly readable, although presumably hidden by the jacket sleeve. Him, 'already drowned', as he had written in one of the 'concise and bloody poems of 1946, and he, who was then saved perhaps also because of this, to be present at Cagni trial, he, with the number 174.517; he, who was the body of evidence".

F : "Decades later, Isn't it a right for them to defend themselves by saying 'I don't remember'? And also, is not memory, a magnificent but misleading tool?".

G : "Though, Levi's reconstruction doesn't fit with what is recorded by archive documents."

H : "The chemist Primo Levi acts as an ethic reagent for this story of *Resistenza*"

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