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AFTER THE RETURN FROM LAGER: THE LITERATURE OF POST-MEMORY IN ITALY

Después del regreso del lager: la literatura de la postmemoria en Italia

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RESUMEN: El artículo explora los problemas relacionados con la idea de transferencia intergeneracional de la memoria, utilizando la estructura acuñada por Marianne Hirsch con la palabra postmemoria, y analiza en particular el caso de la autora translingüe Edith Bruck, representante de la primera generación, que vivió las persecuciones en primera persona. En particular se tendrán en cuenta el libro *Signora Auschwitz* (1999), que reflexiona sobre la imposibilidad de superar el horror del Lager, a pesar del acto de testimoniar, y el último libro publicado, *Il pane perduto* (2021). En la última parte, el artículo se centra en la segunda generación de judíos, tratando de mostrar cómo se puede hablar también en Italia de una «literatura de la postmemoria» por lo que concierne al trauma de la Shoah, a partir del caso de Helena Janeczek (*Lezioni di tenebra*, 1997).

Palabras clave: postmemoria; Edith Bruck; Helena Janeczek; testimonio; Shoah.

ABSTRACT: The paper explores the problems related to the idea of intergenerational transfer of memory, using the structure coined by Marianne

Hirsch with the word postmemory, and analyzes in particular the case of the translingual author Edith Bruck, a representative of first generation, who experienced the persecutions first hand. In particular will be taken into account the book *Signora Auschwitz* (1999), that reflects on the impossibility of overcoming the horror of the Lager, despite the act of witnessing, and the last book released *Il pane perduto* (2021). Finally, the paper focuses on the second generation of Jews, trying to show how we can talk also in Italy of a «postmemorian literature» for what concerns the trauma of the Shoah, starting from the case of Helena Janeczek (*Lezioni di tenebra*, 1997).

Key words: Postmemory; Edith Bruck; Helena Janeczek; Testimony; Shoah.

The present paper aims to highlight the main problems related to the return from the concentration camp, particularly the processing of the trauma and its narration, both in autobiographical works and in fictional works, written by authors of first and second generation of Jews, specifically Edith Bruck and Helena Janeczek. This subject is part of the debate on the possibility of representing trauma and on testimony, focusing on how fictional works, where imaginations merges with autobiographical facts, the public dimension with the private one, can constitute the best tool to attempt overcoming it and at the same time contributing to the creation of postmemory, also indirectly. For this reason, this treatise will start from the concept of testimony and from its connection with the traumatic dimension, proceeding to analyse some of the works by Edith Bruck that show this symbiosis of public and private dimension as a tool of personal processing of the trauma and as an attempt to reflect on the problems related to the reinsertion into society, ending up with the second generation and particularly the analysis of *Lezioni di tenebra* by Helena Janeczek, where the author deals with both her mother's past and her return to life after the concentration camp, and the daughter's return to her own familiar and personal past and her way to overcome the trauma that was passed down to her.

1. BACK FROM THE CAMP: MEMORY AND LITERATURE AFTER THE SHOAH

One of the most recurring themes in the endless field of *Trauma Studies* is undoubtedly the motif of the impossibility of representing the trauma. This belief belongs to an even stronger tradition concerning the trauma of the Holocaust, starting from the renowned quotation of Adorno, that might be summed up with the one written in *Minima Moralia*: «Scrivere poesia dopo Auschwitz è barbaro» (Adorno 1974, 174). The aggravating theories

of the philosopher, aimed at investigating the relationship between culture and barbarity and at exposing the false myths of the Enlightenment and modernity, led many critics over the years to reflect on the possibilities offered by culture and art in representing an event according to which all the old categories and communicative patterns seemed poor and inadequate (Franzini 2005, 127-133). Assuming that yes, it is still possible to write poetry (and novels) after Auschwitz (Appelfeld 2005, 31-40), *what* can be written (and *how*) after the Holocaust? To this and more questions concerning representation, many scholars, above all Adorno, tried to answer, also questioning themselves on the necessary ethical implications of narrating the trauma (Haidu 1992). Before we move on, a clarification on the concept of trauma itself is due. The initial notion of trauma as an event that burst into someone's or a society's everyday life, breaking their psyche for the rest of their life and forcing them to constantly repeat the same experience time and again, nowadays must be considered if not obsolete, at least incomplete. And yet, the first trauma studies that we can find in the artistic and literary field will spread precisely from this notion. Cathy Caruth, referring to the idea of compulsion to repeat theorized by Freud, affirms that a representation of trauma is not possible, and only a replica or an endless reproduction can be possible, a replica that can only happen in the artistic and literary field, the only field, in her theory, in which «knowing and not knowing» (Caruth 1996b, 2-3), can meet. Caruth's ideas concerning the impossibility of communicating the traumatic experience have been thoroughly discussed. Particularly substantial are the oppositions of those who wanted to underline the importance of historiography, although not denying the value of art. Among these, it is worth mentioning the considerations of Dominick LaCapra, who wants to mostly underline the ethical value of the historian's (LaCapra 2001). LaCapra, moreover, already underlined how some concepts of psychoanalysis could easily be applied to the relation existing between culture and social groups, introducing a new branch of historic, critic and psychoanalytic research (LaCapra 1996). To be more specific, the concepts of *acting out* and *working-through* are the ones that were borrowed from psychoanalysis and applied to trauma theories. In the first case, *acting out* is an endless repetition of the past, that does not allow the person who lived it to re-elaborate it, but only to re-live it endlessly; whereas in the second case, *working-through*, the person who experienced the trauma can re-elaborate it and finally be able to narrate it and even overcome it. These concepts are used by the historians both at an individual and a collective level, and not considered in total opposition between them, but as two process that can complete each other. If trauma is undoubtedly re-lived repeatedly by the victims, that does not

mean some form of processing and narration is not possible, also through the historians' effort to connect the past and the present. In this sense, they perform an ethical role since, through their work on witnesses, «si fanno anch'essi testimoni, testimoni secondi, potenzialmente posseduti dalla stessa sofferenza a cui danno voce» (Violi 2014, 46), although not identifying themselves with the victims, but empathizing with them, and contributing to the process of *working-through*.

What seems clear, if not immediately, at least since a few years after the end of WWII, is that in any case the representation, intended as an account of the experience, cannot be absent, despite the problems concerning this expressive effort, if anything because of a primary need for communication. As a matter of fact, if in the first post-war period the narration of the extermination has a very marginal role in the European intellectual debate (Guida 2007), the subjective testimonies of the survivors start to emerge as the first works of what has been defined as *Literature of Shoah*. The first representation of the unspeakable is therefore what we call testimony. Testimony has been defined by Geoffrey Hartman as a representation suspended between history and memory, literature and report (Hartman 2002, 122), which takes a central role in our post-Holocaust era, «the era of testimony», so called because, according to Elie Wiesel, it gave birth to its more typical product, which is the literature of testimony (Wiesel 1977, 9).

As Gabriele Scaramuzza rightly stated:

I termini entro cui si muove la questione della testimonianza sono già lucidamente individuati in quello che del testimoniare è forse l'espressione più celebre ed emblematica: *Se questo è un uomo* di Primo Levi. Impossibilità di dimenticare, bisogno di raccontare e rischio di naufragio di ogni proposito di rendere testimonianza segnano i limiti estremi del problema. (Scaramuzza 2005, 69)

On the one hand there is the need to tell, that however does not appear in all the survivors immediately, and on the other hand the fear of not being able to faithfully represent what happened or to not be listened.

This fear is even stronger if we think that testimony is a form of writing intrinsically direct to the outside, to the other, that loses its purpose if it is not heard by someone (Agamben 1998). At the same time, though, this account folds upon itself, speaking of the others, «i sommersi», those who did not survive and to whom often times the salvation from oblivion is promised before they die (Wievorka 1999) and towards who, in some cases, we feel shame in knowing we are not at the same level of those, the perished, who alone could tell the most atrocious horror of the concentration camp. Other turmoil of social, ethical, religious or more personal nature adds on

to these thoughts that, together with a not so favourable situation concerning the willing to hear these tales in the social destination context, make testimony a highly problematic effort, because of the fear of not being believed, which seems to annihilate the witness and jeopardise their every effort (De Matteis 2009, 19).

The risk is to go from unspeakable to inaudible, something that does not want to be heard from public opinion and that struggle to be accepted by the same editorial environment.

David Bidussa identified three generations of writing among such an uneven field.

La prima tipologia è rappresentata da una scrittura che si afferma come memoria-testimonianza, e la sua funzione consiste nel non dimenticare. Una seconda stagione di scrittura adotta lo schema della memoria-riflessione. La domanda che sottende è: «Come è stato possibile Auschwitz?» L'operare di questa seconda interpretazione della memoria consiste nell'analisi degli atti, dei movimenti del corpo, dei comportamenti, dei passaggi mentali. Da questa seconda modalità se ne origina una terza, fondata sulla domanda se sia possibile uscire da Auschwitz. Qui gli autori non hanno vissuto in prima persona l'intero ciclo dell'esperienza concentrazionaria eppure le voci narranti delle loro scritture non sono capaci di superarlo. (Bidussa 2009, 18)

These kinds of narrations do not present a linear and chronological way to tell the story. As Stefania Lucamante points out, in the last years, and generally from the Nineties, we witnessed a more and more frequent comeback of the first kind of testimony (Lucamante 2012, 59), also because of the approaching death of many direct witnesses, who finally decided to entrust their memories to their kids or grandkids.

The second knot is about the literary genre: what can be defined testimony and what not? Certainly, we are talking about autobiographical writings, but the mix of historical and personal events often creates different narrative forms, such as journals or their re-elaborated versions, epistolary exchanges, but also actual novels, that go towards more and more fictitious outcomes or towards hybrid forms of writings oscillating between essays and self-commentary.

2. THE CASE OF EDITH BRUCK, BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DIMENSION

Edith Bruck, by now an internationally renowned writer, studied and appreciated by critics and the public, has been and still is an important direct witness of the Shoah.

Deported as a child at the age of twelve from Hungary and one of the few survivors from Auschwitz and other concentration camps, after becoming an orphan, the writer published several books in Italian, that oscillate between memoirs and testimony works and novels, in which the weight of memory interlocks with fiction and fantasy, contributing to the creation of a real Italian *postmemory*, meaning by that, using the words of Bidussa, «il contenuto culturale, emozionale, e mentale che ci troviamo a «governare» dopo «l'era del testimone»» (Bidussa 2012, 15). Some of Bruck's works are particularly meaningful, as they witness how, if for the author is possible to somehow represent the trauma of Shoah, it is not possible, however, to truly overcome it, making it impossible to go back to an everyday life detached from the role of the witness.

The autobiographical narration of the return from the concentration camp has recently been proposed again by the author in her last work *Il pane perduto* (2021a), along with a series of thoughts that highlight how Bruck never felt understood, accepted or at home again, except when she landed in Italy and met Nelo Risi. Her trips all over Europe, from Hungary to the Promise Land, passing through Greece and finally Italy, transformed into fiction in her novel *Quanta stella c'è nel cielo* (2009), are characterized by indifference and by the difficulty of reinserting herself into not only society, but also her family of origin. Once they returned, Edith and her sister knew that what they had experienced created a huge gap between them and the rest of the world, that seems not to be interested at all in the terrible experiences of the years in the concentration camp.

Tra me e Judith scambiammo un dialogo muto come per dire che tra noi e chi non aveva vissuto le nostre esperienze s'era aperto un abisso, che noi eravamo diverse, di un'altra specie. Cosa stava succedendo? Il nostro avanzo di vita non era che un peso, mentre ci aspettavamo un mondo che ci attendesse, che si inginocchiasse. Ciò che ci turbava era reale o immaginario?

[...]

Eravamo disperate con la voglia di fuggire, ma dove?

«Ma in che mondo siamo tornate? Ma perché abbiamo lottato tanto per la nostra sopravvivenza? Perché? Perché? [...]». (Bruck 2021a, 68-69)

The two sisters feel «uncomfortable» in their own skin (Bruck 2021a, 70), «sempre più sole e abbandonate» (Bruck 2021a, 71) during travels that take them all around the world, looking for a lost homeland, and particularly Edith, who cannot find peace not even in the new-born Israeli State, which disappoints her under several aspects, first and foremost the compulsory military service «Oh no, non ho l'età e non voglio uniformi: né ammazzare, né morire. Io vengo da Auschwitz», she will say to a soldier who

asked her why she was not in the army (Bruck 2021a, 85). «Forse è colpa mia, non mi trovo più bene da nessuna parte» (Bruck 2021a, 84), she will say in a dialogue with her sister, excited about the Promised Land. Nevertheless, the need to write and the will to bring her own story and testimony into the world, will keep being a constant thought in the mind of the young woman, until the moment in Rome when she resumes her old notebook (Bruck 2021a, 111), and finally writes in Italian, a new language, «una lingua che ferisce meno della mia, natia» (Bruck 2021a, 106).

If the need to witness and the idea of going back to do it constitutes one of the main sources of life for the survivors, since the time they were held captive, once the concentration camp experience is over, they often end up being torn apart precisely by this duty-need, as Edith Bruck narrates in her 1999 work titled *Signora Auschwitz*, a work that is hard to classify in terms of genre. In this novel-confession, that interlocks with the epistolary dimension, very present in the Hungarian writer's works, Bruck tries to bring to light the weight and the personal consequences of a life spent in witnessing the horror, in living everyday with Auschwitz, a monster that eats you from the inside out, an «inquilino devastatore» (Bruck 1999, 16) who forbids you from living a normal life, detached from the role of the witness. The symbiosis between the writer and the camp is first declared in the title, result of one episode that happened for real during one of the school lectures, which ends up fully expressing what Bruck already sensed:

[...] e non mi meravigliai per niente quando un'impacciata studentessa rivolgendomi una domanda mi chiamò «Signora Auschwitz». Luogo che abitava il mio corpo e che mi sentivo anche addosso, come una camicia di forza sempre più stretta, che negli ultimi due anni mi stava letteralmente soffocando, senza che fossi capace di liberarmene. Ero convinta che dire di no alla testimonianza, separarmi da Auschwitz, da me stessa, dal mio essere, mi avrebbe fatto più male che continuare. (Bruck 1999, 16)

And still, this episode returns several times in the book, to underline how that nickname is by now part of the essence of the writer, superseding her identity, making her a sort of living monument that brushes against the life of her listeners only for a short moment:

Alcuni mi volevano solo toccare, baciare grati e commossi e via di corsa fuori liberi lontani da Auschwitz, dalla Signora Auschwitz. (Bruck 1999, 23)

Sognavo di poter vivere senza più andare in giro come una rappresentante di Auschwitz, l'archetipo di Auschwitz.

Che altro ero? (Bruck 1999, 27)

[...] io non ho neppure un nome; sai come mi ha chiamato una studentessa... mi pare a Pescara? Signora Auschwitz. (Bruck 1999, 68)

Until it became impossible to distinguish between her life and the representation of trauma:

«Allora tornerai? Ti aspettano tutti, c'è un grande bisogno di te in giro.»
«Di me o di quello che rappresento?»
«Non è la stessa cosa?» [...]. (Bruck 1999, 77)

The role of the witness, at first played as it was «su misura» (Bruck 1999, 12), although struggling a lot since the very beginning, ends up suffocating the author.

The terrible and invisible consequences of what happened, the trauma that she had to personally deal with daily, had to necessarily be recognized publicly and institutionally to be overcome, as several Bruck's work prove, other than *Signora Auschwitz*.

One of these works, titled *Lettera da Francoforte*, published in 2004, narrates the path leading to a reimbursement request, re-elaborating what happened to the writer in real life.

Vera Stein, the main character of the novel, even finding herself in a «nightmare», keeps dealing every day with a painful bureaucracy, to be officially recognized as a survivor. To obtain a public recognition, an official document attesting her permanent condition as a victim and witness of the horror, seems to be a primary need for the protagonist, almost visceral, moving the narration forward even when rationality (represented by her husband Carlo) seems to have the best of her and almost leads her to give up her goal. This primary need appears from the very beginning of the novel, when Vera «come spronata da voci inudibili, spinta da mani invisibili» (Bruck 2004, 9) goes towards the drawer where she kept her old reimbursement form, that she had made upon her brother's request. At this point, a meaningful discovery introduces one of the most characteristic aspects of the novel: multilingualism. The first document she finds, of which the author only reports the first lines in Hungarian and that goes on in Italian, since, as the narrating voice herself states, this acquired language seems less real «sembra meno vera» (Bruck 2004, 9), is written in the mother tongue of the author and proves the liberation of Vera/Edith from the camp of Bergen Belsen, bearing the date September 18th, 1945. A second document attests the small reimbursement granted by a first aid organization in Budapest, and it is dated September 30th of that same year. Both documents are considered «not enough» for the reimbursement required and are translated into German. With great disbelief of the protagonist, two more languages add up to the previous three: Russian and English which,

together with German, fill the eight pages reimbursement module, plus another paper containing seven questions. The last of these questions leaves the protagonist speechless and signals to the reader the field of grotesque in which the entire story will develop for the remaining of the novel:

7. Prova documentata della sofferenza subita durante la persecuzione. Le testimonianze non sono sufficienti.

Dopo aver letto e riletto la richiesta numero sette (prova documentata della sofferenza subita durante la persecuzione), le ghiandole salivari mi lasciano la bocca asciutta. La mente si paralizza. (Bruck 2004, 10)

More than the absurdity of the request, Vera is dismayed by the fact that witnesses only are not sufficient to prove her suffering. If society does not officially recognize her witness status and her public role, that became her purpose in life, what is the point of all the pain she went through? At the end of one letter to the responsible of the procedure, to which Vera relates her whole experience in the camp, she angrily reports her constant, and yet invisible, status of *Signora Auschwitz*, that nobody can take away from her:

Caro signor Tarshawsky, la sofferenza ha volti infiniti, esteriori e interiori, documentarla con qualche cicatrice del gelo sulle mie gambe la ridurrebbe a niente.

Se vuole altre prove scritte me lo faccia sapere, per oggi basta il mio vissuto che vivo, che è mio, che nessuno può togliermi, negarmi. La sofferenza è anche forza.

Lei o il Governo federale tedesco potete dirmi di no per la pensione, ma non per Auschwitz. Mai.

Sinceramente

Mrs Castelli (Bruck 2004, 54)

If it is true that the only tangible proof of the protagonist/author's pain is the invisible one of testimony, because «eccetto che per il numero di matricola, quel A11152, la ferita di Auschwitz non porta cicatrici» (Lucamante 2012, 172), at the same time, the struggle to be officially recognized as a witness leads Vera to do some nonsense actions, outside of her reasoning as outside of any reasoning (and cruel) are the constant requests of certificates, documents, proofs. The woman even asks her accountant to lie on her income, so she would not reach the upper limit decided by the Government. This request makes her drown in a sort of sadness thinking how all her life, marked out by such a deep and real pain, ends up being validated through «una misera menzogna» (Bruck 2004, 73), a mere matter of money, the only tangible thing in a society where everything, even feelings, even pain, must be translated into money in order to exist (Lucamante 2012, 170).

After another bureaucratic request in the year 2000, the protagonist finally decides to bring the requested birth certificate herself to Frankfurt. This city, so many times identified with the ruthless enemy, who, over the years, had ended up impersonating a devouring monster in her life and in the already crippled soul (Bruck 2004, 93) of the protagonist, making her an anonymous orphan more and more in each letter, now becomes the final destination of a trip that consists in finding a human contact, in meeting «l'uomo macchina che si chiama Tarshawsky e mi tiene in bilico su una corda da sette anni» (Bruck 2004, 142) in person. At the end of the day, Vera/Edith thinks that «nonostante tutti i disastri che fa l'uomo, non c'è altra speranza che nell'uomo». But this mindset will eventually disappear when Edith faces a reality she does not expect, that grey zone that every deportee knows very well:

[...] mi precipito dall'uomo che avevo immaginato un burocrate gigante con il cuore e gli occhi d'acciaio, invece ho davanti un omino scarnito, piccolo, anonimo, anziano. [...] Lo fisso incredula mentre si solleva per prendere la sua giacca appesa a un attaccapanni di legno e attraverso i polsini sbottonati scopro impietrita il suo tatuaggio... da ex deportato. [...] Sono gli ebrei che gestiscono il Fondo per il risarcimento. Dio mio, magari non l'avessi mai saputo! (Bruck 2004, 142)

Afar from feeling any pity for this man, the author proves to be inflexible towards those who affirm to be only an «executor of their orders». The accusation toward Tarshawsky is that of being a «povero Caino sopravvissuto perché ha caineggiato sui deportati e caineggia sui sopravvissuti», echoing, as Lucamante pointed out, Primo Levi's words in *I sommersi e i salvati*. Nazis appear to win once again, destroying the value of testimony and refusing an official recognition of their status to the victims through the very same Jews.

It appears to me that the ending of this text also adds another fundamental element to the status of witness/survivor and his relationship with the community. Once she comes back to Rome, to her husband Carlo, Vera cannot answer his questions with honesty and invents a different version of the story, as she is frozen by the «vergogna di dire la verità a un non ebreo» (Bruck 2004, 150).

If the dimension and the public status of witness is certainly always present in Edith Bruck's works, the impossibility of the return is nevertheless more apparent in the more private and intimate dimension of the family. The loss of her parents, and particularly of her mother, is a trauma that cannot be removed and that becomes recurrent in the author's production, both prose and poetry.

Stefania Lucamante, speaking about this strong relationship that is so suddenly interrupted, creating a fracture that cannot be repaired and yet perceptible almost as a presence in every text of the Hungarian writer, stated that it is almost as if there was a halo in Edith Bruck's works, an outline of *supernatural* light that surrounds the *unnatural* void created when her mother was killed by the Nazis (Lucamante 2012, 191). The crucial moment of separation, that happened fast and without the chance of saying goodbye after that train arrived in Auschwitz, is described in the first work of the author, *Chi ti ama così* in 1959, and recalled many times by Bruck in her public speeches, in interviews or other literary works.

This is the moment in which History enters the life of young Edith in a definite and irreparable way, preventing her from living a normal adolescence and destroying her family. This is the moment in which the «two hearts» (Raboni 1975, 37), as Giovanni Raboni defined them, of Edith Bruck's poetry were born, the two shores in between which oscillates her creative thought (Meschini 2018, 11) as Michela Meschini states, referring to the public dimension of her persecution and the equally dramatic private dimension of losing her family and the loneliness. Two opposite poles so full of generative charge, both ascribable to deportation, that, despite being inevitably marked by death and absence, end up melting together in the primigenial figure of the mother, which takes that pervasive connotation of presence/absence, particularly apparent in her poetry collections. *Il tatuaggio* (1975), *In difesa del padre* (1980) e *Monologo* (1990) now finally collected in one issue, constitute the three collections in which the verses of the writer¹ are organically put together, to which we must add the latest collection *Tempi* (2021). In her four collections it is possible to notice the strength and the push toward the testimony as a public act, something due to keep the memory of the extermination alive, as well as the more intimate dimension of the irreparable loss, a history deprived of affections and feelings (Meschini 2018, 11) in which the mother is the main character. It is not by chance that the first collection opens with a poetry titled *Nascita* which, in her rawness, vividly painting with just a few brushes strokes the maternal figure as a strong and practical woman, relates the exact moment of Edith's birth and the meeting with a harsh reality of struggles which marked her childhood (Bruck 2018, 41).

Almost as if the entire collection was born from the mother figure bent on a toilet, the poetical path that wind through the verses of these first three

1. The short poem *Specchi* and some other scattered poetries must be added to complete Edith Bruck's production in verses.

collections seems to recreate the symbolic image of a «madre-grembo» (Meschini 2018, 13), in which the author obsessively resorts the image of the womb as a dark place where all her losses assemble, but also from which her poetry originates. In particular, the collection *In difesa del padre* is where this image acquires some well-defined features, but at the same time some blurred ones, finally understanding both the absence of her mother and the one of her other missing relatives. Particularly, in the homonymous poetry that opens the collection, after remembering also her father, «mother» becomes a «strange word», like a big container of memories, unequivocally characterized in a feminine way (with references to the «menstruation»), but potentially containing everything and nothing at all, life, joy, love, pain (Bruck 2018, 120).

Home, family, mother, are «strange words» because they no longer belong to the private dimension of the author, irreparably marked by loss and sorrow, which turn something off even inside her soul. «La solitudine è profonda / un ventre materno buio e silenzioso» (Bruck 2018, 138), the writer reports, but at the same time the bond with her relatives is still strong and felt as present, as we can notice in the poetry *Eravamo in otto*, in which Bruck retraces the events of her own family (Bruck 2018, 133) and puts the act of writing at the centre of her existence, as a distinctive element. But if the mother figure ends up symbolizing death, the end of childhood and every «beautiful» thing ever present in her carefree child life («[...] la cosa più viva / è la loro fine / che oscura / la memoria / del bello / che doveva pur esserci [...]») she writes in the poetry *Se non fossero morti* (dedicated to her parents), nevertheless it is not characterized by silence or absence of communication, on the contrary, it is the subject of a constant dialogue between Bruck and the mother figure, which experiences (in verses) that epistolary dimension already present in the collection *Il tatuaggio* and which we will find again some years later in *Lettera alla madre*, with the poetry *Parliamo madre* (Bruck 2018, 177), in which the poetic narrator directly addresses her perished mother. The maternal dimension is evoked not just as a child who recalls her parents, but also as a pregnancy dreamt of in its impossibility («Un corpo di donna / al mio fianco / un'adolescente / un bambino nudo / vorrei sul mio corpo». Bruck 2018, 143) and symbolic gestation of a pain which can only be born through testimony. If the author repeatedly states that she is carrying in her womb all the pain of the world, but also the joys of life («[...] porto in me il pianto / di ogni madre che perde il proprio figlio / la gioia di quando partorisce [...]». Bruck 2018, 105) it is only in the act of narrating and in the civil duty of testimony that Bruck can find an answer to the question (common to many survivors) *Perché sarei sopravvissuta?*, title of a poetry that summarise in just few verses all the meaning of her writing and actions, as she had probably noticed and

expressed in a *Nota* contained in her first collection in 1975, a short text in which Bruck affirmed that «forse le mie poesie sono il riassunto di tutto quello che ho scritto» (Bruck 2018, 40).

Perché sarei sopravvissuta
se non per rappresentare
le colpe, soprattutto
alle persone vicine?
[...] Con me che sono diversa
dalle altre e porto in me
sei milioni di morti
che parlano la mia lingua
che chiedono all'uomo di ricordare
all'uomo che ha così poca memoria.
Perché sarei sopravvissuta
se non per testimoniare
con la mia vita
con ogni mio gesto
con ogni parola
con ogni mio sguardo. [...] (Bruck 2018, 103)

Paolo Steffan, in his preface to the new complete issue of the first three collections of poetries, recalling the verse «in agonia in amore» of the poetry *Madre pensavo al tuo sesso*, talked about an inseparable duo in the poetry and literary work of Edith Bruck (Steffan 2018), the one of hate and love, two opposites that always find a way to re-join in her poetries, but also in the rest of the literary production of the writer. «L'agonia che la tragedia storica ha inscritto nel corpo e nello spirito di Edith» wrote Meschini, «si scioglie nell'amore di un percorso di scavo e comprensione, compiuto per il tramite della scrittura poetica» (Meschini 2018, 15). A poetry that originates from the most intimate and private dimensions and reaches existential and civil problems, expressed through a plain tone and prosaic verses, that hide existential questions with no answers behind an apparent ease of reading. Those same questions echo in her most recent collection *Tempi* (Bruck, 2021b) in which the author reaffirms that «Non ci sono e non ci saranno mai / parole per dire. / Io ci provo, racconto, scrivo / ma non è che un balbettio» (Bruck 2021b, 23).

3. POSTMEMORY: THE RETURN FOR THE CHILDREN

The impossibility of overcoming and elaborating the trauma of the Shoah is pretty evident for the direct witnesses, despite their apparent return

to normal life. Nevertheless, we can talk about real trauma (and transmitted memory) also for the following generations, thanks to the paradigm of *postmemory* coined by Marianne Hirsch, who underlined how this concept cannot be considered «a movement, a method, or idea» (Hirsch 2012, 6) but it is, as a matter of fact, a *structure* in which we can frame the phenomenon of an inter and transgenerational return of a traumatic past, in which the term post signals the time and quality difference of this kind of memory from the ones of the survivors (Hirsch 2006, 301-302).

It is precisely the shift from memory to postmemory, from the testimony to the moment when the relating of the trauma is no more (or at least not only) through the hearing or the reading of direct testimonies, that we are more interested in. When direct witnesses start to disappear, the transmission of the past, as Olimpia Affuso states, essentially becomes a cultural matter concerning the public dimension, which is based on mediation of artistic works, particularly narrations.

La costruzione della memoria passa dal terreno in cui la storia narrata coincide con l'esperienza diretta, dove chi racconta è anche chi ha vissuto l'evento, al terreno in cui chi racconta non ha vissuto i fatti ma si fa carico di trasmetterli in qualità di autore e lettore di un testo. Attore della memoria diventa chi sceglie di raccontare una storia che ha riguardato altri uomini come se fosse la propria. (Affuso 2017, 51)

Therefore, there is a shift from primary to secondary or adopted witnesses. *Postmemory*, as Hirsch points out, in addition to being different from memory because of the time distance from the events that are being told or recalled, is also different from history because of the presence of a strong personal connection (Hirsch 1997, 22). It is not a non-mediated memory, the scholar adds, but at the same time it is a kind of experience strictly connected to the past, an often familiar past.

About the authors of the second (but also third) generation, which have been defined by Lia Tagliacozzo «generation of desert» (Tagliacozzo 2020, 13) as it derives from a gigantic material emptiness (entire families were destroyed) as well as communicative emptiness, it is possible to recognize some common trajectories in the intergenerational transmission of the trauma. Many of these authors were raised listening to their parents' narration or, more frequently, to their silence, in a sort of «patto di tutela reciproca» (Tagliacozzo 2020, 184), and they were aware of the existence of such a heavy past that was so difficult to elaborate. Emanuele Fiano writes about this in his autobiographical work of postmemorial research *Il profumo di mio padre*:

Auschwitz è stato per me, per lungo tempo, da bambino, una sorta di non-luogo della memoria e della nostra famiglia. Un qualcosa che c'era e non c'era. Una parola sconosciuta e da onorare; sacra, terrificante, ignota. Un nome che vagava nell'aria di casa, quando la mamma mi allontanava perché papà piangeva [...]. Io sono cresciuto, da bambino, con la consapevolezza di un male esistito e terribile, inspiegabile e non spiegato, a cui sapevo di dovere l'assenza di nonni, nonne, zii e zie e cugini. (Fiano 2021, 20)

These hybrid writings, oscillating between autobiography, essay, historical research, became more and more frequent in the last years, and apart from finding their place in the heterogenous field of postmemorial literature, they can also be assimilated to the concept of *secondary witness* theorized by LaCapra, together with all the other works that tried to convert the oral testimony of the survivors into written words, or to organize and publish those written testimonies that remained unpublished for some reason.

In the emblematic case of Helena Janeczek, the author affirms in *Lezioni di tenebra* that she does not know her mother at all, and she does not know anything about her life between 1939 and 1945, because of an «irreparabile separazione», a «azzeramento» (Janeczek 2011, 128), consciously chosen by her parents. Her personal path as a daughter and as a writer aims at recovering this memory, a rebuild that interrupted past and make communication possible between two generations that were unable to speak to each other (Serkowska 2017). The filling of this void mostly happens through an imaginative effort, a fantasy investment carried out through the writing. Janeczek «mette in scena e problematizza i modi della (non)-trasmissione della memoria della madre a lei stessa. La forma scelta dalla scrittrice è quella di un'autobiografia e di una testimonianza postmemoriale finzionalizzante» (De Paulis, 2022, 59). The heart of darkness that must be explored in the novel is the one related to the mother-daughter relationship, but also the one related to a past that had been kept secret, and toward whose origins the characters of the book try to return in a backward trip. The title certainly refers also to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and to his trip in the heart of the African jungle, which assumed a series of meanings, since, as Cristina Mauceri noted, the darkness into which we venture as we go on with the reading of the book is at the same time that in which the mother of the author lived during the camp experience and the one that obscured the life of the daughter for years, precisely because of such a heavy past (Mauceri 2004; Lucamante 2012). The darkness-light connection is also evoked, for what concerns the second generation, by the metaphor in the title of the pioneering work by Dina Wardi *Memorial Candles* (1992 then 2013), which reflects on the (painful) responsibility felt by the sons of the survivors in rebuilding

the connection between the past that the previous generation had kept quiet and their own present, through a constant research of their identity.

Helena Janeczek's journey, though, is not only an inside journey, but an actual itinerary made by mother and daughter in 1995. The two women, as a matter of fact, took part in one of the many memory trips offered to the deportees and their children, organized by a group of Polish survivors, and proposed to them by one of her mother's friends. While the mother mildly accepts the offer and even at first tries to find an excuse not to go, the daughter joins the group with the enthusiasm of who sees this chance as the only one to finally learn something more about her family and, therefore, about herself. The journey appears from the very beginning as a painful «viaggio tra i ricordi» (Janeczek 2011, 132), also because the starting day is the same in which, fifty years before, her mother, father, brother and all her mother's relatives were deported to Auschwitz. Nina finds the deepest darkness of her soul gathering in this same date, even though she had been trying to hide for years her guilt for having abandoned her entire family, just the night before, saying to her mother «me ne vado, non voglio bruciare nei forni!» (Janeczek 2011, 16), leaving her to her destiny. Guilt is one of the few things that, for Helena, witnesses the mystery of the existence of her own mother before the Shoah, a «mistero che non si risolve tranne in poche cose come la colpa e il dolore di mia madre, la colpa e il dolore che mia madre ha conservato per aver abbandonato sua madre » (Janeczek 2011, 152) and that will explode in the hopeless cry «la mia mamma, la mia mamma», once she reaches Auschwitz Birkenau.

Nevertheless, it is a journey that will reveal nothing; on the contrary, it seems almost forced and false, until the scream of her mother in front of the gas chambers, which somehow transfers to the daughter the memory of something she did not live, and makes her live for a moment that experience that, guiding her from psychoanalysis to postmemory, Raffaella di Castro defined *télescopage*, which is the presence of memories that transfer from one person to another or from one generation to another «like a gas», but also as a crash between a variety of times, experiences (lived and not lived), memories (wanted or accidental), images (visible and not visible), quotes, fragments, gestures (Di Castro 2008, 232).

Tutti le stanno intorno, le stanno addosso, ma io non riesco a restarle accanto perché mi è entrato in testa il suo grido, l'immagine di mia nonna che muore asfissata, forse è solo la foto che mio nonno è riuscito a salvare insieme ad altre quando l'hanno richiamato in fabbrica e lui deve essere passato da casa non so come, la foto ora appesa sopra il letto di mia madre, forse è una qualsiasi figura messa insieme da quelle viste nei documentari, o nessuna delle due, forse solo nelle gambe e nella trachea la suggestione di un senso di morte inalata. (Janeczek 2011, 153)

As Maria Pia De Paulis wrote, «il trauma si incista nelle piaghe dell'inconscio formando una «cripta» (*crypte*) nella quale si annida un «fantasma» (*fantôme*) che riaffiora a distanza di tempo e trasmigra nel discendente» (De Paulis 2022, 77) and it is significant that this phantasmagorical image is evoked also by Nedo Fiano's son, Emanuele, when referring to the trauma that his father transferred to him. Even in Fiano's case, the cultural mediators influence the possibility of reconstructing the trauma, but they never acquire the same strength as the family's memories. And, in the same way as Helena, the narration, together with the process of research of original and official documents, constitute the only way to bring to life «le rovine di una civiltà conosciuta nel racconto epico, ma che ora affiora disvelata dallo scavo degli archeologi» (Fiano 2021, 74).

Mi rendo conto che nonostante io abbia letto tanto su quella vicenda, sulla Shoah in generale, nonostante abbia ascoltato tanti testimoni e visto quei luoghi, la dimensione di racconto e relazione con il padre che questa vicenda ha avuto nella mia vita, la qualità di trasmissione di una vita di padre al figlio, come una scatola che ti viene consegnata, dove dentro c'è la vita di tuo padre che diventa la tua, dove il dolore di tuo padre diventa il tuo, e i suoi odi e le sue speranze pure, ecco quella dimensione che mi è così difficile spiegarvi, come fosse un'immagine fantasmatica che sta sospesa tra me e mio padre, è come se si frantumasse alla vista di quei documenti originali. (Fiano 2021, 74)

The weight of the memory, or rather its shadow (Serkowska 2017), Auschwitz's shadow, that covers also half of the figures on the Italian cover of the book *Lezioni di tenebra*, will never be overcome by Helena, if not, partially, through the writing of her novel, that for this precise reason appears as a complex, polyphonic, but also counterpointing work «contrappuntistica (parlano diverse persone, io, lei, tu), rispecchiando l'identità (per)turbata in fuga da un'identità fissa, con un «noi» inteso come famiglia, città di origine, lingua, nome» (Serkowska 2017, 156).

The author's mother seems to have adopted, when raising her child, all those mechanisms that Edith Bruck in *Lettera alla madre* feared to put to practice if she ever had a daughter. The dreadful fear to say too much or too little (Bruck 1990, 18) and the one of being an «extremist» mother (Bruck 1990, 54) appear in the way she raised young Helena, since, if on the one hand she omits some fundamental aspects of her past (like the fake last name Janeczek that her father used), that lead the author into admitting that she has no idea of who her mother was between 1939 and 1945 (Janeczek 2011, 128), and that she underwent a «resetting», on the other hand she was able to activate in her even some involuntary identification mechanisms. One of these appears as a form of generalized fear, fear of

persecution that shows up in her dreams ever since she was a little girl, where she is always the prey, sometimes of attackers in uniform and boots, with dogs following them (Janeczek 2011, 103) and most of all fear of bureaucracy and authorities, especially in uniform, that appears when Helena has to request her residency permit in Italy due to her imminent passport's expiration date. The protagonist describes a «spavento che m'era entrato nelle ossa, o mi era uscito fuori da chissà dove» (Janeczek 2011, 35), that pushes her to show up as humble, shy, kind when she goes to the offices, but that does not prevent her from watching, angry and scared, the humiliation experienced by other applicants and pushes her, after several attempts and adventures, to keep living in Italy without any documents. A behaviour that the same author recognizes as irrational, and yet deeply rooted in her own being, precisely because of the example and teaching of her mother.

Non glielo posso certo spiegare, a quelli lì, che in tutti questi anni non ho fatto il permesso di soggiorno per delle ragioni storiche e familiari che mi spingono a evitare gli uffici della polizia e enti simili. Che cosa mi possono fare? Purtroppo devo concludere che i tuoi insegnamenti mi hanno messo in un bel guaio (Janeczek 2011, 42).

It is significant how episodes like this, connected to an atavistic fear concerning a sense of familiar belonging, are often related also in other works from the descendants of the survivors. Lia Tagliacozzo, in her autobiographical and introspective work *La generazione del deserto*, remembers an episode of her youth, about a trip to Berlin with her friends, after the fall of the wall. The owner of a hostel, at eight o'clock, vigorously invites the young people to go away yelling «Raus, raus» and banging the broom on the door, provoking a real secondary trauma in the author.

Io «Raus, raus», anzi «Juden raus» lo avevo sentito solo nei film e nei racconti dei sopravvissuti ma per me fu il concretizzarsi di un incubo. I miei amici non colsero la situazione ed io rimasi a digerire quello spavento in solitudine. [...] il problema della memoria bloccata è proprio questo: le parole perdono il loro significato originario e funzionano come simboli di una memoria imprigionata che diventa a sua volta prigioniera della comunità che la vive. (Tagliacozzo 2020, 245)

A secondary trauma that in the postmemory works is often connected to the food dimension. The hunger that the protagonist of *Lezioni di tenebra* says she constantly feels, a hunger that is at the same time real and metaphorical (as it is hunger of knowledge, of information that have been omitted), probably derives from her mother, says the author, from how much she suffered during the war. If, as a child, Nina ate very little, writes Janeczek, after the war «aveva fame, mia mamma, mangiava, mangiava sul

serio: i suoi vestiti di allora vanno bene a me, che sono più alta di dieci centimetri e peso dieci chili in più» (Janeczek 2011, 13). Despite the fact that now she strictly controls her diet, that hunger that she so strongly felt (even though the narrator underlines the reticence of her mother on these topics, since Nina does not specify which kind of hunger and does not say that she did not die of hunger only because of some miracle or by chance) (Janeczek 2011, 13) seems to have passed on to her daughter, who at the beginning of the book asks herself, transferring the questions on a level of memorial reflection, what are the mechanisms that regulate the transmission of these feelings, involuntary memories, behaviours.

Vorrei sapere se è possibile trasmettere conoscenze e esperienze non con il latte materno, ma ancora prima, attraverso le acque della placenta o non so come, perché il latte di mia madre non l'ho avuto e ho invece una fame atavica, una fame da morti di fame, che lei non ha più (Janeczek 2011, 12).

The compulsive relationship with food, and with bread in particular, is a recurring element both in the survivor's works and in the postmemory's ones. Right at the beginning of *Lezioni di tenebra*, the first lesson that Helena says she learned from her mother is the one concerning the bread, that became an obsession and fuelled a sort of bulimia in her, becoming an uncontrolled outlet and symbolizing the willing of take possession her own roots, of a past felt as fleeing and therefore that can be seized only through the material dimension of food. After all, even Edith Bruck repeats many times, in interviews as well as in her literary works, that bread is for her a fundamental element, without which she cannot even sit at a table, and her characters, especially if they are sons of survivors or survivors themselves, are often characterized by hunger (Bruck 1990, 22-23). To prove this, her last work, *Il pane perduto*, connects in its title the symbol of bread, left at home without being eaten, in the moment of deportation and definitive abandonment of the life before the camps (Bruck 2021, 29-31). Precisely the word bread, in Hungarian *kenyér*, has the power of awakening in the author the pain of wounds that still ache, pain that is alleviated only by the choice of writing in Italian (Guida 2007, 192). Food always represents a mediation between the psychic and the physical part of the human being, a way in which the inside turmoil can be poured out, and because of that the behaviours of the survivors connected to the culinary world are often connected to the experiences lived in the camp, as Nedo Fiano's case shows. Using the words of the son Emanuele

odiava cucinare, e aveva sviluppato molti sentimenti e comportamenti rispetto al mangiare, come l'inflessibile richiesta che ognuno di noi fosse presente alle otto a casa per la cena e che la tavola fosse perfettamente apparecchiata, con il pane dritto, a faccia in su, in mezzo al tavolo [...].

Una cerimonia del cibo, il riscatto contro la fame, l'ordine contro il dolore, la sporcizia, e il sangue e i corpi [...]. (Fiano 2021, 22)

The relationship between the two generations, fathers and sons, is extremely complex and often characterized by frequent and deep conflicts, as highlighted by the all-female relationship investigated in *Lezioni di tenebra*. Conflicts that are intensified and somehow also mitigate by the way the mother approaches the daughter, and by the barriers of silence built between them over the years. The firm strictness of Nina, but also her always excessive way of reacting, so much so that the narrator speaks of a usual «piscodramma madre-figlia» (Janeczek 2011, 49) are consequences of the trauma, as Eva Hoffman analysed in her *After Such Knowledge* (Hoffman 2005), talking about an excessive strictness that can manifest also in pushing your kid toward self-affirmation and success at all costs.

In conclusion, if the deep truth inside the testimony literature, that the reader must absorb, is first and foremost an attempt of identity reconstruction, of taking back the world «after Auschwitz», of their authors (Scaramuzza 2005, 76), the same truth must be acknowledged also to the future generations and, therefore, postmemorial literature. Edith Bruck's case is emblematic and at the same time outside any form of classification because the writer does not embody only the role of the primary witness, but also actively reflects on the transit from memory to postmemory, and therefore on the passage from one generation to another, knowing that she stands between the two generations, having experienced the trauma as a child.

Memory and oblivion, presence and absence, loss and recovery are strictly connected not just for the first generation, the one of the survivors, but also for the generation of those «who came after» (Tagliacozzo 2005, 7), of the descendants that have a connection with the traumatic past of their own family, even though they did not experience the trauma directly.

The works of Italian postmemories can be read in this perspective, as I tried to show through the brief examination of *Lezioni di tenebra* by Helena Janeczek, whose postmemorial reading, using the words of Maria Pia De Paulis, is one of the several hermeneutic trails despite being «una delle linee di lettura privilegiate» (De Paulis 2022, 80). This novel does not perfectly fit any literary genre, focusing on a return and discovery trip and the meeting-crash between two generations, and therefore it can represent very well the latter, the one of the Italian postmemory, which can overcome the trauma of the Shoah only through the writing.

In the last years, after all, we are watching the rise on the editorial scene of a series of writings that, despite not reaching the literary peaks reached by *Lezioni di tenebra*, still subscribe to the paradigm of *postmemory* and are fundamental to better understand both the return from the camp of

the survivors, as seen through the eyes of their sons, and the attempt of its overcoming made by the latter. In this set we can collect both *Il profumo di mio padre* by Emanuele Fiano (2021) and *La generazione del deserto* by Lia Tagliacozzo (2020), two deeply autobiographical books that have in common the awareness of operating a process destined to act on the memory, not only the private and the familiar one, but also the Italian and public one, ending up close to the thoughts of Edith Bruck made in *Signora Auschwitz* and other works. The concept of postmemory is not only applied to the memory transmitted in the intimate space of the family, but also reaches adoptive witnesses and dear ones. Any community can become the subject of this *affiliative postmemory* (Hirsch 2008, 114-115), even more so now that, as we saw, new media play an important role in the transmitting process and in the construction of a cultural memory thanks to their immediacy.

Il lavoro sulla memoria infatti non è un lavoro solitario, coinvolge gli individui e la collettività, ha misura insieme corale e personale: la storia delle mie famiglie non è solo mia [...]. (Tagliacozzo 2020, 228)

Ecco, io voglio dire, a 75 anni da Auschwitz, che di quella memoria comune e di quella pubblica coscienza abbiamo noi bisogno oggi. Per l'oggi. Non serve illudersi che la memoria, intesa come testimonianza, di per sé possa vaccinarci. Ma ne abbiamo bisogno comunque. (Fiano 2022, 23)

A red thread between first and second generation can be considered this intersection between public and private, familiar and collective memory, individual and national awareness. Both Edith Bruck, Helena Janeczek and the other «figli dell'Olocausto», clearly feel the need to be recognized in their status of primary and secondary witnesses, of real and surrogate victims, also on a collective awareness level. Only when we will all become actors of postmemory, also affiliative, the real return from the camp will be possible.

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