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## SUMMARY

Clara Sereni (Rome, 1946) and Aldo Zargani (Turin, 1933) share a number of *appartenenze*, the word used in contemporary Italian discourses on 'identity' to denote conscious belonging to one or more ethnic groups, religious faiths, regional origins, political allegiances. Both are non-practicing Jews and left-wing public intellectuals. Both have written autobiographical books, essays, articles, lectures and stories: cumulatively, they constitute two macrotexts, where each text positions itself against the background of the previous texts and is linked to them by numerous cross-references. Zargani, who lived through the Shoah as a child, writes mainly in order to explain to his – mostly non-Jewish – readers issues connected with the problematic notion of 'Jewish identity'. Sereni, whose formative years were the late Sixties and early Seventies, places herself at the intersection of four *appartenenze*: as a Jew, a woman, a 'handicapped mother' and a political utopian. Drawing on Nancy K. Miller's distinction between 'speaking *as a ...*' (as an individual who identifies specifically as one thing in a specific context) and 'speaking *for*' (representing a group and speaking on its behalf), I examine aspects of both macrotexts with a particular focus on the connections between self-representation, public contexts and Jewishness. I also, drawing mainly on Linda Hutcheon (1994), look at the way Sereni and Zargani use irony – particularly self-deprecating irony – to emphasize their unfulfilled political expectations and their status as insiders or outsiders according to whom and in which public situations they speak 'as' and 'for'.

## KEYWORDS

Sereni, Zargani, *appartenenze*, autobiography, irony

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SPEAKING “AS A” AND “SPEAKING FOR”  
MULTIPLE *APPARTENENZE* IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MACROTEXTS  
OF ALDO ZARGANI AND CLARA SERENI

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Clara Sereni (born in Rome in 1946) and Aldo Zargani (born in Turin in 1933) share a number of *appartenenze*, the word used in contemporary Italian discourses on ‘identity’ to denote conscious belonging to one or more ethnic groups, religious faiths, regional origins, political allegiances. Both are non-practicing Jews who have written autobiographical texts, and both have occupied a variety of positions on the left of the continuum of Italian politics. The major aim of this essay is to analyze their autobiographical self-representations in the context of their roles, and of their writings, as public intellectuals.

Zargani and Sereni came to the notice of the Italian reading public between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, a period in which the traditional Left disintegrated and Italians grew increasingly disenchanted with all-embracing ideologies.<sup>1</sup> For each of them, recognition came late. Sereni was over forty years old in 1987 when she published her best-selling *Casalinghitudine*, a fragmented account of the intersections between political and personal relations in her family and in her own life. Zargani was a sixty-two-year-old retiree in 1995 when he published *Per violino solo*, the first of his two autobiographical books, where he traces how the 1938 Race Laws and their consequences deprived him of his childhood. Both have expanded their autobiographical constructs in subsequent texts. Sereni described the complex history of her family from 1900 to the 1990s in *Il gioco dei Regni* (1993) and thinly disguised her experiences as deputy mayor of Perugia between 1994 and 1997 in *Passami il sale* (2002). Zargani represented his generation’s attraction to socialism and Zionism in the years following World War II and its gradual disillusionment with both in *Certe promesse d’amore* (1997). Both of them have been, and are, participants in progressive political activities. Sereni, after being a member of the far-left movement *Lotta Continua*, has been connected in various ways to the *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS) ever since the Italian Communist Party dissolved in 1991.<sup>2</sup> The mother of a son with a mental illness, she has also been an advocate for mental health issues and a very visible member of associations lobbying on behalf of people with psychoses. Zargani was a long-time member of a left faction of the Italian Socialist Party and is now an active member of the *Gruppo Martin Buber – Ebrei per la Pace*, which recognizes the right of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples to independent national states. He is also – as someone who spent his childhood hiding from fascists and Nazis between 1938 and April 1945 – frequently asked to speak on the Italian Day of Memory or to

commemorate anniversaries of the Resistance. Zargani and Sereni are also known as writers of opinion articles for political and cultural publications which are read by the members of what the historian Paul Ginsborg calls the *ceti medi riflessivi*, the reflexive middle class.<sup>3</sup> Both, therefore, fit the definition, widespread and widely-discussed in English-speaking countries,<sup>4</sup> of 'public intellectuals'.

It is clearly impossible to give an overall definition that encompasses all varieties of 'public intellectuals' and the 'publics' they address. However, behind the term there are some basic assumptions: that public intellectuals "use the media to express views on a number of subjects on which they are not necessarily expert"<sup>5</sup> and "address a non-specialist public on matters of general concern"<sup>6</sup> which relate to history, society and culture. Sereni writes mainly in order to contribute to discussions of politics and social justice in Italy; Zargani mainly in order to explain to his – mostly non-Jewish – implied readers issues connected with notions of 'Jewish identity' and with the historical and political uses of Holocaust memory. For both of them, their Jewish *appartenenza* is inseparable from their innate sense of being Italian, shaped by the developments of Italian history and society for many generations.

Most of the production of each writer (essays, articles written for periodicals, stories and fragments as well as books) constitutes an autobiographical macrotext: each text positions itself against the background of the previous ones, and there is constant interplay through autobiographical cross-references. I look at the two macrotexts concentrating on Zargani's and Sereni's writings as public intellectuals rather than on the specifically autobiographical works. I examine their representations of their experiences with various forms of political and social power, and look at the way they use irony to foreground the precarious position of the two narrated selves *vis-à-vis* their *appartenenze*.

Zargani's public intellectual persona is first and foremost that of a Jew who has lived through the Shoah in Italy, and who traces every aspect of his life back to this *appartenenza*. The second chapter of *Per violino solo* opens with the acknowledgement of this fact and the explanation that public (historical and political) events are to blame for the disproportion in his personal recollections:

L'infanzia di tutti è una specie di cannocchiale collegato a un microscopio, ma il mio strumento esplora la notte della Shoah [...] Ho più di sessant'anni e la mia vita è spezzata in due frammenti ineguali: il tempo dei sette anni di persecuzione si è moltiplicato a dismisura ed è divenuto un'escrescenza dell'anima che schiaccia le stagioni normali, mezzo secolo, e le confina, con tutte le loro vicende alterne ma comuni, in uno spazio angusto. (Zargani 1995, 13)<sup>7</sup>

Sereni – whose formative years were the late 60s and early 70s, when the private/public dichotomy was challenged – represents herself in a more diverse way. She positions herself at the interconnection of four *appartenenze*, and stresses that in each case her personal experiences are inseparable from political choices and linked to political discourses:

[Questi sono] i quattro spicchi dei quali, con continui sconfinamenti, mi sembra di compormi: ebrea per scelta più che per destino, donna non solo per l'anagrafe, esperta di handicap e debolezze come chiunque ne faccia l'esperienza, utopista come chi, radicandosi in quanto esiste qui e oggi, senza esimersi dall'intervenire sulla realtà quotidiana, coltiva il bisogno di darsi un respiro e una passione agganciati al domani. (Sereni 1998, 12)<sup>8</sup>

Like Zargani, Sereni also refers to her life as fragmented, but, unlike him, she makes an explicit connection between her fragmented self and her gendered self: "nella mia vita costruita a tessere mal tagliate, nella mia vita a mosaico (come quella di tutti, e più delle donne)" (Sereni, 1987, 165).<sup>9</sup>

The two macrotexts construct 'Jewish experience' and 'Jewish voice' cumulatively, with different contradictions and ambiguities deriving from different gender, generation, historical and political positions. A useful starting point for an analysis is the problem of representativity raised by the American theorist of autobiography Nancy K. Miller in her collection of essays *Getting Personal*. Miller distinguishes between "speaking *as a*" (as an individual who has a specific *appartenenza*, and whose statements are inevitably accompanied by specific expectations from the audience) and "speaking *for*" (an individual who takes on, or is given, the burden of representing a group and speaking on its behalf).<sup>10</sup> Sereni primarily speaks as a Jew (as an individual positioned within a culture, which she consciously chooses to claim for herself). Zargani, although with occasional qualifications, speaks for Jews (as someone who is asked to, or wants to, explain 'Jewishness' and 'Jewish culture' to non-Jews, and speak on behalf of the survivors of persecution).

Positioning the narrated self as "speaking *as a*" or "speaking *for*" also makes a connection between the private and the public dimensions within both macrotexts. Both have a similar narrative feature: frequently, a public event triggers autobiographical recollections, which are then placed in the context of the author's wider political and ethical perspectives. The public event which inspires Sereni's article "Al voto con furore" (Going to Vote in Anger), written in June 2005, is her forthcoming participation in a television panel on the attempt to abolish a law which restricts choice on reproductive technologies through a nation-wide referendum. She makes a (gendered) acknowledgement of her growing anger with the law:

[I]l mio corpo di donna torna ad essere considerato [...] un contenitore che può essere usato violentemente, contro la mia volontà e contro i miei desideri, per produrre una vita difficile che ricadrà sulle mie spalle. (Sereni 2005, 27)<sup>11</sup>

She then connects her personal stake in the issue of the right to choose to two of her *appartenenze*. First she speaks as a mother: "io ce l'ho, sulle spalle e nel cuore, il peso di un figlio difficile".<sup>12</sup> Then she speaks as a Jew, with Jewishness as a marker of differentiation from the ethics of a part of Catholic Italians: "l'Italia si ferma, inchiodata da diktat religiosi pervasivi che molti cattolici non condividono, e che tanto più offendono me, che sono di cultura e di radici ebraiche" (Sereni 2005, 27).<sup>13</sup>

She concludes speaking for all Italians, with the hope – unmarked by any *appartenenze* – for policies which will give the country secular perspectives on the developments of bio-technologies:

Con la speranza, sempre più disperata, che ci sia un momento in cui i grandi temi del vivere e del morire [...] del diritto alla felicità e della sofferenza, siano al centro di un dibattito politico finalmente serio, di alto profilo, capace di costruire risposte di cui, al momento, non si vede neanche l'ombra. (27)<sup>14</sup>

Sereni's oxymoron "speranze disperate" emphasizes the contrast between her desires and her awareness that they have hardly any connection with real-world politics. The gap between expectations and actual events is in fact one of the main recurring themes in both autobiographical macrotexts: the narrated selves often feel displaced, falling between their multiple *appartenenze* and uncertain as to whether they can speak as or for someone. Therefore in their accounts of their political experiences they are sometimes surprised, often disappointed, and on several occasions – from the perspective of the narrating selves, who have the benefit of hindsight – they 'should have known better'. To foreground their unfulfilled expectations, the narrating selves often use irony.

Although irony eludes classifications and categorizations, most of its theorists agree that it is a strategy to make interlocutors – or, in the case of writers, implied readers – aware of the different dimensions that coexist in each act of communication and of the contradictions and ambiguities within narratives.<sup>15</sup> Therefore it redefines what is 'known', encouraging multiple perspectives. A particularly complex kind of irony is self-disparaging irony: apparently self-critical, it can be seen as a self-protective strategy<sup>16</sup> and, in the specific context of Jewish humour, as a defense mechanism which mocks the prejudices of the dominant group and builds bonds of solidarity.<sup>17</sup> Another useful critical tool is the notion of reframing, developed by the psychologists Juni and Katz: self-disparaging humour is one of the strategies whereby a difficult situation is rethought and redefined so that it is bearable.<sup>18</sup>

Zargani's 2001 essay 'Mi hanno tradotto!' (I Have Been Translated!) starts with an argument between the narrated self and a friend on the way mistranslations sometimes make the target texts richer in meanings. Then the narration shifts from the general to the particular. In the same sentence the narrating self speaks first as a survivor and a writer, then connects his first book to Holocaust testimony and, through the quotation of a Jewish witticism, ends up speaking for Jews:

Vengo ora alla mia personale vicenda di autore che, con Per violino solo, ha aggiunto il suo mattoncino all'enorme muraglia di scritture sulla Shoah: 'Hitler ce ne ha fatte tante, ma noi ebrei poi gliene abbiamo dette [...]'. (Zargani 2001, 9)<sup>19</sup>

The self-disparaging quip reframes Holocaust testimony as an inevitably inadequate yet necessary response to genocide, and includes the narrating voice in the first person plural 'we Jews': Jewishness, testimony and humour belong to him. The focus

then shifts again to the personal dimension: Zargani's lecture tour in Berlin after the success of the German translation of *Per violino solo*<sup>20</sup> and his relationship with the interpreter provided by the German publishers. This movement along the personal/public continuum is based on a sequence of clichés:

Non era biondo, meno male, ma i capelli neri e lisci, con la discriminatura e rasati alti sulla nuca, generavano ugualmente parecchia apprensione. Tuttavia quel che mi suscitava i peggiori sospetti era il suo modo di vestire, patologicamente ordinato, con un completo grigio con le maniche troppo lunghe, i pantaloni troppo stirati, una camicia di qualità ma con il colletto troppo largo e una cravatta troppo scura per quell'abito. Quell'uomo era tutto in bianco e nero come un documentario sul processo di Norimberga. Non ne sono sicuro, ma nella mia allucinazione vedevo sul bavero di quella giacca un distintivo che, senza entrare nei dettagli, mi appariva il simbolo della decorazione *pour le mérite*, la massima onorificenza della terribile Wehrmacht. (Zargani 1995, 9)<sup>21</sup>

The passage is constructed as a crescendo of tension between two frames of reference: that of the narrated self, who, in public situations, projects his wariness of Germany onto an individual, and that of the narrating self, who – with hindsight – mocks the narrated self's *apprensione* and *allucinazione*. The narrated self reads in political terms (specifically, in Nazi terms) every personal detail about his interpreter, even colour-coding him in an explicit simile, "in bianco e nero come un documentario sul processo di Norimberga". Two paragraphs later he progresses to speaking for the interpreter, ironically praising him for his faithful translations "nonostante l'abisso incolmabile che ci separava a causa delle sue atroci, intime e inconfessate, convinzioni" (Zargani 1995, 10).<sup>22</sup> When the narrated self meets the interpreter for the last time, the interaction is private instead of public: the interpreter – no longer in black and white, but wearing blue jeans, a yellow shoulder bag and an orange helmet – visits the narrated self in his hotel and gives him a guidebook, published by a small left-wing publisher, to the 'topography of Nazi terror' in Berlin. The narrated self finally realizes the extent to which he has 'mistranslated' someone who never was an enemy, and with whom there never was any real political difference.

In Sereni's case, self-disparaging irony tends to arise from the fact that she represents herself as being constantly at the intersection of two or more *appartenenze* and trying, without much success, to make connections between them. One of the fragments of *Casalinghitudine* relates an experience that the narrated self had in 1973, when feminism and different 'countercultures' were thriving in Italian cities. The narrated self – politically very distant from the Communist Party, but eager for adventure – agrees to sing in a 'festa dell'Unità'<sup>23</sup> in a remote village in Calabria. She arrives with a programme of challenging songs on oppressive institutions and women's estate, and finds herself in a square full of rowdy Party members, all men. She resorts to a desperate measure:

Attaccai a pieni polmoni Bandiera rossa. Il sindaco, continuando a distribuire urtoni, cominciò a farmi coro, seguito quasi immediatamente dai più anziani, che l'inno richiamava a un ordine

non suscettibile di discussione. Prima che la canzone finisse la piazza era calma, anche i giovani cantavano. Benedicevo per la prima volta la “disciplina rivoluzionaria” contro cui mi ero più volte battuta. L’applauso finale fu compatto.

Snocciolai l’intero repertorio degli inni più popolari e alla fine potei permettermi qualche canzone più “difficile”: evitai accuratamente tutte quelle sulla condizione femminile. (Sereni 1987, 97)<sup>24</sup>

The outcome, and the irony, are ambiguous: an example of what the humour theorist Christie Davies has defined as “comic images that are at once self-praise and self-deprecation”.<sup>25</sup> Sereni mocks the “ordine non suscettibile di discussione” and the “disciplina rivoluzionaria” of the old Party, which, however, are what allow the narrated self (who ‘should have known better’) to reframe her role and her performance in order to win over the crowd. However, the narrated self – at the same time an outsider who would like to speak for the new Left and an insider who needs to speak as a Party ‘faithful’ – does not escape consequences: the bitterness of “potei permettermi” and “evitai accuratamente” stress that cost of survival is her erasure of some of her own *appartenenze*.

A song is also the starting-point for political reflections in the article ‘Spaesamento’ (Displacement), published in 2005. The narrated self has begun to sing again after thirty years, and finds herself recalling a song of the 1960s, based on the well-known passage from Pavese’s *La luna e i falò*: “Un paese vuol dire non essere soli [...]” (A country means that you’re not alone). The quotation becomes a metaphor, which in turn expands into other ironic metaphors: like an illegal migrant with no papers or expired IDs, the narrated self no longer has a political *appartenenza*, either as a member of the Left or as a feminist. Shifting from the first person singular to the first person plural, Sereni identifies as a gendered member of a generation which may slide into despair unless it urgently rethinks politics. The hyperbolic opposition between “un paese” and “una cabina balneare” ironically emphasizes what a difficult challenge this has become in Italy in the past thirty years.

È che io un paese proprio non ce l’ho più, e credo che siamo in tanti a trovarci nelle stesse condizioni.

Non ho più un paese politico, un progetto una teoria e un’utopia in cui riconoscermi. Sono una sans-papier, i documenti che avevo sono scaduti e inutilizzabili e non c’è anagrafe al mondo che possa farmene di nuovi [...] Perfino l’età, gli anni che ho, non sono più un paese riconoscibile: diverse dalle nostre madri, differenti dalle figlie che verranno, noi – generazione degli zoccoli e delle gonne a fiori – non riusciamo ad essere né giovani né vecchie, né dentro né fuori dal gioco dei sessi e delle differenze, insomma viviamo in un terrain-vague esposto a venti, maree, conchiglie e distruzioni, in cui appare follia costruire non dico un paese, ma perfino una cabina balneare. (Sereni 2005, 11)<sup>26</sup>

The conclusion of the article reiterates Sereni’s “speranze disperate” as a public intellectual. She hopes, warily yet stubbornly, that the Italian people may establish connections in the public sphere and formulate alternatives to old ideologies which may become viable answers to cynicism and displacement:

[...] creare con altri e altre una rete, qualcosa che permetta di non affogare e anzi di alzarsi un po' più su del pelo dell'acqua. Qualcosa che prefiguri un paese nuovo, un orizzonte di possibilità, una comunità in cui sia possibile tornare a riconoscersi. (Sereni 2005, 1)<sup>27</sup>

The need for new ways of thinking politically is also at the centre of a controversial article Sereni wrote for *L'Unità* on 16 January 2006. The ironic title, 'La colpa di essere ebrea' (The Crime of Being a Jew), foregrounds her anger at explicit or implicit racism forcing her to speak for Jews rather than as a Jew. The starting point are two incidents, one in the private sphere and one in the public sphere. The private incident takes place at a birthday dinner among representatives of the left-wing "ceti medi riflessivi" ("tutta gente di sinistra e per bene" (all left-wing, respectable people)). When the conversation shifts to the Middle East, the narrated self – the only Jew present – is the only person who feels the need to speak out when someone rattles off a series of negative stereotypes about Jews before stating that the Palestinians are 'the oppressed' and the Israelis are 'the oppressors': "ho dovuto, da ebrea, fare il mio 'Radames discolpati'" (Sereni 2005, 24).<sup>28</sup> The ironic cultural reference to both Verdi's *Aida* and a well-known article published by the journalist Rosellina Balbi in 1982, at the time of the massacres of Sabra and Chatila,<sup>29</sup> highlights the ambiguities of the narrated self's position: she feels simultaneously a part of the group of left-wing friends, angry at being pushed to answer for Israel because of her Jewishness, determined to distance herself from the aggressive policies of the Sharon government, and offended by the racist generalizations. The second incident occurs at the beginning of a panel discussion on peace and war organized by the left-wing union CGIL,<sup>30</sup> where Sereni is introduced as "Clara Sereni, ebrea e scrittrice" (Clara Sereni, a Jew and a writer). She interprets this as an appropriation of her subjectivity by the public representatives, who reduce her to two *appartenenze*, both of which she has claimed for herself, but which, in that sequence and in that political context, implicitly amount to another demand for Jewish self-justification. On both occasions, although offended, Sereni explains that all simplifications and sweeping generalizations about the Middle East are dangerous, and stresses "la richiesta di più politica e meno 'tifo' rispetto alla questione due popoli/due Stati" (Sereni 2005, 24).<sup>31</sup> She concludes with a repeated reference to self-justification ("Vorrei non dovermi discolpare delle mie opinioni" (I wish I did not have to defend myself and my views)) and the wish that the Left, instead of locking her into one definition that forces her to speak for Jews, would fully acknowledge her Jewishness as one of her many *appartenenze* (as well as "donna, comunista, madre handicappata e intellettuale" (a woman, a communist, a handicapped mother and an intellectual)).<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Sereni, Zargani implicitly considers his role as mediator between Jews and non-Jews the central one in his life. In fact, in his 1999 essay 'La caldaia spenta del sabato' (The Boiler Switched Off On the Sabbath) he represents all Jews, starting from Josephus Flavius, as cultural mediators. The essay starts from a conversation with a non-Jewish friend who, on a winter Saturday in New York, was asked to turn on the heating for a small synagogue. 'La caldaia spenta riguarda anche me' (The

switched-off boiler is about me too) Zargani states, thinking generally of Jewish/ non-Jewish cultural relations (Zargani 1999, 37). He goes on to describe the cultures of *Diaspora* Jews as being complementary to the other cultures within which they live, constantly explaining Jewishness to 'the others' and constantly redefining it in the process. In the lecture 'La mia identità ebraica *en amateur*' (My Amateurish Jewish Identity) – given in September 2002 at Monash University, Melbourne, and which takes up and expands some of the reflections of "Mi hanno tradotto!" – he paints a positive, if ironic, picture of this relationship between Jewish writers and non-Jewish readers. Two literary references add ironic ambiguity. The impossibility of giving one, clear-cut definition (historical, social, political, literary) of what it means to speak as a Jew is emphasized through an extended comparison to the semi-serious poem *The Naming of Cats* by T.S. Eliot: 'Jewish identity' is the secret third name of cats,

the name that you never will guess; / The name that no human research can discover – / But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess. (Eliot 1986, 11)

La gente ha perduto l'ubi consistam, i gentili, denudati a rate anch'essi, con le buone o con le cattive, della propria identità, diventano talvolta accaniti lettori delle ricerche a tentoni che gli ebrei fanno, nella speranza forse di trarne per sé una qualche utilità. (Zargani 2002, 10)<sup>33</sup>

[...] I nostri lettori [...] ascoltano con attenzione le ripetizioni di quanto già sanno, nell'attesa inappagata, perennemente inappagata, che venga alla fine svelato [...] il terzo nome del gatto, in che consista cioè la famosa identità ebraica. Ma poiché questa identità è ignota anche a noi stessi – animula vagula blandula, hospes comesque mei – e di essa viene alla luce in definitiva solo l'affanno di raccontarla, in questo travaglio è racchiuso il fascino della narrazionalità ebraica che, in tutti i continenti, crea le fortune di così tanti scrittori. I lettori continuano ad ascoltarci, sperando e non sperando che giunga la parola FINE che invece è rimandata alle fiabe della notte successiva. (10-11)<sup>34</sup>

The second literary reference is less accessible, but just as significant. Referring to 'Jewish identity' through the series of diminutives used by the dying Emperor Hadrian in his final poem to address his departing soul can be read as ironic in two ways: as an apparently self-deprecating mocking of the notion of 'Jews as Other' ("my guest and companion") or as mocking all reductive attempts to conceptualize one Jewish 'soul'. Furthermore, the Latin quotation implicitly points out that in the case of Italian Jews, Jewish cultural *appartenenza* is inextricably linked to the classical heritage they absorbed in the Italian secondary school system.

Relations between Jews and non-Jews in Italy are also at the centre of the essay 'Il posto degli ebrei del posto' (The Place of the Local Jews) written at the end of 2003 as a response to the monograph *Il posto degli ebrei*, by the then-President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, Amos Luzzatto.<sup>35</sup> Luzzatto's thesis is that Diaspora Jews, integrated yet different, represent a challenge to racism wherever they live, and that Jews are bound to find an equal 'place' in a unified Europe. Zargani agrees, but argues that at the beginning of the twenty-first century even

integrated Diaspora Jews are feeling increasingly uneasy as a consequence of the growth not only of various kinds of anti-Semitism, but also of some problematic varieties of pro-Semitism. The essay begins with some 'personal and public' good news. The first item is a conversation between the narrated self and his twelve-year-old grandson, then a student at a Rome state school:

'De ... degli ebrei pa ... parlate qualche volta?' 'Mai.' 'E di ... di Israele?' 'No, anzi sí. Solo quando leggiamo *Repubblica*'. (lungo silenzio, anche mio). 'Ehm ... e di te che sei un ebreuccio cosa dicono i tuoi compagni? Eh! eh!' 'Niente.' 'Ma tu, dí la verità, lo tieni un po' nascosto, il fatto di essere ebreo, no?' 'Ma che dici? *a nonno!* e perché dovrei *tenello* nascosto? Mah!' (Zargani 2003, 2)<sup>36</sup>

The narrated self's insecurities and fears – self-disparagingly highlighted by the reproduction of a stammer – are unfavourably compared to the laconic, matter-of-fact integration of the representative of the survivors' grandchildren. However, as the essay moves from the private to the public sphere (namely to the complex Italian responses to Israeli policies after 2001), self-disparaging humour is replaced by sarcastic parody. The narrating voice parodies two different voices, which express opposite, equally problematic perspectives on Jews and Israel. The first is the far Right, which is constructed, with grotesque exaggeration, as pro-Israel and pro-Semitic for the wrong reason ("the enemy of our enemies is our friend"):

Cosí ci piacete, voi ebrei, non come all'epoca di quando vi scardellavamo noi, cosí ci piacete, siete diventati camerati, soldati, guerrieri, certo per merito nostro – che, se non altro, vi abbiamo irrobustito! – sentinelle di scorta al mondo di Cristo, di Odino, di Wothan, contro la barbarie orientale e, in particolare, quella degli arabi, che hanno dimenticato, quegli irriconoscenti, le Crociate. (6)<sup>37</sup>

The second voice, also reduced to grotesque stereotypes, is that of the part of the Left which strongly opposes most Israeli policies. Like the first parody, this also culminates in the word *irriconoscenti*, which in both fictitious discourses is used to refer to the oppressors' view of the minorities they have oppressed.

Ecco, ecco, basta criticare qualche aspetto dell'operato del governo Sharon, e viene subito usata contro di noi, democratici, progressisti, internazionalisti, pacifisti, l'accusa di antisemitismo che ci offende profondamente. Tanto piú ci offende l'uso di quest'arma impropria, che ad adoperarla siano gli ebrei di oggi, che, loro sí, sono diventati antisemiti, perché hanno dimenticato, irriconoscenti, la tragica lezione di Auschwitz. (13)<sup>38</sup>

The sarcastic reframing – speaking for two threatening Others – allows the narrating voice to speak for *Diaspora* Jews and to express their uncertainty and fears.

Primo Levi wrote that "chi sta al margine del gruppo [...] può andarsene quando vuole e vede meglio il paesaggio" (Anyone who is on the margins of a group [...] can leave whenever he wants to and can get a better view of the landscape).<sup>39</sup> Zargani's and Sereni's autobiographical macrottexts show that both are deeply rooted

in their cultural and political Italianness, yet are on the margins of several Italian groups, simultaneously insiders and outsiders according to whom, and in which public situations, they speak as and for. Irony – which in Linda Hutcheon’s words “can only ‘complexify’; it can never ‘disambiguate’” – allows both of them to problematize all monolithic notions of ‘identity’.<sup>40</sup> Sereni does that by pointing out her multiple *appartenenze* and the conflicts between them, Zargani by exposing the complexities and contradictions inherent in being Jewish. Their major contribution as public intellectuals arises from this constant questioning and renegotiation of ‘meanings’ in public discourses and in their own personal discourses.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The philosopher Giacomo Marramao talks in terms of “una separazione progressiva della politica [...] dalla mappa dei saperi” (a progressive separation of politics [. . .] from the map of knowledges) (82). See also Chapters 3 and 8 of Ginsborg.

<sup>2</sup> She was never a member of the Italian Communist Party; she joined the then PDS (Partito dei Democratici di Sinistra, now DS) after becoming deputy mayor of Perugia, and left it around 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Ginsborg 2001, 42-44 and 96 and Andrews 2005, 104-106 and 170-171.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Altman 1997, Daniel 1997, Ozick 2000, Collini 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Altman 1997, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Collini 2002, 210.

<sup>7</sup> “Childhood is like a telescope attached to a microscope; in my case, when I peer through it I see the dark night of the Shoah [. . .] I am now more than sixty years old, and my life is divided into two unequal parts; those seven years of persecution have expanded out of all proportion and become an excrescence of my soul, pushing aside half a century filled with the normal stages of life, confining them and all of the various ordinary trials of a life into a tiny space” (*For Solo Violin*, 14).

<sup>8</sup> “I think of myself as being made up of four segments whose boundaries constantly blur: a Jew because I chose rather than happened to be; a woman not only because my birth certificate says so; an expert on disabilities and shortcomings, like anyone who has direct experience of them; a utopian like anyone who is firmly rooted in the here and now, and who, without refusing to get involved in day-to-day issues, cultivates the need to have a vision and a passion which draws them towards the future”. Translations of quotes are mine unless otherwise specified.

<sup>9</sup> “[...] in my life, pieced together with ill-fitting bits, in the mosaic of my life (as in everyone’s, but more so women’s” (*Keeping House*, 142).

<sup>10</sup> Miller 1991, XIV, 20, 97.

<sup>11</sup> “My woman’s body is considered once again [...] a container which can be used violently, against my will and against my wishes, to create a difficult life whose responsibility will fall back on my shoulders”.

<sup>12</sup> “I do have, on my shoulders and in my heart, the weight of a difficult child”.

<sup>13</sup> “Italy is at a standstill, shackled by intrusive religious prescriptions which are not shared by many Catholics, and which offend me even more, since I have Jewish roots and culture”.

<sup>14</sup> “With the increasingly desperate hope that there may come a time when the big issues of living and dying [...] of the right to happiness and of pain may be central to a political discussion; and that this discussion may at long last be substantial, high quality, able to produce answers which, right now, are nowhere to be found”.

<sup>15</sup> See Hutcheon 1995, 60-64, Mizzau 1984, 21, 35-40, and Anolli e.a. 2002, 137-139.

<sup>16</sup> See Hutcheon 1995, 47-50 and Muecke 1970, 56-57.

<sup>17</sup> See ‘Introduction’, in Ziv 1998, 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> See Juni & Katz 2001, 122-130.

<sup>19</sup> “And now I come to my own experiences as an author who, with *For Solo Violin*, has added his small brick to the huge wall of writings on the Holocaust: ‘Hitler did so many things to us, but now we Jews have had so much to say about him [...]’”.

<sup>20</sup> The German translation (*Für Violine Solo: Meine Kindheit im Diesseits 1938-1945*) was published by Fischer Verlag in 1998 (translation by Ruth Mader).

<sup>21</sup> “Luckily he was not blond, but his smooth black hair, parted and shaved high on the nape of his neck, nevertheless produced considerable apprehension. However, what aroused my worst suspicions was the way he dressed – pathologically neat, with a grey suit with sleeves that were too long and exceedingly well-ironed trousers, a shirt of good quality but with too wide a collar, and a tie which was too dark for that suit. The man was all in black and white, like a documentary on the Nuremberg trials. I am not sure, but in my hallucination I saw on the lapels of that jacket a badge which – without going into details – seemed to me the symbol of a decoration *pour le mérite*, the highest decoration of the terrible Wehrmacht”.

<sup>22</sup> “in spite of the unbridgeable chasm which separated us due to his awful, deep and unconfessed, convictions”.

<sup>23</sup> The ‘feste dell’Unità’ were Communist Party festivals, with food, speeches by Party leaders, and various cultural and community activities.

<sup>24</sup> “I started singing *Bandiera Rossa* (Red Flag) at the top of my lungs. The mayor, still shoving people around, joined me in singing along with the elderly men, who were brought about by the Communist hymn to a nonnegotiable order. Before the song was over the square was already calm; even the young people were singing. For the first time I praised the ‘revolutionary discipline’ against which I had fought so many times. The final applause was solid.

I went through the entire repertory of the most popular hymns, and at the end I could afford to sing some of the more involved songs: I carefully avoided all those about women’s issues” (*Keeping House*, 92).

<sup>25</sup> Davies 1993, 43, n. 3.

<sup>26</sup> “The fact is that I no longer have a country, and I think there are many of us in the same position. I no longer have a political country, a project a theory and a utopia with which I could identify. I am without an ID, the identity papers I had have expired and cannot be used, and there is no registry office in the world which can provide me with new ones [. . .] Even my age, my years, are no longer a recognisable country. Different from our mothers, different from the daughters who will follow us, we – the generation who wore wooden clogs and flowered skirts – cannot manage to be either young or old, either inside or outside the games between sexes and differences. In short, we are in an in-between land exposed to winds, tides, shells and destruction, where it appears insane to build even a bathing hut, let alone a country”.

<sup>27</sup> “[...] creating with other men and women a net, something that may allow us not to drown, in fact to rise a little above the water line. Something which may evoke a new country, a horizon of possibilities, a community in which we may once again recognise ourselves”.

<sup>28</sup> “As a Jew, I had to act out my ‘Radames, defend yourself’”.

<sup>29</sup> Balbi 1982.

<sup>30</sup> Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro.

<sup>31</sup> “[...] the call for more politics and less side-taking when it comes to the question ‘two peoples, two States’”.

<sup>32</sup> The responses to the article were strong (see, as examples, the articles by Fait and by Israel). The irony of the title was apparently not perceived, since Sereni was accused of being ashamed of her Jewishness and of not being aware of the incompatibility between being a Jew and being a Communist.

<sup>33</sup> “People have lost their *ubi consistam* (their resting place). Non-Jews, who have also been – more or less gently – gradually divested of their identity, sometimes become passionate readers of the fumbling searches of the Jews, possibly hoping to gain something for themselves from them”.

<sup>34</sup> “Our readers [...] listen carefully to the repetitions of what they already know, in the unfulfilled, ever unfulfilled, expectation that [...] the third name of the cat, that is to say, the nature of the much-debated Jewish identity, may eventually be revealed. But this identity is unknown to ourselves – *animula vagula blandula, hospes comesque mei* – and the part that emerges is only our anxious attempts to tell its story. In this labour lies the attraction of Jewish storytelling, which, in all continents, has made the fortune of so many writers. Readers keep listening to us, hoping and not hoping to get to the words THE END – which, however, are postponed to the following night’s tales”.

<sup>35</sup> The essay – originally a lecture given on 30 October 2003 at the World Conference on Religion and Peace in Rome on the topic ‘Religious Identities’ – is to be republished in a collection of essays and sketches with the provisional title *Cocci rotti*.

<sup>36</sup> “‘D ... do you ever t ... talk about Jews?’ ‘Never.’ ‘And about ... about Israel?’ ‘No, I mean yes. Only when we read *Repubblica*’. (A long silence, mine as well). ‘Er ... and what do your friends say about you, who are a little Jew? Heh, heh!’ ‘Nothing’. ‘But you, tell the truth, you keep it secret, the fact that you’re a Jew, don’t you?’ ‘What are you talking about? Come on, grandpa! Why should I keep it secret? Who knows!’”

<sup>37</sup> “That’s the way we like you, you Jews – not like the times when we were bashing you up. That’s the way we like you, you have become comrades, soldiers, warriors, definitely thanks to us – if nothing else, we made you strong! You’re sentries and escorts to the world of Christ, Odin, Wotan, against Eastern barbarism – particularly that of Arabs, who (thankless people that they are) have forgotten about the Crusades”.

<sup>38</sup> “Look, look, all we do is criticize some aspect of the actions of the Sharon government, and immediately you accuse us – democratic, progressive, internationalist pacifists – of anti-Semitism, which deeply hurts us. We are even more hurt by this weapon because the ones wielding it are today’s Jews: it is they who have become anti-Semitic, because they (thankless people that they are) have forgotten the tragic lesson of Auschwitz”.

<sup>39</sup> Preface to *L'altrui mestiere. Opere*, II, 631.

<sup>40</sup> Hutcheon 1995, 13.

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