

MARCHETTI, Silvia, 'Private memory, public history, and testimony in Rosetta Loy's *La parola ebreo*'. *Memoria collettiva e memoria privata: il ricordo della Shoah come politica sociale*, a cura di Stefania Lucamante, Monica Jansen, Raniero Speelman & Silvia Gaiga. ITALIANISTICA ULTRAIECTINA 3. Utrecht: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving Services, 2008. ISBN9789067010245.

#### SUMMARY

In *La parola ebreo* Rosetta Loy traces her own becoming of the word 'ebreo' by juxtaposing it with the transformation of this word in Fascist Italy up to the mass deportation of Italian Jews in 1943. Narration splits into two voices: the child narrator, who is 'blind' to political events and understands "la parola ebreo" through the filter of her domestic and familiar realm, populated by her Jewish neighbors, and the adult narrator, who attempts to fill the child's lacunae through historical research. In the process, Loy is able to show how the child's blindness reflected a collective, purposeful refusal to see and indifference on the part of Christians, including Pope Pious XII himself, thus underscoring the need to acknowledge and assume collective responsibility for the *Shoah*. The tragedy and absurdity of Jewish persecution is dramatized by the fact that Loy, in returning to her childhood, explores the time before the *Shoah*, during which no separation and difference existed between Jews and non-Jews. The adoption of a greater temporal dimension allows Loy to bear witness, without being a witness, to the *Shoah* and her indirect relationship to the event – being Catholic and having never experienced discrimination and persecution – underlines the importance of maintaining a certain distance from it. As a matter of fact, by providing her familiar and yet distant view, Loy challenges the mode of Holocaust representation that, through overly repeated phrases and images, leads to familiarization with the *Shoah* and gives the illusion of directly knowing it. Through her account of Giorgio Levi's story, deported to Auschwitz, which culminates in an unverbalizable silence, Loy bears witness because, as Giorgio Agamben would claim, her language gives way to a non-language, thus showing the impossibility of providing complete testimony.

#### KEYWORDS

Private memory, public history, Rosetta Loy, testimony, familiar distance

#### © Gli autori

Gli atti del convegno *Memoria collettiva e memoria privata: il ricordo della Shoah come politica sociale* (Roma, 6-7 giugno 2007) sono il volume 3 della collana ITALIANISTICA ULTRAIECTINA. STUDIES IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, pubblicata da Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving Services, ISSN 1874-9577 (<http://www.italianisticaultraiectina.org>).

PRIVATE MEMORY, PUBLIC HISTORY, AND TESTIMONY  
IN ROSETTA LOY'S *LA PAROLA EBREO*

**Silvia Marchetti**

University of Michigan

INTRODUCTION

An article that appeared in *L'Espresso Local* on January 26, 2007 states that in *La parola ebreo*, Rosetta Loy

racconta [...] quel senso d'*estraneità* [...] nei confronti di persone che [...] avevano fatto parte d'una *normalità* quotidiana condivisa e che, per decreto-legge, diventavano talmente *alieni* da essere considerati infidi nemici.<sup>1</sup> (1; emphasis added)

In this paper I will explore the ways in which Loy juxtaposes a 'sense of estrangement' with 'daily normality' and how she challenges the 'becoming alien' of the word 'ebreo'. In her autobiographical memoir, Loy traces the various phases of the transformation of this word in Fascist Italy and the corresponding political events that led to the mass deportation of Italian Jews in 1943. Her narration starts in 1936, when she was a young child, belonging to a wealthy Catholic family from Rome, and she first encountered "la parola ebreo". Throughout the book, "che non è un saggio ma nemmeno un libro di fantasia", as Loy herself claims (1997, 149), the child's private view of her Jewish neighbors is constantly set in counterpoint with – but also complemented by – public, historical facts. These historical data provide a detailed account of how discrimination and prejudice against Italian Jews led to the passing of the Racial Laws in 1938 and, in the years that followed, to persecution and deportation.

These two separate and yet intertwined strands of narration find expression into two narrating voices: the child narrator, who is unaware of what happens around her and understands "la parola ebreo" through the filter of her domestic and familiar realm, and the adult narrator, who attempts to fill the child's lacunae through historical research. In the process, Loy shows how the child's inability to fully understand reflects a collective pretending not to see, as well as lack of action towards, what was happening to Italian Jews on the part of many Christians, a position epitomized by Pope Pious XII himself. By becoming the spokesperson for several private stories of Jews who either survived or perished during the war, this double narration allows Loy to bear witness to history in a unique way. Loy's relationship to Giorgio Levi, the son of a neighboring family, is particularly apt in order to show the trajectory that Loy follows in her act of providing testimony. The recapturing of the child's vision combined with historical research bring her face to face with the issue of an inescapable silence that affects testimony. An abyss of

silence follows the author's account of Giorgio Levi, which I would argue is not a defeat, but an important component of her act of bearing witness.

#### LOY'S 'FAMILIAR DISTANCE' WITH THE SHOAH

In order to underscore the absurdity of that "senso di estraneità" and that "diventare altri" affecting Italian Jews, the text stresses child Rosetta's familiar relationship to her Jewish neighbors who populated her domestic sphere and "avevano fatto parte d'una normalità quotidiana condivisa" with the Loys. I want to begin by relating this concept of 'familiar' with the notion of 'familiarization' with the *Shoah* as discussed by Eva Hoffman who alerts us to how the sheer quantity of production around this atrocity, the familiarization of horror through the reiteration of images and formulaic phrases, makes it available for increasingly glib perceptions and representations (Hoffman 2004, 171).

These overly repeated "images and formulaic phrases" and "the familiarization of horror" not only lead to "habituation to horror," (Hoffman 2004, 178) but also create the illusion of 'directly' knowing the event. Such vast circulation of material certainly contributes to fostering public discourse on the *Shoah*, but also carries the drawback of making the need for further research, thinking, and understanding seem irrelevant and superfluous. Readers of *La parola ebreo* do not derive a sense of immediacy to the horror of *Shoah* because Loy holds – and explicitly reveals – her indirect relationship to the event. The author has not been in the camps and, being Catholic, she did not experience any prejudice, discrimination, or persecution. Even the personal stories of Jews found in the book are 'second hand' since they are reported by Loy herself. I believe that it is precisely by virtue of this indirectness that we should regard *La parola ebreo* as a valuable source of testimony in that, as Hoffman argues, "we need to acknowledge the distance at which we stand from events – and from which we have to start if we want to further the reach of our knowledge" (Hoffman 2004, 180). Loy starts precisely from her distance, from the 'familiar distance' that characterizes her relationship with the *Shoah* as a child and as an adult. She goes back and explores the familiarity and closeness to her Jewish neighbors resulting from that shared "normalità" but she acknowledges the space that separated and still separates her from them and from all the victims of the *Shoah*. The adoption of the child's perspective for a significant portion of the text puts readers in the position of non-knowledge and of partial blindness. And yet, such nearsightedness is instrumental because it allows Loy, through the "further knowledge" she acquires with historical research, to reveal a more collective blindness or, rather, neglect and indifference on the part of non-Jews. In investigating the role of childhood in Loy's work, Giuliana Minghelli contends:

In *La parola ebreo*, Loy [...] grants the world and the language of childhood an equal standing with adult historical discourse. The search for the word Jew constitutes the possibility of a critical confrontation between these two apparently irreducible points of view. *La parola ebreo* creates a silence in which the voice of childhood can be heard and by doing so it gives voice to

the silence at the heart of history. It is from the point of view of childhood [...] that Loy interrogates History. (Minghelli 2001, 162-163)

Stefania Lucamante also uses the notion of silence when she discusses Loy's act of bearing witness, which the author sees as inextricably linked with the issue of collective responsibility. The author claims:

Loy is [...] not a camp survivor, but she [...] considers herself a Holocaust survivor. Loy's unbearable legacy is that of a Christian who suffers for the silence of her fellow Christians, of an Italian who realizes that fellow Italians allowed her neighbours to be deported to camps. Members of a society that, until the day before, had accepted them and had considered them to be part of their same world. (Lucamante 2003, 97)

Lucamante's reference to the "same world" recalls the aforementioned notion of "normalità condivisa" and hints at the need to explore the time before the *Shoah* in order to fathom even more the absurdity of that "diventare altri". The act of "interrogating History" that Minghelli sees Loy operating from the position of the child is a far-reaching one that, in order to unpack and illuminate that "silence at the heart of history", investigates what happened during the *Shoah* against the background of what was before it. Hoffman, too, underscores the importance of an extended temporal dimension within which to situate the *Shoah* when she claims that "as the Holocaust recedes from us in temporal distance, it might be time [...] to [...] start exploring again the multifarious life before. We need to do this [...] through a difficult processing of the past, through full acknowledgement. It may be time to return the *Shoah* [...] to the *longue durée* of previous and subsequent history" (Hoffman 2004, 199). In *La parola ebreo*, Loy makes the exploring of "the multifarious life before" the indispensable condition for looking at subsequent history and engage with the issue of memory.

#### THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE AND THE RECAPTURING OF THE TIME BEFORE THE SHOAH

The text opens with a perfectly 'normal,' daily scene from 1936, when the adult narrator recounts the first time she heard the word 'ebreo':

Se vado indietro nel tempo e penso a come la parola 'ebreo' è entrata nella mia vita, mi vedo seduta su una seggiolina azzurra nella camera dei bambini [...] nell'appartamento al di là della strada [...] c'è una festa [...] da poco è nato un bambino [...] 'Un battesimo?' chiedo. No, mi dice [...] Annemarie, la mia Fräulein. Sono ebrei aggiunge [...] loro i bambini non li battezzano, li circoncidono. Ha detto 'beschneiden' con una smorfia di disgusto. (Loy 1997, 3)<sup>2</sup>

As the narrator continues and assumes child Rosetta's voice, she recounts:

Anche la signora Della Seta è ebrea. Abita accanto a noi [...] Adoro la signora Della Seta, anche se è ebrea. Al piano di sopra abitano i Levi [...] Anche loro, dice Annemarie, sono ebrei [...] Qualche volta Giorgio Levi suona alla porta e chiama mio fratello per andare a giocare a pallone (Loy 1997, 4).<sup>3</sup>

From the very beginning, two separate ways of looking at the word 'ebreo' are identifiable: on the one hand, Rosetta's nanny Annemarie clearly expresses Antisemitic prejudice, as emerges from the 'disgusto' with which she pronounces 'beschneiden', the German equivalent for 'to circumcise'. On the other, Rosetta herself begins to formulate her own personal take on the term 'ebreo', which challenges the prejudice that surrounds her and initiates a separate trajectory. The girl's statement that she loves "signora Della Seta", who lives next to the Loys, as well as her look at the party from her own room and her memory of Giorgio Levi who plays soccer with her brother attest to and are meant to stress that familiarity, even intimacy, with her Jewish neighbors who are about to be turned into "infidi nemici".

The author contaminates the process of becoming 'alien' by insinuating a parallel process of becoming or rather re-becoming 'intimate' and closer. Her private realm is instrumental for rekindling a memory, a national memory of a shared past that the Racial Laws were trying to erase. It is notoriously known that the basic and underlying idea of the Antisemitic legislation was the inevitable and insurmountable difference and separation established between 'italiani' and 'ebrei'.<sup>4</sup> Such rupture – a "solco profondo", as Giorgio Bassani vividly describes it in *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (Bassani 2003, 240) – occurred first at a linguistic level when more charged words than "la parola ebreo" were introduced to designate Italian Jews:

le nuove leggi [...] [entrano] in vigore. Cosa sono poi 48032 individui, "persone" come verranno ora in avanti indicati nei documenti ufficiali, "giudei" come verranno definiti in via non ufficiale ma corrente? (Loy 1997, 44)<sup>5</sup>

These linguistic innovations, which stripped Italian Jews of the name 'italiani', are undercut by the following passage:

E che siano intellettuali o commercianti, liberi professionisti o imprenditori, che vivano a Roma o disseminati lungo la penisola, quasi tutti hanno cercato di dimostrare il loro patriottismo combattendo valorosamente nella prima guerra mondiale [...] Hanno preso parte alla vita politica. (44)<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, Loy blurs the separation between Italians and Jews by showing how these 'persone' or 'giudei' depending on the context were regarded as patriotic Italians only a few decades before. A 1915 article published on the first page of the journal *Vessillo Israelitico* on the occasion of Italy's entry into World War I underscores such patriotic feeling: "We Jews will give [...] ourselves to our country. We will give our sons, our possessions, our lives" (cit. in Gunzberg 223). Mussolini himself, in 1932, had stressed that "Italian Jews have always been good citizens and as soldiers they have fought bravely" (cit. in Gunzberg 233).<sup>7</sup> Italian Jews' attachment to Italy and their strong 'Italianness' were mainly due to the 'massive assimilation' that occurred in Italy

especially after about 1880 [...] Italian Jewry thrived as a largely assimilated community that identified itself as Italian first and whose members took their place in all aspects of Italian life. (Gunzberg 1992, 221)

Loy underscores this feeling of sharedness when discussing the fate of the Levi family, to which the aforementioned Giorgio belongs, arrested and deported to Auschwitz. The author states:

Brucia dirlo, ma un orlo nero segna i nostri giorni incolpevoli, senza memoria e senza storia [...] se i Levi non si sono difesi e non sono riusciti a immaginare l'inconcepibile, è anche perché [...] Per troppo tempo avevano condiviso con *noi* giornate tristi e felici. Erano saliti e scesi per le medesime scale [...] Troppo tempo, per sentirsi *altri*. (Loy 1997, 135-136; the second emphasis is mine)<sup>8</sup>

The collective oblivion characterizing the days of the Racial Laws, those “giorni senza memoria e senza storia” concealed a previous communality that actually appeared for many Jews a warranty against deportation. The author stresses the forced, abrupt exile that Italian Jews suffered and the equivocation familiar/alien (‘condiviso’, ‘medesime’ vs. ‘altri’) reinforces its absurdness, its being ‘inconcepibile’. Powerful in this respect is the sentence “erano saliti e scesi per le medesime scale”, which I believe is a reference to the passage, in Dante’s *Commedia*, in which Cacciaguida, the pilgrim’s ancestor, predicts his imminent exile from Florence. In underscoring the suffering of this condition Cacciaguida announces to Dante

Tu proverai sì come sa di sale  
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle  
lo scendere e l’alir per l’altrui scale. (Par. XVII, 58-60)<sup>9</sup>

Loy blurs the distinction between ‘noi’ and ‘altro’ by telling us how the same ‘scale’ – and here is the crucial reformulation of Cacciaguida’s words – became all of a sudden ‘altrui’ for Roman Jews and how they were turned into ‘altri’. Dante the character learns about his future banishment from Florence by a voice coming from the past, which for the author corresponds to a backward glance in order to discuss his present condition. In the *Commedia*, Dante’s exile from Florence is set along a continuum, is pondered from a past, present and future perspective. In a similar fashion, in *La parola ebreo*, the *Shoah* is inserted in the greater picture of the years that preceded and in those that followed it, up to the present day. By demarcating and highlighting that “orlo nero”, Loy re-activates a cultural and national memory prior to the *Shoah*, which is an integral part of her act of bearing witness. In this particular sense I interpret David Bidussa’s claim that *La parola ebreo* is a text “significativo in merito al trinomio memoria/oblio/rimemorizzazione” (Bidussa 2005, 1). As a matter of fact, by resuscitating a pre-Holocaust memory that had fallen into ‘oblio’, Loy suggests that in order to have a ‘rimemorizzazione’ it is necessary to re-familiarize ourselves with those aspects

of Italian history that are sometimes overshadowed by the over-familiar images of the *Shoah*. And here Hoffman's concept of the *longue durée* is crucial. For Loy, memory of the *Shoah* presupposes, first, exploring a 'normal' time that preceded it and, secondly, coming to terms with the actual event. For many who were not implicated, like child Rosetta, that was a time "senza storia e senza memoria", the exploration of which is the indispensable prerequisite for telling and bearing witness to what came afterwards. The insistence on historical accuracy, on "continue verifiche", as the author explicitly states in the closing note (Loy 1997, 149), makes the "senso di estraneità" even more conspicuous and dramatic.

#### ROSETTA'S BLINDNESS AS A MIRROR FOR A COLLECTIVE PURPOSEFUL FORGETFULNESS

In *La parola ebreo* Loy provides, for example, a detailed list of all the prohibitions imposed on Italian Jews starting from 1938. Then, the focus shifts to child Rosetta who, though unaware, witnesses the implementation of some of these prohibitions in her private realm, within the Levi family:

La mamma di Giorgio Levi [...] si è messa a dare lezioni di inglese. Da lei possono venire solo studenti ebrei [...] Giorgio frequenta una scuola allestita dalla comunità ebraica a Trastevere e la mattina molto presto parte in bicicletta [...] Qualche volta, ancora assonnata, lo vedo dai vetri del piccolo autobus che ci porta a scuola. (Loy 1997, 98)<sup>10</sup>

This rather fleeting and blurred view of Giorgio Levi, whom she sees through the window and 'assonnata', progressively fades away in Rosetta's mind and by October 16, 1943, which for the child is primarily the second day of school, it is just a 'pale,' remote memory.

I Levi sono stati portati via dalle SS quella mattina [...] Ma i Levi [...] si erano già impalliditi nel mio ricordo (Loy 1997, 122)

Neanche mio padre e mia madre, che di sicuro avranno provato pietà per il destino dei Levi, hanno dimenticato per un giorno [...] la carne e il pane, le uova. (Loy 1997, 121)<sup>11</sup>

Rosetta's increasingly 'looser' connection with the Levis is juxtaposed with that of her parents who, contrary to their child, were perfectly aware of the situation; the parents knew and felt pity, but their daily concerns and priorities were not shaken. Loy's denouncing does not stop at her family and involves a whole collectivity, a collective lack of action, from which the Catholic Church, embodied by Pope Pious XII, emerges most vehemently. After condemning the fact that "Nessuno ha fermato i camion che si allontanavano con uomini e donne, bambini svegliati orrendamente dal sonno" (Loy 1997, 136),<sup>12</sup> Loy harshly denounces the fact that

Pio XII non è comparso bianco e ieratico alla stazione di Trastevere per mettersi davanti al convoglio fermo sul binario e impedirne la partenza [...] I vagoni sono stati piombati e

quel treno è partito senza incidenti, il fischio della locomotiva lungo via Salaria. (Loy 1997, 136)<sup>13</sup>

The emphasizing on what Pious XII did not do is the most tragic example in the book of that adopted 'blindness' of many bystanders that is refracted through the unawareness of child Rosetta. Despite the fact that on October 16, 1943 the child had only a pale memory of the Levis and despite the fact that Rosetta's parents could not forget their own concern for food, Loy stresses above all else the Pope's refusal to see and to act humanely by underlining the physicality of his cowardly reaction: "Pio XII è rimasto chiuso dietro le finestre della sua stanza" (Loy 1997, 136).<sup>14</sup> Such emphasis on the Pope's inaction and, thus, on his conniving with the deportation of Roman Jews, exemplifies the fact that, as Lucamante contends:

Loy's objective in her writing is a constant admonition to Christians to become aware of their complicity and moral responsibility in their annihilation of Jews during the Second World War. (Lucamante 2003, 98)

As Loy makes this complicity and responsibility of Christians increasingly collective, by moving from her private and personal realm to the public and institutional level, she initiates a process by which the plight of the Levis is inscribed in that of all Roman Jews arrested on that infamous October day. Loy begins her detailed account of the round-up by providing the exact number of the arrested Jews: "all'alba del 16 ottobre [...] i tedeschi riuscirono a catturarne 1259" (Loy 1997, 122).<sup>15</sup>

The account of the round-up of October 16, 1943 marks a turning point in the book and the climax of a process that set a familiar and yet distant view of the *Shoah* against accurate historical facts. Only now, after she has explored her personal 'oblio', which, as we have seen, reflected a collective one, is Loy able to start the process of 'rimemorizzazione'.

#### TESTIMONY AND SILENCE. THE EXAMPLE OF GIORGIO LEVI

In her process of 'rememorization', the author maintains the combination of private/public, private/historical, with the difference that her personal voice becomes now instrumental for giving expression to several private stories of Jews who either survived or perished during the war. This is the case, for example, with how Loy recovers Giorgio Levi's story and in a way regains that closeness and familiarity that she had lost. Loy contends: "la storia del ragazzo dei Levi la conosco bene perché [...] ho potuto vederla attraverso gli occhi di una ragazza che era con lui la mattina che vennero a prenderlo" (Loy 1997, 137-138).<sup>16</sup> This girl is Alberta, Giorgio's cousin, who that morning miraculously managed to hide despite living in the same apartment with the boy and his family. Loy's relationship with Giorgio Levi does not end with Alberta's account and through historical 'verifiche' – the author cites for

example Liliana Picciotto Fargion's seminal work *Il libro della memoria* – she finds out that the boy “Ad Auschwitz-Birkenau arrivò la notte del 22 ottobre [...] È morto in un luogo ignoto, le sue tracce si perdono il 29 dicembre 1943” (Loy 1997, 147).<sup>17</sup>

Giorgio Levi, whose story emerges only thanks to Loy's words, recalls Primo Levi's account of Hurbinek, the little speechless boy he met at Auschwitz. Nobody knew who the boy was, where he came from – “era un nulla, un figlio della morte, un figlio di Auschwitz” (Levi 1995, 166)<sup>18</sup> – and the name Hurbinek was given to him by one of the inmates. Levi recounts: “Hurbinek morì ai primi giorni di marzo 1945, libero ma non redento. Nulla resta di lui: egli testimonia attraverso queste mie parole” (Levi 1995, 167).<sup>19</sup> Levi, however, challenges the idea of *testimoniare*, even survivor testimony, when he contends that:

non siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri [...] Noi [...] siamo quelli che [...] non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato per raccontare [...] sono loro [...] i sommersi, i testimoni integrali. (Levi 1991, 64)<sup>20</sup>

Although he personally experienced the camps, Levi does not feel entitled to calling himself a complete witness like Hurbinek, a ‘sommerso’, was and suggests the presence of a distance, of an indirect access to that ‘bottom’ that the dead have reached. Not even his personal experience of seeing Hurbinek suffer and die can fill the irremediable gap that mars that bearing witness “attraverso queste mie parole”. Loy's relationship to the ‘sommersi’ is a further, enormous step removed from Giorgio Levi; it presents a further level of indirectness because the boy can testify through her words only after his story has been filtered by Alberta's. What sort of testimony, then, does Loy provide?

Significant in this respect is the connection, more specifically the continuity that Lucamante establishes between Loy and Levi. The author claims that Loy falls within Levi's “indispensable legacy” which entails the emphasizing of “the lack of collective responsibility that Levi so vigorously warned against in his writings” (Lucamante 2003, 97). Also, according to Lucamante, Loy's work attests to the crucial way in which art allows a writer to bear witness without being a witness (101). As I have shown above, Loy strongly denounces the lack of collective responsibility and her writing of Giorgio Levi's story does raise several crucial questions on the issue of indirect memory and literary engagement, which I now turn to discuss. Through *La parola ebreo*, the author seems to suggest that the impossibility of fully grasping and retrieving what the ‘sommersi’ witnessed does not excuse us from committing to testimony and memory. The first step of such commitment is her attempt to merge the private with the historical by setting personal memories and stories against historical ‘verifiche’. In this process, Loy moves from a condition of nearsightedness, almost blindness (let us recall her ‘assonnata’ and blurred view of Giorgio Levi) to one of reported language that borders on silence (as suggested by “le sue tracce si perdono il 29 dicembre 1943”). With her book, she brings language to Giorgio Levi but she inevitably ends up stumbling upon silence. Such silence hints at the failure of

language to tell what the drowned experienced, but it does not – and this distinction is crucial – deny its potential for bearing witness. With specific reference to Levi's 'ventriloquizing' of Hurbinek's speechlessness, Giorgio Agamben contends:

Hurbinek non può testimoniare perchè non ha lingua. E tuttavia 'egli testimonia attraverso queste mie parole'. Ma nemmeno il superstite può testimoniare integralmente [...] ciò significa che la lingua, per testimoniare, deve cedere il posto a una non-lingua, mostrare l'impossibilità di testimoniare. (1999, 36)<sup>21</sup>

Even Giorgio "non ha lingua" and yet he is a witness through the author's words, through her work. Loy manages to trace some crucial steps of Giorgio's life and by not providing, or rather, by showing her inability to provide a definite closure – traces that become indistinguishable defer time indefinitely – the author hints at an ungraspable, 'unverbalizable' space that lies beyond. Thus, Loy's language – and literary engagement – does bear witness: it shows the impossibility of offering complete testimony precisely because it subsides and "lascia il posto" to the non-language that lies beyond those traces that become indistinguishable.

In reflecting upon the validity of his personal engagement with memory and testimony despite this 'impossibilità', Agamben remarks:

Prestare ascolto ad una lacuna non si è dimostrato un lavoro inutile [...] l'autore si riterrà pago della sua fatica se nel tentativo di identificare il luogo e il soggetto della testimonianza [...] avrà ottenuto che alcuni termini con cui è stata registrata la lezione decisiva del secolo siano rettificati, che alcune parole siano lasciate cadere e altre comprese in modo diverso.<sup>22</sup> (1999, 10)

*La parola ebreo* starts with Loy listening to the lacuna of her unawareness as a child, which leads her to explore a more collective silence and indifference, as epitomized by the Pope's silence and inaction, and ends with the author listening to the lacuna that lies beyond what she could gather, through personal recollections and research, of Giorgio's life. Through her work, Loy bears witness because she evokes that space that cannot be reached and verbalized by whomever has not drowned. What she also manages to do, however, is to foster that attention to and reevaluation of words to which Agamben aspires. By producing a text that strays from the over-familiar rhetoric with which the *Shoah* is so vividly told and made accessible and against which Hoffman warns, Loy stresses the need to reinterpret what is deemed as known and familiar through the lens of an incommensurable distance with the *Shoah*. In *La parola ebreo* the author offers her familiar and yet distant view of the event, which also serves to refamiliarize readers with the connection between Italian Jews and non-Jews that existed before the *Shoah*. Through her book, the title of which underscores precisely the importance of a lexical consciousness, Loy compels readers to revisit some key terms and ideas that have informed the way in which the *Shoah* has been reported, starting precisely from "la parola ebreo".

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “recounts [...] that sense of estrangement [...] with respect to people who [...] had belonged to a daily shared normality and who, by law, were becoming so alien as to be considered treacherous enemies”. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Italian quotes into English are mine.

<sup>2</sup> “If I go back in time and I think about how the word ‘Jew’ came into my life, I see myself seated on a light blue chair in the children’s room [...] In the apartment across the street [...] there is a party [...] A baby has recently been born [...] ‘A baptism?’ I ask. No, says [...] Annemarie, my *Fräulein*. They are Jews, she adds [...] They don’t baptize their children, they circumcise them. She said ‘*beschneiden*’ with a grimace of disgust”.

<sup>3</sup> “Even Mrs. Della Seta is Jewish. She lives next to us [...] I love Mrs. Della Seta, even though she is Jewish. Upstairs from us live the Levis [...] Even they, says Annemarie, are Jewish [...] Sometimes Giorgio Levi rings our doorbell and calls my brother to go play soccer”.

<sup>4</sup> The Racial Laws, which were published in *Il giornale d’Italia* on July 14, 1938 explicitly state that “Gli ebrei non appartengono alla razza italiana [...] Gli ebrei rappresentano l’unica popolazione che non si è mai assimilata in Italia perché essa è costituita da elementi razziali non europei, diversi in modo assoluto dagli elementi che hanno dato origine agli Italiani [...] I caratteri fisici e psicologici puramente europei degli Italiani non devono essere alterati in nessun modo. L’unione è ammissibile solo nell’ambito delle razze europee”.

<sup>5</sup> “The new laws [...] [take] effect. What are, after all, 48,032 individuals, ‘people’ as from now on they will be defined on official documents, ‘giudei’ as they will be commonly called in a non-official way?” Translator’s note: the Italian ‘*giudeo*’ is a derogatory term for ‘*ebreo*’ (Jew).

<sup>6</sup> “Whether they are intellectuals or traders, self-employed men or entrepreneurs, whether they live in Rome or in other parts of Italy, almost all have attempted to show their patriotism by fighting bravely in World War I [...] They took part in political life”.

<sup>7</sup> Gunzberg quotes from Ludwig, 1950.

<sup>8</sup> “It hurts to say it, but a black border marks those guiltless days of ours, without memory and without history [...] And if the Levis did not defend themselves and were not able to imagine the unimaginable, it is also because [...] For too long they had shared with *us* sad and happy days. They had ascended and descended the same stairs as us [...] Too long to feel as *other*”.

<sup>9</sup> “You are to know the bitter taste/of others’ bread, how salt it is, and know/how hard a path it is for one who goes/descending and ascending others’ stairs”. Translation by Allen Mandelbaum.

<sup>10</sup> “Giorgio Levi’s mom [...] now tutors students privately. Only Jewish students can go to her [...] Giorgio attends a school set up by the Jewish community at Trastevere and very early in the morning he leaves the house on his bicycle [...] Sometimes, still sleepy, I see him through the windows of the little bus that takes us to school”.

<sup>11</sup> “The Levis were taken away that morning by the SS [...] But the Levis [...] had already faded away in my memory [...] not even my father and my mother, who certainly felt pity for the Levis’ fate, forgot for one day [...] meat and bread, eggs”.

<sup>12</sup> “Nobody stopped the trucks that were driving away with men and women, children who had been horribly woken up from their sleep”.

<sup>13</sup> “Pious XII did not appear, dressed in white and hieratic, at the Trastevere station in order to stand in front of the train and prevent it from leaving [...] The train was sealed and it left with no incidents, whistling along Salaria Street”.

<sup>14</sup> “Pious XII remained home, behind the windows of his room”.

<sup>15</sup> "On October 16, at dawn [...] the Germans managed to capture 1259 [Jews]"

<sup>16</sup> "I know the story of the Levi boy well because [...] I was able to see it through the eyes of a girl who was with him the morning that they came to get him".

<sup>17</sup> "At Auschwitz-Birkenau he arrived on the night of October 22 [...] He died in an unknown place, his traces fade away on December 29, 1943".

<sup>18</sup> "He was nothing, a son of death, a son of Auschwitz".

<sup>19</sup> "Hurbinek died in early March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine".

<sup>20</sup> "We, the survivors, are not the real witnesses [...] we [...] are those who [...] have not touched bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, did not come back to tell about it [...] they [...] the drowned, are the complete witnesses".

<sup>21</sup> "Hurbinek cannot bear witness because he has no language. And yet, 'he bears witness through these words of mine'. But not even survivors can provide complete testimony [...] this means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language, it must show the impossibility of bearing witness".

<sup>22</sup> "Listening to a lacuna did not prove a useless job [...] I will consider myself rewarded for my endeavor if, in identifying the place and the subject of testimony [...] I have spurred a correction of the terms with which the decisive lesson of the century has been reported and I have caused some words to be abandoned and others to be understood in a different way".

## WORKS CITED

Agamben, Giorgio. *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998.

Alighieri, Dante. *Paradiso. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Mandelbaum, Allen & Gabriel Marazzo, eds.. Translation by Allen Mandelbaum. NY: Bantam, 1986.

---. *Paradiso*, a cura di Natalino Sapegno. Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1985.

Bassani, Giorgio. *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*. Milano: Mondadori, 2003.

Bidussa, David. 'Sul filo della memoria. Comunità d'ascolto'. [01. 01. 2005] *Golem l'Indispensabile* – 03.02.2007 <http://www.golemindispensabile.it/index.php? idnodo=8001& idfrm=61>.

'Come chiudemmo gli occhi'. [26.01.2007] *L'Espresso Local* – 03.02.2007 <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio-local//1488190>.

Gunzberg, Lynn M. *Strangers at home: Jews in the Italian Literary Imagination*. Berkeley: UCP, 1992.

Hoffman, Eva. *After such knowledge: memory, history, and the legacy of the Holocaust*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

'Leggi razziali in Italia. Documenti storici 1930 – 1945' – 04.02.2007 [http://cronologia.leonardo.it/ugopersi/leggi\\_razziali\\_italia/manifesto\\_razzisti.htm](http://cronologia.leonardo.it/ugopersi/leggi_razziali_italia/manifesto_razzisti.htm).

Levi, Primo. *I sommersi e i salvati*. Torino: Einaudi, 1991.

---. *La tregua*. Torino: Einaudi, 1995.

Loy, Rosetta. *La parola ebreo*. Torino: Einaudi, 1997.

Lucamante Stefania. 'The Indispensable legacy of Primo Levi from Eraldo Affinati to Rosetta Loy between History and Fiction'. *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 24/2 (2003): 87-104.

Minghelli, Giuliana. 'What's in a Word? Rosetta Loy's Search for History in Childhood'. *MLN* 116/1 (2001): 162-176.