

Carlo Levi,
Paura della libertà

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The Eternal Tendency Toward Fascism

Ogni tempo ha il suo fascismo.
Primo Levi

1.

When *Paura della libertà* was first published in Italy in 1946, critics were puzzled: was this the same Carlo Levi whose extraordinary *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* had appeared the previous year? With its concrete imagery and compassionate ethnography, that earlier book had won over not only the Italian literary establishment and its various political currents, but the larger public as well. *Paura della libertà* seemed to have been written by an entirely different author. And yet, there is a clear genealogy between the two; indeed, the later essay must be recognized as the interpretive key to understanding Levi's entire oeuvre.¹ It was not until the second edition was published in 1964, that Italo Calvino understood, before other critics, that «Levi [...] è il testimone della presenza d'un altro tempo all'interno del nostro tempo, è l'ambasciatore d'un altro mondo all'interno del nostro mondo».²

1 For the initial reaction by the Italian literary establishment, see L. Bortone, *Carlo Levi: «Paura della libertà»*, in «Il Ponte», giugno 1947, pp. 92-93, and A. Bizzari, *Un saggio di Carlo Levi*, in «La Fiera Letteraria», 13 febbraio 1947, pp. 6-7. See, in English, L. Baldassarro, «*Paura della libertà*»: Carlo Levi's *Unfinished Preface*, in «Italice», 72, 2, Summer 1995, pp. 143-154, and D. Ward, *Carlo Levi: Gli italiani e la paura della libertà*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 2002, pp. 49-53; Id., *Antifascisms: Cultural Politics in Italy, 1943-46. Benedetto Croce and the Liberals, Carlo Levi and the "Actionists"*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison (NJ) 1996, pp. 157-191.

2 I. Calvino, *La compresenza dei tempi* [1967], in Id., *Saggi. 1945-1985*, a cura di M. Barenghi, Mondadori, Milano 2007, vol. 1, pp. 1122-1125; p. 1123.

Paura della libertà is a work that is *sui generis*. Levi called it «un poema filosofico»³ and meant it to serve as an introduction to a larger work, perhaps a grand master narrative. In some ways, his elegiac post-war novel *L'Orologio* (1950) took up this meditation on time, memory, and history in a different, more intimate, form.

Written as war clouds were gathering over Europe, *Paura della libertà* is a lyrical and metaphysical thinking-through of man's flight from moral and spiritual autonomy and the resulting loss of self and creativity. As he watched British troops disembark in the fall of 1939 on the western coast of France, Levi brooded on what surely appeared to be the decline, if not the fall, of Europe as the German armies prepared to eviscerate an entire world. In many ways, Levi here anticipated ideas put forth later by a wide range of Western intellectuals: social psychologist of the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm, Italian semiotician Umberto Eco, cultural critic Susan Sontag, and literary critic Terry Eagleton. Levi approaches the problem of fascism through poetic language, employing a lexicon of metaphor, symbolism, poetry and mythology. Without access to a library but with references to the entire intellectual and cultural patrimony of Western civilization (from the Bible and Greek mythology to Freud and Jung; from the eighteenth-century counter-Enlightenment Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico to Friedrich Nietzsche), Levi's book is a profound mytho-poetic meditation on the paradoxical relationship between human beings, freedom, and the creative process. *Paura della libertà* is not only a meditation on a specific moment in history and a universal, timeless condition; today it reads as a powerful indictment of our own contemporary moral and political failures.

2.

Carlo Levi earned a degree in medicine from the University of Turin in 1924 though he never officially practiced medicine. Instead, he gravitated toward painting and – in the context of the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini – anti-fascist politics. The two activities – painting and anti-fascism – were intimately connected in his mind. Anti-fascism required a new style of painting, one capable of freeing men and women from fear. Conversely, Levi saw in certain forms of contemporary painting – especially the tendency away from figurative art and the human form – a reflection of an eternal tendency to flee from freedom.

3 C. Levi, interview with F. Bertolo [1971], cited by R. Galvagno, *Alle origini della parola e dell'immagine*, in C. Levi, *Prima e dopo le parole. Scritti e discorsi sulla letteratura*, a cura di G. De Donato, R. Galvagno, Donzelli, Roma 2001, p. 4.

Levi embraced Piero Gobetti's thesis that Italy, never having fully experienced the great transformative events of modernity such as the religious, political, scientific and intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had never really reached political "maturity." It was through Gobetti that Levi came to know a Sardinian intellectual transplanted into the soil of Turin: Antonio Gramsci, a founding member of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI). Levi embraced Gobetti's condemnation that fascism was no mere parenthesis in Italian history, as Benedetto Croce would interpret the fascist ventennio in an influential 1944 speech, nor an aberration of Italian history, but «l'autobiografia di una nazione»; a nation that rejected the necessary compromise of politics; a nation that worshiped unanimity; a nation that feared heresy.⁴

In addition to his relationships with Gobetti and Gramsci, another crucial friendship was that with Carlo and Nello Rosselli. Carlo, the elder brother, was a co-founder of a new political movement, Giustizia e Libertà,⁵ and one of the most charismatic and influential of European anti-fascist intellectuals. Born into a wealthy Jewish family and abandoning a promising career as a professor of political economics, Rosselli devoted his considerable fortune and ultimately his life to the struggle against fascism. In 1925, he was instrumental in establishing the first underground antifascist newspaper, «Non Mollare!». Rosselli had been sentenced, as would Levi later, to *confino* or domestic exile, on Lipari. There, he wrote his major theoretical work, *Socialismo Liberale*, arguing that socialism was the logical development of the principle of liberty.⁶ After a daring escape

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- 4 P. Gobetti, *Elogio della ghigliottina*, in «La Rivoluzione Liberale», 23 novembre 1923. On Gobetti, see P. Bagnoli, *L'eretico Gobetti*, La Pietra, Milano 1978; A. Cabella, *Elogio della libertà. Biografia di Piero Gobetti*, Il Punto, Torino 1998; M. Gervasoni, *L'intellettuale come eroe: Piero Gobetti e le culture del Novecento*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 2000; J. Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, Palgrave, New York 2008; D. Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World: Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2010; P. Gobetti, A. Gobetti, *Nella tua breve esistenza: Lettere 1918-1926*, a cura di E. Alessandrone Perona, Einaudi, Torino 2017.
- 5 The literature on Giustizia e Libertà is vast. See «*Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*». *Ristampa anastatica con scritti di A. Galante Garrone e A. Tarchiani*, Bottega d'Erasmus, Torino 1975; *Giustizia e Libertà nella lotta antifascista e nella storia d'Italia. Attualità dei fratelli Rosselli a quaranta anni dal loro sacrificio*, a cura di C. Francovich, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1978; S. Fedele, *E verrà un'altra Italia. Politica e cultura nei «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà»*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 1992; *Giustizia e Libertà e il Socialismo Liberale. Scritti scelti*, a cura di V. Spini, M. Gervasoni, M & B, Milano 2002; F. Fantoni, *L'incrocio possibile. Liberalismo e socialismo da «Critica Sociale» ai «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà»*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2005; M. Giovana, *Giustizia e Libertà in Italia. Storia di una cospirazione antifascista. 1929-1937*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2005; D. Giacchetti, *Per la giustizia e la libertà. La stampa Gielle nel secondo dopoguerra*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2011; M. Bresciani, *Quale antifascismo? Storia di Giustizia e Libertà*, Carocci, Roma 2017.
- 6 C. Rosselli, *Socialisme libéral*, trad. fr. par S. Priacel, Libraire Valois, Paris 1930; *Socialismo liberale*, prefazione di G. Salvemini, Polis Editrice, Napoli 1944. On Rosselli, see N. Tranfaglia, *Carlo Rosselli. Dall'interventismo a «Giustizia e Libertà»*, Laterza, Bari 1968; Id., *Carlo Rosselli e il sogno di una democrazia sociale moderna*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano 2010; S. Pugliese, *Carlo Rosselli: Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999, tr. it. di D. Panziera, P.

from the island of Lipari, he made his way to Paris. With his historian brother Nello and Riccardo Bauer, Carlo Levi founded a new journal in Turin, «La lotta politica», in 1929. If Carlo Levi and Nello Rosselli represented an intellectual resistance against fascism, Carlo Rosselli was the epitome of the anti-fascist activist. He was among the first to arrive in Barcelona after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in which he commanded an armed column of volunteers in defense of the Republic. When the secret police learned of Rosselli's plan to expand the Spanish Civil War into a pre-emptive strike against Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and discovered his plot to assassinate Mussolini, they declared him the regime's most dangerous enemy and had him murdered, along with his brother Nello, on a country road in Normandy. (The assassination became the basis for Alberto Moravia's novel, *Il conformista* [1951] as well as the 1970 film of the same name by Bernardo Bertolucci). Levi, intellectually and emotionally close to both brothers, worked through his grief by painting a revealing *Autoritratto con la camicia insanguinata*.

Levi was strongly attracted to the radical new ideology of Giustizia e Libertà. The movement stressed that, unlike the other anti-fascist parties such as the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) and the PCI which had their roots in a pre-fascist Italy, GL was the only movement that arose directly in response to Mussolini's regime. It was a heterogeneous group of intellectuals; both a strength and a weakness. Levi was, together with Leone Ginzburg, Vittorio Foa, Augusto Monti, Aldo Garosci, Piero Gobetti's extraordinary widow, Ada,⁷ and others, one of the leaders of GL in Turin. (Later the Turin branch would welcome writer Cesare Pavese and chemist Primo Levi.) It was because of Levi's experience in *confino* in Basilicata that these northern Italian intellectuals were forced to confront the seemingly-intractable problem of *meridionalismo* or «la questione del Mezzogiorno», which had first been broached by Guido Dorso, Gaetano Salvemini, and Giustino Fortunato.⁸ When GL was accused of vague ideas, inarticulate anti-fascism and «povertà intellettuale» by Giorgio Amendola

Soddu, *Carlo Rosselli. Socialista eretico ed esule antifascista, 1899-1937*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2001; P. Bagnoli, *Carlo Rosselli. Socialismo, giustizia e libertà*, Biblion, Milano 2010; Id., *L'Italia civile dei Rosselli*, Biblion, Milano 2019; V. Spini, *Carlo e Nello Rosselli. Testimoni di Giustizia e Libertà*, Edizioni Clichy, Firenze 2016. See also C. Moorhead, *A Bold and Dangerous Family: The Remarkable Story of An Italian Mother, Her Two Sons, and Their Fight Against Fascism*, Harper, New York 2018.

7 A. Gobetti, *Diario partigiano*, Einaudi, Torino 2014; J. Alano, *A Life of Resistance: Ada Prospero Marchesini Gobetti (1902-1968)*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester 2017. Other influential women of the movement were Barbara Allason (see her *Memorie di un'antifascista*, Edizioni U, Roma 1945) and Joyce Salvadori Lussu (see her *Fronti e frontiere*, Laterza, Bari 1967). On the women of GL and the "women's question", see N. Crain Merz, *L'illusione della parità. Donne e questione femminile in Giustizia e Libertà e nel Partito d'Azione*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2013.

8 For an American perspective, see *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno. Essays in Comparative History*, ed. by E. Dal Lago and R. Halpern, Palgrave, New York 2002; *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, ed. by J. Schneider, Berg, Oxford-New York 1998.

and the PCI, Levi worked with Carlo Rosselli, Emilio Lussu, Alberto Tarchiani and others in drafting the *Programma rivoluzionario di «Giustizia e Libertà»*.⁹

Fascism could only be defeated by a revolutionary movement that confronted the problem of freedom. They argued that GL was «la espressione concreta» of the forces that struggle on the revolutionary terrain against fascism. Its program: abolish the monarchy; foster forms of democracy and autonomy based on the working classes; land reform; nationalization of essential public services; better industrial relations, factory organization, and workers' control (reflecting the influence of Gobetti and Gramsci); unemployment insurance and a minimum wage; a foreign policy of peace and disarmament with greatly reduced military and colonial spending; freedom for the inhabitants of the colonies; a united Europe; cultural and administrative autonomy for ethnic minorities; free education; separation of Church and State; and unconditional freedom of conscience and worship. In short, for GL, the liberal, monarchical, past was no model for an anti-fascist and post-fascist Italy. Levi argued that pre-fascist Italy was directly responsible for the politically monstrous birth of fascism. There could be no nostalgic «ritorno al passato».

GL soon became known as the “il partito degli intellettuali”; in fact, its great flaw was its difficulty in attracting factory workers, artisans, the bourgeoisie or peasants. More ominously, in the reports of the fascist secret police, GL was soon labeled «il partito degli intellettuali ebrei».¹⁰ When Sion Segre Amar, a young idealistic man from Turin approached Carlo Levi about joining the movement, Levi could only moan, «Ahimè, un altro ebreo». Levi made it clear to the young man that he didn't want GL to be known as a “Jewish” movement. Segre wittily asked if he should first convert to Catholicism to join, or should he become a fascist just because he was a Jew?¹¹ Amar was clear on why Italian Jews were attracted to GL: fascism offended them morally, and they saw in the movement a vehicle to combat the odious ideology without constricting them in an equally rigid ideology such as communism.¹²

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- 9 *Il programma rivoluzionario di «Giustizia e Libertà»*, in «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà», 1, gennaio 1932, pp. 4-8.
- 10 OVRA reports of 20 dicembre 1933 and 7 giugno 1936, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Polizia Politica, busta 114; quoted in J. Blatt, *The Battle of Turin, 1933-1936: Carlo Rosselli, Giustizia e Libertà, OVRA and the origins of Mussolini's anti-Semitic campaign*, in «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», 1, 1, 1995, pp. 22-57: pp. 28, 45.
- 11 A. Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism*, Summit Books, New York 1991, p. 99, and S. Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival*, Basic Books, New York 1987, p. 28.
- 12 S. Segre Amar, *Sui “fatti” di Torino del 1934*, in *Gli ebrei in Italia durante il fascismo*, «Quaderni del Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea», II, 3, marzo 1962, pp. 125-134: p. 126; quoted in Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, cit., p. 250.

The Turin branch of GL was deeply immersed in the cultural battle raging within Italy during the 1930s. Levi's practice of painting portraits in his studio in Turin offered ample time and sufficient cover to discuss anti-fascism with others. Under the patronage of Giulio Einaudi and the Einaudi publishing house, Carlo Levi, Leone Ginzburg, Cesare Pavese, and Luigi Salvatorelli came together to revive the journal «La Cultura». Levi there signed his work with the *nome de plume* «Tre Stelle».

In the spring of 1935, the Turinese GL group was betrayed by a police spy and most of its members arrested by the fascists.¹³ Levi was interrogated and then sent to Rome's notorious Regina Coeli prison. Two months after his arrest he was sentenced to three years of *confino* in Basilicata, first in Grassano, then Aliano. During his confinement, he was permitted to receive visitors, the most important being his sister Luisa and his lover, Paola Levi, who was Adriano Olivetti's wife, and whose portrait he painted several times (Paola gave birth to their daughter in 1937).

It was out of that year in *confino* that, eight years later, hiding from the Nazis in Florence, he was to write his most famous work, a masterpiece of ethnography and human solidarity, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*. For a northern Italian – and a Jew – the experience of the lives of the southern Italian peasant came as a revelation. Levi soon came to recognize that beneath a thin veneer of Christianity lay millennia of pagan culture.

On May 20, 1936, in celebration of the fascist acquisition of an “African Empire” after the defeat of Ethiopia, Levi and other political prisoners were granted an amnesty and released. Levi, though, did not immediately leave. The year he had spent in Aliano had marked him for life; in accordance with his last wishes, he is buried there.

Levi, Carlo Rosselli, and other members of GL, developed a conception of fascism that would be echoed several decades later in the work of the German-born psychoanalyst and social philosopher, Erich Fromm.¹⁴ Levi saw the deep roots of fascism in the «ereditata incapacità ad essere liberi» and in the «paura della passione e della responsabilità che porta a ricercare adorando chi ce ne privi e ce ne liberi». The Italians, for Levi feel «il bisogno di un ordine esteriore che possa assumersi a riprova e quasi sostituito della inesistente moralità».¹⁵ Emilio Lussu, for his part, agreed with Gobetti, Rosselli, and Levi that the Italians had inherited a moral

13 See Blatt, *The Battle of Turin, 1933-1936*, cit., p. 33.

14 See especially Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, but also later books such as *Man for Himself. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, Rinehart, New York 1947; *The Sane Society*, Rinehart, New York 1955; *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1973.

15 C. Levi, *Seconda lettera dall'Italia*, in «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà», 2, marzo 1932, pp. 10-16: p. 11; ora in Id., *Il coraggio dei miti. Scritti contemporanei (1922-1974)*, a cura di G. De Donato, De Donato, Bari 1975, pp. 33-40.

conscience brutalized by centuries of feudalism and Catholicism.¹⁶ Levi and his colleagues were anticipating Italian Liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce's later formulation of fascism as «moral sickness» with roots in rabid nationalism, fanatical imperialism, romantic decadentism, and the First World War. By defining fascism first as a «parenthesis» in the unfolding history of liberty in Italy and then later as a «moral sickness», Croce was crafting a strategy that could deny that there was anything specifically «Italian» about fascism. Levi, Rosselli, and Ferruccio Parri instead condemned the entire experience of Liberal Italy, from unification to the Great War, as responsible for the rise of fascism.¹⁷ Levi agreed with Parri's condemnation that «tra lo stato italiano dopo il 1860 e il fascismo esiste una connessione; se non di affiliazione, di degenerazione progressiva».¹⁸

For Levi, there were other forces as well that contributed to the rise of fascism: hundreds of thousands of people who supported the mechanism of the bureaucratic and dictatorial State; the cult of violence, a taste for adventure, and authoritarian tendencies generated by the war; a religion of nationalism; weakness of character in the part of the Italians; centuries of servility; the influence of the Church; and political apathy. In short, fascism was both class reaction and moral crisis, and those that fought only the former were fighting only half the battle.¹⁹

Levi's analysis of future forms of political organization can be seen in the contemporary version of a «media regime»:

Noi non possiamo oggi prevedere quali forme politiche si preparino per il futuro: ma in un paese di piccola borghesia come l'Italia, e nel quale le ideologie piccolo-borghesi sono andate contagiando anche le classi popolari cittadine, purtroppo è probabile che le nuove istituzioni che seguiranno al fascismo, per evoluzione lenta o per opera di violenza, e anche le più estreme e apparentemente rivoluzionarie fra esse, saranno riportate a riaffermare, in modi diversi, quelle ideologie; ricreeranno uno Stato altrettanto, e forse più, lontano della vita, idolatrico e astratto, perpetueranno e peggioreranno, sotto nuovi nomi e nuove bandiere, l'eterno fascismo italiano.²⁰

Levi's warning about an «eterno fascismo» seems ever more prescient.

According to Levi, the only response to fascism lay in inventing a new form of government, a new conception of the State «che non può più essere né quello fascista, né quello liberale, né quello comunista, forme

16 E. Lussu, *Errico Malatesta*, in «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà», 5, dicembre 1932, pp. 37-41.

17 F. Parri, *Scritti 1915-1975*, a cura di E. Collotti, G. Rochat, G. Solaro Pelazza, P. Speciale, Feltrinelli, Milano 1976, p. 179.

18 *Discussione sul Risorgimento*, in «Giustizia e Libertà», 26 aprile 1935.

19 C. Levi, *Il programma dell'Opposizione Comunista*, in «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà», 4, settembre 1932, p. 49.

20 C. Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* [1945], Einaudi, Torino 1983, p. 222.

tutte diverse e sostanzialmente identiche della stessa religione statale».²¹ Instead, it was imperative that Italy reconceptualize the concept of the State with the concept of the individual. «Al tradizionale concetto giuridico e astratto di individuo, dobbiamo sostituire un nuovo concetto, che esprime la realtà vivente, che abolisca la invalicabile trascendenza di individuo e di Stato».²² Levi thought he discerned the answer in peasant civilization. The humanistic yet tragic conception of the individual which was at the heart of peasant culture was the only path that «permetterà di uscire dal giro vizioso di fascismo e antifascismo».²³

Stanislao
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3.

Levi's analysis of fascism is part of a distinguished lineage of political critique. Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, first published in 1941, bears an uncanny resemblance to Levi's *Paura della libertà*.²⁴ Fromm (1900-1980) joined Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research and was instrumental in developing the school of Critical Theory. Struck by the mass hysteria of the First World War and the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, Fromm's great task was to introduce the indeterminacy of freedom into the relatively deterministic systems of Marx and Freud. The result was a radical, socialist humanism.²⁵

For Fromm, there was no escaping the fundamental charge of modernity: that as human beings gain freedom by emerging from their dependence on other human beings and nature and becoming "individuals," they were presented a choice: «unite oneself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work» or else seek refuge in a kind of security through such ties with the world as to destroy their freedom and the integrity of their individual selves.²⁶

Forty-five years after Levi's *Paura della libertà* first appeared, its message was heard once again, in different form. Speaking at the Casa Italiana of Columbia University in New York City on April 25, 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Italy from the Nazi occupation, Umberto Eco, sketched a typology of what he called "Ur-Fascism" or "Eternal Fascism" in 14 points.²⁷ The subsequent publication of the essay – in

21 *Ivi*, p. 223.

22 *Ibidem*.

23 *Ibidem*.

24 In fact, *Escape from Freedom* was published in Britain as *Fear of Freedom*, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., London 1942.

25 E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, Rinehart, New York 1941, p. viii.

26 *Ivi*, p. 23.

27 U. Eco, *Ur-Fascism*, in «The New York Review of Books», 42, 11, 22 June 1995, pp. 12-15; reprinted in a slightly different version as *Il fascismo eterno*, in Id., *Cinque scritti morali*, Rizzoli, Milano 1997, pp. 25-48, and as *Ur-Fascism*, in Id., *Five Moral Pieces*, Eng. tr. by A. McEwen, Harcourt, New York 2002, pp. 65-88.

slightly different form – in the «New York Review of Books», generated considerable interest at the time and a quarter-century of analytical insight. The first feature of this «eternal fascism», according to Eco, was what he termed the «cult of tradition». Traditionalism, in turn, implies the «rejection of modernism». With the Enlightenment depicted as the beginning of modern depravity, fascism embraced *irrationalism*.

This leads the fascist to the «cult of action for action's sake». Thinking, for the fascist «is a form of emasculation». Intellectuals, with their fondness for ambiguity and complexity, are not to be trusted. For the fascist, Eco continues, «disagreement is treason» and diversity is to be exterminated based on a «fear of difference. Eternal Fascism is «racist by definition». Undergirding fascist social psychology is the «obsession with a plot». The fascists revel in feeling besieged. And the «easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia».

Life is «permanent warfare». Pacifism, therefore «is trafficking with the enemy» so fascism insists on «contempt for the weak» and a rabid machismo. Finally, recalling Orwell, Eco writes that Eternal Fascism «speaks Newspeak». «Ur-Fascism», cautioned Eco, «is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes».

Another analysis similar to Levi's is Terry Eagleton's *Holy Terror*.²⁸ As a literary theorist who privileges the political, Eagleton's training and intellectual concerns make him a particularly astute commentator and gloss on Levi. The British thinker opens with a preface that defends his analysis of a «poetics of fascism» or what the author calls a metaphysical or theological turn in the study of fascist terror.

The politics implicit in this rather exotic talk of Satan and Dionysus, scapegoats and demons, are more, not less radical than much that is to be found in the more orthodox discourse of leftism today... The left is at home with imperial power and guerilla warfare but embarrassed on the whole by the thought of death, evil, sacrifice, or the sublime.²⁹

Eagleton echoes Levi when he writes that the concept of terror is intimately linked with that of the *sacred*. «The word *sacer* can mean either blessed or cursed, holy or reviled; and there are kinds of terror in ancient civilization which are both creative and destructive, life-giving and death-dealing. The sacred is dangerous, to be kept in a cage rather than a glass case».³⁰

The sacred is a Janus-faced power, at once life-giving and death-dealing, which can be traced all the way from the orgies of Dionysus to the

28 T. Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

29 *Ivi*, p. vi.

30 *Ivi*, p. 2.

shattering elements of the sublime. For late modern civilization, some of its primary incarnations are known as the unconscious, the death drive, or the Real. This monstrous ambivalence, which for the Judaeo-Christian lineage finds its epitome in the holy terror of God, is also to be found at the root of the modern conception of freedom. The absolute notion of freedom, pressed to an extreme limit, involves a form of terror which turns against the finitude of the flesh in the very act of seeking to serve it. Like the tragic protagonist, it glides through some invisible frontier at which its “everything” collapses into nothing.³¹

In a chapter tellingly titled «Fear and Freedom», Eagleton offers a metaphysical de-construction of the Western concept of freedom that sounds as though it were written by Levi himself. Freedom, he writes, is «the most sublime phenomenon», which, like the god Dionysius, «is both angel and demon, beauty and terror. If there is something sacred about liberty it is not only because it is precious, but because it can destroy as well as create». ³² This is the basis of understanding our «self-consuming» and infinite war on terror as «the “bad” sublime of our own era». ³³ The terror of freedom, as Levi and Eagleton both perceived, lies in its ambiguity. ³⁴ Today, we exist in a bewildering epistemological paradox: «As science comes to net more and more truth, philosophy insists that the knower himself, whose essence is freedom, is as inaccessible as the remotest star». ³⁵

In a seminal essay reviewing Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba* (1973), Susan Sontag also echoed Levi’s analysis of fascism:

Fascist aesthetics [...] flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force. The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets, uniformly garbed and shown in ever swelling numbers. Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, “virile” posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death. ³⁶

31 *Ivi*, p. 115.

32 *Ivi*, p. 68.

33 *Ivi*, pp. 71-72.

34 *Ivi*, p. 77.

35 *Ivi*, p. 81.

36 S. Sontag, *Fascinating Fascism*, in «The New York Review of Books», 6 February 1975; reprinted in Ead., *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 1980, pp. 73-105.

That other extraordinary Levi from Turin – Primo Levi – had also discerned fascism’s eternal fascination. Writing during the “anni di piombo” Primo Levi courageously wrote:

Ogni tempo ha il suo fascismo: se ne notano i segni premonitori dovunque la concentrazione di potere nega al cittadino la possibilità e la capacità di esprimersi ed attuare la sua volontà. A questo si arriva in molti modi, non necessariamente col terrore dell’intimidazione poliziesca, ma anche negando o distortendo l’informazione, inquinando la giustizia, paralizzando la scuola, diffondendo in molti modi sottili la nostalgia per un mondo in cui regnava sovrano l’ordine, ed in cui la sicurezza dei pochi privilegiati riposava sul lavoro forzato e sul silenzio dei molti.³⁷

Carlo Levi, *Paura della libertà*

4.

Intimately tied to two cities – his native Turin and his adopted Rome – Carlo Levi uncannily saw the modern metropolis as a metaphor for the dark indistinctness of chaos. Just as the free individual and the creative artist had to break free yet retain ties to the primeval mass, the contemporary city dweller had to navigate the labyrinth crafted by modern technology. Just as the ancient labyrinth had been an image of primeval forest, and of chaos, and perhaps «even of the soul inhabited by monsters» so modern technology had led to «exceedingly contradictory and paradoxical» consequence of neither solving nor overcoming the complexities of chaos but of merely offering the techné of a «rational reconstruction of the irrational», the creation of «a place of loss and fear»; in short, the creation of another – no less fearful – labyrinth.³⁸

On July 1, 1942, as Levi was hiding from the fascists in Florence, he penned the extraordinary essay, *Paura della pittura*, which he read over the airwaves on Radio Firenze on October 25, 1944.³⁹ When his friend, the publisher Giulio Einaudi, reprinted *Paura della libertà* in a new edition in 1964, Levi requested that *Paura della pittura* serve as a new appendix. The essay addresses many of the same issues first raised in *Fear of Freedom*. Here Levi uses painting as a prism through which we can see the problem of freedom in a different light. Paintings, Levi was to write (1950) in *L’Orologio*, «sono sempre mitici paesaggi dell’anima, e non possono essere privi di

37 P. Levi, *Un passato che credevamo non dovesse tornare più*, in «Corriere della Sera», 8 maggio 1974; ora in Id., *Opere complete*, a cura di M. Belpoliti, Einaudi, Torino 2016, vol. 1, pp. 1370-1372; End. tr. by A. and F. Bastagli, *A Past We Thought Would Never Return*, in Id., *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, general editor A. Goldstein, Norton, New York 2015, vol. 1, pp. 446-449.

38 C. Levi, *The Labyrinth*, in Id., *Fleeting Rome*, Eng. tr. by A. Shugaar, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2004, pp. 216-217.

39 G. Sacerdoti, *Paura della pittura di Carlo Levi e le paure di prospettive*, in «Archimagazine», <http://www.archimagazine.com/rlevisacerdoti.htm> (last accessed: 8/5/2020).

questi boschi intricati e senza strade, di queste paludi, di questo tedio ozioso e notturno».⁴⁰

As Giovanna Faleschini Lerner insists, the distinction between word and symbol is fundamental to Levi's poetics and aesthetics:

For Levi, symbols are abstract. They do not bear a direct relationship with reality – whereas the meaning of all art is precisely the revelation of connections between signs and their referents. In fact, elsewhere Levi says that the purpose of art is to create reality in the moment in which reality is represented. Sign and referent, in other words, must coincide. The problem with modern art (modernism in general, really) for Levi is that it renounces realism, and thus can no longer represent the world, which becomes monstrous and alien to humanity. Hence Levi's insistence on "consenso" as the correspondence of representation and its object through the mediation of the artist who expresses in this formal correspondence his embrace of the object of representation.⁴¹

Levi's startling condemnation of Picasso and abstract art in *Paura della pittura* is based on this premise: that abstract art reveals the desperate desire to escape from reality. The irremediable separation from the concrete – from the earth, from human form – renders painting as magic, an instrument of impossible salvation. «La paura del deserto dell'anima desolata è il senso della pittura contemporanea: i suoi oggetti, non uomini e cose viventi, ma idoli».⁴²

For Carlo Levi, fascism – in its failed attempt to embrace and sterilize everything – is forced to realize itself in death. Placing itself at the service of barbarism, the negation of freedom, of the instruments that destroy autonomy, and which impose the most stifling conformity and alienation, fascism had thought of itself as the catalyst of history. Instead it proved itself tragically bound by the forces it had unleashed. In making the State an empty but ferocious ideal, Levi argued, it had transformed men and women into dead objects.⁴³

Just as that first exiled intellectual, Adam – responsible for putting a name on all things – Carlo Levi seeks in *Paura della libertà* and *Paura della pittura* to put a name on a certain melancholy that ripens into a holy terror, a dumb awe, a trembling before the gods. He had intuited the inescapable double bind of modernity: that we must differentiate ourselves from the maternal indistinct chaos in order to be free; but in order to be creative, we must never sever our genealogical ties that bind us to that fertile yet terrifying sacredness.

40 C. Levi, *L'Orologio*, Einaudi, Torino 1950, p. 54, Eng. tr. by J. Farrar, *The Watch*, Farrar, Straus & Young, New York 1951, now Steerforth Italia, South Royalton (VT) 1999, p. 53.

41 Private correspondence; see also G. Faleschini Lerner, *Carlo Levi's Visual Poetics: The Painter as Writer*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York-London 2012.

42 C. Levi, *Paura della pittura*, in Id., *Scritti politici*, a cura di D. Bidussa, Einaudi, Torino 2001, p. 206.

43 C. Levi, *Le cartoline della storia*, introduction to *Autobiografia del fascismo: i miti del totalitarismo fascista*, a cura di E. Nizza, La Pietra, Milano 1962, p. vi.

Riccardo Gasperina Geroni

Alla radice dell'umanesimo politico di Carlo Levi

Nel 1973, impossibilitato a vedere a causa di un distacco di retina che lo costringe a letto, Carlo Levi redige le pagine oniriche e immaginifiche di *Quaderno a cancelli*, il suo ultimo lavoro da poco ripubblicato per Einaudi in una edizione filologicamente più attendibile.¹ L'opera, seppur diversa dalla precedente produzione artistica di Levi, è nondimeno attraversata da una forma di ottimismo sempre viva nella sua narrativa, sin dal suo primo romanzo *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945), scritto al chiuso di una stanza in piazza Pitti a Firenze, mentre è braccato dai nazisti. In essa gli uomini sono divisi nelle categorie dei diabetici e degli allergici, la cui genesi rimanda alla condizione fisica dell'autore, invalidato da una forma particolarmente aggressiva di diabete e dal conseguente e duplice distacco di retina. L'opposizione "diabetici contro allergici" riassume le numerose contrapposizioni del pensiero di Levi che accompagnano il suo percorso intellettuale e artistico sin dagli anni di stesura di *Paura della libertà*, l'*opus primum* scritto nel 1939 su una spiaggia della Loira atlantica, dove l'opposizione in questione aveva trovato la sua prima espressione. Per un gobettiano e meridionalista, poi giellino, punto di raccordo tra i fuoriusciti parigini e i gruppi locali torinesi,² e infine tra i primi a sostenere il Partito d'Azione,³ i "giusti" non potevano non essere i poveri, i contadini, i subalterni; mentre i "malvagi" erano la rapace borghesia italiana, corresponsabile dell'ascesa di Mussolini al governo e del suo sogno imperialista.

A distanza di quarant'anni questa netta bipartizione (che Levi non aveva mancato di problematizzare anche nel romanzo politico *L'Orologio* del 1950, in cui aveva creato le categorie dei "Luigini" e dei "Contadini") è calata in un contesto storico del tutto diverso, dove il sogno di conquista è ora proprio degli Americani che, in Vietnam, vogliono imporre con violenza la loro visione del mondo, al suono di *Freedom e Democracy*.⁴ Come avrà modo di ricordare l'amico Italo Calvino, all'indomani della pubblicazione postuma del *Quaderno* nel 1979, in queste pagine, tra le più belle del libro, «il Levi moralista» identifica i caratteri dei diabetici, partendo da «un suo autoritratto ideale», da «un modello d'atteggiamento verso il

Carlo Levi, *Paura della libertà*

1 C. Levi, *Quaderno a cancelli*, a cura di R. Gasperina Geroni, Einaudi, Torino 2020.

2 Per una sintesi di quegli anni, si veda G. De Donato, S. d'Amaro, *Un torinese del Sud: Carlo Levi. Una biografia*, Baldini Castoldi Dalai, Milano 2005, pp. 11-151.

3 Nell'estate del 1945, Levi viene chiamato a Roma come direttore dell'organo di stampa del Partito d'Azione, «L'Italia libera», dopo aver condiviso la direzione della «Nazione del popolo».

4 Levi, *Quaderno a cancelli*, cit., p. 133.