

Book Review: Mara Josi, *Rome, 16 October 1943. History, Memory, Literature*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2023

By Gianluca Cinelli

The Holocaust can be imagined as a prism with a thousand facets, which is how the author of *Rome, 16 October 1943*, Mara Josi, opens her book. See from afar, “the perception of the Holocaust, therefore, is not only supranational but also transnational” (p. 1). Understanding such a broad phenomenon should include observation of its constituting parts, even the smallest or most peripheral. Such short-range focalisation characterises Josi’s book, which takes into account the round-up of the Roman Jews on 16 October 1943. Although the deportation of the Italian Jews went on systematically until 1945 in the areas of Italy occupied by the German armies, the Roman round-up was a particularly shocking event that influenced the perception of the Holocaust in Italy for decades. Josi’s aim, therefore, is to “map changes and developments in Italian cultural memory of the Holocaust over the last eighty years” (p. 2) by focusing on four works: Giacomo Debenedetti’s *16 ottobre 1943* (1944), Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* (1974), Rosetta Loy’s *La parola ebreo* (1997), and Anna Foa’s *Portico d’Ottavia 13* (2013). By considering these case studies, the author provides a reliable observation angle to understand how the memory and cultural legacy of the Roman round-up have evolved.

The method through which this investigation is carried out is expounded in chapter one. Here, Josi begins by defining “collective memory”, which consists of a combination of individual (and biological) memory of experienced events and another form of “broader” and “suprapersonal” memory constituted by symbolic institutions and places, or events and dates that are objects of public remembrance. Thus, this collective memory is described as a continuous interaction of the cognitive and social spheres (p. 12). Besides this form of memory, Josi mentions “cultural memory” as a compound of “memories maintained across generations by social practices and institutions such as media, monuments, and commemorations” (12), which seemingly matches the above-given definition of socially imprinted collective memory. Within this framework, Josi outlines her approach to the analysis of the selected texts by referring to *Memory in Culture* (2011), whose author Astrid Erll claims that the past can be accounted for in five ways, namely the “experiential”, “monumental”, “antagonistic”, “historicising”, and “reflexive” (14). Alongside

Erll's volume, Josi relies on Ann Rigney's *The Dynamics of Remembrance* (2010), from which she borrows the definition of the historical-literary text as a "relay station", a "stabilizer", a "catalyst", an "object of recollection", and a "calibrator" (p. 15). Eventually, Josi completes her methodological setup by referring to Allison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" (p. 15) and Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory", with an emphasis on her claim that prosthetic memory also includes the personal dimension of "re-embodiment in the present of distant individual and family memories" (p. 26). Josi engages with these theories throughout the volume, using in particular Rigney's descriptors to assess the cultural impact and influence of the selected texts (p. 27).

By combining these theoretical perspectives and assuming that culture and memory intersect on the two levels of the individual "or cognitive memory" and of society "or collective memory", Josi also considers some aspects of the theory of emotions to "understand the formative influence that narrative texts have on readers, and therefore the mechanisms behind the process of prosthetic memory and more broadly behind cultural memory" (p. 16). The most relevant implication of this methodological approach is that prosthetic memory includes an empathetic response from the reader "because the emotional experiences that literature transmits are similar to those that readers experience in life" (p. 16). This last statement about the role of emotions in literature deserves consideration for two reasons: first, cognitive poetics and the theory of emotions help us understand the role of emotions in the hermeneutic process of handing down and interpreting testimonies and literary narrations of past events; and second, these theories remind us that literature's connection to reality is much stronger than the postmodern theory wanted us to believe. However, in my opinion, the application of the concept of empathy to literary criticism demands caution. The term "empathy" implies a mechanism of identification with someone else's emotions and feelings that literature does not automatically fulfil. In a literary text, emotions and feelings are expressed and described through words, which means that experiencing emotions in a literary text is an intellectual endeavour. All this demands interpretation, cooperation, and sometimes even translation while, in real life, empathy triggers the emotional response through the immediate recognition of somatic markers and other non-verbal signals (for example, vocalisations, moans or screams). Thus, in my opinion, the kind of emotional connection that the literary text establishes between the reader and the characters (and possibly the autobiographical author in the case of a testimony) can also be described by the word sympathy

(as a way of sharing feelings through the intermediation of conscious thinking). In both cases, when memory is handed down in the form of a literary representation, the emotional response of the reader is mediated and interfered with by language, culture, gender, age, and other factors that might contribute to separating the text from the reader rather than bringing them closer. Thus, the first two chapters introduce the reader to the methodological framework of the book and point out the importance of emotions for the understanding of literary testimonies of the Holocaust.

The second part of the book consists of four chapters of textual analysis. The selected case studies are framed historically in the twentieth-century Italian cultural and literary panorama and within the horizon of their authors' poetics and ideology to provide insight into how they approach, interpret and shape the legacy of the Roman round-up. For example, while Debenedetti entirely focuses on the description of the event almost as a chronicle (p. 63), Morante includes the round-up in her novel by highlighting its symbolic and emotional impact through the perspective of the characters Ida and Ueseppe (p. 86-91). In Loy's case, the round-up is absorbed within the autobiographical character's childhood memory through the mediation of history books and testimonies (p. 103). Eventually, in Foa's novel, the round-up becomes the object of an intimate and intellectualised exercise in micro-history "through a combination of the subjective, historicism, and scientific methods of historiography" (130).

At the end of each chapter, Josi concludes her analysis by checking how the work responds to Rigney's categories, thus explaining the extent to which the selected texts contributed to shaping the cultural legacy of the Roman round-up in Italy. By arguing how the texts work as "relay stations", "stabilizers", "catalysts", "objects of recollection", and "calibrators" of cultural memory, the author condenses in this recognition a relevant part of her critical assessment. Such an approach reminded me of the classical hermeneutic idea of the "consciousness of the history of effects". Through the expression *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, Hans-Georg Gadamer conveys the idea that each act of interpretation implies the interpreter's awareness of their historical perspective, which is influenced by the tradition and, in turn, influences their understanding of the tradition itself, in a circle that becomes virtuous if the interpreter approaches the text with full awareness of these "historical effects". Thus, Josi suggests that our dialogue with the past is intermediated by factors that readers must consider critically, being aware of their cultural-historical perspectives.

By considering how the selected works engage with Italian history and cultural memory, Josi adds a paving slab to the critical understanding of the multifaceted prism of the Holocaust narratives. To such an end, the author considers the contributions of cinema, TV and theatre as forms of “popular engagement” (p. 151). In the Conclusion and Appendix of her book, Josi synthetically accounts for the films, documentaries, TV series and theatrical performances that have engaged with the history and memory of the Roman round-up between 1961 and 2021.

Particular relevance in the book assumes the role of emotions in handing down history and memory. Scholars have finally recognised that emotions play a role in literary communication that can no longer be underestimated or disregarded by criticism. Emotions permeate our lives and play a pivotal role in decision-making, calculation and rational planning. They also play a role in negotiating our relationship with the past in negotiating our relationship with the past, especially when this past is traumatic and controversial, such as the legacies of the World Wars and the Holocaust, and demand not only analysis but also understanding, empathy, and compassion. For this reason, Josi’s book is welcome in both Italian Studies and Holocaust Studies because it explores the fertile border where the Humanities meet the cognitive theories. Such encounter blends the cultural approach to literary texts with a bottom-up method that rigorously contextualises the emotions and the cognitive mechanisms of remembering, empathy, and sympathy. Therefore, such approaches to literary criticism must be encouraged and pursued with perseverance.