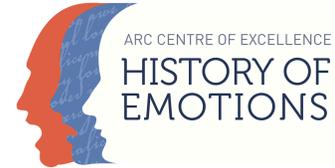




Italian Studies



Dante at Auschwitz: the role of poetry in our world

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1. Primo Levi, *Shemà*, 10 Jan. 1946

Voi che vivete sicuri
Nelle vostre tiepide case
Voi che trovate tornando a sera
Il cibo caldo e visi amici:

**Considerate se questo è un uomo
Che lavora nel fango
Che non conosce pace
Che lotta per mezzo pane
Che muore per un sì o per un no.**

**Considerate se questa è una donna,
Senza capelli e senza nome
Senza più forza di ricordare
Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
Come una rana d'inverno.**

*Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.*

*Consider if this is a woman
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.*

(Translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann)

2. G. Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, 1971

The camp embodies, often down to minutiae, the images and chronicles of Hell in European art and thought from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries...

It is in the fantasies of the infernal, as they literally haunt Western sensibility, that we find the technology of pain without meaning, of bestiality without end, of gratuitous terror...

The literature of the camps is extensive. But nothing in it equals the fullness of Dante's observations...

The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century, wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are *Hell made immanent*. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface. They are the deliberate enactment of a long, precise imagining. Because it imagined more fully than any other text, because it argued the centrality of Hell in the Western order, the *Commedia* remains our literal guidebook – to the flames, to the ice fields, to the meat hooks.

3. Primo Levi: *Se questo è un uomo. (Il canto di Ulisse)*

Here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

**Consider your origin:
you were not made to live like beasts,
but to pursue virtue and knowledge. (Inf. 26, 118-20)**

[Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza]

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.

4. Primo Levi: *Se questo è un uomo. (Il canto di Ulisse)*

**‘And three times round she went in roaring smother
With all the waters; at the fourth the poop
Rose, and the prow went down, as pleased Another.’ (Inf. 26, 139–41)**

I keep Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this “**as pleased Another**” before it is too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, but still more, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today.

5. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (1986), transl. 1989

Culture was useful to me. Not always, at times perhaps by subterranean and unforeseen paths, but it served me well and perhaps it has saved me. After forty years I am reading in SQ the chapter entitled *Il canto di Ulisse*. [...] Well, where I wrote “I would give today’s soup to know how to join “the like on any day” to the ending’, I had neither lied nor exaggerated. I would really have given bread and soup, that is, blood, to save from nothingness those memories which today with the sure support of printed paper I can refresh whenever I wish and gratis, and which therefore seem of little value.

Then and there they had great value. They made it possible for me to reestablish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity. They convinced me that my mind, although besieged by everyday necessities, had not ceased to function. They elevated me in my own eyes and those of my interlocutor. They granted me a respite, ephemeral but not hebetudinous, in fact liberating and differentiating: in short, a way to find myself.

6. Primo Levi, from Rita Sodi, *Intervista con Primo Levi*, 1987

What, as a fervent Catholic, Dante felt towards the damned, who have lost all right of appeal and are made to suffer, was perhaps analogous to the attitude that the Nazi took towards the Jews: they felt that the Jews had to be made to suffer the greatest suffering possible.

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For a full version of this paper see:

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