

Introduction

“A Jewish woman”. This is how Hannah Arendt answered the question “who are you?”, a question posed to her daily during the ‘dark times’, years of anguish, oppression, anti-Semitism, the years of racial laws, of exile, persecution, the years of the World War, the years of massacre. ‘Dark times’, times of catastrophe, times of silence. Yet this is how she wished to define herself ‘after’, the ‘after’ of a renewed life, in 1959 to be precise, as she declared at the conference titled *On Humanity in Dark Times. Thoughts about Lessing*, which was held on the occasion of the first public recognition of her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), when the city of Hamburg awarded her the Lessing prize.

“A Jewish woman”. With this answer and self-definition, Arendt meant to underline her belonging to the huge number of Jews who were forced out of Germany in 1933. She brought into consideration the reality of persecution; she certainly intended to refer to a historically specific reality, but above all she meant to say, as she asserted at the conference, something extremely difficult to understand in times of vilification and persecution: “one can resist only”, she wrote, “in terms of the identity that is under attack. Those who reject such identification on the part of a hostile world may feel wonderfully superior to the world, but their superiority is then truly no longer of this world; it is the superiority of a more or less well-equipped cloud-cuckoo-land” (Hannah Arendt, *On Humanity in Dark Times. Thoughts about Lessing*, in Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, New York 1968, 18). The answer “a Jewish woman” therefore meant an acceptance of that imposed identity, in order to re-define it starting from this very imposition, impossible and yet real; it also meant confronting history, the present, others, but above all herself: for her, it meant referring to her life experience, to the significant events of her existence and to the need to recount them; it referred, to sum up, to her experience as a woman and a Jewish intellectual in the twentieth century.

Arendt’s perspective on this condition – a situation and an imposition – of being, being perceived, and being made “a Jewish woman”, will be used hereafter as the heuristic question that provides the context to look at

a sample of Jewish women who, as philosophers and thinkers, articulated particular approaches to addressing the Shoah. The issue sets itself the task of understanding and ‘defining’ the challenge that the Shoah poses from the angle of gender differences, following the different paths, multifaceted and individual, both philosophical and poetic, of these Jewish women, specifically of this “feminine Judaism”. In other words, the issue aims to show how the Jewish roots of some of the last century’s Jewish women thinkers and writers have characterised not only their lives and destinies during those ‘dark times’ or ‘after’, but how they marked their intellectual journeys and their writing in often radically different ways. At the same time, the issue sets out to highlight certain women authors based on their differences, their particular thinking, intuition, and sensibility, trying to understand how the condition of being women guided them in their reflections and in their life choices, and in their outspoken affiliation to Judaism.

Whether we consider philosophers as famous as Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) or less well-known thinkers such as Eliane Amado Levi-Valensi (1919–2006) right up to contemporary examples, or even poets such as Nelly Sachs (1881–1970) – and the list could be a lot longer – it can be said that, as women and Jews, they all had to confront, necessarily, their Jewish heritage with their femininity. In particular, they had to re-think, re-formulate, re-define Judaism through a quintessentially feminine sensitivity, but above all else they had to confront themselves – in their life and work (work which was fed by life itself) with history, making it the subject of their actions, thoughts, suffering and writing.

The choice of featuring both philosophers and writers (and particularly a poet) together in one issue is motivated by my conviction that there is a need for an unbreakable pairing of understanding and recounting: for understanding as recounting – life, history, Judaism – and for recounting as understanding. Understanding by itself, in an epistemological sense, appears to be insufficient and requires a ‘narration’ on a much broader scale that encompasses poetry (literature, essentially) because, as Arendt said at the aforementioned conference, “the narration of a story has achieved permanence and persistence” and only in this way can it attain “its place in the world, where it will survive us” (Arendt, 22).

Understanding and ‘narration’, understanding and ‘poetry’, if you want, one the counter melody of the other, not so much to recount the private,

intimate, personal and public histories of these Jewish female intellectuals, but to travel, thanks to them and their individuality, the peculiarities of their conjectures and their verses, as with the interweaving of thoughts and words, through a century built on ruins; but also, in particular, to retrace and identify common roots – that is, Judaism – even though those, too, were destroyed and subsequently re-born from their own ashes. Finally, to re-discover them, and to “re-write” them from a very specific point of view, perhaps one seldom heard, such as the one of women.

It is therefore about looking at some of the European intellectuals – but the choice could have been much wider – who demonstrated through their work particular sensitivity towards the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, who tried to think about Judaism starting from this hiatus in history. The foremost aim is to ask these Jewish women and thinkers who posed themselves philosophical conundrums – even if not exclusively by means of philosophical conceptuality, such as for instance Nelly Sachs – about Judaism after the Shoah. What happened to Judaism after this event? How did they see Israel’s role and that of the Jewish people take shape? On the other hand, what happened to philosophy, to its “structures”, and to its “language”? Can philosophical thought in general and Jewish thought meet, intertwine once again? If so, how? Finally, why did a particular gender sensitivity drive these women towards these questions in particular?

It will be interesting to consider the different positions of one of the most prominent Jewish women and philosophers such as Arendt and those of an almost unknown status such as Levi-Valensi and see how they each tackled, although in very different and sometimes diametrically opposite ways, the question of Judaism and of its potential renewal. At the same time, it won’t be pointless to give way to the philosophical reflections of a poet who, not less than the very famous Paul Celan, made the Holocaust and Judaism the pivot of her work, as did Sachs, even though she remains to this day a voice less prominent and celebrated. Might it not be forced to insist on finding analogies between these women, come what may, or to suggest easy, sometimes impossible, comparisons and parallels between their thoughts and their writings, such as couldn’t but produce superficial results. So why should we read them together?

Because these Jewish women – thinkers, philosophers or writers – just as many others it wasn’t possible to include in these pages, made an original and essential contribution to the thought of our century and on the key themes that our philosophical tradition could not/would not take on

adequately; because, in a way, they constitute *another* tradition, *another* Jewish thought, that of women, far from feminist intransigencies and temptations, and equally distant from religious intolerance and rigidity, *another tradition* in its most authentic sense of the term (from the Latin *traditio, tradere*); these women *transmit* to us a legacy made up of their ideas, their writings and their lives, of their different lifestyles and styles of writing, a legacy which is nevertheless made up of a running thread which unites them, which holds them together. It is therefore through our outlook that we can follow them and come close to them, respecting their peculiarities; it is through our own feminine outlook, mine in this case, and of the several female writers and one male writer who have been given the job of reading and interpreting them, that we can follow this running thread or, if you will, the interpretative key proposed here, with the aim of listening to the legacy these intellectuals have left us, future readers, men and women alike.

What legacy, therefore? “The intelligence of emotions”, of course, to use the subtitle of a book by Martha C. Nussbaum (*Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge 2001), to support the notion that emotions can be an inherent part of philosophical reasoning and that they cannot, in any way, stay on the outside of its framework; to say that thought, generally supported or put into motion by a concept and tending towards universality, needs to feed on experience, life, does not mean wanting by so doing to fall into irrationality or sentimentality. It is not about, for these authors, a case of rehabilitating emotions to the detriment of reason. On the contrary, reason, rational mind and theoretical reason are not undermined in their rigour and characteristics, but rather, to cold conjecture we add, through writing and thought, a vibration – quintessentially feminine – a sensitivity, an intelligence that comes from emotions, from a *legacy of feeling*, from sentiments, compassion, anger and so on, in other words from that sphere which usually, in western philosophical tradition, has been prevented from coming into contact with reflection. It goes without saying that “the intelligence of emotions” inhabits first the realm of the poetic and, as mentioned already, that the choice to include in the same issue both female philosophers and poets is justified because of that “intelligence” which made a philosopher such as Catherine Chalièr suggest an intense philosophical reflection, almost a meditation, on the poetry of Nelly Sachs. But this idea of the “intelligence of emotions”, I

will say this once again, is not an attempt to rehabilitate emotions in order to follow the temptations of an inner life or to seek refuge in the sphere of sentiments. The authors studied here, especially Arendt and Levi-Valensi, are extremely careful, albeit in their own different ways, in their attitude towards collective emotive experiences. They ascribed to them a fundamental role in the mechanisms of power and violence and in the unleashing of anti-Semitism; at the same time, they are ready to denounce, in the single individual, coldness and lack of imagination whenever they present themselves, identifying within them the first beginnings of the “banality of evil”, as Arendt’s now classic *Eichmann in Jerusalem, a Report on the Banality of Evil*, to which Michal Ben-Naftali dedicates her examination focusing on Arendt’s use of language, suggests, and Levi-Valensi’s writings show as David Taieb points out.

Furthermore, these individuals’ legacy is inscribed, as was said at the beginning of this introduction, in a certain *passion* for history, both in the passive and active sense of the term *passion*: a precise historical reality – the Shoah – was withstood, lived on one’s own skin (or on that of those closest to one), was *suffered*, but from this ‘*passion*’ a more *active passion* emerged at the same time, one determined by events, of course, and which nevertheless pushed these authors to put at the centre of their work that very historical reality, or to start from there, as the subject of their thinking and their writing. This reality induced them to concentrate on what now has nothing to do with either pure intellectual speculation or with the history of ideas, on a living ‘subject’, one that burns, that hurts, and which turns to ashes, in the words of Adorno, “every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind’s objectification”. (Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London 1973, 365). Living among the ruins of history or at the beginning of new constructions being undertaken, these women wanted to maintain a constant link with reality and especially *that* reality: very simply, they tried to understand how the values of reason, humanity, truth, peace, freedom and progress could have been overturned into their opposite, letting (western) civilisation sink into a profound, extremely sophisticated form of modern barbarity.

In conclusion, these authors offer us a very unusual look, an awareness, a clarity, that is entirely feminine. But their originality lies, I think, in referring themselves to a thought on which life itself is based: a thought made of life and about life, nourished not only by lived experience but in which experience itself, life, like history and Judaism, is at the centre.

Courage, independence, strength also in fragility, self-belief and belief in their work, radicalness, authenticity are only some of the traits which unite them and which today can help us in *another* – different – understanding of the world and ourselves, and above all which teach us *another* way of thinking, one on which their lives depended, and on which our lives still depend.

Orietta Ombrosi