

The Watch

L'Orologio

Presented by: Silvia Valentini

As the third book by the Italian painter and writer Carlo Levi (1902-1975) after the famous *Christ stopped in Eboli* (1945) and the essay *Fear of Freedom* (1946), *The Watch* (1950) reconstructs the atmosphere of a very special moment in Italian history: the months immediately following the end of the Second World War in autumn 1945. The most important historical event that remains in the background of the narrative is the defeat of the government led by Ferruccio Parri, which had embodied the values of the Resistance to Nazism and Fascism and thus, in its short duration (June - December 1945), represented a break with pre-fascist and fascist Italy. Since the fall of this short-lived government meant, in the eyes of both Levi and Parri, the restoration of the old pre-fascist institutions and the preservation of those who had collaborated with fascism in the public service, the great political question that runs through the whole book is that of *continuity*. In other words: How do we deal with the past? Was Fascism and the Resistance against it just a parenthesis after which everything will be as it was before, as if nothing had happened?

The book is set in Rome in the autumn of 1945 and is written in the first person. At the beginning of the narrative, the narrator's watch, a former gift from his father, falls down and breaks. From this moment on, as if the breaking of the object symbolically entails the abolition of time, we follow the narrator as he strolls through post-war Rome like a modern-day flâneur – from the office of the newspaper he runs to the Ministry of the Interior, from the hustle and bustle of the black market in the streets of the city centre to the intimate atmosphere of the Roman osterias, until a family emergency takes him to the city of Naples at the end of the book. Like all other books by Carlo Levi, *The Watch* is also an autobiographical book. In the summer of 1945, Levi had actually left Florence – where he had lived since 1942 and where, as a Jew, he had hidden from Nazi persecution – to move to Rome and take over the magazine *L'Italia libera* ("Free Italy"), the daily newspaper of the Action Party. The Action Party ("Partito d'Azione") was a centre-left anti-fascist party founded in 1942 which, together with the Italian Communist Party, played a leading role in the Italian Resistance after the armistice of 8 September 1943 until the end of the war. The leader of the party was Ferruccio Parri, who, as already mentioned, also became the leader of the first Italian government formed immediately after the end of the war, from June to December 1945. In this sense, Parri's resignation speech at the Ministry of the Interior – which historically took place on 24 November 1945 and to which Levi dedicates an entire chapter of his book – becomes the symbol of the defeat of the left and the interruption of that authentically revolutionary spirit that had begun with the Italian Resistance (defined in the book as the only real revolution Italy ever had) (Levi 1989, 170). Just as the Restoration represented an attempt to return to the Ancien Régime before the French Revolution, as if it had never taken place, so the successful attempt of the conservative parties, both Liberal and Christian Democrat, to overthrow the Parri government (one of the key points was the *epurazione* - *purge* - that is the necessity to remove from the state those employees

who had collaborated with fascism) represented, in the eyes of Levi and Parri, an attempt to return to the old liberal state that preceded Fascism and the revolution embodied by the Italian Resistance.

Since its publication, the political dimension of *The Watch* was immediately recognised by critics. The problem with the reception of this book was rather that for a long time (from its publication in 1950 until the beginning of the 21st century, when a new generation of scholars rediscovered it), it was only read as a political or neo-realist novel, whereas the political dimension of the book is also inextricably interwoven with a major philosophical theme that is already announced and anticipated in the title: reflection on time. Indeed, the breaking of the watch at the beginning of the book seems to represent not only the narrator's attempt to rediscover his own individual time against the slavery of collective, mechanical time represented by the clock (here Levi seems to have in mind the famous distinction between internal and external time theorised by the French philosopher Henri Bergson); but also the interruption of that revolutionary period that began with the Resistance, which seemed to promise a change of course and which is now instead threatened by the anti-progressive return to the past, as if the clock of history had begun to turn backwards. The reconstruction of a historical moment of transition thus gives Levi the opportunity to write a novel that is a philosophical and anthropological meditation on time.

And yet, if someone had asked Levi whether his book was a "political novel", he would probably have answered "no". Not so much because of the adjective *political* (*The Watch* is certainly a *political* book, even if, as we have just seen, it is not only that), but above all because of the second term in the definition, the word *novel*. On one of the book's pages, the reflection on the need to come to terms with the past leads to another big question: the issue of the impossibility of writing novels after Auschwitz. "What kind of novels do you want after Auschwitz and Buchenwald?" asks one of the characters (Levi 1989, 57), anticipating the famous reflection that the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno will develop in his essay *Negative Dialectics* (1966). The idea underlying this reflection is that the weight of the reality of Auschwitz makes it impossible to accept a kind of literature that consists of pure invention. Although *The Watch* – which interweaves reality and fiction – could certainly be defined as an autobiographical novel from a literary point of view, Levi therefore takes a stand against the genre of the novel in a political sense: as an act of affirmation of truth over falsification.

In the post-war period, the spectre of Nazi-fascism haunts Levi's book both through the theme of continuity (we could say: the historical absence of an Italian version of the Nuremberg trials), with the fascists remaining in society and the recurring possibility of the return of new fascisms; and through the interpretation of the Shoah as a point of no return, which post-war intellectuals must confront. Politics and literature go hand in hand, because literature itself becomes an instrument for making politics. In this sense, it is legitimate to see the political dimension of the book not only in the content that it develops, but also in the narrative decisions. The temporal extension and the voluntary absence of an actual plot, as in traditional novels, allow the narrator to pause with everyday people and give them a voice. Franco Baldasso writes that Levi "gave voice to the people excluded from his narrative by focussing on the politically inexpressible, which only literature could express" (2022, 170). And it is precisely this contact with concrete people and concrete things (as opposed to the abstractness of empty words, the criticism of which is a leitmotif of the book) that is the act of politics and the act of love that Levi performs with his book.

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