

BOOK REVIEW

Rome, 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature

by Mara Josi, Cambridge, UK, Legenda Modern Humanities
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Rome, 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature starts with a mental exercise: Mara Josi invites readers to perceive the Holocaust through an imaginary prism. In doing so, we are encouraged to consider how a broad, supranational perspective on the Holocaust encompasses numerous smaller-scale facets, including lesser-studied national and local episodes. One such local event is the round-up of the Jews in Rome on Saturday 16 October 1943, when 1,259 persons were arrested by German occupiers and most were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau from the Tiburtina railway station two days later. The ways cultural memory of this local episode in history has developed remain understudied; research on representations of the Holocaust in Italian literature has predominantly focused on testimonies of the extermination camps while, more broadly, Italy is still considered a marginal case in Holocaust Studies. Josi's monograph responds to this lacuna by investigating how cultural memory of the Roman round-up has been co-constituted, elaborated, and transmitted through four literary texts: Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943*, Elsa Morante's *La Storia*, Rosetta Loy's *La parola ebreo*, and Anna Foa's *Portico d'Ottavia 13*.

Josi successfully manages the metaphorical prism as she zooms in on personal memories and single modes of representation, while also considering a broad perception of Holocaust memory in Italy. The four selected texts are each collocated within different historical and memorial contexts and have all offered critical perspectives on dominant interpretations of the Holocaust in Italy. Debenedetti reports on the round-up in 1944 while the war was still ongoing, and the Roman episode was largely unknown; Morante narrates the round-up in 1974, when representations of the Holocaust focused on the extermination camps; Loy reflects on responsibility regarding the Roman round-up in the 1990s, when far-right politics forged new, often revisionist interpretations of the Holocaust; Foa's book marks the seventieth anniversary of the round-up in a period characterised by heightened interest in the Holocaust in Italy.

The corpus is tested against a theoretical framework that is meticulously set up in the first part of the book and combines different approaches in Cultural Memory Studies to explore the contribution of literature to constructing cultural memory of the Roman round-up. Cultural memory is perceived as 'a product of personal memories which are told in different media' (p. 3), so Josi first considers the four works in relation to the authors and their personal memories of, and connection to, the Roman round-up.

While Debenedetti and Morante offer representations based on first-hand experiences, Loy's and Foa's works are considered postmemory narratives. Josi then analyses how the authors relate to the historical subject of their works through the modes of writing about the past that Astrid Erll proposed in *Memory in Culture*. These modes – 'experiential', 'monumental', 'antagonistic', 'historicising', and 'reflexive' – describe how literature adopts various attitudes and mnemonic strategies when representing and transmitting the past. As a final step in her examination of the cultural memory of the Roman round-up, Josi examines how the texts enact Ann Rigney's five categories of interaction between history, literature and cultural memory. In this light, Josi assesses whether the texts can be considered 'relay stations', 'stabilisers', 'catalysts', 'objects of recollection' and 'calibrators'.

As part of the analysis of the relation between the authors, the texts, the historical subject of their writing and the construction of cultural memory, Josi also considers how the four texts transmit memories of the Roman round-up to readers. To do so, she integrates theories of cultural memory with theories of emotion, which help investigate 'the formative influence of narrative texts on individuals' (p. 16). One could bring up that the 'reader' remains an abstract concept deprived of its cultural and historical background, but Josi addresses this objection by proposing to study literary strategies that provoke emotional involvement and therefore may contribute to creating what Alison Landsberg terms 'prosthetic memories', which shape the reader's knowledge of, and engagement with, the history of the Roman round-up.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the four case studies. Two instances in the analysis stand out. First, Josi underlines the continuing impact of literary texts on cultural memory by tracing literary strategies from Debenedetti's first representation of 16 October that resonate in successive works, such as the attention to auditory elements in Morante's work and the polyphonic nature of testimony in the work of Foa. Josi also underscores some elements that provoke emotional involvement in Debenedetti's work, which have nevertheless been absent from later representations – particularly the interweaving of linear and biblical time, and the attention to Jewish ritual and tradition (p. 57). With these observations, Josi offers a particularly detailed examination of the dynamics that, over time, have contributed to a shared and shareable cultural memory of the Roman round-up in Italy. Second, the chapter on Foa's *Portico d'Ottavia 13* includes an analysis of the adaptation of this text into an illustrated children's version. The fairytale elements in this version not only create engagement and empathy in young readers, but also 'offer a challenge to the dominant realist, documentary mode of other testimonies' (p. 145). With this analysis, Josi thoughtfully contributes to debates on the significance of children's literature in the construction of cultural memory of the Holocaust.

At a few different points in the volume, the application of the theoretical framework to the selected texts seems somewhat schematical and leaves little space to elaborate contrasts and tensions. One example of this is the stretching of Hirsch's category of postmemory to include Rosetta Loy, who experienced the Roman round-up as a child and, being Catholic, as an outsider. While this choice may be defended, the questions that Loy's text raises regarding the transmission of memory by contemporaries who did not experience the Holocaust directly, but do narrate personal memories related to it, remain largely implicit. Such examples that challenge existing categories may be addressed in Josi's current research project on texts written by individuals who spent the wartime in hiding. In this sense, Josi's *Rome, 16 October 1943* offers a solid theoretical base for further studies and presents a rich analysis of a well-chosen corpus, constituting a welcome addition to the growing number of studies that address the memory of the Holocaust in Italy.