

# *To write is bread. The function of writing for Edith Bruck*<sup>\*</sup>

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*Abstract.* The article proposes a transversal reading of the narrative work of an Italian narrator, Edith Bruck (pseudonym of Edith Steinschreiber), a Hungarian Jewish woman who survived Nazi barbarity. Examining some novels published between 1959 and 2009, it questions the function of the writing in the process of the development of the trauma. More precisely, it singles out the three deep routes that motivate the narration in the individual need to give vent to one's feelings (therapy), in the need to weigh heavily in society (tradition) and in the necessity of oblivion (truce). Focussing the attention on these aspects, the course is outlined, human and intellectual, of a woman who has made from words the main means of elaboration of a mourning that is individual and collective.

*Key words:* Shoah, writing, atonement.

## Introduction

The idea of presenting the narrative work of Edith Bruck centring the reflection of the function of the writing allows the following of a story of the woman and of the testimony without putting in the shade the expressive, stylistic and formal quality of the literary testimony.

First of all, it is useful to recall some biographic notes. Born into a poor Jewish family in a small town in Hungary on the border with Ukraine, Edith Bruck, at twelve years of age, was deported to Auschwitz. She was also involved in the dramatic transfer which signalled the final phase of the extermination and transferred to the Lager of Kaufering, Landsberg, Dachau, Christianstadt and Bergen Belsen, where she was liberated on 15 April 1945 together with a sister with whom she had shared the whole concentration camp experience. From the end of the war her life is a journey tormented by the search for a country that would accept her; first of all obliged to move between Hungary and Czechoslovakia and in 1948 to emigrate to Israel. But the biblical vision of the Promised Land which her mother described as “a fairy tale land [...], the land of milk and honey” (Bruck, 2009, p. 34), turned out to be in reality a country of war:

When I arrived it was another disappointment [...]. The country was just born and needed all the force, of armed men and women to defend the land where bullets flew [...]. Life was so fully complicated and difficult that I didn't want to stay...

To leave was a trauma that still today I have not recovered from, a deep wound because that was the country of my dreams, it was *my* land where however I was not able to insert myself<sup>1</sup>.

It being impossible to recognise herself in a society which could not connect with her immediate need for peace, Edith Bruck took to the road. In 1954 she arrived in Italy and she remained settled in Rome. As she has confided with simplicity in a long interview, “I liked the atmosphere and the

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<sup>\*</sup> This essay takes up and goes deeper into some subjects which in the course of my studies, I had the chance to confront (cf. Guida, 2007, pp. 187-204; *Ib.* 2011, pp. 141-159 and *Ib.* 2012). The reflections expressed here are the result of a formation route taken under the guidance of Leonardo Rapone and made possible thanks to the support of Edith Bruck and Nelo Risi. For the check of the text and the attention given to my work I also thank Tommaso Dell'Era.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Edith Bruck, in Andreoli, I & Ciuffi, F. (2012). Regarding the transcription of the interview it must be noticed that this operation is a translation from oral to written, with the consequence and inevitable loss of some peculiarities expressed in the oral version. Wherever possible I have adhered to the recorded document, trying to simplify the reading making internal assemblies and avoiding in the text repetition and conversation left in suspense, with the exception of the cases in which the fragmentation was shown to be significant.

street construction workers who offered you bread and tomato”<sup>2</sup>, it is the warmth that she feels in an Italy so different from that of today that made her realize that she had arrived home:

It was the right place to begin again, but from where? I had lost everything: I had lost my mother, my father, my brother... I didn't know what else to do with my life and I began to write because of an interior need<sup>3</sup>.

More exactly, the first writings of Bruck date back to the period immediately after the liberation when the girl, under an extreme need to express herself, wrote her notes (the *incipit* of an autobiographical account and verses) in a notebook but she lost it during the escape from Czechoslovakia. On arrival to Italy, she takes up the themes with which she had worked, but she abandons the Hungarian language and chooses to write in Italian. A new language, a language with no past, a language that does not have the same evocative power as her mother tongue and because of this, allows the necessary detachment to the narrative<sup>4</sup>. Protected by the filter of a sound of a language recently discovered, and therefore new and neutral, Edith Bruck transposes on paper her real pain, trying on paper the means of communication denied and the place to rebuild herself.

### **The writing in the process of development of the trauma**

Writing for me is bread. Writing for me is a moral duty and at the same time a necessity that is almost physical [...]. When I began I did not have the consciousness of having to testify what I had seen, I simply had the need to release the poison that I had inside me [...]. With time, I have understood that what had happened to me did not refer only to me but to mankind in general and so I began to write for me but also for others<sup>5</sup>.

Alone in a foreign land, Edith Bruck reacts to the wounds provoked by the experience, entrusting to the writing the task of controlling the events and to put in order a life which she herself has declared “was no longer possible”<sup>6</sup>. The writing exercise is the means through which it follows an individual course of elaboration whose function is that of giving significance of existence, to defend oneself against the distress that the past continues to procure. In this sense writing is an *atonement*<sup>7</sup>.

Nelo Risi, among the more attentive and profound experts of the writer, remembers her as a very young person intent on writing “with a suitcase on the knees, serious and diligent like a child who beautifully recopies her theme from an old notebook” (Risi, 1974, p. 6). The poet adds, “that suitcase knew of temporary things as with all her life as a forced or involuntary traveller continually searching for a definite solution” (*ibid.*). Bruck, “spreading unnumbered pages on the floor of the studio” (*ibid.*), begins the drafting of the first novel, a biography in which she covers her real existence with the fury of an injured creature “like ridding oneself of a matter which is too painful” (*ibid.*). Highly representative in this context is the description of the arrival at Auschwitz, that the author introduces through a dry prose and a syntactical structure that often turns into direct speech. The scene is chaotic, the selection immediate and approximate: the occasion, the need of labour or the whim of an official decides more than any other criteria. To choose for Edith Bruck, selected for immediate death and torn from the arms of the mother, is a soldier taking pity on the little blonde girl with light-coloured eyes who seemed German.

That which happened on the arrival platform of Auschwitz is a sudden and violent separation that represents for the surviving daughter a central value for all her life:

A line of SS was to the right, another line was to the left and in the middle other Germans who divided us shouting and pushing us. -Right, left, right, left!-. I didn't know then that the left meant the crematorium and the right forced labour.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>4</sup> For more details about the linguistic experimentation in the Bruckian poetry, cf. Guida, 2007, pp.190-193.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with E. Bruck, in Andreoli, I & Ciuffi, F. (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Interview given to me by E. Bruck, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ferrari, 1994.

To the right the youngsters, to the left the aged and the children, the useless ones. They threw me to the left with my mother [...]. I clutched the arm of mother with all my strength. Unexpectedly I felt that a soldier was pushing me to the right and he was almost whispering: -Right, right! - I refused. My mother fell to her knees and spoke in German to the soldier. -Leave me with my little baby, leave her with me, don't take her away!- she said. But the soldier pushed her away with the rifle and with the force of blows he forced me to go to the right. (Bruck, 1959, p. 25)

The work, published in 1959 with the allegoric title *Chi ti ama così* ["Who loves you like this"], announces the fundamental assumptions of literature which aims to restore the weight of experience through a retrospective look focussed on those "daily things that have history inside"<sup>8</sup>. Interlacing the flow of the conscience present at the recall of memory, Edith Bruck reconstructs her past according to a play of association; and in the succession of images which are attentive to the details, her childhood comes back in every one of its aspects. "That which strikes you", said Cesare Zavattini at the beginning of the 1980's, "is the naturalness of the style with which Edith succeeds in simplifying memories so strong and dramatic"<sup>9</sup>. "Her literature", concluded one of the most authoritative voices in the Italian Neorealismo, "is like the cinema that I love", because "it has a communication of lyric nature and one that continues between the lines that is critical of society"<sup>10</sup>. Here we are in front of an aspect which deserves to be evidenced so that the role of the witness does not go beyond that of the writer. The good thing about the testimony in fact is really the literary quality of the narration because the stronger that the evocative power is, that much higher is the possibility that the telling will impact in the memory of whoever reads it<sup>11</sup>.

To hand on the experience, Edith Bruck builds the real work on the communicative transparency but also, and we will return to this point, on the union between real and imaginary that permits the dissolving of the reality, of working on it, of putting it in perspective and of proposing in a formula capable of transmitting, at least in part, the truth of the testimony. At the same time, the work on the words and on the images permit the filtering of the experience and because of this to distance it. The same Primo Levi, in the article *Perché si scrive* ["Why does one write"], suggests the importance of the literary construction in the process of elaboration of the trauma:

I have no objection to he who writes while pushed by tension, I wish he will also be able to liberate himself in this way, as has happened to me in the years of long ago. However I ask him that he forces himself to filter his anguish, not to fling it at someone as it is, rough and raw: otherwise he risks to contaminate others without distancing himself from the anguish. (Levi, 1985, pp. 33-34)

In the work of Edith Bruck, and more in general in the literature, the atonement comes from the distancing, together with a relationship of continuity with the past and above all it comes from the force and the possibility of transforming in artistic form that complicated interlacing, and memories and perception that live in the depth of the mind. This mechanism is very clear in the novel *Lettera alla madre* [Letter to my mother], a book that merits particular attention because it is both a real journey and an interior journey. It researches the lost time and confession to face what is to come, also private letters and messages for posterity.

The work is composed of two separate parts: different in their form (first a letter, next a story) and in the contents (in one part a dialogue *in absentia* and on the other the story of a journey). The first section, which gives the title to the novel, tells of the pain of a daughter, by now an adult, who tries an extreme dialogue but doesn't know how to begin:

How many times I've started to write to you! A hundred, a thousand? I don't know. I only know I wrote and threw away the pages one after another, the way you do when you begin a letter to someone you deeply love and aren't sure you're loved back.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with C. Zavattini, in B. Révész Laszlo, *A Látogatás*, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>11</sup> For the importance of the *mimesis* of the Bruckian literature cf. Guida, 2011. For an approach to the debate on Shoah and fiction cf. Coquio's work 2006. The consideration of authors like Kerstész, 2007 and Semprùn, 1994 are fundamental.

I don't even have a clear idea of what I'm going to say to you, it's a mystery even to me. It's something that leaves neither of us in peace. What's certain, the only thing that's certain, is that there is something suspended between us, maybe only infinite silence or a distance that can't be bridged. The brief time we had together is an indissoluble bond but also painfully, often unbearably, extraneous. (Bruck, 2006, p. 3)

Pushed by the strong need to come to terms with an insuperable mourning, Edith Bruck commits to writing the task of an impossible confrontation, but necessary so as not to lose their own origin:

Oh forgive me, Mama, a thousand times, forgive me. You are one of the holy dead, an untouchable martyr - true, but it's also true that you're my mother. And I've the right to tell my mother everything. In fact, I have to. [...] if I don't talk to you, say your name, fight with you, I forget you, and if I don't write about you, I'll let you be forgotten. And if I forget you, I forget myself. As long as I exist, you do too. (Bruck, 2006, p. 60)

The *Letter* represents the pain of a surviving daughter who on arrival in the Lager was not able to protect her mother<sup>12</sup> and who now tries to achieve the recognition of her real innocence and claim the right to be loved for what she is. But this novel is also the place in which the individual mourning passes inexorably through the collective one in an interlacing of questions that remain unresolved. In fact the remembrance does not take up all the space of the narration but consists of the plot which causes a reflection on the condition of the «saved»<sup>13</sup> and on the impossibility of a religious vision of the world *after* Auschwitz. This is an aspect not to be undervalued, that shows well the complexity of an individual process of elaboration that goes through the social recognition of the horror. The novel opens up a testimony in which the need of atonement and of self-analysis mixed with the obligation of an individual who questions herself about the nature of man and on the always possible violence in a world where not even death has value, because “yesterday's dead haven't redeemed our right to be alive” (Bruck, 2006, p. 84).

The second part instead opens a window on a horizon (apparently) different: a narration in first person which starts with the escape of the protagonist, Katia, from the apathy of the present time. The very title of the short story, *Traces*, suggests the halfway stage of a journey undertaken in search of herself, therefore of her real past, because it is necessary to return in order to go forward<sup>14</sup>. The existential condition of the woman who decides to confront herself returning to the Lager where she was a prisoner is the excuse that the author uses to reflect on her own life and, once again, to recover and keep the images and the memory of the person most dear, defending her from oblivion:

I press my palms to my eyes and think again of my mother in her ornate holiday dress with a white jabot under her chin. I've always seen her - or better, remembered her - wearing that good dress, the dress for grand occasions, funerals and marriages, or the day of Yom Kippur in the synagogue. Maybe memory is conscience. The mind cancels or represses what it deems unnecessary or useless to remember. Even while denying it to myself, I do nothing but look for the reasons for this stasis, paralysis, arrest, which doesn't allow me to move either backward or forward. I should leave. But where to? (Bruck, 2006, pp. 139-140)

In the two sections you can perceive the same process which suggests to one to read the texts that compose the novel as different voices in one chorus. A comparative approach really emphasises the connection that joins the two souls of the book and both are anchored to the biographical confession. What strikes you is the fusion of roles and of characters. In fact, the bad state of Katia seems to be the mirror of the writer's suffering explained in *Letter to my mother* and the journey undertaken by the protagonist of *Traces* is none other than the allegoric representation of the

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<sup>12</sup> Highly representative is the extract in which E. Bruck proposes once again the image of the arrival at Auschwitz, “«Obey!!» you pushed me away while I fought wildly, screaming like a Christmas pig under its owner's knife. Because of me the soldier hit you, beat you. Forgive me, but how could I leave you, let myself be taken from you?”. (Bruck, 2006, p. 6)

<sup>13</sup> The expression is of P. Levi, (1986) and it refers to the men and women survived from the Nazi extermination camp. Those killed are shown with the term «drowned».

<sup>14</sup> From the novel: “The hour has come to take a trip in memory, a voyage thought about a thousand times and put off a thousand times, for forty years. [...] I have to go. To return in order to go forward. (Bruck, 2006, pp. 144-145).

internal digging that Edith Bruck achieves through the writing. The two texts are indivisible; in a certain sense they are identical, because identical is the objective of liberation at which they are looking, because they never forget, digging up the wounds, of wanting to save the life, to save themselves also through a writing that again ties the threads of the existence and that is none other than a journey within themselves. Let us pause and think now on the metaphor which closes the novel and which represents with extreme efficiency the function of aesthetic experience. Katia, who has affronted herself by returning to Dachau, is home again when a bullet accidentally strikes the mirror that reflects her image which explodes in a mirage of splinters that fall to the ground. In a splinter she perceives the intact and young-again face of a new woman.

In this context it is possible to observe the allegory of the journey - which through space but above all through time - characterizes the entire narrative production of Edith Bruck, that gives back the fracture provoked by the Nazi extermination, reasoning exactly on the continuity which ties the present to the past. To the description of the life and of the death in the concentration camps there intersects in fact a more subtle reflection on the sense of existence *after* Auschwitz. The objective is double: from one side, through a process of recovery, the author puts under observation her own story, on the other side it gives back to humanity the weight of an experience so devastating that it cannot be kept in, because “once inside”, as she wrote in an open letter to Bruno Vasari, “one never comes out of the Lager” (Bruck, 1993, p. 80). It is revealed therefore the significance of a literary work constructed on the flashback that needs to be read without rigid timing because that which has happened has happened for ever.

For example, in this context are included stories in the volume *Due stanze vuote* (“Two empty rooms”), but also the more recent *Lettera da Francoforte* (“Letter from Frankfurt”) and *Quanta stella c'è nel cielo* (“How many stars are there in the sky”), about which will be given details later. However, before doing so it is necessary to give attention to the novel *L'attrice* (“The actress”). This is also centred on the story of a journey. The protagonist of the novel is Linda Stone, a woman who survived the *Shoah* and emigrated to America to follow a career in the world of show business. The work on the stage permits her to hide herself in the roles she interprets until her hidden identity reappears suddenly. From the involuntary revelation, her agent and a young producer take charge and are determined to re-launch the star taking advantage of the dramatic secret. Linda agreed to make a documentary film on her own story of survivor, but the reality of what confronts her, the journey and the arrival at Dachau, does not allow her any pretending. Faced with the tragedy of extermination, warns Edith Bruck, no falsification is allowed. In the “overpowering hallucinating end” (Mengaldo, 2007, p. 74) of the novel, the actress, symbolically called for the first time by her real name, remains petrified in front of the list of the Nazi concentration camps given on the Memorial. Her real identity returns to her with dramatic violence: “The cold which had penetrated her body [...] seemed to have also veiled the eyes with ice” (Bruck, 1995, p. 150). “The eyes decided to find themselves again between all those names that were breaking her tongue, her heart, her mind” (Bruck, 1995, p. 154):

Despite the stop, the interventions to remind her of her duty, of her contract, of her future as an actress, she continued to read the biggest lines a little in a confused way. From top to bottom and vice versa, from one extreme to the other of Germany, across the frontiers of occupied Europe: «DACHAU, BERGEN-BELSEN, BUCHENWALD, STUTTHOF, DORA-MITTELBAU, RAWENSBRÜCK, FLOSSENBÜRG, NEUENGAMME, ANKENBUCK, MAUTHAUSEN, ARBEITSDORF, NEUSUSTRUM, BELZEC, PLASZOW, WESTERBORK». (Bruck, 1995, p. 152)

Through the characterisation of a character who tries to evade her proper life, the reflection moves to the pain provoked by the remembrance and, therefore, on the desire to escape and of oblivion. As also read in the last novel of Bruck, *La donna dal cappotto verde* (“The woman in the green coat”), “the idea of amnesia urges as a debit to herself” (Bruck, 2012, p. 9). The memory, that up to now we have positively analysed as the engine of the writing necessary for the elaboration of the trauma, imposes itself in a contradictory way: “remembering”, in fact, “is a double-edged

weapon which recovers and destroys at the same time”<sup>15</sup>. Also the writing is therefore revealed in the two opposites because it looks at a liberation that cannot come. Fundamentally in this context the consideration that Bruck exposes in *Signora Auschwitz* (“Mrs Auschwitz”), a volume that shows with extreme clarity the internal tearing of the author, the need to not forget, in fact, turns into the condemnation to remember. Therefore it turns on the desire to escape and at the same time the sense of guilt, as if the silence is equivalent to betraying oneself, betraying the pact with the «*submerged*». Let us read some extracts from the book:

[Writing about my] childhood and about Auschwitz carries me back in time on every occasion, in a reality outside of the world. Another place that is part of me but separates me from *here* and *now* makes me ill, throwing me in the grip of memories. (Bruck, 1999, p. 55)

And again,

Whoever has Auschwitz as a devastating presence inside himself, writing about it and speaking about it will not get rid of it but on the contrary will make it grow. But how to get rid of it and liberate one’s own body of that heavy weight? (Bruck, 1999, p. 16)

The aesthetic and literary search of Bruck consists exactly in putting this question; knowing that it is not possible to entrust to the words the task of a definite solution, the accent moves on to the ethical and pedagogic value of the testimony. The writing reveals a dual function which replies at the same time to the internal need of elaboration and to the necessity to act both *in* and *on* society. If the memory constitutes the theme of the work of Bruck, the shared memory is the true objective, because the psychic and individual elaboration is possible only if the recognition of the horror is collective. As Nunziante Cesàro has well shown, “if history is denied and its traces cancelled he who remains alive finds himself constricted to a recovery of his identity tougher and more tragic” (Nunziante Cesàro, 1999, p. 238). So that the elaboration can be completed, therefore, the individual catastrophe must be written and recognized as it is, a social catastrophe.

But let’s return to the journey, real and symbolic, which characterizes the Bruckian writing and which offers an extraordinary observation point also to make a confrontation with *Quanta stella c’è nel cielo*, a novel awarded a prize at Viareggio in 2009 that needs a multiplicity of reading keys. It is in fact a complex work which inserts itself in our itinerary, attentive to the atonement by means of the writing and provides at the same time an exceptional testimony. For the first time Edith Bruck centres on the reflection on the drama she faced immediately after the liberation. She reflects on the difficulties, real and psychological, which blocked the process of integration of the survivors and proposes to the reader a view of Europe moving in the immediate post-war period. This is the image which opens the narration and which shows the protagonist, Anita, freed from the concentration camp, now travelling towards Czechoslovakia in search of a place that will accept her:

As a clandestine traveller, just escaped from her own country, I could not and dare not breathe, squashed as I was between the walls of the smelly corridor of an old, cold and over-crowded train. The noisy crowd who showed misery and hunger, who had their lives saved like mine, pushed each other with brusque arrogance for a few centimetres of space for the feet. (Bruck, 2009, p. 7)

Going back to her own story through the events of the girl, Edith Bruck reflects on the disastrous consequences of the *total war*, on the disorientation of the broken-up families and on the slow and tiring process of recovery of identity that the «saved» had to face. About this last aspect it gives light to an element still not investigated, which is the sexual development in the process of recovery of the female identity after the offences suffered in the camp. “That which interested me”, Bruck has underlined, “was to relate how difficult it had been to cope with this body of a woman survivor that I myself have despised, that everybody despised”<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with E. Bruck, in Andreoli, I & Ciuffi, F. (2012).

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*.

Determined to dig into her own life, the writer accompanied the young protagonist in a second itinerary, that of the rediscovery of herself and a reborn body able to generate life. Anita is expecting a baby and the pregnancy of the young woman is really and truly a *deus ex machina* in the resolution of the plot, which becomes the literary pretext to confront the delicate theme of maternity *after* Auschwitz and to confide to the writing a new function, that of *manipulating* history. The world that Edith Bruck shows in this novel is a world dominated by the blindness, the conquest and the most primitive and immoral confirmation of itself; it is that out of line world which the author, for more than 50 years, tries with hard work to come to terms, but with which there is no possibility of any reconciliation. But if it is true that in real life you can't put things straight it is also true that it is possible to imagine it better than it is, and writing becomes the place where can be achieved what has not been possible in real life. In this sense to write is a truce. The elaboration of trauma passes this time through the pretending and it resolves itself in the name of fantasy and hope.

The work closes, in fact, in the dream of the protagonist who is preparing for the *Aliyah*; the baby will be born in that "fairytale land" (Bruck, 2009, p. 34) that Edith Bruck has searched for so much in her pilgrimage, in that "land of milk and honey" (Bruck, 2009, p. 43) recalled so strongly by the mother, that in a circle which closes, reappears in the oneiric ending of the book:

In the dream my mother also had on her head the blue handkerchief, a colour never worn, that made her look young and beautiful. I wanted to, I was about to touch her to be sure it was her [...], but as soon as I touched her lightly, she turned into a fish, slipping from my hand directly into the sea and swam under the bottom of the boat that was taking me to Palestine. (Bruck, 2009, p. 194)

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