

Book Reviews

Edith Bruck, *Il sogno rapito*. [The Kidnapped Dream]
Milan: Garzanti, 2014

Reviewed by Elisa Guida*

Edith Steinschreiber (pen name Bruck) is an Italian writer of Hungarian origin (Taub, 2014). Born in Tiszakarád in 1932 into a numerous family of poor Jews, is deported, twelve years old, to Auschwitz. Freed on 15 April 1945 at Bergen Belsen, Bruck wanders between Hungary and Czechoslovakia and in 1948 she emigrates to Israel. Soon, she takes the road again; in 1954 arrives in Italy, settles permanently in Rome and decide to dedicate her existence to the dissemination on of the event (Guida, 2007, pp. 187-204; *ib.*, 2011, pp. 141-159; *ib.*, 2012; *ib.*, 2014, pp. 24-30). In 1959 the editor Marsilio publishes her first autobiographical novel written in Italian and allegorically titled *Chi ti ama così* ["Who loves you like this"]. In a short time, Bruck stands out in the Italian literary scene as a writer capable of telling the horrors of the Shoah by means of the individual experience. Her style is characterized at once by immediate and incisive communication (Guida, 2007, pp. 190-193).

With *Il sogno rapito* ["The kidnapped dream"] the author connects the testimony of her own past with the commitment of an intellectual who acts in the present time; she reflects with concern on the "disorder of the world" (Bruck, 2014, p. 10) and on the "fratricidal blood" (Bruck, 2014, p. 10) pouring in the Promised Land. To the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - symbolically represented by the desire of conciliation that animates the protagonist - Bruck connects the telling of her real story, a perspective review which allows the widening of the reflection to the formation of the identity of the children of the survivors and to their relationship with the parents. In this way, Edith Bruck reconstructs a complex itinerary that goes back to the past, rebounds to the present and projects itself to the future, involving three generations of women.

The novel opens with an epigraph. They are verses from *Dentro la sostanza* ["Inside the substance"] by Nelo Risi: "Without something to lean/ upon you cannot build" (Risi, 1965, p. 63). Again from the words of the Lombard poet: "[...] always/ the choral truths are/ radiant truths and they make an infernal uproar, they are an ordeal/ of outbursts entrusted to who comes/ afterwards, for a new/ beginning" (*Ibid.*). It is clear the intention of the author who, by placing this lyric at the beginning, anticipates the themes of the novel: the denial of the real truth, the illusion of reality and the presence of the combination of despair-hope that ties up to new beginnings, private or historical.

The novel narrates only apparently the story of a love triangle: Matteo, "a brilliant man with the attitude of one who invented life" (Bruck, 2014, p. 12), leaves his wife Sara for Layla, a younger pregnant woman. The scene of the abandonment, which gives the start to the narration, falls in an undefined context and ends with few words. What prevails is not the tale of a wounded love, but the description of an allegoric space in which the story of Sara (betrayed wife and daughter of a Shoah survivor) becomes interlaced with the life of Layla, a beautiful Palestinian "with slightly dark skin,

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shiny black hair” and “eyes of black velvet” (Bruck, 2014, p. 50). The experience of Sara’s mother (the only character who is never called by name and represents the voice of the «saved») links in an indissoluble way the present to the past. In this way, Edith Bruck again reflects on the expansion of time, reaffirming that “the lifetime of the ex-deported is only one: the present which includes the past and the future”, because “the *unique* experience of deportation does not permit anything else” (Bruck, 1993, pp. 80-81).

The attention moves to the relationship between the «saved» and the «children of the Holocaust»¹. A relationship that, as emerges from the novel, is marked by shadows, absences and forced conciseness. The protagonist’s mother, survived from the extermination, raised her child teaching her to respect others, loving her deeply but overwhelming her with the burden of *that* experience - “conveyed more with the blood than with the words” (Bruck, 2014, p. 25) - which returns in the various flashbacks that fill the story. In this respect is highly representative the scene in which Sara, giving the mother a *bouquet* of flowers wrapped in red crepe paper, brings back a dramatic past:

[...] I enter mama's bedroom and she glances towards me from afar, but when I put the flowers in her hand she almost withdraws frightened as if I had brought a dead mouse and in her native language, I suppose, she says: *Krepp-papir*

[...] she looks ahead and she remembers, soliloquizing in a loud voice:

[...] at Auschwitz, one person had a small piece of krepp-papir. Who knows why... at those sudden calls, that we knew were for selections, in exchange for half a portion of that tiny piece of black bread, she tinted our pale cheeks to make us seem more healthy [...]. That damned paper was our only hope, even if depriving us of that minimum they gave us, weakened us. (Bruck, 2014, pp. 90-91).

The mother turns to the petrified daughter who asks to be forgiven: “Are you happy now?” (Bruck, 2014, p. 91); then she regrets having involved her in her own past and for having her born into an unfair world where she lives with a deep sense of guilt. By now old, thinking of those who could not grow old, she repeats that she is ashamed of her own age “and adds in a subdued voice, of living” (Bruck, 2014, p. 11). The sense of precariousness of the existence conveyed to the daughter, protected and crushed at the same time, is described with precision and delicacy. It emerges the picture of two women alone, deeply joined in a relationship where there is no space for the comparison and for the diversity: with a survived mother, who “does nothing but take refuge in bed at every sign of pain which is more than anything else psychosomatic”, “I am not free either” (Bruck, 2014, p. 23). “Our bond”, the protagonist venting “from now on should be made up of lies” (*ibid.*).

On the opposite side is placed the role played by Layla’s daughter, Aurora (Dawn in English): the third generation of woman who is found in the novel. She is a baby, just born, she has “skin of ebony”, “perfect little hands” and “big eyes like mirrors of coal” (Bruck, 2014, p. 50) and represents a dream of peace among the people. The main theme of the story is exactly that of “same respect for every human being” (Bruck, 2014, p. 12); and the denouncing of whatever type of injustice takes shape from the first lines. The protagonist’s thoughts call the attention to the present time marked by the use of violence. Several memories follow: from the abuse of the corpse of Gheddafi to the attack on the synagogue of Rome in 1982; from the terrorism of OLP to the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit and the “alarming disparity” (Bruck, 2014, p. 23) which permitted his release. Beginning with social condemnation and insisting on the need for peace in Israel, Bruck builds a story which personifies the contestants in war and which looks at a universal solution of peaceful coexistence. In the central part of the novel, in fact, Sara transforms her own desperation into courage, decides to

¹ The expression is of H. Epstein (1979) and it refers to the children of survivors.

meet Layla and asks to be involved in the education of the child. The idea is that Aurora can be the bridge between two different cultures and religions:

Aurora, with our help, will find the right way for the land contested between Israelis and Palestinians. That day should arrive, no? Each one will have his own piece of land, independent and reciprocally recognized and peacefully bordering.

Thoughts, childish words, useless? Silly hopes?

[...] I know well that we will not be the two of us to change the world, to re-establish justice [...] but at times it is enough [...] a small light to light up the obscurity. (Bruck, 2014, pp. 71-72)

The plot gets complicated, it assumes the form of the enigma and the child disappears. Are there some unreachable distances? Edith Bruck does not give way to the attraction of easy solutions, she defines her dream of peace (which is, indeed, a *kidnapped dream*) and calls the attention back to the horrors of a war which prevents whatever happy ending. “If it depended on me”, writes the author, “there would already be peace everywhere and with everybody”, because “the continuing war is the worst failure of man” (Bruck, 2014, p. 34).

Desperation counterbalances hope. But what hope can there be in a situation so difficult? “Hope”, replies Bruck, “is always there”². She is echoed by another intellectual who many times has reflected on the Arab-Israeli conflict: it is the hope of whom, writes David Grossman, “without ignoring the dangers and the numerous difficulties, refuses to see only those” (Grossman, 2014, p. 12). The hope of who believes that in peace can “emerge the healthy and balanced features of the two people, on which will begin to take effect the therapeutic power of the daily life, of the wisdom of life and of the compromise” (*Ibidem*). It is the hope of who cannot allow himself the “luxury of desperation” and who for years has been asking for peace. A hope, the authors agree, “aware and which will not give up. Which knows to be, for Israelis and Palestinians, the only possibility of defeating the force of gravity of desperation” (*Ibidem*).

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² Interview given to me by E. Bruck, Rome, 2005.