“Labour of Civilization and Peace”: Primo Levi Looks at Interpreters and Interpreting

Mirna Cicioni

“We can and must communicate,” Primo Levi states uncompromisingly at the beginning of the chapter “Communicating” in I sommersi e i salvati (The Drowned and the Saved). He sharply dismisses the notion of incomunicabilità—the inability of alienated individuals in capitalist societies to convey thoughts or feelings to others—made famous by the debates arising from the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, and makes his point by referring to a scene from one of Antonioni’s films, The Red Desert (1964). Toward the end of the film, the main character wanders around a harbor at night and meets a Turkish sailor. In broken Italian sentences, she attempts to tell him about her feelings of disorientation and aimlessness; the sailor repeats, in Turkish, that he cannot understand her, but offers coffee and help. While Antonioni’s scene focuses on the two characters’ failure to communicate, Levi’s reading emphasizes their attempts to do so: they do not have a common language, but they do try to speak to each other. “On both sides...there is the will to communicate,” stresses Levi:

We can and must communicate. It is a useful and easy way of contributing to people’s peace of mind, including our own, because silence—the absence of signals—is in itself a signal, but it is ambiguous, and ambiguity produces unease and suspicion.¹

Human beings, he adds, are “biologically and socially predisposed to communication” because they can speak, and therefore refusing to communicate is ethically wrong (“è colpa”).² This view can be connected with an earlier essay (“Translating and Being Translated,” published in 1981), in which Levi states
that translators and interpreters—facilitators of interlinguistic and intercultural communication—are particularly worthy of recognition, because their work is “labour of civilization and peace” and because “they strive to limit the damage caused by the curse of Babel.”

I examine one facet of the theme of intercultural communication that runs throughout Levi’s works: his representations of people who, in a variety of situations, become interpreters, that is to say, perform speech acts on behalf of individuals or groups who do not share the same language. Drawing on linguistic theory and interpreting theory, I discuss the general expectations regarding the role of interpreters and the way these expectations are challenged by extralinguistic factors. This is, of course, the case for those “interpreters” in Levi’s texts who are not trained professionals and operate under difficult conditions. Levi’s representations of interpreting situations are intersections of ethics and learning, virtute and conoscenza, always central and always linked in his writings. Interpreting is, at least potentially, “labour of civilization and peace,” because it involves acknowledging responsibilities toward others, mediating between cultures, confronting incorrect or inaccurate assumptions, and understanding how power relations are at work in every communicative exchange. These perspectives are integrated with what I have learned in my own work as a community interpreter, a profession that Levi might have called “lonely, unarmed and on foot, on a human scale,” not unlike the work of an industrial chemist.

I analyze five interpreters and their place in Levi’s works. The first one is Flesch, during the earliest contact between prisoners and SS in Auschwitz in the chapter “On the Bottom” in Se questo è un uomo (If This Is a Man). The second is a French-speaking Polish lawyer who attempts to mediate between Levi’s narrated self and a small crowd at a Polish railway station in the chapter “The Greek” in La tregua (The Truce). The third is Levi’s narrated self in two negotiations between Italian ex-deportees and Russian peasants in the chapters “The Little Hen” and “Old Roads” in La tregua. The fourth is the young Polish Jew protagonist of “The Story of Avrom,” published in Italian in the collection Lilít and in English in Moments of Reprieve. And the last one is a wealthy Milanese Jewish woman in the final chapter of Se non ora, quando? (If Not Now, When?), whose Italian friends, at her postwar party, meet some members of the band of ostjudisch guerrilla fighters who had fought their way across Eastern Europe.

Interpreters can influence communication in that they can choose to translate inaccurately or selectively; therefore the essential requirements of good interpreting, both in interpreting theory and in commonsense expectations, are “accuracy” and “impartiality.” “Accuracy” is generally explained as “complete rendition of an utterance with no distortion of the original message through addition or omission,” and “impartiality” is taken to be “refraining from altering a message for political, religious or moral reasons.” In the first discussions on the role of interpreters, in the 1960s, these notions were