

Luisa Passerini

## A Limited Regression



Born 1941 in Asti, Italy. 1965 Laurea in Filosofia e Storia, University of Turin; 1968-69 researches at the Universities of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Lusaka, Zambia; 1969-73 high school teacher; 1974-84 assistant professor of Contemporary History, University of Turin; from 1984 associate professor of Metodologia della ricerca storica, University of Turin. She has worked in the fields of cultural history, history of social movements (African liberation movements, women's and student's movements), methods of history and social sciences. Since 1976, a major centre of her researches has been oral and written memory, that she has examined in connection with Italian Fascism (and recently with the question of totalitarianism on a European scale) and with reference to the memory of 1968 and neofeminism. In this latter perspective she has written a collective autobiography, *Autoritratto di gruppo*, a narrative combining her own memory and the testimonies of her contemporaries, from which a theatre-play has been produced by the "Teatro Fabbri-conc" of Prato. Publications on the history of Fascism: *Fascism in Popular Memory*, Cambridge 1987; *Mussolini immaginario*, Rome 1991; *Memory and totalitarianism* (editor), Oxford 1992. On methodology: *Storia e soggettività. Le fonti orali, la memoria*, Firenze 1988; *Stork di donne e femministe*, Torino 1991. — Address: Via Piazza 32, I-10129 Torino.

Just before leaving for the Wissenschaftskolleg I read *Paris-Berlin* by Gombrowicz and found myself totally out of touch with the images and atmosphere it presented of Berlin. I resented the insistence on "old ghosts" of memory in Berlin and felt rather inclined to consider that city as the site of new beginnings, the symbol of a reunited Europe on a collective side, and more modestly as a place where a new phase of my life could start. In the previous years I had been running and rushing, writing and teaching, travelling and giving talks, participating in conferences, presentations, et cetera. Now all that hurry and accent on productivity had to stop: I was to start anew, reading and meditating, reducing the public talks, recuper-

ating what had been overlooked for the compression of too many things. I was also to engage in a totally new project, concerning the history of the love-discourse in a European perspective. This was a long-postponed project, concerning a theme that I had already investigated in my free time, but never fully taken up. Finally, I was going to learn German, an idea I had cherished since adolescence, that I had tried at least ten times to put into practice, but that the more frequent occasions to practice English and French had always pushed back to the stage of wishful thinking.

A suddenly quiet life in beautiful surroundings, among lakes and trees, with a perfect library service and many other advantages, is very hard to take. The change of rhythm is enormous and one cannot, in the end, ignore too many things. It quickly became clear that Gombrowicz's impression was right, although it had to be brought up to date. Berlin is still a city of ghosts, that in fact have become even more numerous and perplexing. One of their favourite sites appears to be the area where the Martin-Gropius-Bau, the Gestapo building's ruin, the newly restored local Parliament and some pieces of the Wall, plus a postmodern house by Aldo Rossi, all lie within a few dozens of meters from one another. If this place was particularly filled with memories of all sorts, Grunewald also had many echoes to be listened to. Living in that particular borough of Berlin — apparently secluded — proved to be a double experience. Firstly of privilege, that in a town exposing so many problems of relationships between East and West, evidenced to me the feeling of Europe as a besieged fortress. But also of anxiety and almost anguish, because of the memory that this place fosters, of what Grunewald once was — so well described in Nicolaus Sombart's autobiography — and no longer is, as the abandoned area where Walter Benjamin's house was on Delbrückstraße reminds the passers by.

Rather than to a flamboyant new start, the setting proved favourable to regression. Dreams showed that the process was under way within myself, presenting many images of people who had died a long time ago. Given my profession and my state of mind, going back took place both in individual terms, referred to my own life, and in historical ones, concerning the past and the memory of Europe. I thought I had already settled my score with both, through a psychoanalytical experience and through my work with the oral history of Fascism, but evidently there was something more for me to understand or simply to accept.

Regression means that one has to start from the beginning — in language, in research, in daily life - prepared to give up being a specialist and to be ready to "invent the umbrella", at times with some enjoyment. So it happened with that part of the regression which stemmed from my ignorance of German: for instance the learning of the language meant that our

German class, composed of three, had a good time reading children's books, fairy tales, cartoons. But I also felt pushed to substitute words with music and images, provided by Berlin's galleries and concerts. These other types of communication accumulated to fill the void left by the abrupt stop of previous incessant activity — not without disconcert. Certainly music and art cannot be considered a regression in a strict sense, but it was for me to be left speechless. In such a situation the influence of spectacles and shows was great: not only a pleasure and an exercise in taste, but also a different language from the use of words that had always been my privileged form of communication. To a certain degree all these images and sounds reduced the importance of dreams, but I have the impression that they constituted a reservoir that will produce something at a later stage.

The study of courtly love led me through agonies of various kinds, like crossing the chronological boundaries from modern to medieval history, and giving me ground for reflection on the rigid limits of our competences — often justified and yet to be challenged. That was very difficult, although fascinating: plunging into hundreds of books and journals, every day finding something new for myself and yet despairing of finding anything new in a more objective sense.

I felt like a fish out of its usual water, that enjoys enormously but is also scared of swimming in a new liquid. I was glad to find a more amenable route when I moved from a direct approach concerning love in Provence to investigation of the relationship between European identity and courtly love, following the claim that there was a uniquely European way of loving. Studying this claim in the period from the early 19th century to the first half of our century brought the research closer to my competences. The regression involved in supposing that one can do anything one thinks of, gave way to a more realistic outlook. However, it left something of the grandiose hopes of childhood and adolescence, that otherwise would have been lost.

The Kolleg was particularly apt for this type of enterprise: in the sense that it encouraged me upon a way that anybody supporting an economic use of previous competences would have disapproved (and actually did disapprove, as the faces of most of my fellow-historians outside of the Kolleg showed when I tried to reply to their question on what was I doing in Berlin). But also in the sense that the effort to understand what a European identity had meant and might mean could not be better placed. The flow of scholars and artists coming through made the question of how a European identity can exist without establishing hierarchies, rather exchanges, with the rest of the world unavoidable; the very form of existence of the Kolleg — to be a centre without claiming a superiority as such — suggested some reflections in that direction. (Reading certain novels, like

Anita Desai's *Baumgarten's Bombay* — where the memory of a childhood in Berlin, with German nursery rhymes and Sunday excursions to Grunewald, is evoked from India — helped to decentralize the idea of centre). Finally, the place provided a setting comparable, with some imagination, to one of the small communities where European courtly love had been born: I could now see from daily experience that in such situations (good) manners are absolutely indispensable, and courtly love is an extreme form of manners, a very artificial and refined form of expression. This is not to deny that deep friendships and good relationships can develop at the Wissenschaftskolleg, but they do so in a peculiar form, comparable to the mixture of artificial and spontaneous attitudes that characterizes a psychoanalytical setting.

Regression in fact has a social side and a psychic one. It involves becoming a group of school children again, at least on some occasions, displaying dependence and putting forward queries of all sorts (as Barbara Sanders and Monika Fogt among others must know). But we seemed not to be the best class the Wissenschaftskolleg had ever had: we did not immediately socialize and, compared with the previous year's fellows, who had left among the staff an oral tradition about their customs, we were shy, reserved, individualistic, less brilliant and altogether less fun. The unspoken competition between years was not in our favour, and it took some months to develop an *esprit de corps*, that however — we boasted after reading last year's yearbook — was wider and more democratic and more self-ironical than theirs. A high point in this development was probably the carnival party, also because it took place in a central part of the year, after a period of collective tension and some aggressiveness displayed in the colloquia. The fact of disguising ourselves and making fun of our own images was somehow crucial to relating to each other, and to making the mood of self-irony a continuing one.

In spite of the development of a sense of collective fate, some of the best experiences for me were made in small groups that could not be imagined anywhere else, like the poetry group that met in the long winter evenings to read poems in different languages, or the reading group that started reading *Cinderella* and through Kafka and Benjamin arrived at Lacan and Kleist. These were encounters of five to six people, who found the time and quietness necessary for this sort of thing, in spite of the many outside engagements that everybody developed after the first weeks. A more public group was the women's one. The four of us met and had meals together just for the sake of meeting, but out of this the initiative grew of organizing a women's forum on the question of relationships between east and west. We invited women from Berlin to two seminars where they told us about women's conditions after reunification and discussed problems of com-

munication, of employment, of gender relations. We felt that it was important for us and for them to populate a male institution like the Kolleg with audiences that were in the majority female.

Meanwhile I was gradually growing up again and recovering my actual age. The German lessons included by now reading all sorts of texts; a climate that could be defined as spring-summer had come; the theatre season was drawing to an end. The tree of knowledge had displayed itself, at least to some extent, in front of our eyes, with all its chanciness and idiosyncrasies partially due to individual choices, partially dictated by a wider logic and sometimes lack of logic. I was contented to perceive that I occupied a small point in its labyrinthic structure, in a balance of relevance and irrelevance required to come to terms with the narcissism indispensable to intellectual work, without taking it (the narcissism) too seriously. My suggestion for the future is that the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg should start in the spring and end up for Christmas, with the Carnival party on midsummer night.