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PART I

Cultures

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I

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Primo Levi's Turin

Turin was Primo Levi's city. Born, bred and schooled there, he lived at number 75 Corso Umberto for the entirety of his life, save two forced absences, the first as a consequence of the Racial Laws when he found work in Milan, the second during his detention in the death camps.¹ Turin and the cultural climate that had grown up in and around the city in the post-Risorgimento period onwards were vital components of Levi's world. Without placing him within this context it is hard for us to understand him fully as a writer, as a witness and as an individual. If Levi can be characterized not only as a rationalist, a late Enlightenment intellectual with a sceptical, analytical mind and faith in the power and integrity of positivist science, but also as someone who held dear a progressive liberal and anti-Fascist set of values, that is in no small part due to the cultural history of Turin.

Turin as capital

The Turin of the generation of Cesare Levi (1878–1942), Primo's father, was a city on the rebound from a period of crisis and humiliation. In the light of what Turin and Piedmont represented for Italy at unification it made sense that Turin be designated Italy's first capital. The city itself, and the Piedmont region with it, were by far the most modern and enlightened of the states that made up pre-Risorgimento Italy; city and region boasted an entrepreneurial middle class and a forward-looking ruling class; the city was on a par, or almost, with the nation that was its northerly neighbour and with which it enjoyed close contact: France. It had been the Piedmont ruling class, and its leader, Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, with their close diplomatic ties to France, who had spearheaded a unification process that otherwise might well not have succeeded. Last but by no means least, Turin was the seat of the Italian royal family, the house of Savoy, headed by the new King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II. Yet, compared to the overriding reason for the choice

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of Turin, all of the above pales into relative insignificance. Italy's 'natural' capital was not Turin, nor had it ever been, but Rome. Indeed, the eternal city had for centuries been at the very centre of a long intellectual debate about Italy's always desired, seemingly endlessly deferred national liberation and unification. The problem was that in 1860 Rome, still under papal and French control, was not yet part of the Italy that had been liberated and unified, nor were there any immediate prospects of the city joining the rest of the nation. Turin, then, was crowned capital by default, a temporary and thus rather double-edged honour.

That Turin's status as capital was only temporary was no secret to the guardians of the city. Still, in the early 1860s, the day on which Rome would come to occupy its rightful place seemed relatively far off. Imagine the surprise, then, when in September 1864 the city learned of the secret deal between the French and Italian governments, which had ended with the decision to transfer the capital away from Turin. The deal stated that in return for the transfer of the capital, Italy and the Papal States would desist from attacking each other, and France would withdraw its troops from Rome within two years. The choice of new capital was left to the Italian government, and on 18 September, only three days after the secret signing of the agreement in Paris, Florence was designated capital elect, until such a time as Rome could bear the mantle.

It can easily be imagined how the people of Turin reacted to the news of their 'decapitalization'. The city felt cheated and humiliated by the nation. If Florence was only to be another temporary home, as everyone knew, what was the point of moving at all? Riots broke out, an occurrence that was comparatively rare in the city, and demonstrators were killed; a duel was fought between the editors of two rival newspapers, the *Gazzetta di Torino* and *Gazzetta del popolo*. The cost to the city in financial terms was enormous, but this was nothing when compared to the loss of prestige. The city's great fear was that it might be reduced to a monument to a now past period in Italian national life, irrelevant to the new Italy. Turin's population had risen from its 1861 figure of 204,000 to 220,000 when it became capital, but by 1868, in the immediate aftermath of what became known as the 'excruciating deprivation' (*lacerante sottrazione*), for the sheer letdown of having its capital status snatched away so soon, it had dropped back to 191,500.

Turin regained its health and came to flourish economically and intellectually over the following decades, but this did not come about by chance. Rather, it was the result of the city guardians' understanding that something needed to be done if Turin was to have a post-capital future. Seeking to etch a new image of the city, the city guardians set about from the 1870s onwards

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creating a public, civic consciousness and local identity that would propel Turin's economic and intellectual life forwards. They instituted a concerted symbolic campaign of planning museums, exhibitions such as the 1884 international Exposition and grand publications, such as an 1880 volume simply entitled *Torino*,² to celebrate the past and imagine the future of the city.

Perhaps the most important step in this work of persuasion and creation of a new public consciousness and identity was the planning of the Museo del Risorgimento, in honour of the death of Vittorio Emanuele in 1878. This was to be a museum with a powerful agenda. It would seek, on the one hand, to offer a new interpretation of the city's recent past, claiming in the strongest of terms that Turin was unified Italy's spiritual capital (if no longer its political one), and that all the good that had come of the Risorgimento – the struggle for national liberation, unity, patriotism, sacrifice – had its roots in Turin and Piedmont. On the other hand, the museum, to be housed in the then brand new, grandly domed and spired monument the Mole Antonelliana, offered a picture of a modern, industrial, forward-looking city moving into the future propelled by its illustrious past. And it is striking to note the patriotic, civic contribution to this future Turin (and Italy) by the small but vibrant Jewish community of Turin: the Mole had been begun in 1863 as a new synagogue, only for the community to donate it to the city for its projects in 1877.

Neither the museum (which in reality opened only in 1908), nor the 1884 Exposition that was held in the Mole, nor the volume *Torino* offered pictures of a Turin that existed in reality. Image came before fact, an ideal, much desired Turin identity was, as it were, performed. The volume, for example, described Turin in glowing terms, as the 'Mecca of Italy', as the modern, economically and industrially strong city, the city that 'thinks and works', with a 'poetry of industry'. Although largely a symbolic operation, the picture of Turin launched by this manifesto was not entirely without foundation. An actual local identity and prosperous economy was being built. And the idea of a city whose citizens' feet were firmly on the ground and whose academic institutions abandoned their ivory towers to descend into the practicalities of the everyday life of industry and agriculture chimed very well with a long-established self-image that the citizens of Turin had given themselves, embodied by the figure of Gianduia. Originally a puppet created in the eighteenth century, Gianduia became the mask that exemplified the Turin and Piedmont character: sensible, serious, hard-working, a family man devoted to his wife Giacometta, measured (he enjoys a glass of wine and the chocolate that was named after him, but neither eats nor drinks himself into oblivion), straightforward, not given to flights of fancy. Both this local

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Turinese self-characterization and its application to the modern world would find strong resonance in Primo Levi's later presentations of his own sense of self, his values and his intellectual principles.

By the 1890s, the city had more than made up for the lost population of the 1860s; the inhabitants of Turin numbered 330,000 in 1892, a sure sign that the city had emerged from its post-capital crisis. Among the newcomers was the young Cesare Levi, who had moved with his brothers to Turin from a small town in southern Piedmont in 1888 or 1889, following the scandalous suicide of their father Michele.³

Positivism

In this growing modern urban setting, with its new industries and new population, the newly dominant intellectual current was positivism, epitomized by ground-breaking work in criminal anthropology by Cesare Lombroso and others. Lombroso and his circle became very much the epicentre of intellectual life in the city, his charismatic personality drawing large numbers of people to his lectures. His Sunday salon, held in his house on via Legnano, was a meeting place for the Turin intelligentsia, including towards the end of the century Cesare Levi, trained like his father before him as an engineer.⁴

Lombroso's group of positivist intellectuals were forward-looking and socially committed. Although they called themselves socialist, what they espoused was a socialism that bore heavily on the principles of Darwin's theory of evolution and on the belief that science, the positivist observation of data in the world, and education would usher in a better, fairer world where social injustice would be overcome. In marked contrast to the socialism that would emerge from Turin in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, theirs was a socialism bereft of any class antagonism and with little or no mention of Marx. Indeed, one could surmise that the (respectively) radical liberal and communist theories that Piero Gobetti and Antonio Gramsci were to elaborate a generation later, where it is the friction between classes that sparks change, were a polemical response to what became known, a little maliciously, as Lombroso and his ilk's paternalistic and elitist 'socialism of the professors'. Far from being a socialism of revolution, this was a socialism of reconciliation and compromise, in the service of a vision of a society without divisions, whether of class or region. Although the limits of such a reformist and gradualist politics are plain to see, the Turin positivists' genuine commitment to the betterment of social life did bring with it beneficial practical effects, such as high levels of public health, hygiene and safety in the workplace.

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No text illustrates better the strengths and weaknesses of the positivists' socialism than De Amicis' *Cuore* ('Heart'), a book that was to become a staple on the curriculum of Italian schools for many generations, including Primo Levi's. Published in 1886, telling in diary format the story of a year in the life of a third-year elementary school class in Turin, *Cuore* was an immediate success, becoming Italy's first literary best-seller. The school and the pupils' families are painted as an ideal space where all social tensions dissolve thanks to the good will and magnanimity of individuals. If society works, says De Amicis, it is because good-hearted people make it work. The text, in fact, responds to much the same logic of wish-fulfilment as the *Torino* volume mentioned earlier, offering its readers an image of the organic society they would like to see. In *Cuore*, danger and transgression are defused by means of a handshake or a hug, as all parties involved realize that the greater good of the community and of the still-infant nation is best served by being responsible, generous, open-minded and fair. Respect for the institutions of family, monarchy and school is paramount, as is love of country and gratitude for those who created it. It is, for example, the bourgeois Sig. Nobis who gives the class its most important lesson of the year when he proudly shakes the hand of Sig. Betti, a humble coalman, whose son had been insulted by Nobis' son. Vignettes like this argue for an inclusiveness that gives to each and all a role, whether humble or mighty, in a utopian organic society where everyone knows their rightful place and whose unity transcends and obliterates any differences of class, status and region.

One boy alone challenges and undermines the harmony, causing anguish to his mother and to the community: Franti. Through the anti-heroic Franti, De Amicis hints at the unavoidable dark side to the utopia, to those one would want neither to hug nor shake hands with. It is here that we encounter the less attractive side of positivist science and especially the area of it that made Lombroso's name, criminal anthropology, with its deterministic study of delinquents, the weak and the deviant (criminals, Jews, women and so on).

Although *Cuore* does not give us any precise details about him (apart from the fact that he has a low forehead), it is no stretch of the imagination to see Franti as a member of the category of born criminals elaborated by Lombroso. These are those members of the community who have a biologically determined propensity for crime and anti-social behaviour that can be predicted in advance by measuring the dimensions of the individuals' craniums: beyond a certain measure they were criminals; within it, upstanding members of the community. According to Lombroso, there were two types of criminal: those who are pushed by circumstance and social and economic injustice into the ways of crime; and those who are born criminals (on the basis of the size of their cranium). For the former, a soft approach is warranted that aims at reform and the recovery of the lost soul within the

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embrace of the community; for the latter, there is no hope of avoiding biological destiny, and they must be separated from the community lest – or before – they do it harm. Such born criminals are criminals even before they have committed a crime, as there is no escaping their biological destiny. Although Lombroso's theories have now been thoroughly discredited both on scientific and on ethical grounds, the impact he had on Turin (as well as on the still very fragile nation of Italy as a whole, not to mention abroad) in the final decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century was immense.⁵ Cesare Levi and his son Primo would inherit much of the culture and values of the scientific positivism and socialism of Lombroso's circle; but they would both live to see also one of the lines of descent of its pseudo-scientific eugenicist, not to say racist, social engineering.

Reactions against positivism

The Turin of the turn of the century was one of Europe's most flourishing cities with a vibrant social life and growing industrial wealth. The capital of the Italian fashion and cinema industries, Turin was also home to a small car factory, *Fabbrica italiana automobili Torino*, or FIAT, which was founded in 1899. Yet, despite these achievements, successive generations looked back with some disdain on this period of Turin's life, for its superficialities, its compromises and its corruptions. The sense of malaise was not confined to Turin, but was perceived by a growing number of young and not so young intellectuals the nation over. What brought together a band of men and women of varying ideological persuasions was a common project of both cultural and political renewal.

Positivism came out of this reassessment of the cultural state of Italy in a particularly bad way. The slipshod manner of Lombroso's research and its nature as self-fulfilling prophecy was challenged, as was the tendency of the positivist method to belittle the powers of human agency. If our future was already pre-determined, biologically or otherwise, what role did that leave for creativity, innovation, will, novelty? Looking back on the Lombroso years, the anti-Fascist philosopher Zino Zini, a long-time resident of Turin, whose daughter Marisa was to become Primo's private tutor in the late 1920s, spoke of a city where 'nothing is spontaneous, little is modern'. This, he went on, is a city that 'leant more toward obedience than innovation, and is not curious or sociable at all'. Recalling the days he attended Lombroso's lectures, the man he now called the 'genial Lilliputian', Zini describes a performance situated half way between science and cabaret, between 'wonder and swindle' (*prodigio e ciurmeria*), a smoke-and-mirrors show more at home in the theatre than in the laboratory.⁶

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The waning of the primacy that positivism had enjoyed in the final years of the nineteenth century was due to a number of factors, but two in particular: first, the optimistic conviction that society would gradually and inevitably develop along predictable scientific lines with a minimum of social friction was questioned by the emergence of a working-class mass with its own political voice, for whom progress through class struggle rather than gradual evolution was paramount; and second, by the growing apprehension of many Italian intellectuals that positivism had ushered in a materialistic and bourgeois culture that ran counter to the spiritual mission to which the Italian nation had been called. If positivist materialism had eclipsed spirit, now was the time for Italy to set the balance right and embrace idealism, and with it the primacy of spirit and mind over matter.

The necessity and urgency of a cultural and spiritual renewal were central to the projects of a band of intellectuals ranging from idealists like Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile to Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini, who were behind the influential Florence journal *La voce*; to nationalists such as Enrico Corradini; to the futurists; to literary icons like Gabriele D'Annunzio. As can be well imagined, although it may have had a common basis, the means of achieving this project were various and contradictory. Some saw salvation in the emancipation of the working classes, others saw the emergence of that class as a threat; some abhorred modernity, others loved it; some saw Italy's salvation in war, others saw it in colonialism; some saw it in both. But the glue that held the whole together, despite its many internal tensions, was the way in which it was cast as the revolt of a younger generation against their staid and now discredited father figures. This, for example, is how Gobetti spoke of the effect the philosophy of Gentile, for which the name 'Actualism' was coined, had had on the young men and women of his generation. Gentile's work, he wrote, had 'brought down (or rather: lifted up) philosophy from the level of professorial disputes to the immense concreteness of life. It is in him and in him alone that individuals recognize a master of morality and an entire new generation draws inspiration from his thought to bring about renewal'.⁷

The first rush to renewal in Italy was led by the Florentine reviews *Leonardo* and *La voce* in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Turin's contribution to the movement came a little later, initially through two reviews, both of which contain the word new in their titles: *L'ordine nuovo* (in which Gramsci was involved) and *Energie nove*, which was founded by Gobetti when, remarkably, he was still at high school. Both destined to be victims of Fascism, Gramsci and Gobetti were to become the centres of much of Turin's intellectual and cultural life in the post-World-War-I and early Fascist years.⁸

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More politically minded than their more literary counterparts in Florence, the Turin reviews also marked a radical departure from the kind of socialism that had been practised by the Lombroso school of professors, with its dream of painless reform and domesticated masses. Gobetti and Gramsci both realized that the working class was the new protagonist on the social scene and in no city better than Turin, with its factories, entrepreneurs and industrial base and culture, could its dynamic potential be seen.

Gramsci and Gobetti, however, came from different ideological and regional backgrounds and envisaged different roles for the emerging working classes. Gramsci, born in a backward part of a backward island – Sardinia – had come to Turin in 1911 on a scholarship to study at the university. He became a socialist and, when the party split in 1921, he was instrumental in founding the Italian Communist Party; Gobetti, on the other hand, was Turin born and bred, the son of shopkeepers and was ideologically a liberal, albeit a frustrated one, living in a period of crisis of liberalism. Both in distinct ways found inspiration in the Turin working class and, above all, in the Factory Council Movement of 1919, when for a short time the FIAT workers took over control of the car factory. For Gramsci, the movement was a dress rehearsal for the day when, as two years previously in Russia, Italian workers would gain control of the means of production and run the factories and the state itself on their own. For Gobetti, they represented an infusion of new entrepreneurial blood into the body politic, useful to regenerate a then moribund liberalism. Much of Gobetti's considerable intellectual energy was expended on attempting to convince traditional liberals that there was little to fear and everything to be gained from understanding the real dynamic that lay just below the surface not only of the workers' movement, but also of the Russian Revolution (of which he offered an identical interpretation).

Despite these differences, both Gobetti and Gramsci held ideas on social and political change that were light years away from those of the Lombroso group. For both the one and the other, social antagonism, rather than quiescence, was crucial. Progress took the form of a generational struggle between newly emerged elites – like the one at the FIAT factory – who challenged an existing status quo and sought to take its place, in turn to be challenged by a future freshly emerged elite. Change, then, came from below, rather than being managed from above, and was the fruit of the actions of individuals autonomously creating their own world. For many of the young men and women who were deeply influenced by the charismatic Gobetti, autonomy was a key concept that spilled over from the factories to personal lives and on to inform the way the state should reorganize itself on a federalist basis according to which each component has the power to make

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its own decisions and laws. It would also influence, not to say inspire, a generation of anti-Fascists.

Culture and anti-Fascism

Both Gobetti and Gramsci fell victim to Fascist repression: the latter dying shortly after being released for ill health from over a decade in prison; the former dying at the age of twenty-five in voluntary exile in Paris after being severely beaten on direct orders from Mussolini. Despite the fanciful nature of some of his thinking, Gobetti's influence on young Italian intellectuals of the following generations, especially in Turin (including Primo Levi), was enormous. One of the places where his influence was most concentrated was the Liceo Massimo d'Azeglio, one of Turin's most prestigious schools and later also Levi's school. It was here that anti-Fascist-leaning professors like Augusto Monti and Zini taught; and it was here that, in the mid-1920s, a remarkable group of people, many of whom were to leave an indelible mark on Italian history and culture, studied. The list makes impressive reading, including unionist and socialist Vittorio Foa, writer Cesare Pavese, intellectual and victim of Nazi torture Leone Ginzburg, philosopher Norberto Bobbio and Communist Party cadre and journalist Giancarlo Pajetta. In 1933, another of the school's 'old boys', Giulio Einaudi, was to found the publishing company named after him, which remained throughout the post-war period one of Italy's most prestigious and intellectually committed cultural institutions. Many of Einaudi's first publications had a distinctly anti-Fascist flavour and soon attracted the attention of the Fascist authorities, leading to arrests and disruptions but also necessary accommodations. Both before and after World War II, Einaudi's core group of collaborators was drawn from the Turin intelligentsia, especially from the *dazeglioni* (as graduates of the d'Azeglio school were known), Pavese and Leone Ginzburg being the most prominent. In the post-war period, Levi's friend, Leone's widow Natalia Ginzburg, and Italo Calvino joined the company and worked on a daily basis in the Rome and Turin offices. Einaudi published not only the works of Gramsci, but also a wide range of the most significant Italian and non-Italian literary and intellectual writers of the era. Primo Levi would become one of the most important of those in-house Einaudi writers, but not before 1958, and long after *If This is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947) had been turned down by Einaudi in 1946.

In the 1930s, many of the *dazeglioni* and *einaudiani* became part of the anti-Fascist movement Giustizia e libertà (Justice and Liberty, or GL), an important group that put down deep roots in Turin's intelligentsia (and included a strong Jewish element).⁹ The GL militants' opposition to Fascism was not