

CARLO LEVI
(1902-1975)

In the March essay, I wrote about the life and work of the Italian novelist, Primo Levi. For the May essay, I would like to consider the life and works of another writer and artist named Levi, this time the figure is Carlo Levi. He was a contemporary of Primo Levi (although not related to him), who worked creatively in two areas of artistic expression...literature and painting, in addition to being a medical doctor. Levi's most famous literary piece is Christ Stopped at Eboli, published in 1945, which was a fact/fiction memoir of his time spent in exile in Lucania, Italy, after being arrested in 1935 by Mussolini's henchmen in connection with his anti-Fascist activism. (In 1979, the book became the basis of a [movie](#) of the same name, directed by Francesco Rosi and starring Gian Maria Volontè as Carlo Levi). Lucania, now called Basilicata, was historically one of the poorest and most backward regions of the impoverished Italian South. Levi's lucid, non-ideological and sympathetic description of the daily hardships experienced by the local peasants helped to propel the "Problem of the South" into national discourse after World War II. I find him a fascinating figure that, like Primo Levi, was caught in the anti-Fascist feelings that combined artistic endeavor with political activism.



Levi was born in Turin, Piedmont, to a wealthy Jewish physician, Ercole Levi, and his physician wife, Annetta Treves. His upbringing in a household of doctors may have developed in him a feeling for caring and helping people that would last his entire life. His mother's brother, Claudio Treves, was an important socialist leader in Italy, and no doubt had a significant influence on Carlo as he became more aware and interested in Italian politics. Following his graduation from Turin's prestigious secondary school (*Liceo Alfieri*) in 1917, he attended the University of Turin, where he studied medicine. While he was at the university, Levi became friends with Piero Gobetti, author of the anti-Fascist review, *La Rivoluzione*. He

wrote for the radical paper until Mussolini disbanded it. Gobetti nurtured the socialist sentiments that had been developed in him by his Uncle Claudio, and helped him embrace political activism against Fascism that Levi faithfully maintained throughout his life. He graduated from the University in 1924 with high marks.

Levi's medical training served him well in his later exile as a strong thread that linked him to the poor people of Lucania and to humanity as a whole. Although he did not set up a medical practice in Turin following his graduation, he continued his medical interests and served as assistant to Prof. Micheli at the University of Turin's Clinic from 1924 to 1928, working on research involving hepatopathy and diseases of the bile tract. During this period, he also went to Paris to continue his medical specialization studies.

Levi began to paint without ever really having planned to become a painter. He submitted a portrait he had painted to the Quadriennale of modern art in Turin in 1923, and the picture was not only accepted but also singled out for great critical praise. He was invited back the next year and went on to become one of Italy's great modern painters. Since he had successfully exhibited some of his art works at the XIV Venice Biennale soon after his graduation from the University, by 1927 Levi had decided to dedicate his life to painting and literature, rather than to medicine. During his sojourn in Paris as an artist and as a student of medicine, he

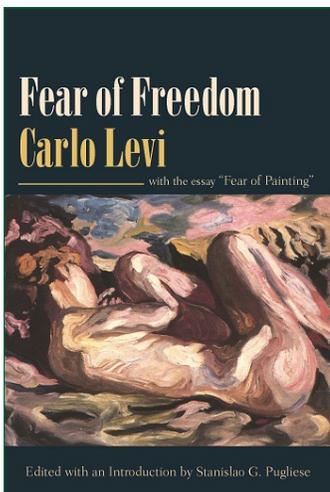
came into contact with many notable artistic personalities of the 20th century, including Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, Alberto Moravia, Giorgio de Chirico, and others who all had a great influence on his decision to pursue an artistic career.

In 1929, along with Carlo and Nello Rosselli, he founded an anti-Fascist movement called “*Giustizia e Libertà*” (“Justice and Freedom”), becoming a leader of the Italian branch along with Leone Ginzburg, a Russian Jew from Odessa who had emigrated with his parents to Italy. Primo Levi was also a member of this group.

Levi lived almost exclusively in Paris from 1932 to 1934. (He attended the funeral of his uncle, Claudio Treves, who had died in exile in Paris in June, 1933). However, he maintained his anti-Fascist activities and, from time to time, returned to Italy to oppose the authoritarianism of Mussolini.

Anti-Semitism was on the rise in Italy in the early 1930s. As a result of his activism and involvement with anti-Mussolini movements and because he was Jewish, Levi was arrested in 1935 and banished for one year to Aliano (the town that formed the prototype for Gagliano in his novel). The town is in a remote area of Italy called Lucania. There he encountered poverty almost unknown in prosperous Northern Italy. While there, Levi was often called upon to provide medical help for the impoverished villagers, even though he had never practiced medicine after graduating from medical school. Like the protagonist in his novel, he had abandoned medicine in favor of his true passion, the arts. Thus, during his exile, he spent most of his time painting.

After his release, he moved to France and lived there from 1939 to 1941 in order to avoid the anti-Jewish sentiment in Italy, which culminated in the Italian Racial Laws of October, 1938. Before the Racial Laws, his family, like other Italian Jewish families, had long been assimilated with little to distinguish them from other Italians. After enactment of the Italian anti-Jewish legislation, Italian Jews lost their basic civil rights, their positions in public offices, and their assets. Their books were prohibited and Jewish writers could not publish in magazines owned by Aryans.



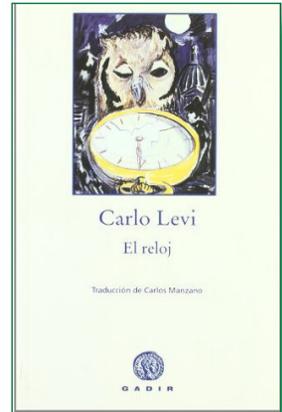
While in this self-imposed exile in France, he wrote his first literary piece, *Paura della Libertà (Fear of Freedom)* (1939), which dealt with dictatorship and its irrational structure. Ideologically, in all of his writings and political work, Levi denounced the rift between the classes and protested the exploitation of the lower classes. Thus, he saw in Italian history a continual struggle between “*contadini*” (peasants) and “*luigini*” “fascist government officials” (after Don Luigi, a local Fascist-party functionary in *Cristo si è Fermato a Eboli*). Such ideas were at the root of his volume of essays *Paura della Libertà*.

In 1941, soon after the Nazi occupation of France, he returned to Italy to avoid the Nazi anti-Jewish laws and programs of deportation, and also to combat Mussolini’s Fascism. While in Italy during World War II, he played an active role in the resistance movement, the “*Partito di Azione*” (“The Action Party”). Levi was eventually arrested in Florence and imprisoned in the Murate prison for his continued agitation against the Fascists.

He was released following the arrest of Mussolini, and hid across the street from the Pitti Palace to avoid being swept away with the Nazi deportation of the Jews from Italy. While in hiding, he wrote his most famous literary piece, *Cristo si è Fermato a Eboli (Christ Stopped at Eboli)*, which fictionally portrayed his life in his

period of political detention in the South. Levi described the life of the village and its inhabitants, the struggles of everyday existence, and the characters of the town who both symbolized the climate of the times as well as universal figures. Most importantly, he provided a portrait of the dependence that the southern Italian provinces had on Rome, and the latter's total neglect of the region and its people.

Following World War II, Levi moved to Rome, and from 1945 to 1946 he served as the editor of *L'Italia Libera (Free Italy)*, the publication of the *Partito d'Azione (Action Party)*, an anti-Fascist organization that grew out of the republican tradition. His next book, *L'orologio (The Clock)* (1950), showed his disillusionment with the course Italian life had taken after the Liberation. The Rome of the immediate postwar era was the subject of this book, in which narration and critical observation alternated and in which facts were mixed with fiction.



He continued to write and paint, exhibiting his works of art in Europe and in the United States. Throughout his life, he was a prominent figure on the Roman artistic scene. Many of his paintings focused on the human figure and demonstrate his belief in man as the center of the universe. He believed that “any art that doesn’t address itself to the whole of man is destined to failure.”

In his later writings, his tendency to mix fact with fiction was resolved in favor of the factual and critical approach. *Le Parole sono Pietre: Tre Giornate in Sicilia (Words are Stones: Three Days in Sicily)* (1955) was an account of a trip to Sicily in which he further denounced the situation in the Italian South. *Il Futuro ha un Cuore Antico (The Future has an Ancient Heart)* (1956) was a critical report on a trip to the Soviet Union, whose great traditions Levi viewed as being absorbed by the revolution. *La Doppia Notte dei Tigli (Two Nights in Linden)* (1959) was a critical, if rather inaccurate, travelogue on a few days Levi spent in Linden, Germany. It dealt with post-war Germany and examined the roots of a society that had tolerated the rise of Nazism. In *Tutto il Miele è Finito (All the Honey is Finished)* (1964) Levi returned to a critical investigation of underprivileged Italian provinces in the South. This book, which took its title from a Sardinian song sung at wakes, was a description of a trip Levi took to Sardinia.

He also wrote numerous prefaces and introductions for many authors throughout his lifetime. There have also been collections of Levi’s works published after his death, notably essays, miscellaneous writings and poetry. In 1963, his political activism turned to a role in the legislative branch of government. He was elected to the Senate as an independent on the Communist Party ticket; he was re-elected to the Senate in 1968 and served there until 1972. He died of pneumonia in Rome on January 4, 1975. He is buried in Aliano, a town in Basilicata region of southern Italy. The Persiana Gallery in Palermo exhibited his last painting, *Apollo and Daphne*, executed on a goatskin drum the day before he was admitted to the hospital.

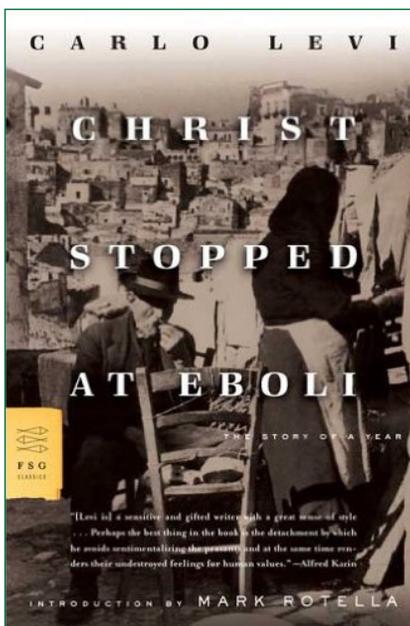
CRISTO SI È FERMATO A EBOLI (CHRIST STOPPED AT EBOLI)

“The title of the book comes from an expression by the people of ‘Gagliano’ (a made-up name for several towns in the region of Lucania) who say of themselves, ‘Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli’ which means, in effect, that they feel they have been bypassed by Christianity, by morality, by history itself—that they have somehow been excluded from the full human experience.” Levi explained that Eboli, a location in the region of Campania to the west near the seacoast, is where the road and railway to Basilicata branched away from the coastal north-south routes.

Gagliano is lost in the middle of the remote and poverty stricken hills of Lucania, south of Naples. The people in the village are eternal outsiders, eking out an existence on inhospitable malaria-infested hills, adhering to a strict centuries-old division between nobility and peasants. The nobles are almost as poor as the peasants; the richer nobility having departed long before, and the remaining ones are all smoldering with hatred and envy for one another in a never-ending fight to grasp one of the few government-paid civil service posts. They despise the peasants, who in turn despise them. Among the nobles are two doctors with little or no medical expertise and even less desire to heal anybody, and the daughters of a pharmacist who continue to distribute their own mixtures of drugs and medicines with unknown proportions of whatever they can get their hands on. The peasants are all hungry and sick with malaria, working like slaves to grow something to eat on their small, insufficient plots of land. They rightly expect nothing from Rome except for taxes and regulations which will crush them even further. Rome has never done anything for them since ancient times—they have always been and will always be the outsiders.



The townspeople lack basic goods because there are no shops in the village. A typical though meagre diet consists of bread, oil, crushed tomatoes, and peppers. They do not have many modern items, and those they do possess are not often utilized. One working bathroom in the town stands as a retreat for animals rather than for people. Also, there is only one car in the whole area. Homes are sparsely furnished; the most frequent decoration consists of an American dollar, a photo of the American president FDR, or the Madonna di Viggiano displayed on their walls. Healthcare is atrocious. The two doctors in town are invariably inept. The peasants simply do not trust these in-town physicians and therefore count on Levi's medical skills instead. Malaria took the lives of many villagers; it is merciless and rampant. Education is available, but as Levi stated, the mayor who taught class spent more time overlooking the balcony than educating the children.



This is the miserable world into which the narrator, a physician and artist, is banished in 1935 to learn obedience. He hopes to spend a quiet time there painting landscapes and peasant portraits, but instead the rumor circulates even before his arrival that he is a trained doctor—a real one—and from his very first evening there the peasants congregate at his doorstep to beg him to come and care for their sick. He doesn't wish to be drawn into local politics, but cannot find it in himself to turn away the sick. And so, little by little, he gets to know the peasants and their hidden, timeless, introspective world, filled with magic and witchcraft, with charms to ward off diseases, with squalid misery, and with strange tales of hidden treasures. The region was home to organized groups of bandits in the 1800s, and these live on in the peasants' imagination as heroes of sorts, members of their own social status who fought the desperate fight against the unjust order of the world, knowing from the outset they would lose. They would get caught and be publicly hanged, and yet they kept fighting because it was the only dignified reaction. And, of course, there are rumors and popular myths about how they had hid marvelous treasures in dark caves and forests.

When the physician/artist looks for a housekeeper, the local policeman's wife, who helps him purely out of spite for the quack doctors whom she hates, explains that no honest peasant woman would come into his house: it is their firm belief that if a man and a woman are left alone, they cannot control themselves. Thus, for a woman to step into his house means she has given herself to him. The only women who will accept to come are the "witches"—women learned in witchcraft, having no interest in social propriety. Most of them have about a dozen children from a dozen different lovers. And so, a witch it is who comes to live with the physician/artist, drawing him even closer to the world of the peasants, teaching him some of her witchcraft, cooking his food, and cleaning his house.



Carlo Levi verbally paints a gallery of portraits of individuals, such as the Fascist mayor, Giulia, who was also the school teacher, but spent little time teaching children and more time flirting with men. (She had more than a dozen pregnancies with more than a dozen men). The physician/artist is occasionally allowed to visit Eboli, the central town of the region. Throughout the region, he helps people who are suffering from malaria, and sees their daily struggle under totalitarianism. Through his sister he also receives medicine, and witnesses how the hard conditions drive people to emigrate to the United States.

The physician/artist realizes that the religious values of the villages he visited were a mixture of Christianity and mysticism. While the people are pious in the sense that they are moral and kind, they are not exactly religious. They do not avidly attend church, and in fact, they have ostracized their priest, who was a drunk and allegedly had sexual relations with several of the women of the village. The priest, however, has just as much dislike for the people, as evident by his statement "The people here are donkeys, not Christians." It seems that Christianity was not fully embraced in the whole region; this is shown by the multitude of priests begetting illegitimate children and the licentious sexual relations that were often overlooked. Superstitions, gnomes, and spells seem to shape day-to-day tasks, not Christ and the belief in God. People do, however, attend church on holidays like Christmas, and do respect the Madonna. (When we are reading this, it becomes apparent that Christianity was an idea introduced but never completely adopted).

The southern half of Italy was not completely on board with Mussolini and his Fascist government. The Southerners were looked upon as inferior citizens. Carlo Levi recalls one local man's view that he and his fellow people were not even considered humans, rather they were dogs. He tells how Northerners viewed the Southerners as being of "inherent racial inferiority." The people specifically felt torn from Italy, and looked to America as a beacon of hope and prosperity rather than to Rome. Levi writes, "Yes, New York, rather than Rome or Naples would be the real capital of the peasants of Lucania, if these men without a country could have a capital at all." He is insinuating that the peasants and people of Lucania have no country which cares for them. The people were in dire shape, they lived in complete destitution and yet nothing was being done to provide for them. The war with Abyssinia (Ethiopia) only served to remind them of the impossibility of emigrating to America.

In 1935 Italy began a quick war in Abyssinia. The people in Gagliano thought little to nothing about it. It did not faze them and they had no hope of any gain because of it. The physician/artist refers to them as being indifferent to the war cause, and mentions only one man who enlisted to escape a troubled home life. He does notice, however, that they do not talk about World War I despite the fact that a large number of men in the village lost their lives.

Near the end of his term of banishment, Levi takes a trip to the North to attend a funeral. After spending almost a year in Lucania, he feels an awkwardness he had not experienced before. As he talks with friends and acquaintances about politics, he begins to uncover a common ignorance about the issue of Southern Italy. He listens as people share their opinions on “the problems of the South,” about who is to blame and what can be done. A commonality is found in all their answers: the state must take action! The government must do “something concretely useful, and beneficent, and miraculous.” Levi chalks this response up to having fourteen years’ worth of Fascist notions in their heads. He goes on to explain how the idea of a united “utopian” Italy has been subconsciously ingrained in all of them.

Carlo Levi believed the hidden, despised world of the South would continue to exist in the same misery, regardless of political upheavals in Rome, from Fascism to democracy and back again. He saw no hope for a change coming from above, and from below there would only be occasional violent outbreaks, crushed down with ruthless cruelty by whomever happened to be governing. With a novelist’s literary skill and a painter’s artistic eye, Levi’s novel depicts this world in realistic terms and forces Italians, and the world outside Italy, to come to grips with the poverty and misery of this region of Italy.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Review of Lerner, Giovanna Faleschini, Carlo Levi’s Visual Politics: The Painter as Writer (2012), in “Centro Primo Levi Online Monthly,” May 20, 2015; Jill Mushkat, “Carlo Levi,” paper presented to the Novel Club of Cleveland, April, 2013; “Biography-Carlo Levi” on Your Dictionary website; Moyshale Rosencrantz, review of Carlo Levi’s Christ Stopped at Eboli in “The Moyshale Rosencrantz Blog”; Encyclopedia Britannica (britannica.com); and Wikipedia.



PAINTINGS BY CARLO LEVI