

This novel can be read in many ways. Those who wish may, says Turkish writer Mario Levi in his preface, satisfy themselves with reading the short chapter titled *The Starlings*, placed at the beginning of the book to review

# My Istanbul was a fable

THE BOOK

by Mario Levi

what the reader already knows. Others may be only interested in the details. “Like any Jew,” says Levi, “I too was a roving wanderer, roaming the world in the attempt to ‘give birth to’, live and find my country.”

I know that the things recounted “here”, or experienced here as “writing”, in this “long tale” that allowed itself to be written little by little, will worry some people. Even in the seemingly endless nights – during which I tried to distance myself as much as possible from the others, from those who wished to push me into accepting this “writing”; during which I tried, in fact, to investigate it – I had let myself be caught up by such a feeling. Those were nights in which I made myself place the things that I was made to feel in certain places of my life... A deep-rooted feeling, its roots identifiable in a received heritage that would not manage to free itself of me despite all the hidden corners and games that I had discovered, even though I had tried to render the “me” that gave myself back to me, “my writing”, with another voice, that inner voice of mine... Obviously, I had to set out the tale of living this legacy “in my language”, I had to see and show, to the extent my capabilities, “my limits” would allow, the extension of this possibility in my life, in the city in which I was born and where I lived. With the energy transmitted by such conviction, I would therefore have been



able to proceed on this more tranquil, familiar and reliable “verge”. I would have been able to express this “verge” with familiar words, remaining in the waters of an identity that “the others” expected of me. But this situation that I was adapting, that I could have adapted to myself, was only one of the possibilities that I was experiencing and to which I wished to cling. ...Except that, on the days in which I was trying to swim in those tranquil waters, other voices had called me. For this reason too, also because I had been unable to totally believe in this possibility, the fear of remaining in a single place, of living and dying for a single place, had opened within me the road to go there where I had not been able to remain, live a long life. This is why I had let myself be caught up by those dreams. This is why I had lied, learned to live even with falsehoods, betrayed what I loved. This is why I had filled up my lungs, uncaring of my

asthma, with the smoke of “all the ideas that were smoking” in my mind, “besides the smoke of the coal of the stove”. This is why I had wanted to marry a blue-eyed whore with freckles and hair the colour of honey, who taught me, with all her generosity and coarseness, the dark twists, completely unknown to me, of making love, in that time of my dark “apprenticeship”, and who sometimes said she wanted to become a professor of Sociology at some university. This is why I had preferred to read Spinoza on the day of the Great Fast. This is why I had thought of becoming a pimp; this is why I had tried to write advertising copy. This is why I had hated “virtuous” women, who boasted of cooking excellent *börek* and tasty stuffed vine leaves. That is why I had also become disgusted with the women who talked of or played with “freedom” without, however, being prepared to get their hands dirty; who only talked and played and, in the end, always remained



tied to those houses and those “heritages” of theirs; I was also repelled by those who tried to base all my “points of view” on a “scientific” foundation to be better able to defend themselves, or to always be able to take turns showing each other capable of holding this world in their fists, contenting themselves with describing some “things” without having the courage to touch those feelings, to really touch them... Of course, these were my solitudes, these my games; all the things, that is, which I could not say to anyone at the time. The child inside me, who believed he had been abandoned, who always tried to show off to someone, had, however, felt the need to live thus. That child had for years expected this man from me. That child was right. That child had a right to all that “impertinence”... And perhaps these were the ways that child followed to better see and know... It was therefore with this effort to understand that I tried to keep carrying on towards that tale that I believed I was living one fine day, or, to put it better, to find, in my darkness, that tale in which I couldn’t as yet give up believing?... Maybe. Certainly, in such a situation, I should interrogate myself once more about myself, always keeping in mind myself, my angers, my doubts, my betrayals, in the name of this tale that I have tried to build inside me. I must interrogate myself about myself once again... I must try to understand whether that sense of being able to make other people uncomfortable with the things I say is or not one of the things that, willingly or unwillingly, I have taken on from someone else. For what I experienced then taught me that I had to keep silent: keep silent, burying my anger inside me. After all, I too was born in an atmosphere in which it is not easy to annoy some people by holding up a mirror in front of some others, inviting them to think from a different perspective. The “languages” of that atmosphere were my refuge. The “languages” of that atmosphere were also my imprisonment... On the days when I started my travels, on the other hand, I had no intention at all, despite what I had experienced, of making others uneasy through my existence, through what I wanted to say and recollect. In those days, I too had a fable that I wished to “tell”, simply “tell”. It was

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the tale of experiencing “writing”, a journey to different “countries” in the world, like a “violinist”. Like any Jew, I too was basically a roving wanderer, roaming the world in the attempt to “give birth”, live and find my country. Like any Jew, I too was a “homeless person” in the opinion of some... Like any Jew, I too was one “of the usual”, “wary and unreliable”, “a tongue-less outsider”. ... That history, therefore; that history that I could call “our history” – where, when, how and for whom had it ever started? Where, when, for whom? This too was one of those tales that we had tried to safeguard to postpone, to continue to hope, to live all the way to the end, to live and show, in spite of “those”, or “live telling”, to generate a new morning after a long, seemingly endless night? The past that we had told, and, rather, that we thought we had told: a past of what language or what words was it really? These are also, to some extent, the questions that it requires courage to ask ourselves, with the replies able to give rise to small murders, to the killing in some places of some things, some things we



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cannot, in any way, name. We had not thought, in vain, that we would have exhaust ourselves even more in those relations, just that pilgrimage of love, every day, in each person... Those relations, in the course of those years, had perhaps become our solitude to an even greater extent... For the words, those words, were not always our words... The words were not always our words... But our words could also have been our nudity, the rediscovery of ourselves, and we had slowly been stripped of our "origin", in a devious way, by those who wanted to give us their words alone... Could we ask each other now what those words were? Could we want them from each other, recall them to each other? Could we be those words once more? Could we be those words once more? Can we be ourselves? What we experienced in those relations was certainly not anyone's "mistake". No instant was the result of a "mistaken" instant. And, above all, there was no mistake. There was no "mistake"... There was neither "wrong" nor "right"... There was only that which was experienced, that

which could be experienced and that which one wished to leave to someone... Or... That which one wished to "show" to someone, to believe that he would have lived to believe it, albeit for a short time... This being the state of things, this book, with a similar approach to "what is being told", can be read in different ways. Those who wish may satisfy themselves with reading the short chapter titled *The Starlings*, placed at the beginning of the book to review what the reader already knows. It may be held that those who make this "choice" have read and "seen" the book. This effort could suffice to understand another, others. In fact, this had already been done previously; earlier too people had limited themselves to this. Images, or simply visible things, had already sufficed for others previously... Finishing it in a short time and then, after having finished it, putting it in a place that we believed was the right one, far from upheavals, was one of the known options, which assigned us to those places, our real places... And the pages that remained behind, those that contained the stories



that still continue inside me, were for those who were only interested in the “details”... For those who were only interested in the “details”... For those who wanted to take a few steps towards someone else by means of the “details”, the “lost languages”... Those who wish may proceed from the first page to the last, listening to, and feeling, the sound of their own steps, “skipping” many chapters, or placing them in “another” order of reading and importance. I know well that that even this is not a new “proposal”. In other climates, in other “writings” and in other times, one had already wanted to proceed following this voice, I know. But I, when I dare to make a “proposal” of the kind, or recall it, despite all the probable repetitions, probably think above all of that touch of my “writing” that, for better or worse, directs my life. It had never been easy to demonstrate the courage to gather the “pieces”, to put them together. Rather than ability, it required patience, to be able to look again, at the proper moment, at that image, placing oneself within it. To be

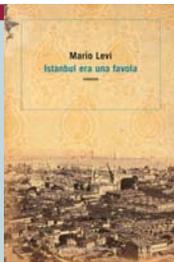
\_Writer Marco Levi, a Turkish Jew, author of the book *My Istanbul was a fable*

able to look at that painting, to be able to really look at it, required a commitment, the effort of devotion, “spontaneity”. It was an affair of a heart, this one. An affair of the heart... Only an affair of the heart... Precisely as in those relations that we tried to nourish, defend, not lose... Precisely as in that relation in which we had entered with our “real language”, that we tried to nourish, defend, not lose, that allowed us to grow within ourselves, that showed us to ourselves in perhaps the most correct way...

Naturally I am not in a position to know who would have carried these details, where and how. It is not necessary for me to repeat at this point that, while a person proceeds towards another, or advances within another with all those old images inside him, he is experiencing his own

adventure, only his own adventure. In the place where I had neared some solutions, there was the protagonist of my tale, trying to look out of a window completely different from that city where I was born, its sea, which he had yearned for, which he had not in any way managed to abandon, who, moreover, was prepared for a long walk to find his own “language”, his own “original language”. The secret of the “country” was hidden in this walk, the borders of the “country” were to have been traced with this “language”. The “country” was that very “language”, the horizon that this “language” had revealed, the dreams that this “language” had conceded, reawakened, the feeling that this “language” had generated. As for the story, it was a very old one. The clock of the story, for example, was one that had already been “used”, that had “lived” in other places, the “dead” in the story were of the “well-known” type, the book in the story was a book written patiently, both to hide oneself and not to hide oneself. In this book, a person considered the text he was trying to recount, to build, as the only “country” in which he would have been able to take refuge. A person who was at once witness, spectator and protagonist of the story he was telling... A person, in other words, who remained, seemed condemned to remain both inside and

outside what he was narrating... The “walls” had been erected there too; even the “walls” had outlined and, even more notably, revealed the borders of “that country”. I was no stranger to those “walls”... Those “walls” were also my walls... my walls... My walls that I wished to find in my “language”, that I dreamed of telling “in my language”... And perhaps we could have sought that fear of taking the wrong steps in the story of these walls... That fear was hidden in those walls... But it was not my fault that I was born an “outsider” in the peninsula of Istanbul closest to the “West”. Nor was it my fault that I experienced Istanbul as a fable, or that I wanted sometimes to resemble people of other books or characters of stories or dramas of my life who were showing me a direction, or that I used, without realising it, the words “of others”, influenced by an old blunder, or that I had experienced the hope of a new trip, a new liberation... In sum, my Istanbul was a fable... This fable was my story... This fable was “their” story... This fable was our story... This fable was your story... This fable was the story of those who perceived themselves to be outsiders in their own city... This fable, despite all the experience, was the story of the desire to consider the waters of the Bosphorus a womb... This fable was the story of the fear of being swallowed up by one of those currents, sucked into a totally different sea by a “wrong” stroke of the arm or oar... This fable was a fable, that is it...



### Ambience and memory

This book by the writer Mario Levi, a Turkish Jew (publisher: Baldini Castoldi Dalai; 832 pages, 18.50) is a journey among old photographs and an opportunity to tell the

numerous stories that originate in these images. The result is a splendid and colourful description of places and people who live next to each other with their varying habits, religion and culture – a *melting pot* of races composing the most vital essence of an enchanted and tragic city. Through this novel, made up of fragments of a past (including the recent past), the author manages to recreate the atmosphere of a capital whose geographical location.