

Playing after Auschwitz The case of Primo Levi and Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*

Sara Vandewaetere

On 19 December 1948 the Italian journal *L'Italia socialista* published a short story written by an unknown Turinese chemist.¹ It is the story of a child, Maria, who finds a decorator in the kitchen of her home. In order to prevent Maria from touching the freshly painted cupboards in the kitchen, the painter draws a circle on the ground around Maria, explaining to her that she cannot leave the confined space. Maria rapidly discovers that the circle is 'evidently magic' and plays along, while watching the decorator with curiosity from within the boundary lines of her magic circle. Only when the painter wipes away the circle with a rag does Maria move freely and happily around the house again.

The expression and elaboration of the concept of the 'magic circle', so familiar to us in the age of gaming, was actually not that widely spread when this short story was published.² The expression as such had been coined in 1938 by the Dutch historian and cultural critic Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens*.³ However, it is unlikely that the writer of the short story, who was unfamiliar with the Dutch language, came to know of this work that early. It is much more likely that he read the Italian edition, which was published in 1946 shortly after his return from a ten-month imprisonment in Auschwitz when he was eager to make up for lost time by reading.⁴

The story, which was entitled *Maria e il cerchio* (English: *Maria and the Circle*) would probably have been forgotten rather quickly if its writer, Primo Levi, had not become so well known in the 1950s. This fame was due to the Turinese publishing house Einaudi publishing his account of his incarceration in Auschwitz, *If This is a Man* (Italian: *Se questo è un uomo*, 1958) after having initially rejected his work for publication in 1946.⁵ Levi saved the short story from oblivion by integrating it into his

¹ P. Levi, *Opere II*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 1447.

² Although limitations should be placed on its reliability, a search with the Google Books Ngram Viewer suggests that the term 'cerchio magico' only came into use in Italian on a larger scale from the late 1950s. This could mean that Levi's use of the expression is somewhat remarkable and not purely coincidental.

³ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens, proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, Haarlem, Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1938.

⁴ Levi returned from Auschwitz on 19 October 1945.

⁵ P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1958. UK translation: P. Levi, *If This is a Man*, London, Orion Press, 1959. US translation: P. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf, New York, Collier Book, 1959.

1975 book *The Periodic Table*, slightly adapting it to make it fit into the book, as he himself explained, and giving it a new title: *Titanio*.⁶

The story is particularly short and Levi was most probably inspired by the idea of the fairy tale, which he would continue to privilege as a genre in his later short stories, some of which are included in *Storie naturali* and *Vizio di forma*.⁷ At the same time, however, it is one of Levi's more mysterious short stories and therefore suggests the possibility of more sophisticated interpretations. The story has attracted the attention of more than one scholarly reader of Levi's work.⁸ One wonders if such an interpretation might establish a link with Huizinga, and whether the prominence of a magic circle - a key concept in Huizinga's work - is more than coincidental.

Despite the fact that Levi and Huizinga seem to share a view on play as a marker of culture, as this article will later discuss, there is no material evidence that Levi was actually familiar with Huizinga's work. Unfortunately, Levi's library and personal notes cannot be consulted to look for possible evidence on this matter. In general terms, it seems that Huizinga's work was quite well known in Italy in the 1930s and that some of Huizinga's books had been translated into Italian. The personal friendship between Luigi Einaudi and Huizinga, who met during a trip to America, seems to have been decisive in ensuring the translation and publication of the latter's work.⁹ Moreover, Huizinga's texts were at the centre of intellectual debate. In particular, the 1935 text *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (original Dutch title: *In de schaduw van morgen*), translated into Italian as *La crisi della civiltà* (English: *The Crisis of Civilization*), attracted attention from Italy's intellectuals.¹⁰ The text, however, was not well received in Italy. The Italian philosopher Delio Cantimori wrote a particularly harsh review, reproaching Huizinga for his general pessimism regarding contemporary politics.¹¹ The Turinese intellectual Vittorio Foa expressed his lack of appreciation for the same text in a letter from prison, where he was being held for his anti-fascist views. Although Foa admitted the text was anti-Nazi in its intention, he reproached its author for offering views so close to those of the Germans that they might have attracted a Nazi following.¹²

It was only in 1946 after the definitive defeat of fascism, when the question of Huizinga's position towards Nazism became less urgent, that *Homo Ludens* was finally published in Italian. It was a work that looked deeper into some of the aspects present in his earlier work, and that - according to Umberto Eco - might have attracted the attention of the young Italian intellectuals of the time but instead ended up being known for creating negative reactions.¹³

Therefore it is possible, although not certain, that Levi did come to know about Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* soon after its publication in Italy in 1945 and reprinting in 1946. Although Levi was evidently still attempting to reintegrate into society after his deportation and was writing his own memoirs, he certainly maintained an interest in the intellectual scene and especially in the Turinese publishing house, Einaudi.

⁶ P. Levi, *Il sistema periodico*, Torino, Einaudi, 1975. US translation: *The Periodic Table*, New York, Schocken Books, 1984. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal.

⁷ P. Levi, *Storie naturali*, Torino, Einaudi, 1966; P. Levi, *Vizio di forma*, Torino, Einaudi, 1971.

⁸ C. Angier, 'Le storie di Primo Levi: messaggi in bottiglia', in: Luigi Dei (ed.), *Voci dal mondo per Primo Levi*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2007, pp. 1-20; P. Valabrega, 'Il Segreto Del Cerchio: La percezione del tempo nell'opera di Primo Levi', in: *Rassegna mensile di Israel* (1989), pp. 281-87; M. Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge*, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1995.

⁹ L. Endrizzi, 'La crisi della civiltà in Italia: l'epistolario Einaudi-Huizinga', in: *Laboratoire italien, Politique et société*, 6(2006), pp. 201-211.

¹⁰ J. Huizinga, *La crisi della civiltà*, Torino: Einaudi, 1937. Originally published in Dutch in 1935

¹¹ L. Endrizzi, 'La crisi della civiltà in Italia', cit., pp. 205-206. The 1936 review of Cantimori has been republished in L. Mangoni (ed.), *Cantimori: Politica e storia contemporanea*, Torino, Einaudi, 1991.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 208.

¹³ U. Eco, 'Homo Ludens Oggi', in: J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Torino, Einaudi, 1973, pp. vii-xxvii.

It is clear that the answer to these questions, and to the actual familiarity of Levi with Huizinga's work at this or any later date, is unresolved, and will probably remain so, unless a future opening up of the Levi archive shows otherwise.¹⁴ However, the question remains as to whether Levi's views on play are in any way connected to Huizinga's views. In trying to answer this, it is useful to consider the role of play in Levi's work.

Levi's conceptual view of play

As early as 1990, the Italian critic Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo noticed Levi's playfulness at a linguistic level, noting that his work contained a 'verbal ludicity [...] that we would not expect to be so outspoken in this apostle of the sobriety [...] of language' (my translation).¹⁵

In his book *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues*, Robert Gordon recognizes 'play' as one of the most fundamental of Levi's virtues, 'the most characteristic and influential of all'.¹⁶ According to Gordon's analysis, play is to be read in Levi's work as the key to freedom.

Other interesting observations about play in Levi's work have been made over the years by Stefano Bartezzaghi, the well-known Italian journalist, essay writer and word-game designer. In 2010 he repeated and expanded on his thoughts on Levi's attention to play in the chapter of the book *Scrittori Giocatori (Game-Playing Writers)*, which is dedicated to Levi.¹⁷ An important part of the chapter is concerned with Levi's privileging of 'linguistic games', which has been previously analyzed by Marco Belpoliti, the editor of Levi's collected works.

It is clear, then, that play appears in many forms in Levi's work, and yet it is an aspect that remains under-researched. Therefore, this article will consider some elements of play in Levi's work against the background of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and will examine the role a cultural, Huizinga-like interpretation of play could have had in the work of a Holocaust survivor like Levi. It will concentrate on three aspects, considering how these relate to Huizinga's play-theory: Levi's explicit conceptual view of play; the thematization of play in his work as a witness; and play as a linguistic feature of his writings.

In Huizinga's view, play is a 'free and meaningful activity, carried out for its own sake, spatially and temporally segregated from the requirements of practical life, and bound by a self-contained system of rules that holds absolutely'.¹⁸ In what measure can we find the same ideas in Levi's work?

Bartezzaghi is right to point out that Levi never developed a complete theory on play, but occasionally Levi formulated explicit ideas on the subject. Initial indicators give the impression that Levi believed play is limited to childhood. In the essay *Tornare a scuola*, he makes the following comment:

¹⁴ Even Cicala and La Mendola's volume *Libri e scrittori di via Biancamano, Casi editoriali in 75 anni di Einaudi*, which reconstructs intellectual life surrounding the Einaudi publishing house, does not shed light on the question. See R. Cicala & V. La Mendola (eds.), *Libri e scrittori di via Biancamano. Casi editoriali in 75 anni di Einaudi*, Educatt, Milano, 2009.

¹⁵ P. V. Mengaldo, 'Lingua e scrittura', in: E. Ferrero (ed.), *Primo Levi: un'antologia della critica*, Torino, Einaudi 1997, p. 197: 'un ludismo verbale e un gusto per il significante che non ci attenderemmo così marcati in questo apostolo della sobrietà e transività della lingua'.

¹⁶ R. Gordon, *Le virtù dell'uomo normale*, Roma, Carocci, 2003.

¹⁷ S. Bartezzaghi, 'Le cosmichimiche di Primo Levi. Gioco, osservazione linguistica, invenzione', in: idem, *Scrittori giocatori*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010, pp. 21-76.

¹⁸ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, cit.

Il gioco, cioè l'esercizio fine a sé stesso, ma regolato e ordinato, è proprio del bambino ma giocando a tornare a scuola si ritrova un sapore d'infanzia, delicato e dimenticato.¹⁹

In other words, adult play is just a nostalgic return to an infantile reality. Adults can only imitate the playing activity of children; they 'play to play' as Bartezzaghi has already pointed out.

The same view emerges from Levi's reflections on a British study entitled *Children's Games in Street and Playground*.²⁰ Levi's essay, *L'internazionale dei bambini*, is dedicated to the universal quality of children's games in different parts of the world. At the end of the essay Levi clearly takes the discussion beyond the level of games and opens up a parenthesis on the civilizing functions of play, partially in line with Huizinga's thoughts:

Resta il fatto che le frontiere politiche sono impervie alle nostre culture verbali, mentre la civiltà del gioco, sostanzialmente non verbale, le attraversa con la libertà felice del vento e delle nuvole.²¹

In this case Levi associates play with culture: play is not, as in the case of *Homo Ludens*, the origin of culture itself. The passage quoted above seems to suggest instead that play is to be seen in parallel with culture, rather than as at its origins. At the same time play can even be considered superior to ordinary 'culture' as it can cross political boundaries more easily than our typically 'verbal' culture.

However, it is in his fictional texts that Levi seems to attribute an even stronger function to play. Play is present at different moments in his prose and essays, and frequently, more than simply in parallel with civilization, it appears as a marker of some kind of civilization itself. In order to focus on the apparent contradiction between the moral witness of Auschwitz and the prominence given to play, we will now examine the role of play in Levi's testimonial writings.

The thematization of play in Levi's testimonies

The major challenge in approaching Levi's work against the background of Huizinga's play theory is situated in the important testimonial aspect of Levi's work. It is clear that play, as defined by Huizinga, could hardly exist in Auschwitz. The free activity Huizinga had in mind was self-evidently forbidden for the deportees at Auschwitz: finding a spatially and temporally segregated place was nearly impossible. Auschwitz is reminiscent of the situation in a specific type of war that Huizinga describes, where he explains that no real play can take place in wars against 'groups not recognized as human beings and thus deprived of human rights – barbarians, devils, heathens, heretics and "lesser breeds without the law"'.²²

In accordance with historical reality, play in its Huizinganian form, as a basis for civilization, could not occur in the camps and nor is it to be found in Levi's testimonials on Auschwitz. However, Levi carefully registers its disappearance and absence. When describing the last night at the Italian transit camp in Fossoli, for instance, Levi does not forget to mention how the children's toys - in a way a symbol of play - are carefully packed away by the mothers who are preparing the luggage for the voyage to Auschwitz:

¹⁹ P. Levi, *L'altrui mestiere*, in P. Levi, *Opere II*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 658.

²⁰ I & P. Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.

²¹ Ivi, p. 740.

²² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, cit., p. 102.

E [le madri] non dimenticarono le fasce, e i *giocattoli*, e i cuscini, e le cento piccole cose che esse ben sanno, e di cui i bambini hanno in ogni caso bisogno. Non fareste anche voi altrettanto? Se dovessero uccidervi domani col vostro bambino, voi non gli dareste oggi da mangiare?²³

We know that neither the children nor their mothers would see those toys again. Once the testimony enters into the details of camp life very few mentions of any form of play are made, bar the expression that someone is ‘playing’ with the deportees (in Italian: ‘si fa gioco di noi’), that is, making a fool of them.²⁴

It is in a similar context that theatre and music, two phenomena close to play – as Huizinga also stresses – are mentioned.²⁵ Indeed, according to Huizinga, theatre and music cannot sever themselves from play but are intrinsically related to both ritual and play.

However, in Levi’s account, there is no play or ritual whatsoever associated with theatre when it is mentioned for the first time. In contrast, it is used as a metaphor to express his disbelief. Indeed, on their arrival at the camp, Levi and his fellow deportees get the impression that they are ‘watching a mad play’.²⁶ The scene described only superficially has the characteristics of theatre and play; a false representation is left. The same is true of the music that, strangely, is present in the camp. Levi relates how he heard a band playing music and was relieved – thinking that his situation was a bad dream or a joke after all – until it turned out to his surprise that the band was really part of camp life.²⁷ The music was no more than a surreal memory of a distant reality.

In a very similar way, the presence of play is destined to be no more than a formal representation in Levi’s 1986 publication *The Drowned and the Saved* – a long essay on the grey zone that dangerously blurs the line between victims and perpetrators. Rather than music or theatre, a real game is described: Levi discusses a football game that he had read about in the testimony of a Hungarian doctor in Birkenau between SS soldiers and members of the Sonderkommando, the special squad of mainly Jewish deportees who were made to work in the gas chambers. Levi wrote:

All’incontro assistono altri militi delle SS e il resto della Squadra, parteggiano, scommettono, applaudono, incoraggiano i giocatori, come se, invece che davanti alle porte dell’inferno, la partita si svolgesse sul campo di un villaggio.²⁸

Even if the overall tone of Levi’s Auschwitz testimonial confirms the fact that no real play could take place in the camps, surprisingly forms of play do appear on a few occasions in their most fundamental form, protecting the deportees in some rare moments. Singing could take on such a role: at least once Levi mentions the members of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community within the camp, who had created a separate ‘space’ for themselves within the camp, singing a rhapsody:

Dalla porticina posteriore, di nascosto e guardandosi attorno con cautela, è entrato il cantastorie. Si è seduto sulla cuccetta di Wachsmann, e subito gli si è raccolta attorno una piccola folla attenta e silenziosa. Lui canta una interminabile rapsodia yiddisch, sempre la stessa, in quartine rimate, di una melanconia rassegnata e penetrante (o forse tale la ricordo perché allora ed in quel luogo l’ho udita?); dalle poche parole che capisco, dev’essere una

²³ P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1989, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 19.

²⁵ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, cit., see for instance p. 50 on music and p. 12 or 53 on play.

²⁶ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, cit., p. 25; Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, cit., p. 19: ‘Ci pare di assistere a qualche dramma pazzo, di quei drammi in cui vengono sulla scena le streghe, lo Spirito Santo e il demonio’.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, in P. Levi, *Opere II*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 1032.

canzone da lui stesso composta, dove ha racchiuso tutta la vita del Lager, nei più minuti particolari.²⁹

The song of the storyteller creates a rare moment of socialization and solidarity within the camp. Likewise, when the news of the imminent liberation was brought to the Greek community in the camp, they began to sing in a circle, standing shoulder to shoulder.³⁰ The beginning of the end of the Nazi era is thus announced by the return of play elements.

These kinds of scenes become more frequent in *The Truce*, the book in which Levi describes his adventurous journey back home from Auschwitz. After the first dark pages, *The Truce* actually becomes very joyful and mostly presents itself as a happy journal that tells the reader about Levi's return to society. Levi has to wait in different provisional camps before being able to go home. The waiting camps are inhabited by a multicultural community of survivors who pass the time by playing and dancing. It is not the children's play this time, but the adult's play that seems to cross boundaries. When the news of the final defeat of the Nazis reaches the camp, it is celebrated with play and a joyous game of football between the Poles and Italians.³¹

Further indications of the play that accompanies the return to civil society can be seen in the friendship between Levi and a Greek survivor. The two travelling companions are clearly engaged in an internal competition, and it is often Levi who loses the game. The Greek's motto is 'war is always' and he sees this kind of competition in every part of his life, even in his friendship with Levi.

The fact that Levi begins his journey back to normal life with a Greek, Mordo Nahum, with whom he is caught up in a harsh competition, is not a total coincidence. It is as if his return to civilization must start from the cradle of Western society and, what is more, with a competitive relationship. According to Huizinga, it is precisely this type of competitive activity called 'agon' – which was omnipresent in Ancient Greek society – that forms the foundation of culture.³² Levi actually explicitly makes a connection between his friend and the Ancient Greeks, describing how the way in which he met the Greek reminded him of ancient times.³³

Levi's complicated friendship with Mordo Nahum marks his return to civilization. This type of friendship, characterized by an antagonistic relationship, is repeated in Levi's writings over the years. Similarly, in Levi's portrayal of himself as an adolescent in his short stories he is often set in opposition to his friends. An emblematic figure is the adolescent opponent Guido, who is described in the short story *A Long Duel* (Italian: '*Un lungo duello*'). Guido and Primo are in the same class and organize strange competitions to see which of the two of them is best at different 'challenges', such as slapping each other in the face, getting undressed in class without being noticed by the teacher, passing through fences and athletic competitions.³⁴

A Long Duel is an intriguing story, which has drawn the attention of Levi's major biographers and has been read as part of Levi's *Bildungsroman*, which can be pieced together from various of his chapters and short stories. Huizinga sees 'agon' as the foundation for society and culture, and this feature is reflected in Levi's own entrance into society as an adult

²⁹ Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, cit., p. 51.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 73.

³¹ P. Levi, *La tregua*, in: idem, *Opere I*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, pp. 282-284.

³² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, cit., p. 28.

³³ Levi, *La tregua*, cit., p. 225.

³⁴ P. Levi, 'A Long Duel', in: idem, *Other People's Trade*, cit., pp. 52-58.

Levi's 'writing as playing'

Levi's principal relationship with play is to be found in his writing and language. We have already explained, with reference to his early short story *Maria and the Circle*, how Levi's work functioned as his own magic circle, his own playground and his own protected space. While trying to adjust to normal life in the year after his return Levi began to write in order to quiet his mind: not only did he write his first short stories, like *Maria and the Circle*, he also wrote the first version of *If This is a Man* and several poems. When, much later, Levi published his poems after his prose had made him famous, he was inevitably asked his opinion on Adorno's previous statement that 'poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric [and] has become impossible'.³⁵

La mia esperienza è stata opposta. Allora mi sembrò che la poesia fosse più idonea della prosa per esprimere quello che mi pesava dentro [...]. In quegli anni, semmai, avrei riformulato le parole di Adorno: dopo Auschwitz non si può più fare poesia se non su Auschwitz.³⁶

Levi's early poems are sad, and seem anything but playful. However, even then it can be said that poetry is connected to play, through searching for the right word, the right rhythm, and through following the conventions, the rules of the game of poetry. As Huizinga noted, 'The function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born'.³⁷

If we look at it from this point of view, we can identify a new moment of play in *If This is a Man*. Indeed, there is an important chapter dedicated to Italian poetry that every reader of *If This is a Man* will remember: 'The Canto of Ulysses'. In this chapter, Levi shares one of the rare positive moments during his imprisonment. His French friend, Jean – who had a slightly privileged situation in the camp – chooses Levi to accompany him to fetch soup. Levi decides to teach Jean Italian by reciting a canto by Dante. However, Levi does not perfectly remember the verses and has a hard time bringing them to mind. The verses come back to him very slowly but it is very satisfying when they do.

What makes this experience extraordinary is that during this walk Levi seems to have created an almost sacred space and time, a magic circle, far from the *hic et nunc* of the camp. The contents of the canto already offer some consolation, but the slow and difficult reconstruction of the verses with their rhymes and rhythms also gave the exhausted mind of the prisoner welcome and seldom pause.

The joy of writing, in other words, is clearly interconnected with Levi's love of language, something which showed itself in a particular pastime of Levi's: the making of word games, such as rebus puzzles or palindromes. Among many short stories and essays concerning particular linguistic phenomena, Levi dedicated a short story to his

³⁵ Adorno's original statement appears in the concluding passage of the 1949 essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society', reprinted as the first essay in *Prisms*: 'Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.' T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*, Trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1981, p. 34. The passage is not easy to grasp and later on Adorno himself commented that '[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural questions whether after Auschwitz you can go on living [...] confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death.', T.W. Adorno, *Meditations on Metaphysics, Negative Dialectics.*, trans. E. B. Ashton, New York, Continuum, 1993, p. 363. Adorno seems to suggest that it is necessary to revisit the whole concept of death and culture rather than stating simply that poetry has become impossible.

³⁶ M. Belpoliti, *Conversazioni e interviste: 1963-1987*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 137.

³⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, cit., p. 135.

love of palindromes, entitled *Calore Vorticoso* (English *Swirling Heat*; my translation).³⁸ The story first appeared in the Turinese newspaper *La Stampa* in the summer of 1978 and was later included in *Moments of Reprieve*. In the short story Levi introduces the reader to a character who forms palindromes that allude to various situations in his life.³⁹

From the testimony of Giampaolo Dossena, a journalist and maker of word games, we know that Levi probably even submitted different word games to *La Stampa*. He gave his own work the Piedmontese name 'dmura', meaning a plaything of little value. According to Dossena his submissions to the paper were anonymous. Levi, the moral witness, did not allow himself to be seen 'playing games of little value'.⁴⁰

Levi and play: a diachronic view

When we consider the elements of play and games presented in Levi's life from a diachronic point of view, we can see how his early writings contain the most positive views on play – with *The Truce* as an emblematic example – be it through a thematic approach, linguistic preferences for poetry or his explicit views on play.

While play necessarily disappears in his testimony in *If This is a Man*, elements of play appear again at the end of the book. Furthermore, play and theatrical elements have an overwhelming presence in *The Truce*, revealing without doubt that Levi's most positive view of play is as offering the possibility of opening up a way to a new and better culture.

When Levi returned to the subject of play later in life, after he had become well known as a witness of repute (despite the fact that his works were varied and not limited to testimony), his views on the subject seem to have become more complicated. *A Long Duel (Un lungo duello)* was written in 1984. Even if, in this story, the agonistic games with the character's friend Guido pave the way to adulthood, the story actually contains some unexpectedly violent aspects, such as in the crude game of slapping each other's faces. Not surprisingly, the final memory of Guido is negative, of an 'ephemeral monument of terrestrial vigour and insolence'.⁴¹ Play did lead both boys to adulthood, but Levi remembers to denounce the most violent aspect of it.

In the previously mentioned essay on universal children's games, despite his positive view of the universalism of children's games Levi vehemently criticizes one specific game that is particularly unfair and in which one child becomes a 'player-victim' for no reason. In his mind, in the context of play there should be no place for unfairness. Children's play can be universal, but even then there must be a *caveat* against cruelty; play has to have clear boundaries.

It is with this view that Levi returns to the subject of play in *Auschwitz in The Drowned and the Saved*. In this book, Levi again takes up the role of witness, and with more authority. Here too the message is that play can only exist within clear boundaries. If play is detached from the conditions of freedom and fairness, as was the case in the football game between perpetrators and victims, a grey zone is created and the metaphorical playground loses its clear boundaries. Only clearly set boundaries can protect us from this dangerous zone in which the distinction between perpetrators and victims can be dangerously blurred, as was the Nazi's intention.

³⁸ P. Levi, 'Calore Vorticoso', in: idem, *Lilit e altri racconti*, Torino, Einaudi, 1981.

³⁹ It is interesting to note that Carlo Levi was also fond of word play. See for instance his 'lo penso ai rebus', published in the posthumous *Le tracce della memoria*, Roma, Donzelli Editore, 2002, pp. 15-17.

⁴⁰ Information from Giampaolo Dossena reported in Bartezzaghi, *Scrittori giocatori*, cit., p. 40.

⁴¹ Levi, *L'altrui mestiere*, cit., p. 836.

Concluding thoughts

The fact that Levi literally used the term ‘magic circle’ in an essay written in 1947, the year after *Homo Ludens* was translated into Italian, makes us wonder how familiar he was with Huizinga’s book. Levi never really articulated his thoughts on play in an extended way. It seems as if he experienced an increasing tension between the positive view of play in all its aspects and his role as a moral witness of the Holocaust, and that this prevented him from exploring the theme too deeply. If, instead, he had chosen to take this path, he might have shared his thoughts on *Homo Ludens* and it would certainly have been enriching to hear his reflections on the work of the great Dutch thinker Huizinga.

As it is, we are left with the indications of play in his work, which are multiple and vary in character from some carefully formulated but sometimes contradictory thoughts on play to the thematic treatment of play and the presence of word games throughout his texts. There are so many aspects to this point of view – and here we consider just a few of them – that it seems difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

What we do know is that, on a thematic level, Levi showed himself to be a careful observer of play, of its appearance and its disappearance, mostly corresponding to a higher or lower degree of some kind of civilization. The first phase of his return to society after Auschwitz seems to go hand in hand with increasing forms of play. Likewise, Levi’s view of his own adolescence seems to reserve an important role for antagonistic play as a pathway to growth and entrance into adulthood, which parallels Huizinga’s idea that culture itself was created on the foundation of a healthy agonistic situation.

As for the meaning of play in his life and work, we can affirm, without any hesitation, that play helped Levi on a personal level to overcome his trauma. He wrote and he played with language, but, even in this case, he emphasized more and more over the years the boundaries between seriousness and play. In the same way, play was to be separated from any situation of violence, with which it was incompatible. His views can be read as a caveat against an overly optimistic view of the possibilities of play. According to Levi, play in post-Auschwitz society, rather than being marginalized, should always and on every occasion go hand in hand with ethical conditions and a total respect for otherness: what remains is a *minima moralia* for play.

Parole chiave

Primo Levi, Johan Huizinga, Shoah, play

Sara Vandewaetere obtained her Ph.D. in 2009 at the University of Antwerp in Belgium on a literary topic: sensoriality in the work of the Italian author Primo Levi. Since 2010 she teaches Italian-Dutch translation at the University of Ghent and now specializes in translation studies. She is currently collaborating in a research project on EU terminology with a special interest in terminology and immigration.

Vakgroep Vertalen, Tolken en Communicatie
Universiteit Gent
Groot-Brittanniëlaan 45
9000 Gent (Belgium)
sara.vandewaetere@gmail.com

Riassunto

Il gioco dopo Auschwitz

Alcuni testi di Primo Levi riletti alla luce dell'*Homo Ludens* di Johan Huizinga

Lo scrittore Primo Levi (1919-1987) non ha mai menzionato esplicitamente lo storico olandese Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) nei suoi testi e gli archivi leviani per ora non permettono di stabilire esattamente quanto Levi avesse familiarità con i testi di Huizinga. Ciononostante i due pensatori sono chiaramente legati dal tema del gioco, tema prediletto di Levi che ha attirato l'attenzione dei critici letterari e oggetto di studio del famoso *Homo Ludens* di Huizinga del 1938, indagine del mondo del gioco come origine di tutta la cultura.

Il presente articolo vuole indagare se l'interesse condiviso per il gioco superi la pura coincidenza tematica. Cerchiamo la risposta nel modo in cui il gioco è presente nell'opera leviana come segnale di civilizzazione, idea fondamentale anche nel testo di Huizinga, attraverso un percorso lungo alcuni testi chiave dell'autore torinese. Anche se Levi e Huizinga non si sono mai incontrati, le loro idee sul gioco sembrano nascere da una comune visione di fondo.