

Norberto Bobbio, *De Senectute e altri scritti autobiografici*, Turin, Einaudi 1997, and *Autobiografia*, Alberto Papuzzi, ed., Bari, Laterza 1997

Review by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat

Born in 1909 in Turin, Norberto Bobbio,¹ a philosopher of law who also wore the hat of a political thinker and a specialist in international relations, is considered by his contemporaries as a guiding light of postwar Italy. His 1984 nomination as senator for life by President Sandro Pertini made him something of a gadfly to the Republic and democracy, to borrow the term Plato applied to Socrates. This *spectateur engagé* – the expression was coined by Raymond Aron to designate the Weberian ethic of the intellectual's responsibility – donned the toga of a philosopher in the Roman tradition (one might think his *De Senectute* had been translated from Seneca's Latin), a philosopher who, out of ethical concerns as well as personal predilection, applies his reason and the rigor of his thought to the problems of society. While he readily terms himself a pessimist, Bobbio has since his youth been busy weaving connections, among people, ideas, and nations alike.

This modest man, loathe to engage in public confession, has now come forth with fragmented memories that have the ring of calls to order as well as exercises of self-criticism and of admiration:² "The world of older people," he recalls with some gravity in these pages, "is more or less a world of memories. It is often said that one is what one has thought, loved, and done. I would add that one is what one remembers." Memory thus has an irreducible political dimension. As Nicole Loraux would say, it belongs to society.³ In Karl Kraus's view, this is what has kept the wise man young when the gravity of the problems with which history has confronted him has made him feel the weight of years in his youth. Indeed, morally and intellectually, Bobbio belongs to that group of great European intellectuals whose lives span the century and whose careers have always been indelibly colored by the tragedies of the times: resistance to fascism, which was also the crucible for indissoluble friendships, and the cold war, which gave rise to a permanent allergy to moral cowardice and to the petty renunciations that fuel major debacles. But Bobbio is not among those who

admit to a shred of cowardice in order to better assault their neighbors with a pretence of outraged virtue. Like so many others, he did not go from one extreme to the other in order to give lessons in virtue from which he would thus, conveniently, exempt himself. Haunted by what is customarily called the “betrayal of the clerks,” he describes his own itinerary, his formative years, his earliest involvement and his first temptations, but also his first betrayals.

In many respects, these are the newest pages of this autobiographical collection. What the author calls the “prehistory” of his life marks the end of a bourgeois education and the painful process of learning intellectual responsibility. In fact, it was not until 1943 – that is, the time of Mussolini’s fall and the resistance to the German occupation of his country – that the young student would become involved in political life and emancipated from his family. The son of a surgeon, raised in a family belonging to the great bourgeoisie of Turin which he quite honestly describes as “protofascist,” he was tempted for several years to consider fascism as less evil than communism, if not as a lesser evil. Mussolini’s very evolution from socialism to fascism seemed to suggest such a judgment. But the intellectual training received at the university was soon to counter this natural tendency. The Turinese intelligentsia was in fact dominated by lofty intellectuals – most of whom were actively hostile to fascism, if only for reasons of intellectual ethics. Though Bobbio was too young to have known Antonio Gramsci⁴ and Pietro Gobetti (who died at the age of twenty-five, a victim of fascist brutality), two atypical Marxists who theorized intellectual commitment and who had left their mark on some of his teachers, as a student he frequented a group of exceptional young minds around which gravitated at one time or another such men as Leone Ginsburg, Primo Levi, Cesare Pavese, and Franco Venturi. These few names suffice to give an idea of the diversity of viewpoints and the intellectual richness of this cenacle. Most of these men were members of the militant movement “Justice and Liberty,” of which the Action Party, the principal non-communist resistance group, was an outgrowth: its ambition, Bobbio explains, to militate for a “democracy without adjectives,” that is, without bias as to the political color of the parties and the men called to assume the responsibilities of the new State after the war. The great disap-

pointment, not to say wound, came from the fact that the emerging Republic would be quickly devoured by a Christian democracy which, in his view, had hardly added to its laurels during the black years of fascism.

The honesty with which Bobbio relates his waverings is itself sufficient cause for admiration. He endeavors most scrupulously to understand and to show his inner struggle between conformism and rupture. For if he was profoundly marked by the ideas of these men, he was slow to join in their movement. Worse still, the "demon of consent," which was later to be dissected by the Czech dissident D. Tatarka, led him one day to disavow his family publicly and to write to Mussolini when accusations by the police threatened to damage his career and even to force him into imprisonment by the fascist regime. This letter, which Bobbio had "forgotten," but which had clearly continued to torment him, created a scandal when the Italian press exhumed it in 1992 and made it public: among the most vehement critics of the young Bobbio was the senator himself, proving that the honors of the Republic do not necessarily lull their recipients into complacency and that, to cite a famous quip, old age is not necessarily a "shipwreck." The text of this letter can be found *in extenso* in the volume *Autobiografia*. The statesman's lucid analysis of this episode in his memoirs is all the more courageous and exemplary because it remains unique, or nearly so. If pressed for a comparison, one would think in spite of everything of Emmanuel Berl (in his confidences to Patrick Modiano), rather than of Bertrand de Jouvenel or Maurice Duverger, so scrupulous, even stinging, are Bobbio's self-incriminations. For the man is not among those who pride themselves on having erred, even for a good cause: in France, he would more readily have sided with Aron than with Sartre. Nevertheless, he is eager to cast the first stone, even though the offense is actually a rather modest one: as a number of his defenders, including certain members of the group arrested at the time, have pointed out (though Bobbio is too modest to make much of this here), he had forbidden himself to give any names whatsoever or to do anything that might endanger the lives of his friends; he was seeking only to withdraw from an oppressive regime and to preserve the future. It seems inevitable to compare him to

Vaclav Havel, who has made decisive pronouncements on the “problematics of engagement.”

In truth, it would be somewhat indecent to dwell on this episode if Bobbio himself, in sounding his conscience, had not devoted such a major section of his autobiographical writings to it. Maturity came at this price: the self-appraisal that followed this incident fuels a whole reflection on the “betrayal of the clerics” in the spirit of Julien Benda and probably played a determining role in the constant, but critical, dialogue with the communists. However painful this dialogue may have been, here Bobbio expatiates at great length upon its necessity, particularly by the rights that these interlocutors had won by resisting barbarism.

Raised on Hegelian idealism, which was most illustriously and profoundly represented in Italy by Benedetto Croce, Bobbio was in fact to remain forever marked by the desire to associate social justice with “formal” freedoms, to use the Marxist term, in the conditions of the modern State. In some ways close to H. Lefebvre or to M. Rubel, in France, he was to evolve towards what could be called a “leftist Aronism,” which was constantly reproaching both the communists, for neglecting the judiciary and institutional guarantees of the rights of man, and the liberals as befitted them, for closing their eyes to the limits of liberal democracy. Intellectually, Bobbio remains an innovator and a discoverer: fifty years before his colleagues all over Europe, he recognized and emphasized the scope of the Austrian Hans Kelsen’s “legal positivism” and, with Q. Skinner and Y.-Ch. Zarka, showed the full importance to humanity of Thomas Hobson’s work. More recently, his natural pacifism has led him to take an interest in the field of international relations: once again, the natural arc of his thought has led him to theorize his sensibility in a spirit of tolerance based on a “procedural” conception of democracy, close to that illustrated today by M. Walzer: “Democracy is the form of government made up of rules that permit the resolution of social conflicts without the need to resort to violence”⁵ – a “minimalist” definition that perfectly sums up what André Tosel, one of Bobbio’s best interpreters in France, has called his tragic social-liberalism.⁶

Whereas in the two autobiographical works, Bobbio reviews his itinerary while “contextualizing” them, as Sartre would say, in the

circumstances that presided over their birth, what emerges is a unity, which is not only that of a life but also that of an intellectual journey: "Rights of man, democracy, and peace are three necessary moments of the same historical movement: without recognition and protection of the rights of man, there is no democracy; without democracy, the minimal conditions for the peaceful resolution of conflicts are not present."⁷

As with the memoirs of Raymond Aron, the reader will be struck by the author's patience and forbearance with regard to his interlocutors, even his political enemies. A rare testimony to over half a century of Italian intellectual and public life, this charting of a way of thought once in a while elicits regret that the intellectual circumstances deprived Bobbio of the time necessary to leave more written traces of thinking that is crucial to Italian and European democracy. Uncontestably his most literary work, *De Senectute* attests to the conflict between "rigor, for knowing and understanding, and commitment, for going beyond contemplation": and yet militant involvement, on which he also offers numerous observations, must not outstrip the effort to understand, but must precede it. Returning to Marx's famous formulation, Bobbio himself modestly provides a key to his own approach: "Until now, non-philosophers have transformed the world (and often for worse); now we must understand it." But always with the very Marxian care to set for oneself only those problems that can be solved, for, to those who have learned from Hobbes and Marx, to understand is already to act. The greatness of the work is thus matched by the modesty of the man.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. With the exception of a few articles in law reviews, Norberto Bobbio's abundant work (together his articles and books amount to more than 1700 titles) has remained virtually unknown in France: apart from "L'Eloge de la

- mitenza," published in *Diogenes* in July 1996 (no. 176), titles found in French translation include *Droit et gauche. Essai sur une distinction politique* (Paris, 1996) and *Libéralisme et démocratie* (Paris, 1996).
2. These add to the collection of portraits and memories published under the title *Maestri e compagni* (Florence, 1984), and *Italia Civile. Ritratti e testimonianze* (Turin, 1986).
 3. Nicole Loraux, *La Cité divisée. L'oubli dans la mémoire d'Athènes* (Paris, 1997).
 4. To whom Bobbio was later to devote an essay: see *Gramsci et la concezione della società civile* (Milan, 1976).
 5. *La Stampa*, Torino, 20 November 1994.
 6. André Tosel, *Démocratie et libéralisme* (Paris, 1995), pp. 151-174.
 7. N. Bobbio, *L'età dei diritti* (Torino, 1990), p. vii, cited by J.-L. Pouthier in his preface to *Droite et gauche*.