

Primo Levi Embraces Europe: A Precursor to Amin Maalouf's 2008 European Language Treaty

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Abstract

In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, 'Europe is not something you discover; Europe is a mission' (Bauman, 2013). The writing of the Italian Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, plays an important role in this 'mission', by promoting a European sense of belonging that goes beyond national and linguistic borders. This is particularly apparent in his autobiographical novel published in 1962, La tregua, in which Levi gives an optimistic portrayal of his contact with different linguistic communities during his journey home from Auschwitz. His stance on the importance of respecting and glorifying linguistic and cultural diversity is reflected in current European language policy in A Rewarding Challenge, a treaty written by Amin Maalouf in 2008. Consequently, this paper aims to bring together Levi and Maalouf along with several other contemporary thinkers of Europe, such as Derrida, Bauman and Habermas, to highlight similarities in their perception of the bonds that exist between Europeans. After first discussing Levi's positive account of his contact with various European languages and cultures during his repatriation to Italy, I will then examine how in A Rewarding Challenge Maalouf deals with many of the issues already raised by Levi. Whilst showing that protecting the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe is certainly a challenge, my paper will clarify why Maalouf states that it is 'a rewarding challenge'. The benefits of accepting this challenge will be shown to represent essential stepping-stones towards creating a collective European identity that defies national and linguistic boundaries.

Keywords: Amin Maalouf, Europe, Primo Levi, inclusivity, language

In *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*, Zygmunt Bauman asserts that ‘Europe is not something you discover; Europe is a mission – something to be made, created, built’ (Bauman: 82). The works of the Italian writer, Primo Levi, play an important role in this mission of constructing Europe, by promoting a European sense of belonging that defies national and linguistic borders. This impetus is particularly apparent in his autobiographical novel published in 1962, *La tregua* (*The Truce*), in which Levi provides an optimistic portrayal of his contact with different linguistic communities during his journey home from Auschwitz. Many of his stances on the importance of respecting and glorifying linguistic diversity are reflected in current European language policy and are mirrored in the propositions laid out in *A Rewarding Challenge*, a treaty written by Amin Maalouf as chair of the Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue in 2008. I argue that Levi’s work can in fact be taken as a forerunner to Maalouf’s idea of an ‘outward-looking’ (14) Europe. Consequently, this paper aims to bring together these two European thinkers along with several other contemporary thinkers of Europe, such as Jacques Derrida and Zygmunt Bauman, to explore where their theories converge and to what extent their messages have been heeded by European citizens and policy makers in 21st century Europe.

To do so, I will first show how Primo Levi promotes a sense of belonging beyond national and linguistic boundaries in *La tregua* and *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man*). Secondly, I will discuss the European language treaty, *A Rewarding Challenge*, and examine how Amin Maalouf deals with many issues already raised by Levi. Finally, I will discuss the feasibility of implementing the ideas presented in Levi’s work and in *A Rewarding Challenge* in the European Union today.

Primo Levi: An ‘Outward-looking’ Representation of European Diversity

Primo Levi, an Italian Holocaust survivor, writes of his experiences inside the Lager in *Se questo è un uomo*. Later, in *La tregua*, he writes of his repatriation from Auschwitz to his home in the north of Italy following the liberation of the concentration camps, and details his passing through different European national and linguistic borders in a world in which a collective European identity is being reinforced. In order to create a sense of European solidarity, Levi’s narratives must first identify the barriers that must be overcome, before proceeding to break down these obstacles.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

Levi’s narratives imply that a lack of language skills hinders human relations. As Angela Flury notes, a world of monolinguals would be home to a ‘divided people’, alienated by their ‘multiple cultural, *linguistic*, ethnic and racial identities’ (Flury: 67, italics mine). In both *La tregua* and *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi often writes of ‘*la prima diffidenza e la difficoltà del linguaggio*’ (the first diffidence and the linguistic obstacles) (*La tregua*: 40) and of the numerous potential friendships that are not able to develop due to the lack of a mutual

language of communication. In the transit camp in Staryje Doroghi, Levi explains that *'le difficoltà di linguaggio ci obbligavano a rapporti monchi e primordiali'* (the difficulties of language reduced us to stunted and primordial relationships) with the Russian officers (*La tregua*: 190). In other situations, Levi demonstrates that this lack of understanding not only hinders, but also sometimes downright thwarts his capacity to connect. In trying to forge a friendship with Wachsmann, the *Scheissbegleiter* in the Lager, Levi writes that *'con questo non riesco a intendermi perché non abbiamo alcuna lingua in comune'* (I never manage to reach an understanding with him, as we have no language in common) (*Se questo è un uomo*: 84). By presenting all that is lost through a lack of linguistic prowess, Levi urges his readers to embrace the learning of foreign languages in order to build bridges between different linguistic communities in order to survive the ordeal of the camps.

Breaking Down Barriers

As Bauman states, referencing Hans-Georg Gadamer: 'in Europeanism, the perpetual effort to separate, expel and externalise is constantly thwarted by the drawing in, admission, accommodation and assimilation of the external' (Bauman 7). Bauman and Gadamer's theory of this 'intrinsically expansive culture' finds a post-war embodiment in the *'spontanea umanità'* (spontaneous humanity) (50) that the people described in *The Truce* show towards each other, and in Levi's positive depiction of an embracing multilingual attitude.

Levi illustrates that, in the aftermath of Auschwitz, the European peoples are united by the horrors of the war that they have lived through together: a war that Levi describes as a European phenomenon involving all of the countries of Europe and whose termination is celebrated by groups of *Europeans* and not by compartmentalised national groups (*La tregua*: 144, 107). This perception of the human race as one united and equal body persists in Levi's description of the aftermath of the camps in *The Truce*. As the survivors are slowly repatriated, they pass through a series of transit camps. In each of these places, the survivors create a community by forming attachments to each other and to the land, with often a large part of them not wanting to move on when the various authorities arbitrarily decree that their homeward journey must continue. Flury writes of how this 'entangled body of people struggle and strive to situate themselves', forging a 'community on the move' (65). For example, Levi's description of the heterogeneous community of the transit camp in Staryje Doroghi as that of a community diverse in sex, race, colour, nationality and religion, fully reveals how these camps were successful melting pots of European languages and cultures (*La tregua*: 165). In his account of the Katowice transit camp, Levi even goes so far as to refer to the group of survivors as the *'popolazione'* (population) of the camp, thus grouping together *'parlatori di tutte le lingue di Europa'* (speakers of all the languages of Europe) as a multilingual and multinational community (65, 23). Levi describes the temporary communities of the transit camps in very positive terms, as forming *'una stagione unica nella (sua) esistenza'* (a unique period of (his) life) (218), and he thus presents a rare, unifying portrait of humanity as men that all share 'the conviction that life has a purpose' (*Survival in Auschwitz*: 71).

In his narratives and theoretical essays, Levi writes not only of embracing the 'other' in a general sense, but also more specifically of embracing the German 'other'. This is particularly meaningful, since the German 'other' was inevitably negatively charged after the war. Levi's portrayal of his and Cesare's encounter with an old German lady in her shop near Katowice shows no consideration for the animosity that is almost expected to exist between survivors and their German oppressors. Levi illustrates how the woman is, at first, brusque and mistrusting of them, but upon hearing that they are Jews from Auschwitz, '*allora era un'altra faccenda*' (well, that changed things) (127). The woman suddenly alters her attitude and urges them to sit down, to drink her beer and eat her food, and, in perhaps her most notable display of trust and comradeship, she invites the Italians to listen to her stories of her own encounters with Nazism. Indeed, Levi's inclusion of this episode in his narrative shows that he has maintained the emotional and rational capacity that allows him to distinguish between his German oppressors in the camps and this German shopkeeper.

Levi's connection with the German 'other' not only includes an embracing of the German people, but also of the German language. In *Se questo è un uomo* (67), Levi explains how the German language has a word that cannot be rendered in Italian:

'La baracca di legno, stipata di umanità dolente, è piena di parole, di ricordi e di un altro dolore. 'Heimweh' si chiama in tedesco questo dolore; è una bella parola, vuol dire 'dolore della casa'.

(The wooden hut, crammed with suffering humanity, is full of words, memories and of another pain. 'Heimweh' the Germans call this pain; it is a beautiful word, it means 'longing for one's home'.)

Levi recognises the emotional value of a German word, thus re-appropriating the sounds of his oppressors and losing his original sense of animosity towards the '*barbarici latrati*' (curt, barbaric barking) of the German language (19).

In fact, language and multilingualism are represented very positively throughout both *Se questo è un uomo* and *The Truce*. As Jacques Derrida points out in *The Other Heading*: 'European cultural identity (...) cannot and must not be dispersed into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable' (39). In *The Truce* and *Se questo è un uomo*, multilingualism is represented as a definitively positive attribute, as a skill that allows people to construct alliances, friendships and effective business negotiations. Each time Levi introduces a new character, language skills are always the first attribute mentioned. Almost unfailingly, linguistic prowess is referred to as a defining characteristic and comes before other more basic traits, such as age and physical appearance, thus showing the importance that the author gives to the mastery of foreign languages. For example, this can be noted in Levi's first description of Mordo Nahum:

‘Oltre alla sua lingua, parlava spagnolo (come tutti gli ebrei di Salonico), francese, un italiano stentato ma di buon accento, e, seppi poi, il turco, il bulgaro e un po’ di albanese. Aveva quarant’anni: era di statura piuttosto alta’.

(Besides his own language, he spoke Spanish (like all Jews from Salonica), French, a halting Italian but with a good accent, and, as I found out later, Turkish, Bulgarian and a little Albanian. He was about forty; of fairly tall stature). (*La tregua*: 38).

Furthermore, it is evident that Levi’s praise of multilingualism goes beyond the subject of his narrative and is even apparent in his narrative style. Levi, the author and main character of his autobiographical texts, is a plurilingual individual and his multilingual writing choice mirrors his all-embracing philosophy and attitude towards languages. In many passages in *The Truce*, Levi uses the technique of code-mixing and quotes direct speech in its original language. For example, direct speech is quoted in French – ‘*Bon Dieu, c’est un français*’ (20); Russian – ‘*Po malu, po malu*’ (19); and Polish – ‘*Sto zlotych*’ (97). Levi’s Auschwitz narratives are truly saturated with foreign words, directly imitating the multilingual context of this reality. In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi shows how his rapport to the signified is no longer restricted to only one signifier: ‘*Entro cinque minuti inizia la distribuzione del pane, del pane-Brot-Broid-chleb-pain-lechem-keynér*’ (within five minutes begins the distribution of bread, of bread-Brot-Broid-chleb-pain-lechem-keynér) (45).

In addition, Levi shows that having a common language can even help to override the past. Levi describes how Mordo Nahum manages to conduct incredibly effective business relations with the Italian army officers in Krakow due to his knowledge of the Italian language, but, most importantly, due to his understanding of the Italian culture. Nahum’s ability at assuming ‘Italian-ness’, as Flury describes it, is a miracle (Flury: 67). Levi relates how Nahum is ‘*esperto di ragazze e di tagliatelle, di Juventus e di musica lirica, di guerra e di blenorragia, di vino e di borsa nera, di motociclette e di espedienti*’ (an expert on girls and spaghetti, Juventus and lyrical music, the war and blenorrhoea, wine and the black market, motorbikes and spivs) (*La tregua*: 49). The Greek man’s in-depth cultural knowledge of Italy cancels out all animosity that the Italian army officers could have felt towards him; the Greeks and Italians had, after all, been fighting on opposite sides not so long ago. Thanks to their willingness to become part of each other’s cultural world, Levi and Nahum end their evening with the great material advantage of a ‘*lettiera di paglia che gli italiani, con cura materna, avevano preparato in un angolo*’ (straw bed that the Italians, with maternal care, had prepared in a corner) (50): an effective business operation concluded thanks to a shared cultural heritage that reaches beyond national and linguistic borders.

Levi represents the learning of other languages as not only vital, but also as an enjoyable experience and writes at length of the pleasure of being able to understand a foreigner. The author himself is left with ‘*gli occhi scintillanti di gioia*’ (eyes shining with joy) (*La tregua*: 61) after exchanges in languages

not his own, and shows how these ‘rewarding challenges’ – as Maalouf might refer to them – are key in creating ‘outward-looking’ (Maalouf: 14) individuals. Levi shows how language skills and the ensuing cross-cultural contact can give a great sense of personal satisfaction and contribute to the construction of a person’s identity and self-worth, even in an extreme ‘limit situation’ like the Holocaust or in Levi’s lengthy repatriation journey.

Levi’s appreciation of the beauty of language itself and its innate untranslatability is linked to how each language represents a unique worldview. This is demonstrated in the scene where Levi describes helping Cesare to seduce a Polish girl. Levi encounters difficulties in providing Cesare with appropriate Polish romantic expressions, claiming that certain romantic matters cannot be expressed ‘*in alcun’altra lingua oltre all’italiano e al francese*’ (in any language other than Italian and French) (*La tregua* 100). Through Levi’s joy in discovering new words in foreign languages and his demonstration that certain concepts are untranslatable, the reader is shown how each language provides a specific and unique way of seeing the world.

**Amin Maalouf’s *Rewarding Challenge*:
a Levi-esque Attitude Towards Cultural and Linguistic Diversity**

In 2008, the GIID was commissioned to discuss the state of linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe in the 21st century. Chaired by Maalouf, the group created the *Rewarding Challenge* treaty, a set of proposals that intend to safeguard the languages and cultures of Europe. Despite the difficulty of the task, the group aimed to present *practical steps* towards the protection of European languages. The most noteworthy of these measures is undoubtedly the ‘personal adoptive language’ (PAL) policy, in which Europeans are encouraged to learn *three* European languages – their mother tongue, a language of international communication such as English or French, and a PAL for unadulterated linguistic and cultural discovery. I will now highlight similarities between Levi’s writing and Maalouf’s treaty.

Language Skills for Effective Business Relations

As Maalouf observes in *A Rewarding Challenge*, multilingualism is not an end unto itself. On the contrary, it should serve to strengthen Europe and aim to foster ‘mutual comprehension’ (2). Maalouf writes clearly and concisely in his treaty of the advantage of multilingualism on our ability to conduct effective business relations:

‘One economist judiciously remarked that a man speaking only one international language could always buy what he wanted anywhere in the world; but if that man wanted to sell rather than buy then it would be better for him to know the language of the prospective purchaser’ (18).

Unsurprisingly, Maalouf seems to echo Levi’s philosophy of language¹ in *A Rewarding Challenge*: ‘To learn the language of a partner who happens to be a former enemy is very important, both for its symbolic value as well as for its

practical advantages' (16, 17).

'Personal adoptive language' proposition

In *A Rewarding Challenge*, Maalouf exposes the 'personal adoptive language' policy, in which he makes 'a clean break with the traditional logic behind language learning' (17). He argues that we must encourage people to reflect not only on 'utilitarian considerations' when choosing whether to learn foreign languages, but to take into account that the 'exploration of another linguistic and cultural universe can (...) bring enormous (...) emotional satisfaction' (17, 14). With his PAL policy, Maalouf suggests that we should all take pride in our own culture, whilst simultaneously embracing others to create the unity in difference of Derrida's envisioned European identity that 'includes respect for *both* universal values *and* difference' (Introduction xlvi). PAL policy respects this balance and considers that one must discover their chosen PAL 'not at the expense of belonging to one's country or culture of origin, but in addition to it' (Maalouf: 14).

Preserving Languages as Unique Worldviews

Maalouf also writes in *A Rewarding Challenge* that turning only to English as an instrument for global communication and rejecting other languages would actually be 'potentially a factor of impoverishment' (16). Maalouf passionately sustains that we must protect all European languages from extinction because 'to neglect a language is to run the risk of seeing its speakers becoming disenchanted with the European project' (12). *A Rewarding Challenge* even goes so far as to state that 'to preserve all the languages of our heritage (...) even for languages that are very much minority languages (...) is inseparable from the very idea of a Europe of peace, culture, universality and prosperity' (13).

Assessing the Feasibility of a Multilingual and Multicultural Europe

It is important in today's Europe that European language policy respects all of the different language communities within its borders, as Peter Kraus underlines in *A Union of Diversity*. Maalouf begins his language treaty with these words: 'Linguistic diversity is a challenge for Europe, but, in our view, a rewarding challenge' (2). Statements such as these leave us in no doubt as to the importance of heeding these messages and taking more care of our common European linguistic and cultural heritage. After first discussing how it is clear that these ideas and philosophies are not always easy to implement in modern-day Europe, I will strive to illustrate how, despite this, Levi and Maalouf's message has succeeded in creating an increased awareness of the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe.

Obstacles and Criticism

In *The Other Heading*, Derrida tackles the issue of how difficult it will be to implement an appropriate philosophy of translation for Europe that will 'both avoid the nationalistic tensions of linguistic difference and the violent homogenization of languages' (58). In *A Rewarding Challenge* itself, Maalouf and the GIID also raise the issue of the costly translation and interpreting

services that are required in order to fully respect the linguistic diversity of Europe. Likewise, László Marác, in *Multilingual Europe, Multilingual Europeans*, makes much the same point that ‘the promotion of a ‘Babylonian Europe’ (...) is neither very efficient nor practical’ and that ‘translating into all the official languages is time and money consuming’ (Marác: 22).

The GIID also draws attention to the fact that ‘despite the efforts of certain leading founder countries, such as France and Germany, we are witnessing an erosion of the level of knowledge of the neighbour’s language in favour of a language of international communication, which is deemed more useful’ (17). This phenomenon can be clearly observed in an example taken from inside Europe, but from outside the European Union: the nation-state of Switzerland. Switzerland only has four official languages, which coexist peacefully enough, but its citizens still often find themselves having to resort to English as a *lingua franca* (Korshunova: 67). Given that Switzerland struggles to handle a mere four languages fairly, it is understandable that there may be some doubts raised as to how Europe can possibly manage all of its twenty-four languages without resorting to the globalising power of English.² Whilst it is true that turning to English as a *lingua franca* for global communication is an easier option, Maalouf points out that this creates ‘a rivalry which results in the weakening of other languages and which is also detrimental to the English language itself and its speakers’ (10, 11). This phenomenon creates a large proportion of native English speakers that are complacently monolingual and are thus not only less involved in the discovery of other cultures, but are also less desirable candidates in the international job market when competing against their multilingual peers (Maalouf: 15).³

Progress

Acutely aware of all the obstacles detailed above, Maalouf uses *A Rewarding Challenge* to highlight the importance of having a realistic and feasible plan for the safeguarding of Europe’s linguistic and cultural diversity, working to counteract D. Grimm’s argument that there is no such thing as a European people. Maalouf is mindful that ‘while being persuaded that such issues will continue to be debated for many generations to come, we nevertheless wanted to come up with some answers and propose to the European leaders and to our fellow citizens a possible approach’ (4). It is thus relevant to look at what steps Europe has already taken to implement Maalouf’s approach.

In terms of protecting the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe, there are currently many initiatives in place, and many of those have come into being as offshoots of *A Rewarding Challenge*. Nonetheless, ambitious enterprises such as *A Rewarding Challenge* are still to be welcomed and have undoubtedly made some lasting impacts on European language policy. The acronym PAL that was first coined by Maalouf and the GIID is now widely used in other European documents and the notion has been assimilated to some extent in current European educational and administrative institutions. In the years directly following the publication of *A Rewarding Challenge*, for example, several new organisations were created to work towards maintaining Europe’s linguistic diversity. A case in point would be the *Language Diversity* project, a two-year

programme funded by the European Commission from 2012-2013 that aimed to raise awareness of multilingualism and the cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe. The *Language Diversity* project worked specifically with regional and minority languages, those languages that were most in need of help to fight against the globalising power of English.

Finally, it seems opportune to give one last example of existing European policies that aim to establish the 'sense of belonging to Europe' that Maalouf posits in *A Rewarding Challenge*. Europe currently operates a complex system of exchange programmes under the *Erasmus Plus* initiative (previously the *Lifelong Learning Programme*, or LLP). These exchanges allow students to embrace other cultures and languages and celebrate the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe by promoting 'plurilingualism, multiculturalism and mobility among Europeans (and by engaging) the European 'civil society' in a polyglot way of life' (Korshunova: 71). Programmes such as these support the discovery of European languages and cultures by helping to create bonds, rather than boundaries, between European nations. The *Erasmus Plus* initiative therefore encourages Europeans to become 'outward-looking' (Maalouf: 14) citizens – with a European network of affinities, and academic, social and work-related contacts.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have brought together the writings of the Italian Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, and Amin Maalouf's 2008 European language treaty, *A Rewarding Challenge*, along with several other contemporary thinkers of Europe, including Derrida and Bauman, in an exploration of the points of convergence between their theories.

To this end, I have shown how Primo Levi promotes a sense of belonging beyond national and linguistic boundaries in *The Truce* and *Se questo è un uomo*, through an examination of how Levi's writing breaks down the barrier between parties that do not share a common language. I have shown how Levi presents a collective European identity in a 'limit situation' and provides a positive representation of multilingualism. Secondly, I have discussed the European language treaty, *A Rewarding Challenge*, and have examined how Maalouf deals with many issues already raised by Levi, such as the advantage of language skills in business relations and how each language represents a unique worldview and must therefore be preserved. Finally, I have discussed the feasibility of implementing the ideas presented in Levi's work and in *A Rewarding Challenge* in the European Union today. Whilst it has been seen that protecting this diversity is certainly a challenge, Maalouf wisely states that it is 'a rewarding challenge'. The benefits of accepting it, some of which have been explored in this paper, are multiple and far-reaching, and represent essential stepping-stones towards creating an all-embracing collective European identity.

Endnotes

- 1 Levi is not normally considered as a philosopher, but he does develop a discourse that becomes the basis for the European philosophy of language that Maalouf describes in *A Rewarding Challenge*.
- 2 Levi even gives one example in *La tregua* of having to turn to the use of a *lingua franca* as a last resort in his quest for a mutual language of communication. When Levi meets a priest in Krakow, who “*non intendeva né il francese né il tedesco*”, he describes their exchange as being “*la più stravagante ed arruffata delle conversazioni*”, held in Latin thanks to Levi’s “*anni di studi classici*.”
- 3 For more information on this debate, see David Crystal: *English as a Global Language*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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Biography

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