

Włodek Goldkorn ‘*acrobata del tempo*’:¹ Imaginative Memory and the Ethics of Remembrance

MATILDE PIU

University College Cork

INTRODUCTION

In *Il bambino nella neve* (2016), Włodek Goldkorn reflects on the legacy of the Holocaust through a deeply personal and politically resonant lens.² Born in 1951 to Jewish parents who survived the Shoah, Goldkorn left Poland for Israel following the anti-Semitic purges of 1968, eventually settling in Italy in 1977, where he became a prominent journalist and public intellectual. His transnational trajectory—marked by Polish origins, Eastern European Jewish heritage, Israeli experience, and Italian cultural integration—positions him to approach Holocaust remembrance not as a fixed national narrative, but as a dynamic, ethically and politically charged process.

As will be shown, Goldkorn’s account unfolds as both a journey to the physical sites of destruction and a meditation on how memory is inherited, imagined, and reshaped across generations. Rejecting sacralised or static conceptions of Holocaust memory, he frames remembrance as an ongoing act of interpretation—rooted in responsibility, critical reflection, and imaginative engagement. In an era of rising historical revisionism and the instrumentalization of collective memory, Goldkorn’s work intervenes in urgent debates about the politics of remembrance, demonstrating that memory is never neutral or merely

¹ ‘Acrobata del tempo’ is an expression borrowed from Günther Anders who uses it to describe a figure capable of extending their temporal horizon beyond the present to encompass both past and future generations. The Italian is retained from its use in scholarship (e.g., Carla Benedetti 2021, 2023), and the phrase is cited here as a quotation. Cf. Günther Anders, *Brevi scritti sulla fine dell’uomo* (Trieste: Asterios Editore, 2016), p. 59.

² This essay uses both ‘Shoah’ and ‘Holocaust’ without intending a strict or systematic conceptual distinction.

retrospective, but a social practice.³ Against the commodification and moral simplification of the Shoah,⁴ Goldkorn proposes a model of remembrance that is self-aware, disruptive, and attentive to present ethical and political concerns.

This essay argues that *Il bambino nella neve* reconceptualises Holocaust memory as a living, transgenerational practice, sustained by critical distance and imaginative empathy. Through a close reading of the text, the essay explores five key dimensions: first, the interplay between personal testimony and historical narrative (section 1); second, Goldkorn's critique of second-generation discourse (section 2); third, his reflections on the limits of language and representation (section 3 and 4); fourth, the role of imagination as ethical engagement (section 5); and finally, the construction of memory as a form of moral labour in the present (section 6). I explore these five aspects in what follows.

THE DOUBLE JOURNEY

In *Il bambino nella neve*, Włodek Goldkorn undertakes a dual journey—temporal and spatial—that becomes a metaphor for the complex, layered work of Holocaust memory. 'Sono un viandante: nello spazio e nel tempo,'⁵ he writes, framing this journey as both personal reckoning and historical exploration. This bifocal odyssey weaves together childhood recollections and visits to sites of genocide, constructing a multidimensional engagement with remembrance that resists static or monumentalised forms.

The temporal journey begins in postwar Poland, where Goldkorn grew up as the child of Jewish survivors. Memory, here, is not inherited through structured narrative but through the texture of domestic space—charged with the lingering presence of the Nazi occupation. His childhood home, once confiscated by the SS, still bore the traces of that violence: 'sul retro dei mobili erano attaccate targhette di metallo scuro. Su quelle targhette c'era una scritta in tedesco: *Proprietà del Terzo Reich*, e una svastica come icona. [...] Le

³ Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁴ Cf. Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁵ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2016), p. 13.

svastiche divennero una presenza quotidiana, familiare parte del mio immaginario infantile e delle mie fantasie'.⁶ Everyday objects, inscribed with Third Reich insignia, formed the backdrop of his early life, embedding trauma in the very fabric of the ordinary.⁷

In this context, memory is transmitted less through testimony than through absence and silence. Goldkorn recalls how he and his sister grew up amid 'mezze parole e scampoli di narrazioni reticenti,'⁸ gestures of speech that concealed as much as they revealed. 'La vergogna è la morte senza il lutto,'⁹ he writes—shame silences grief, and with it, the possibility of forgetting. The refusal or inability to speak becomes itself a formative, haunting presence, a void that propels Goldkorn's inquiry into the limits of representation and the ethics of transmission.

This introspective labour is mirrored by a physical journey to extermination camps: Auschwitz, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka. These are not approached as commemorative destinations, but as charged landscapes where imagination, memory, and affect converge. 'Mi incammino su una lunga, lunghissima strada dove l'incubo e l'immaginazione [...] sono più forti di ogni percezione della realtà.'¹⁰ Walking these grounds, Goldkorn confronts both familial history and the impossibility of total identification. The gesture of empathy—'cerco di immedesimarmi'¹¹—is always shadowed by doubt and historical opacity: 'Penso che dove cammino ora camminarono i miei familiari. O forse non è vero. Forse nell'agosto del 1943 fecero un'altra strada per raggiungere le camere a gas.'¹²

Goldkorn's experience of Auschwitz encapsulates this ambivalence. Far from a site of solemn reverence, it appears to him as a 'luogo postmoderno,'¹³ shaped by the demands of representation and tourism. His visceral reaction—'vorrei vederla distrutta,'¹⁴—signals a refusal to aestheticise horror or to allow the symbolic to eclipse the real: 'questo è un luogo

⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷ On the inheritance of trauma through imaginative and affective channels, cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Himmedesimarmi?—isolocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁸ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 50.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 50–51.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 147–148.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁴ Ibid.

maledetto che non dovrebbe e non sarebbe mai dovuto esistere e che non può essere, in alcun modo, riabilitato. Auschwitz è prima di tutto il mio cimitero di famiglia'.¹⁵

From this double journey emerges a conception of memory as embodied, affective, and unresolved. Memory is not merely a cognitive act or historical reconstruction, but a lived experience—shaped by physical space, emotional residue, and ethical tension. The interweaving of temporal reflection and spatial movement creates a palimpsestic structure in which past and present coexist in tension, continually rewriting one another.¹⁶ This non-linear temporality resists historical narrative's closure, framing memory as a continual negotiation.

Integral to this structure is the book's visual dimension. Neige De Benedetti's stark photographs—depicting, for instance, Katowice, Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Warsaw—introduce an intermedial layer of testimony. Devoid of human presence, the images evoke and testify to the 'scomparsa di un mondo intero',¹⁷ amplifying the sense of absence and historical void. Their silence invites an ethically engaged spectatorship, aligning with Huyssen's observation that photography in contemporary memory culture does not merely document but activates affect, linking disparate temporalities.¹⁸ In this context, the photographs are not illustrative supplements but autonomous visual traces, resonating with and extending Goldkorn's reflections.

Together, text and image construct a multidirectional mode of remembrance (i.e. intermedial and temporally layered), in which the past is not simply recalled but re-inhabited. *Il bambino nella neve* proposes a vision of Holocaust memory as an active, transgenerational process—embodied in movement, shaped by gaps and ruins, and sustained by critical and imaginative engagement.

POSTMEMORY AND THE ETHICS OF INHERITANCE

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cf. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015).

¹⁷ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 180.

¹⁸ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 2–3.

While *Il bambino nella neve* unfolds as a physical and temporal journey, it also engages with a less visible, but equally fraught, terrain: the transmission of memory across generations. As Goldkorn becomes a grandfather, he confronts a central question of his narrative—how to pass on the unspeakable:

Poi capita che nascano i nipotini. E arriva il momento in cui si pone la domanda: come dire loro l'indicibile? Come trasmettere la memoria? Quando si diventa nonni, il futuro divisibile, e ci si chiede come inserire la memoria nella costruzione dell'avvenire.¹⁹

This reflection reframes memory not as a fixed inheritance but as a future-oriented practice, shaped by rupture rather than continuity. Goldkorn rejects the idea that trauma can be faithfully transmitted across generations, handed down like a sealed inheritance, viewing memory instead as a fragmentary and interpretive process—marked by uncertainty, imagination, and the persistent presence of absence.

His position places him at a critical distance from the discourse of the *second generation*, often used to describe the children of Holocaust survivors. Though he acknowledges the psychological weight of this category, Goldkorn remains sceptical of its premises. He resists conflating inherited memory with direct experience, suffering with its echoes, and warns against a form of identification that risks erasing the boundaries between survivor and descendant:

Si parla molto della “seconda generazione”, intendendo i figli dei superstiti [...] Ma diciamolo: in quella definizione c'è un piccolo abuso. Noi, la Shoah, per nostra immensa fortuna non l'abbiamo sperimentata. E allora, non ne risentiamo gli effetti ugualmente? Sì, li risentiamo: però non in quanto vittime, ma per la sensazione del vuoto. [...] E allora quel vuoto viene riempito con una sostanza, un misto di emozioni e di razionalità che chiamiamo memoria. Salvo il fatto che la memoria è un'invenzione: la sua forma e il contenuto ognuno se li costruisce come vuole.²⁰

Here, memory emerges not as a collective possession, but as a singular act of construction—less a stable legacy than an ethical stance. What is inherited is not trauma,

¹⁹ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 131.

²⁰ Ivi., pp. 41–42.

but a void: an inconceivable absence that demands active interpretation. Memory then becomes a form of imaginative labour, shaped as much by the limits of representation as by the need to make sense of inherited silence. This idea resonates strongly with Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory,' which describes the relationship of the 'generation after' to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. Postmemory, as Hirsch argues, is not based on direct recollection but on imaginative reconstruction—a process of investing in and creating narratives from the fragments and silences of the past.²¹ Goldkorn embodies this dynamic as he seeks to reconstruct a family history that he did not witness, acknowledging that the contours of his inheritance are defined as much by what is missing as by what remains.

Crucially, Goldkorn's approach is grounded not in victimhood but in responsibility. Raised in a family where hatred and resentment were consciously rejected, he cultivates a more critical, outward-looking relationship to the past:

Sono stato fortunato a crescere in una famiglia in cui il rancore, l'odio, l'idea della vendetta erano inconcepibili. [...] Per questo il mio rapporto con la memoria, con l'indicibile, con l'inimmaginabile, è più sereno rispetto a quello di molti miei coetanei, [...] Io cerco di comprendere, non cedo alla vendetta. Soprattutto penso che la memoria non serva a rivendicare i torti patiti, a chiudersi in un recinto della propria comunità. Penso che della memoria vada fatto un uso politico.²²

Goldkorn's stance aligns with Neumann's view of memory as an active, selective, and culturally formative process, produced in the present through narratives. His rejection of grievance-based remembrance in favour of a future-oriented ethical engagement exemplifies what Neumann identifies as the constructive, forward-looking dimension of cultural remembrance.²³

This political use of memory does not entail instrumentalisation but ethical engagement. Goldkorn refuses to treat memory as a means of claiming historical grievance or reinforcing group identity; instead, he insists that it must be mobilised to address contemporary injustice and to expand the ethical imagination beyond the confines of one's own history. Such an approach resonates with Meretoja's argument that storytelling

²¹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

²² Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 41.

²³ Birgit Neumann, 'The Literary Representation of Memory', in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 333–43.)

actively shapes ethical understanding and the horizon of the possible.²⁴ In this light, memory becomes a practice of responsibility—reinvented and reactivated in the service of the future.

LANGUAGE BREAKS DOWN: CONSTRUCTIVE NIHILISM AND THE VOID

Goldkorn's scepticism toward inherited memory extends into a deeper interrogation of language itself. In his view, the Holocaust constitutes not only a historical trauma but also a profound rupture in the very conditions of meaning. 'La Shoah,' he writes, 'significa una rottura epistemologica e ontologica: significa l'assenza della parola, della spiegazione, del perché.'²⁵ The catastrophe defies narrative not simply because of its horror, but because it dismantles the symbolic frameworks through which human beings construct intelligibility. Words, in this context, become inadequate, even complicit.

Refusing the impulse to translate the trauma of the Shoah into moral instruction or redemptive closure, Goldkorn embraces a form of what might be called constructive nihilism. 'Chi è morto è morto,' he writes, 'e cercare di dare un senso a una morte così assurda come le camere a gas vuol dire accettare una razionalizzazione di qualcosa che non può essere ragionevole.'²⁶ In this refusal to impose coherence, he challenges the pedagogical clichés and commemorative rituals that seek to stabilise the Holocaust into a lesson:

“Mai più Auschwitz”. Per me sono parole prive di senso e contenuto [...]. dire “mai più” o “non permettete che si ripeta” significa costruire una specie di pedagogia della Shoah [...]. Ma non ci può essere una qualche pedagogia, laddove la parola ha perso ogni significato. O forse sto cercando di dare troppa importanza a qualcosa che ormai è solo un rito stanco, un cerimoniale obbligatorio per capi di Stato, preti, rabbini, politici in carriera o in pensione, moralisti in cerca di una causa ovvia e rassicurante (ci si sente bravi e giusti, quando si condanna l'olocausto, e si riscuote un applauso garantito), attivisti di organizzazioni ebraiche altrimenti ciechi e sordi di fronte alle ingiustizie, [...] La Shoah è solo un vuoto.²⁷

²⁴ Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve.*, p. 119.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ivi., pp. 132–133.

Here, Goldkorn dismantles the rhetoric of moral reassurance often invoked around Holocaust memory. In his view, such slogans mask a refusal to confront the epistemological and ethical abyss that the Shoah represents. To speak of it as a source of 'lessons' is to flatten its absurdity into a palatable narrative, reclaiming its unassimilable violence in the name of civic virtue or symbolic consensus. As Valentina Pisanty notes, contemporary public discourse often turns the Shoah into a symbolic resource through banalisation or ritualisation, thereby neutralising its disruptive force.²⁸ Goldkorn's critique, however, targets not only the language of politicians and institutional ceremonies but also the complacency of those who rehearse memory without confronting its void.

At the same time, Goldkorn resists historical deterministic logics that see the Holocaust as the inevitable outcome of European modernity.²⁹ He rejects the notion that history proceeds toward catastrophes with structural necessity. For him, violence is not preordained but contingent—a rupture, not a culmination. The past does not instruct; it interrupts.

Yet this refusal of closure does not release us from the obligation to remember. On the contrary, it sharpens that obligation. For Goldkorn, remembrance does not mean transmitting a finished story. It means sustaining a relationship with what cannot be said, with what remains unresolved. In this sense, memory becomes not a retrieval of the past but an imaginative and ethical stance toward the silences it leaves behind. It is precisely within this tension—between language and its failure, between absence and its traces—that Goldkorn's renegotiation of Holocaust memory takes form.

FROM SACRED TO SPECTACLE: MEMORY AS PERFORMANCE

If the Holocaust, for Goldkorn, marks a rupture in language and meaning, it also exposes the limits of how atrocity is remembered in public space. In extending his reflections

²⁸ Cf. Valentina Pisanty, 'Banalizzare e sacralizzare', in *Memorie, storiografie e narrazioni della deportazione razziale*, ed. by Marta Baiardi and Alberto Cavaglioni (Rome: Viella, 2014), pp. 185–94; *I guardiani della memoria e il ritorno delle destre xenofobe* (Florence: Bompiani, 2019).

²⁹ Cf. Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 190.

beyond the private domain of transgenerational memory, he turns a critical eye to institutional rituals and sites of commemoration. His target is not remembrance itself, but the ways in which memory is increasingly codified, commodified, and sacralised—turned into spectacle and stripped of its political charge.³⁰

Auschwitz, in particular, becomes for him an emblem of this transformation. Rather than provoking ethical reflection, it risks functioning as a theatre of ritual reassurance:

Auschwitz sembra una fantasmagorica costruzione posticcia. Penso che chiunque arrivi qui abbia già un'idea di quello che sarà il suo sguardo. [...] assuefatti come siamo alle immagini e all'invocazione continua e rituale di questo luogo [...] Auschwitz si presta a ogni abuso, a ogni manipolazione politica, sentimentale, religiosa, perfino a ogni celebrazione [...] E in quanto simbolo e costruzione che sembra preservare tratti di autenticità, con le sue reliquie [...] si presta ai laici e meno laici pellegrinaggi.³¹

This is not a rejection of Auschwitz as a site of memory, but of the way it has been reinscribed as a symbolic and aestheticised experience—what he calls a ‘Disneyland dell’orrore.’³² The sentence encapsulates his discomfort with what he sees as the theatricalization of suffering, the touristification of atrocity—a process in which trauma is curated, sanitised, and the Holocaust reduced to a culturally consumed and emotionally pre-digested artefact palatable to visitors. Memory becomes a set of images and slogans, and is stripped of its unsettling force:

Il museo degli orrori [...] mi dice poco o niente, nato com'è per la volontà di fissare gli oggetti nella memoria collettiva; di costruire un ricordo attraverso un presunto e falso realismo, falso come tutti i realismi, e quindi maggiormente falso qui, perché Auschwitz come la conosciamo, come la vedono gli spettatori, è il risultato di una costruzione culturale che molti vorrebbero scambiare per l'epifania dell'autenticità. Il ricordo, invece, il vero ricordo, non può vivere nella materia; pena la sua reificazione, pena la sua trasformazione in un totem.³³

³⁰ Cf. Valentina Pisanty, ‘Banalizzare e sacralizzare’.

³¹ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, pp. 141, 154.

³² Cf. Ivi., p. 155.

³³ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 142.

Goldkorn's stance echoes broader critiques of what has been termed 'dark tourism'. Philip R. Stone's theorisation of a 'dark tourism spectrum' aims to classify memorial spaces based on their proximity to actual suffering, distinguishing between 'dark fun factories' and 'dark camps of genocide'. William Miles further refines this typology by differentiating between sites 'associated with death' and those 'of death,' emphasising the moral and locational gravity of the latter. Scholars have observed a *growing demand* for so-called *dark experiences*, often problematically framed in terms of *authenticity* and *emotional intensity*—paradigms to measure the darkness of particular sites, the recreational consumption of death, and the deployment of narratives designed to package atrocity into consumable narratives, sometimes veering toward spectacle or voyeurism.³⁴

Above all, however, Goldkorn takes issue with the sacralisation of Holocaust memory—the framing of Auschwitz as a sacred space:

Non c'è niente di sacro ad Auschwitz. Ho letto, ho sentito tante volte associare la parola 'profanazione' a qualche atto ritenuto disdicevole relativo a questo luogo. Profanazione? Ma quanta perversione, quanta volontà di non soffermarsi a riflettere, quanta paura di affrontare la fragilità di noi umani e la nostra propensione al Male, ci sono dietro a questo accostamento tra il sacro—perché la parola profanazione riporta al sacro—e l'immagine di Auschwitz: immagine, perché della realtà delle camere a gas non sappiamo niente.³⁵

This is a provocative reversal. Where others see reverence, Goldkorn sees repression: a refusal to dwell in human fragility, to confront complicity, or to remain with the discomfort of historical violence. Sacralisation, in his view, domesticates memory. It transforms it into a relic, a fixed image, a moral certainty, a manageable past. Instead, he argues, memory must be unsettling. It must resist reification, refuse symbolic closure, and remain open to ethical disruption. In this sense, his critique is not iconoclastic but restorative. By refusing both commodification and sanctification, Goldkorn insists on a

³⁴ Cf. Sharpley, Richard, and Philip R. Stone, eds., *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2009); Magano, José et al., 'Dark Tourism, the Holocaust, and Well-being: A Systematic Review', *Helijon*, 9.1 (2023). Stone, Philip R., 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions', *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 54.2 (2006), pp. 145–60. William F.S. Miles, 'Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29.4 (2002), pp. 1175–78.

³⁵ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, p. 142.

form of remembrance that remains politically alive—one that demands not pious repetition but radical reflection.

IMAGINATION AS RESISTANCE: MEMORY'S ETHICAL FORCE

Goldkorn's critique of the sacralisation and commodification of Holocaust memory, along with his scepticism toward language and representational realism, does not lead to a rejection of remembrance. Rather, it opens space for a different mode of engagement—one grounded in imaginative empathy, affective responsiveness, and ethical attentiveness. Where institutional memory becomes ritualised and realism fails to convey the affective magnitude of the Shoah, imagination becomes a necessary third path: not as embellishment, but as a vital, relational practice.

‘La memoria [...] è fallace; le verità umane sono difficili da decifrare,’³⁶ Goldkorn writes, reminding us that the past is not a fixed repository of facts but a site of instability, ambiguity, and projection. While Auschwitz is an incontrovertible historical fact, ‘il suo vissuto appartiene a una sfera che implica immaginazione, sogno, fantasia.’³⁷ Memory, in this view, does not reproduce experience; it reanimates it: ‘dobbiamo trasfigurare la realtà’,³⁸ Goldkorn reminds us. Memory is ‘una costruzione psicologica, culturale, politica,’³⁹ shaped by the present as much as by the past.

Goldkorn explicitly rejects the adequacy of realist representation in capturing Auschwitz: ‘le opere realistiche che cercano di riprodurlo sono perlopiù fallimentari, perché la loro simbolica e semantica non è adeguata alla dimensione dell’orrore.’⁴⁰ For him, imagination is not a betrayal of truth, but a way of approaching a past that is irretrievable, traumatic, and always mediated. In *Il bambino nella neve*, imagination functions as a method of ethical reconstruction—capable of holding the silences and contradictions that testimony alone cannot bridge.

This imaginative labour becomes even more urgent as witnesses disappear. Memory, Goldkorn suggests, is never a mere act of recall, but a future-oriented projection shaped by dreams, desires, and fears.

³⁶ Ivi., p. 135.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ivi., p. 155.

E del resto cosa è la memoria se non la rappresentazione di quello che eravamo o volevamo essere? [...] la trasfigurazione dei nostri sogni, dei desideri e delle nostre paure. E anche la proiezione della nostra immaginazione sui nostri nipoti. [...] La memoria è fatta di immagini: sognate, viste nelle foto e nelle opere d'arte, costruite da noi stessi e dagli altri. La memoria è solo il nulla su cui cerchiamo di strutturare la nostra identità.⁴¹

Far from escaping historical responsibility, such a view calls for renewed attentiveness to how memory is constructed—and for whom.⁴²

Through this lens, memory becomes not only an ethical task but a political and imaginative one: resistant to closure, aware of its own artifice, and anchored in relationality. By foregrounding what we may call imaginative empathy, *Il bambino nella neve* reclaims memory as an active, affective, and open-ended process. It refuses the comfort of fixed narratives and instead insists on memory's capacity to provoke, unsettle, and sustain emotional and moral complexity. Imagination here is not a retreat from reality, but a means of re-entering it—through multiplicity, fragility, and the unresolvable tensions of remembrance. This logic finds a compelling echo in Olga Tokarczuk's idea of 'ognosia'—a form of knowledge that transcends rational analysis and embraces intuitive, narrative understanding. Tokarczuk describes 'ognosia' as a way of organising the world through empathy and synthesis, allowing disparate experiences to be woven into a larger, meaningful whole. In her Nobel lecture, she emphasises that literature is grounded in 'tenderness (*czułość*) toward any being other than ourselves'⁴³, a stance that captures the affective, relational, and ethically engaged dimension of Goldkorn's narrative project and illuminates the practice of imaginative empathy.⁴⁴

MEMORY AS POLITICAL WORK: RESPONSIBILITY OVER REVERENCE

In *Il bambino nella neve*, memory is not a passive repository of the past but an active, dynamic practice—one that confronts the present with ethical urgency and political clarity.

⁴¹ Ivi., pp. 131, 153.

⁴² On memory and responsibility cf. Bartolini, Guido, and Joseph Ford (eds). *Mediating Historical Responsibility: Memories of 'Difficult Pasts' in European Cultures* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024).

⁴³ Olga Tokarczuk, *The Tender Narrator: Nobel Lecture*, trans. by Jennifer Croft, (The Nobel Prize, 7 December 2019), p. 25.

⁴⁴ Cf. Olga Tokarczuk, 'Ognosia', trans. by Jennifer Croft, *Words Without Borders*, June 6, 2022. Olga Tokarczuk, *The Tender Narrator*.

For Goldkorn, remembering the Holocaust is not a ritual of reverence, nor a performance of sorrow. It is an act of resistance: a mode of speaking truth to power, defending the voiceless, and challenging the mechanisms of exclusion and dehumanisation that persist today.

‘La memoria va usata, strumentalizzata, giocata politicamente: anche la memoria della Shoah,⁴⁵ he writes. But this use must be grounded in ethical, aesthetic, and political discernment. The Shoah, for Goldkorn, cannot be reduced to solemn commemoration or rhetorical gestures: ‘serve a difendere gli oppressi, i derelitti, coloro cui il potere toglie perfino la voce. [...] a niente se non a promuovere e difendere, ovunque e nel concreto, le istanze di emancipazione.’⁴⁶ To remember is to rebel—to contest dominant narratives, resist historical amnesia, and reject the hypocrisy of selective mourning. ‘Altrimenti quella memoria non esiste,’ he warns. ‘Si riduce a un esercizio di vuota retorica [...] un ripetere ‘mai più’ che non dice nulla a nessuno.’⁴⁷

Goldkorn’s model of memory rejects both sacralisation and sentimentalism. Instead, it insists on the need for critical distance—not as detachment, but as the precondition for transforming empathy into action. ‘La distanza è la madre della facoltà di discernimento, ma anche la chiave per poter trasformare l’empatia in azione politica.’⁴⁸ This balance between feeling and critique—between imaginative engagement and political responsibility—animates the ethical force of *Il bambino nella neve*.

As an ‘acrobata del tempo’,⁴⁹ Goldkorn moves between the irretrievable past and the unfinished present to expose the moral failures of contemporary Europe: its indifference to refugees, its abandonment of the vulnerable, its self-serving narratives of remembrance. His indictment is unsparing:

E noi tutti, noi che non sopportiamo i rom (perché sporchi e sfruttatori di bambini), che non siamo stati capaci di difendere la popolazione musulmana di Srebrenica (massacrata con la complicità delle truppe olandesi che non avevano nessuna voglia di proteggere quegli straccioni di musulmani), noi che voltiamo lo sguardo altrove di fronte allo scandalo dei barconi di clandestini (categoria di subumani, in quanto privi di validi documenti di identità) che annegano nelle acque del Canale di Sicilia; noi tutti versiamo una lacrima pietosa quando pensiamo a quegli ebrei che, se oggi fossero tra di noi, in mezzo alle nostre piazze o all’assalto delle nostre frontiere, li tratteremo da rom e clandestini e

⁴⁵ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, pp. 117, 128.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ivi., p. 117.

⁴⁹ Günther Anders, *Brevi scritti sulla fine dell’uomo*, p. 59.

musulmani; noi tutti ci commuoviamo per la loro sorte, perché la consapevolezza che sono morti provoca una specie di catarsi.⁵⁰

In these words, memory becomes a mirror—one that reflects not only the trauma of the past, but the ethical failures of the present.

Il bambino nella neve shows that memory must not comfort, it must discomfort. It must unsettle, provoke, and compel. Goldkorn offers a vision of remembrance as imaginative and resistant: a constant negotiation between history and the now, between mourning and action. Against the backdrop of contemporary Europe, his work insists that only a memory anchored in empathy, imagination, and political struggle can remain alive—refusing to become ceremony and choosing instead to become responsibility.

⁵⁰ Włodek Goldkorn, *Il bambino nella neve*, pp. 159–160.