
"La scienza ha una morale:" The Importance of Impurity**Margaret O'Brien****Publication Date**

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Maggie O'Brien

Rare Books and New Ideas

In the fall of 2021, I took an Italian Seminar (ROIT 53000) in which the major assignment was to write a 5000-word research paper on any topic in Italian Studies. In the beginning of the semester, we had a class section in Rare Books during which we learned about some of the Italian-related collections in the Hesburgh Library. This was only one of several instructional sessions I attended about library resources; throughout the course of the semester, we attended presentations from Tracy Bergstrom (Program Director of Specialized Services and Collections, Program Director and Curator of Italian Studies and Dante Collection, and Italian Subject Librarian), Denise Massa (Visual Resources Curator), and Julia Schneider (Scholarly Resource Assessment Librarian and Subject Specialist for Medieval Studies). At the Rare Books sessions, we were introduced to some rare books of particular interest. The ones that stood out to me were the first editions from the library's Primo Levi collection and the full set of the Italian fascist periodical *La difesa della razza*.

When we were given some free time at the end of our Rare Books class section to peruse some of the laid-out examples, I decided to spend my time looking at *La difesa della razza*, which is a fascist propagandistic publication that enumerated the tenets of Italian fascism's racist ideology. I also looked through *Gioventù fascista*, which is a magazine published under Mussolini's regime that was marketed towards youth and that praised the fascist regime and its philosophy. This magazine is a new library acquisition and held by only four U.S. universities. In them, I recognized some themes that had similarly emerged from my reading of Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (and *La Tregua*) over the summer. When I discussed this with my professor, he told me that *La difesa della razza* was specifically mentioned in another one of Levi's works, *Il sistema periodico*. This one I hadn't yet read, but luckily, the Hesburgh Library

had a copy in their regular collections that I was able to easily obtain to continue my research. After reading the short story in *Il sistema periodico* in which *La difesa della razza* was mentioned (“Zinco”), I knew that I wanted to do my research project on the connections between the two texts.

However, in order to do that, I would need to do some general research in order to have a better grasp of what *La difesa della razza* promoted and how it related to themes that Levi typically discussed. Again, the library’s Rare Books and Special Collections helped me immensely. I spent several hours in the Rare Books and Special Collections reading editions of *La difesa della razza*. In my reading of this journal, I was struck by how much it relied upon quasi-scientific explanations to argue for their racist ideology. This was particularly striking to me in light of my reading of “Zinco” from *Il sistema periodico* because Levi’s story *also* relies on science to make a point about racial purity, though his point is much different from – really, the opposite of – that of *La difesa della razza*. This strengthened my interest in the connection between the texts, especially because it seems to have inspired no analysis in the extensive scholarship on Levi’s work. I felt that Levi’s mention of the text was more than just a surface-level reference and instead should change the way the rest of the story was understood, shifting readers’ focus to the discrepancy between *his* science and that of the racist publication of fascist scientists.

In order to develop this connection, I knew that I would need to rely on secondary sources to give myself a complete picture of the context and methods of *La difesa della razza*. I set up a meeting with the Italian Studies subject librarian, Tracy Bergstrom, in order to help facilitate my search for sources. Though there is limited scholarship on Levi’s *Il sistema periodico* specifically, Tracy helped me find several texts on *La difesa della razza*, both from the

library's general collection and through interlibrary loan, which helped me to contextualize the origins of the publication. For example, I learned that the publications were formulated by prominent fascist academics. This use (or misuse) of the academic ethos was particularly relevant to Levi's "Zinco" because a large part of the story is focused on the description of Levi's own university professor, with whom he studied during the fascist era. Learning about the fascist academic ethos upon which *La difesa della razza* relied helped me see Levi's complicated description of his professor in a different light and thus changed the course of my argument to include an analysis of how his use of characters and setting reacted to the development *La difesa della razza* and the use of academics by fascist Italy more generally.

Throughout the course of my research, I also made use of a number of other library resources. For example, I used OneSearch to gain online access to other secondary sources that helped lay the groundwork for my paper, such as the section in the *Cambridge History of Twentieth-century Political Thought* on the connection between fascism and racism. I also spent some time with *Le opere complete di Primo Levi* in Rare Books and Special Collections, as this version of Primo Levi's works has an index that made it easier to parse through his writings. Additionally, I also made use of the physical library space, such as the study rooms.

It is not an overstatement to say that my research paper would not have been the same without these resources, for it was access to specific library collections unique to Hesburgh, such as the Primo Levi collection and the fascist publications mentioned above, that inspired and strengthened my argument. I was so inspired by this experience with the resources at the Hesburgh Library that I will be continuing this research on Primo Levi as an MPhil candidate at the University of Cambridge, starting in the fall.