

Primo Levi's Mythology of Mourning: A Reading of "Lilit"

In his essay "La memoria dell'offesa" from *I sommersi e i salvati*, Primo Levi mourns the loss of presence to the instability and decay of memory:

I ricordi che giacciono in noi non sono incisi sulla pietra; non solo tendono a cancellarsi con gli anni, ma spesso si modificano, o addirittura si accrescono, incorporando lineamenti estranei... Questa scarsa affidabilità dei nostri ricordi sarà spiegata in modo soddisfacente solo quando sapremo in quale linguaggio, in quale alfabeto essi sono scritti, su quale materiale, con quale penna: a tutt'oggi, è questa una meta da cui siamo lontani... anche in condizioni normali è all'opera una lenta degradazione, un offuscamento dei contorni, un oblio per così dire fisiologico, a cui pochi ricordi resistono. (Levi 13)

Memory, which is traditionally described as living, intimate and immediate, Levi makes textual, a kind of ephemeral yet material writing, complete with *penna* and *materiale* which is perpetually threatened by erasure or distorting emendation. Since memory is transcription from the outset, it is futile to expect that it be faithful to a determinate presence. Thus, all those unspecified – and perhaps unspecifiable – influences on its integrity bring about loss by both degradation and modification. To such scriptural memory, presence can never return whole in all its imagistic, textual or semantic density and singularity, recollected as it had been before its temporal deferral. For Levi, the remembered – that is, obfuscated – sign frustrates the completeness of identity if only because it cannot be purged of materiality. Thus, a prelinguistic, animating intention, which might have established and policed limits on the range of interpretation, is unavailable. I believe there are other, perhaps greater, dangers to the fidelity of this inner writing to presence: chief among them, its transformation into verbal art, which opens memory to even greater loss by interpretation. This is very different from saying that any interpretation is valid. Despite his epistemological pessimism, Levi strives for the preservation and transmission of his experience at

Auschwitz. This desire to preserve in the face of inevitable loss makes a memoir “Lilít” a work of mourning.

This inevitable *degradazione*, various *offuscamenti* and the pervasive *oblio fisiologico* are the promise of ashes – traces of lost meaning – loss without recuperation, the utterly other. Every swerving addition is loss as well, making recollection even more questionable. The text/archive is accordingly interspersed with ashes in a way not unlike the interspersal of ashes in Auschwitz, a place intended by the Nazis for the elimination of human impurity, hence, a place consecrated to ashes. Literary art, on the other hand, promises sufficiency in the details of what it chooses to present, a sufficiency which would surely be insufficient to a historian or a judge. In the verbal artwork, the stratal networks that make up history are contextual. Levi’s *racconto*, accordingly, negotiates the unconditional and the conditional. Unconditional: to do justice to the Polish Jew Il Tischler, a man who tells him the stories of Lilít and whom the Nazis eventually incinerated. Conditional: doing it with textual resources. It is this negotiation that makes the infection by “estetismo e... libidine letteraria,” which Levi decried and proscribed in “La zona grigia” (Levi 45), a necessary supplement to the idealized historical presence which time has attenuated by addition and loss. By itself, the documentary is insufficient: Levi spelled out the issue in his essay “Auschwitz, città tranquilla,” writing about his dissatisfaction with the biographies he had read of history’s monsters:

È probabile che si tratti qui di una insufficienza essenziale della pagina documentaria; essa non possiede quasi mai il potere di restituirci il fondo di un essere umano: a questo scopo, più dello storico o dello psicologo sono idonei il drammaturgo o il poeta. (Levi 31)

The writings of poet and playwright, verbal artworks, can surpass the work of the chronicler. Although both address absence, literary singularity differs from documentary singularity.

Il y a la cendre: Levi mourns the loss of the teller and his tale in “Lilít.” He frames “Lilít” with two moments of mourning:

the *racconto* opens with Levi's reminiscence on the columbarium of the Cimitero Maggiore of Torino, wherein are contained the ashes of men who died in the influenza epidemic of World War One, among them the imprisoned comrades-in-arms of Il Tischler's – his protagonist's – father. Reading their exotic names fills him with sorrow: "...e infatti ancora oggi i loro nomi esotici, nomi ungheresi, polacchi, croati, tedeschi, si possono leggere su un colombario del Cimitero Maggiore, ed è una visita che riempie di pena al pensiero di quelle morti sperdute" (Levi 386).¹ The *racconto* closes with his description of a funeral he attended in Torino where he saw a rabbi perform the protective rite against Lilít's demon offspring that Il Tischler described to him in Auschwitz. Indeed, the very last sentence of the *racconto* acknowledges the "tristezza non medicabile che cresce sulle rovine delle civiltà perdute" (390), *civiltà perdute* to which belong the Judaica Il Tischler recounted to Levi. The frame establishes a distinction among ashes: there are ashes that rest in columbaria which evoke sorrow and thoughtful mourning, and here are those which the SS scattered among the winds of Poland, among them those of Il Tischler. The collection *Lilít* is Levi's *Dei sepolcri*; Levi is the Ugo Foscolo of the Holocaust in Italy.²

A critical theme in "Lilít" is the transmission/preservation of an endangered Judaica, which the Nazis also tried to reduce to ashes. Part of the reason Il Tischler – Levi's model in preservation and mourning – makes Levi the gift of his stories is because he fears their loss: "Mi dispiacerebbe se andassero perdute" (388); his is also a proleptic mourning. Ashes are everywhere; even Il Tischler's given name is ashes: he is simply "Il Tischler" which can mean "this carpenter of ours," and/or the more blandly generic, "carpenter." One could argue that Levi's memorial to an encounter with this man whose ashes rest in no columbarium is itself the creation of an impossible verbal columbarium for him – a columbarium on which only a nickname is inscribed.³ Nevertheless, Levi's attempt to do justice to Il Tischler – faithfully to fulfill an obligation to mourn – implies a corresponding injustice committed against all those for whom Levi cannot or chooses not to create such columbaria. This play of justice/injustice contributes to the pathos of the story.

The cabbalistic oral, written and folkloric story of Lilít

appears most prominently twice in Levi's writings: first, as the title and subject of the poem "Lilít" (25 May 1965), and later as a crucial element in the short story "Lilít" from the volume of *racconti* of that name.⁴ Like the figure of Chaim Rumkowski, to whom Levi would dedicate two *racconti*, the figure of Lilít fascinates him.⁵ As we shall see, the figure of Lilít serves in the elaboration of a creation myth, and also in the elaboration of a theodicy. It has intimate, personal significance for Levi as well. The myth, however, is itself the object of a self-reflexive mourning, for in the *racconto*, Il Tischler, who tries to recount the myth of Lilít to Levi, cannot quite get the myth straight. Indeed, he loses the story among the ashes of its versions ("...sono tante" 388), the emending/critical quarrels of scholars and cabbalists, and tradition. All the while, hovering over the disputants and disputations is the angel of death in the form of the SS, hungry to erase the men and the event. The whole purpose of Auschwitz was to turn singular persons, their culture and history into ashes. Nor should we forget the SS's violent acts of desecration: their almost ritual burning of torahs, and their cutting up prayer shawls to use as undergarments. Despite Il Tischler's vigorous – and triumphal! – display of erudition, the absence of a single originary, authentic and definitive version of the Lilít myth which could be re-collected and restored to its pristine unity is an object of mourning. Thus, Il Tischler's failure to establish the definitive version of the story of Lilít forms an interior allegory of the impossible possibility of memoir: Il Tischler strives after the single, definitive version, but cannot recuperate it – there is simply too great an *accrescimento* of exegetical variants. It is as if too many obscuring strata of ashes preclude the completion of his work. Semantic richness and multiplicity, it could be said, together with the material play of memory – all versions of absence – evoke a mourning of unity and transparency. Il Tischler puts it thus: "Forse tutti quelli che le raccontano ci aggiungono qualche cosa, e le storie nascono così" (389). *Nate così*, perhaps on account of these addenda and variants, stories die this way as well. Nor should we forget the sly willfulness of the teller: "Del resto, non ti garantisco di non averci aggiunto qualcosa anch'io" (389). In "Lilít," preservation by repetition is gentlest and most respectful destruction.

In Buna, Levi lives and works surrounded and covered by the ashes of incinerated Jews and gypsies: the ashes swirl in the air when the crematoria are at work; they splash on him in the rain and are part of the mud in which he labors on the shared birthday Il Tischler celebrates with him by his gift of the Lilit stories, which themselves testify to historical loss. Levi had testified to ashes once before, most prominently in the chapter "Una buona giornata" of *Se questo è un uomo*, where he recounted his greeting by Felicio the Greek: "L'année prochaine à la maison!—mi grida; ed aggiunge: — à la maison par la Cheminée!" (Levi 64). Ashes are an everyday presence; they are also the stuff of the black humor of the Lager. His humor notwithstanding, Felicio's point is that to be wafted home as ashes is not to return home. One might say that the *racconto* thematizes an uncompromising authenticity regarding the possibility of return from Auschwitz, history's greatest *unicum* of atrocity.

"Lilit" begins on a dark rainy day when the kapo, having consulted his civilian foreman, tells the *Häftlinge* to stop work and take shelter. Levi enters a pipe where he finds Il Tischler. Although he may be called "Tischler," carpentry was surely not his trade before his deportation to Auschwitz, however good he was at it. Levi catches sight of a young Ukrainian woman crouching in the pipe opposite who begins, with apparently self-conscious languor, to comb and braid her hair. When Il Tischler sees that Levi is watching her, he identifies her as "Lilit" and promises to make Levi a gift of "her" story. A gift suits the occasion of their meeting: both turned twenty-five that day; hence, they are "twins." They have much in common. For example, they share a common misnaming: "Alberto," or "L'italiano" in the one case; "Il Tischler" in the other. Moreover, the near certainty that this will be their last shared birthday joins them: "difficilmente avremmo festeggiato il compleanno successivo" (386). Their encounter is accordingly both celebration and mourning: it is the reciprocal mourning of friendship, because what occasions and confers pathos on Il Tischler's gift is the shared imminence of his and Levi's death.⁶ "Lilit" is, after all, the survivor's memoir. The implausibility of their meeting that day underscores the singularities among the narrator (Levi-Survivor), Levi-*Häftling* and Il Tischler. Here, in the mud of Poland, far from their homes, on an actuarially

implausible day in which an Italian and a Pole with the identical birthday meet, the one regales the other with a learned disquisition on traditional and cabbalistic exegeses of the story of the creation of man and woman from Genesis. The men are also twins by virtue of their shared differences: *ebraicità/Yidishkeit*; Sephardi/Ashkenazi, differences that shared the common meaning of death. Finally, they are twins by virtue of their acceptance of the rules and roles of the game in which the gift will be given. “Twins”: Il Tischler is also being ironic. His folkloric banter suggests the Nazi credo that Jews are all the same.

Levi receives from Il Tischler two birthday gifts: the first, a rare and exquisite slice of apple, which he savors; the second, a performance and exegesis of the stories of Lilít. The stories are many. Nevertheless, Il Tischler promises Levi, as one promises a child, “te ne racconterò qualcuna, perché è il nostro compleanno e piove” (388). This performance is no trivial gift because Il Tischler enjoys celebrity throughout Buna as an entertainer in Yiddish – he recites verses and stories. So gifted is he that when he sings, the room goes quiet. “Lilít” is, accordingly, a fable of the mourning of a fabulist. In Il Tischler Levi has found at once a magus, savant and trickster. Il Tischler will only present his gift to Levi in the form of a competition. One pastime in Buna was a contest of learning among Jews which set up a scoffing unbeliever and *ignorante*, often a Sephardi, to be shown up by a pious and learned man, often an Ashkenazi. The prescribed role of scoffer falls to Levi. This is inevitable, since the Ashkenazi regards the *Italeyner* as imperfectly Jewish and probably even an “epicurean”: “Si sa bene, gli ebrei d’Occidente sono tutti epicurei, ‘apicorsím’, miscredenti” (387). So today he will tell the story “perché oggi la mia parte è di raccontare e di credere: l’incredulo oggi sei tu” (388). To Il Tischler, Levi is a Jew who is not a Jew. As your typical Sephardi with a smattering of Hebrew left over from the little he learned at age thirteen for his Bar Mitzvah, Levi is required by the conventions of play to presume to scoff at the superior learning of the Ashkenazi, and, of course, to be defeated by him. Nevertheless, Il Tischler is by no means the pious savant of the ideal. He himself admits that he is simply a man playing the role dictated by the game: “Certo che non

ci credo, ma queste storie mi piace raccontarle” (388). His is an exercise of *virtuosismo*, not of faith; he may recount a dark theodicy with strong mythic purchase on the evil of Auschwitz, but it does not compel his belief. “Mi dispiacerebbe se andassero perdute” (388): the prospect of loss occasions the telling. Of course, one of them just might survive. Thus, even as Levi and Il Tischler accept the quasi-certainty of their death, neither is completely present to himself or to the other in part on account of the required roles they affect in their exegetical competition over this complex and mutable story. That is, the presentation of themselves to each other conforms to the rules/roles they must play. Underlying the game is their mourning the loss of Judaica and of each other. That dark rainy day in Poland, “Carpenter,” who is not a carpenter, tells a tale about a Lilít, who is not Lilít, to an epicurean who is not an epicurean.

In *Se questo è un uomo*, and later in *Se non ora, quando?*, Levi observed that to the majority of Polish Ashkenazi, he was not a real Jew, largely because he spoke no Yiddish, although he did know the German of Gattermann’s chemistry text which would save his life (in “Esame di chimica” from *Se questo è un uomo*). In “Lilít,” he is imperfectly Jewish because he knows little Torah and less Cabbala. Il Tischler proceeds to tell the story of God’s creation of Lilít and of His incestuous, relationship with her who is His creature. Il Tischler notes that the story of the creation of woman is told twice. Levi argues that the second telling is mere commentary on the first. False! Il Tischler rebukes him for reading inattentively and superficially. Il Tischler explains: God created them equal, man and woman, separating them with one cut from a golem. But they immediately wanted to return together again and be whole—to restore their unity. Adam insisted that Lilít lie down on the ground and God agreed. No, Lilít responded: had He not created them equal? Lilít rebelled, cursed the name of the Lord and flew off to the bottom of the sea, there to live as a *diavolessa*. Nights, she rises up and enters the houses of men to kill their babies, like a prefiguration of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Il Tischler’s recounting of Lilít’s atrocities glosses Levi’s reflection on the murder of three-year-old Emilia Levi on her arrival in Auschwitz from *Se questo è un uomo*: “Cosí morì Emilia, che aveva tre anni; poiché ai tedeschi appariva palese la necessità

storica di mettere a morte i bambini degli ebrei”(13). Bloodthirsty Lilít is a cabbalistic foreshadowing of the Holocaust.

Poi c'è la storia del seme. Yet another version of the story: Lilít collects all of the wasted male seed on earth in order to impregnate herself and give birth to devils. Levi laughs at this, as would a scoffing unbeliever. Then Il Tischler tells *la storia più strana*: “è scritta nei libri dei cabalisti, e questi erano gente senza paura” (389). As everybody knows, when God created Adam, He realized immediately that it was not good that man be alone. However, the cabbalists added that God realized that it wasn't good for Him either, since He too was male. So, from the beginning, this gendered God took the *Shekinà*, His own presence in creation, “la sua stessa presenza nel Creato” (390), as His wife, and thus she became the mother of all peoples. But when God permitted the Temple to be destroyed and the Jews to be dispersed and enslaved in the diaspora, the *Shekinà* renounced God and entered exile – indeed, going so far as to enter Auschwitz with the Jews. With this, God took Lilít, she-devil and infanticide, as his lover. Such an irresponsible, negligent and self-indulgent God might well permit an Auschwitz.

In this version, this God, who can be judged and rejected, is judged and rejected by His own presence in creation – His own image – because He permitted evil to befall the Jews. The *Shekinà*, once again, God's presence in creation, now abides in exile – sharing Il Tischler and Levi's own exile there in Auschwitz, more precisely in Buna, “intorno a noi, in questo esilio dentro l'esilio, in questa casa del fango e del dolore” (390) – in a state of perpetual and righteous indignation against God. In other words, the *Shekinà* – God's presence in a world devoid of Providence, because there was an Auschwitz, as Levi claimed in *Se questo è un uomo* (140) – mourns among these exiles abandoned by God to atrocity, while God carries on with His she-devil.⁷ Both Lilít and the *Shekinà* effectively renounced the Absolute for their personal absolute of justice.

In brief, a lovers' tiff and a divine indecency give rise to unspeakable atrocity: the quarrel between God and the *Shekinà* occurred as often happens in arguments when one insult leads to another, and things gets out of hand:

[D]evi sapere che questa tresca indecente non è finita, e non finirà tanto presto: per un verso, è causa del male che avviene sulla terra; per un altro verso, è il suo effetto. Finché Dio continuerà a peccare con Lilit, sulla Terra ci saranno sangue e dolore; ma un giorno verrà un potente, quello che tutti aspettano, farà morire Lilit e metterà fine alla lussuria di Dio e al nostro esilio. (390)

The Holocaust, then, is first the consequence of the diaspora which led to the *Shekinà*'s abandonment of God, and to God's further indecency, which is, once again, *[la] causa [ed effetto] del male che avviene sulla terra*. Divine love troubles are enacted on earth: questions of marriage and loneliness gave rise to the encounter when Il Tischler noticed that Levi was looking at the Ukrainian woman and claimed that "essere celibi alla nostra età è peccato" (387). That is, Levi's problems with women recall those of God; Il Tischler has revealed the transcendent origin of coupling and mourning. Lilit is the inspiration and subject of the playful strife between Levi and Il Tischler. Moreover, both Lilit and the *Shekinà* are female figures that disrupted the unity of the divine autoaffection by provoking and satisfying a divine need. Put somewhat differently, the Holocaust arises from a lack in God caused by a creature that He sought to satisfy through sin – a going out of Himself. Nevertheless, such a story could neither shock nor surprise an Italian raised on Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which Roman history begins with the offended vanity of the enraged goddess Juno, intent on avenging herself on the Trojan remnant.⁸ The creation of the female leads to the degeneration of divine autoaffection into narcissistic self-indulgence. Thus does all history become dis-adjustment, difference and mourning. In Il Tischler's tales, the divine nature does not eternally transcend creation, but exists in helpless attraction to it, hence, in eternal mourning, because the mutability inherent to human being is a vestige of the precreational nothing. God bequeaths weakness on his *imagines*: the *ucraina* provokes celibate Levi just as Lilit provoked God.

It would appear that the primordial difference between man and woman lies at the origin of the evil of the world, including the evil that deported both men to Auschwitz. However, an equally

valid argument could be made that in this theodicy/cosmology the male chauvinism which led God inequitably to favor Adam is origin of evil.⁹ Let us leave aside for the moment the question of the possibility of an injustice committed by Him Who is Justice. Il Tischler's stories form myths that apply to both personal and cosmic levels: they explain both the origin of Levi's unease around women – in particular the *ucraina* – and the tragic fate of the Jews in the Twentieth Century. Primordial gender difference disrupted the tranquility of order in Heaven and on earth. On the other hand, the male/female dichotomy is inherently unstable because Lilít is a *uomessa*, him/herself. "She" is an undecidable, cut from an undecidable golem; thus does she, and the historical atrocity she both foreshadows and enacts, arise from the horror of difference.

The theological implications of Il Tischler's cabbalistic theodicy derive the Holocaust from what is, in essence, the weakness of God. The Hebrew God of oral tradition Whom Il Tischler portrays in his narrative is certainly not *Summum Bonum*, that is, the god of the philosophers, hence omnipotent, omniscient (He could not even foresee the troubles He would cause!) and omnibenevolent, as later metaphysics would have it. Nor is He the god of rationalist-Aristotelian Maimonides' first principle of the faith. He is pathetically needy, so he cannot be the Yahweh Elohim of Judges and Isaiah: wise, powerful, stern, testing, loving, and often reproving toward His chosen people. Above all, He is not El-Shaddai of Genesis. Rather, He is a God whom one might pity, mourn, or rebuke because the natural moral law is paradoxically better than He Who established and broke it. The world is turned upside-down when justice is not an attribute of God, but above Him, providing the measure with which man will pass judgment on His behavior. It is telling that there is no sun – traditional symbol of God – in the sky that day, as if to make this a vespertine and Holocaustal theodicy.

Il Tischler makes the law transcend its Author, because God wrote better than He was. Hence, one is struck by the singularity of this God. This is not a God of the ideal and unconditional, but of the conditional. Far from a sovereign, this Lord engages democratically in arguments with His creatures – Lilít and the *Shekinà* – who are free to withdraw from Him, but unlike Lucifer, are not damned to

hell for their pride. Accordingly, one can, without great effort, think a greater God than appears in Il Tischler's stories. Like Roman Jupiter, Il Tischler's God scandalizes by permitting the propagation of apocryphal stories that are only the stuff of revelation in the tabloid sense. Il Tischler is aware of this: the story that he tells begins with the creation of man/woman and ends with the coming of a Messiah to save God. He does not say that the Messiah is God Himself, but rather is one stronger than God who will save Him from this *tresca indecente*. By implication, the Powerful One is a greater, because more just, divinity, perhaps the Unconditional to come.

Genesis (1.26), first book of the Torah, also teaches that man is made in the image of God. However, to be made in the image of such a needy, bumbling God is to rest in an undecidable position, since salvation must come to God from one stronger than He, prompting the question: which of the two is finally mankind's, the *imago's*, Exemplar? Tischler's versions of the Lilít story have mankind made in the image of a concupiscent God Who, like man, needs to be saved from Himself. Thus, one subtext of Il Tischler's stories is that the weaker God is a God made in the image of concupiscent man. If so, then this God is made in the image of an image, making the image prior to the Exemplar, and accordingly, repetition prior to origins. Clearly, the cosmology Il Tischler recounts actually has the great founding religion of monotheism yielding to a mournful polytheism of the rescue of God by a Powerful One ("un potente") – One Who is actually a *More* Powerful One – One Who can both rescue God and end the exile of His chosen people. Rather than unlikeness to God, sin becomes likeness to God. Rather than unnatural to man, sin becomes natural. Sin does not arise from mankind's freedom, but from his resemblance to God.

The God of the *Muselmänner*: "Lilít" mourns multiple absence: absence in God; absence in man. That is, mourning defect in God implies mourning a corresponding defect in his *vestigia* and *imagines*. Finally, "Lilít" mourns mourning itself, for this is, in essence, God's relationship to the world—both to preserve it and yet to release it.¹⁰ Levi's elaboration of myth accounts for the ubiquity of mourning along the great chain of being. Down to the particulars of "Lilít": God's enfeeblement and vice permitted the

diasporal split in a once unified Judaism on which the competition of the two men is based. And from enfeebled God arises a theme central to the *racconti* in *Lilít*: the surprise Levi feels that Il Tischler, this beguiling Ashkenazi, is a Jew like him, the difference within the same. And his surprise is reciprocal, for this *Italeyner*/Sephardi who speaks no Yiddish and knows so little Torah is equally exotic to the Ashkenazi. This is a familiar theme in Levi's writings (in particular *La tregua*) where one way of being Jewish is to exclude and be excluded from Jewry (Chiampi "Rewriting Race Law" 80-100). After all, Il Tischler is Levi's "twin." The *racconti* in *Lilít* accept and renounce such exclusion: whether in the persons of Il Tischler (Bandi, Wolf, Rappoport, Ezra, Avrom, Joel et al) Levi's *racconti* are a great discovery, invention and welcoming of the other.

By portraying himself as "epicurean" in "Lilít," Levi evokes his portrayal of himself at the outset of *Se questo è un uomo*, that is, as a man whose world was "scarsamente reale, popolato da civili fastismi cartesiani, da sincere amicizie maschili e da amicizie femminili esangui" (11), that is, as a scientist and intellectual ill at ease and unspontaneous around women. The Levi of "Lilít" is also impractical, rather like Mordo Nahum's callow, bumbling apprentice in flimflam from *La tregua*. In "Lilít," Levi notes that encounters with women were few and never as self-consciously and deliberately provocative as with the *ucraina*: "A quel tempo capitava di rado di vedere una donna da vicino, ed era un'esperienza dolce e feroce, da cui si usciva affranti" (387). This acquires figural resonance: the woman Il Tischler identified as Lilít, like the Lilít of myth, comes bearing death. Levi speculates that she is a reluctant "ucraina della Todt" (386). However, on account of the myth Il Tischler spins about her, the name "Todt Company" is transformed into a homonymous variant: "der Tod" means "death" in German; hence, "Lilít" works for the "Death Company." Similarly, the myth of Lilít turns Levi's unease in the presence of women into another instance of "il male che avviene sulla terra" (390) and the fulfillment of a figural threat.

In the poem "Lilít," Levi took upon himself Il Tischler's role as mythographer and made her sex a volatile absence:

Si è congiunta con Adamo, dopo il peccato,
 Ma di lei non sono nati
 Che spiriti senza corpo né pace.
 Sta scritto nel gran libro
 Che è donna bella fino alla cintura;
 Il resto è fiamma fatua e luce pallida.

(*Ad ora incerta* 547)

Lilít is not what she seems, and her sex and sexuality are incomprehensible. The *donna* of the poem – not the *Männin* or *uomessa* of the *racconto* – is, once again, a massacerer of innocents, making Pharaoh, Antiochus, Haman and Herod her avatars. She is the objective correlative not just of the demoralizing futility that the SS contrived with such deliberateness in their absurd rules for hygiene and comportment throughout stinking Auschwitz, but of sexual futility as well. No male can have her, if only because “il resto è fiamma fatua e luce pallida.” And her demon children are ineffectual. She is the spirit of mourning absence and of sexual longing who will be killed by the messianic *potente* when he rescues feckless God, He Himself undone by desire for this double-natured creature. Desire implies absence, or lack. But, once again, if not God, then Whom would Il Tischler have man worship? Perhaps the Powerful One, another God Who will achieve the recuperation of the whole of the past in its infinite singularity, and put an end to Levi's writing by establishing circular return both for memory and for the Jews. It must be He who will resurrect/recollect ashes into singular persons, and awaken God from His millennial distraction.

But the variations in the myth of Lilít, as well as the differences between *racconto* and poem, suggest that there is no originary unity, no originary presence there to be recuperated. On the contrary, like her myth and body, Lilít's is unstable and ephemeral, patient of many interpretations and reinterpretations, all resistant to a single reductive, monolithic reading. One could further argue that Lilít is figured in the activity of the text itself: her diverse and elusive capacities for change are its *estetismo* and its beckoning to reinterpretation. Lilít, cause and effect of “il male che avviene sulla terra” (390), figures the defects of “estetismo e... libidine letteraria”; she is the brooding

spirit of opaque self-reflexivity. Like art that can divert the glance from history to itself, she seduced the Ens Realissimum. She deals in futility and misdirections of the will both aesthetic and ethical. Once God Himself, the *Plenum*, is wounded by desire for what lies outside Himself, no version of union and harmony can close these stories of primordial gender inequality. What is more, Lilít, the undecidable *uomessa*, like the *Shekinà*, God's presence in the world, is in perpetual flight from the primordial male, Adam, and from his feckless male God, the Exemplar.

After speculating that this epicurean might survive Auschwitz, Il Tischler tells a prophetic story: "Può capitare... che tu veda che in certi funerali il rabbino col suo seguito fa sette giri intorno al morto: ecco, fa barriera intorno al morto perché i suoi [di Lilít] figli senza corpo non vengano a dargli pena" (389). Years later, Levi attends just such a funeral. Indeed, it is at this event of ritual mourning, where Il Tischler's words are corroborated, reawakening Levi's memory of him. Thus, another of Il Tischler's birthday gifts to Levi is a proleptic mourning, which is irremediable: "Ed è inesplicabile che il destino abbia scelto un epicureo per ripetere questa favola pia ed empia, intessuta di poesia, di ignoranza, di acutezza temeraria, e della tristezza non medicabile che cresce sulle rovine delle civiltà perdute" (390). Levi, however, in good epicurean fashion, repays Il Tischler's gift of folklore and affected piety with his mourning representation of them in a *favola*. Levi thus self-consciously situates the *racconto* between art and testimony.

Once again, Levi understates his triumph over Il Tischler by limiting mention of his survival and return to attendance at an anonymous funeral. Levi's attendance at the funeral is a richly ambiguous, ambivalent gesture of mourning: first, this is a Jewish funeral, which means that it does not take place in Auschwitz; second it brings to mind Il Tischler's words. The funeral thus testifies both to loss and to survival: that Levi has survived Auschwitz and that the Jews have survived the Holocaust. This funeral is also both celebration and mourning because a columbarium in the Cimitero di Torino awaits the ashes of this anonymous Jew who has died at home in Torino, in a time and place where s/he can be mourned according to ancient ritual and without fear. Il Tischler's stories

have likewise survived and returned, but greatly changed on account of Levi's rendering them as Holocaustal *favol[e]... intessut[e] di poesia*, with benevolent *estetismo*. Still, ambiguity and ambivalence pervade Levi's relationship to his own return: elsewhere in his works Levi treats his return as both gift, "Chi non è morto è perché è un miracolato in qualche modo" (Levi *Conversazioni e interviste* 168-169), and failure, the latter to the degree that home has been contaminated by Auschwitz, as he suggests in his poem "Alzarsi" from 11 January 1946, in which he describes lying in bed at home in Torino: "Presto udiremo ancora / il comando straniero: / "Wstawać" (*Opere* 530) The cry "Wstawać" resounds in his home, as does the dream of incomprehension around the dinner table that he repeats throughout his writings.¹¹ The circle of return for this Odysseus of the Holocaust will never be complete, because just as Odysseus, having understood nothing, will leave Ithaka to sack more cities, so Levi will depart Torino interiorly for the progressively paler and more unstable Auschwitz of memory, and continue to write of it. Bear in mind that although Auschwitz might be a deferred presence, it is at the same time the deferred presence of what Levi calls an "unicum" on numerous occasions throughout his works, hence, not a comprehensible presence. Perhaps only the Powerful One could complete the circle of return and do final and definitive justice to Auschwitz.

Jacques Derrida wrote, "Hypothesis to be verified: all responsible witnessing involves a poetic experience of language" ("A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text" 181). I would add as corollary that to the degree the *racconto* succeeds as art, the historical – that is, extra-textual – Il Tischler is diminished. The more Levi's Il Tischler fascinates the reader, satisfying her with the play of literary resources from which Il Tischler arises – *estetismi*, in short – the more it tends to divert interest from the empirical Il Tischler. Thus, it is somewhat misguided for a Paul Steinberg to object in *Chroniques d'ailleurs* that he most certainly is not like "Henri," as Levi pseudonymously described him in *Se questo è un uomo*: a smooth, cold, cunning thief, flatterer and manipulator. Although Steinberg's mild indignation at "his" description is understandable, to the reader his objection is finally inane. Equally inane is the corroboration of Jean Samuel,

who writes that the encounter between himself as Jean the Pikolo and Levi took place substantially as Levi recounts it in the chapter “Il canto di Ulisse” from *Se questo è un uomo* (Samuel and Dreyfus).¹² Il Tischler is likewise impossible: he is neither documentary nor art, yet both documentary and art.

What we have in “Lilít” is a work of art that follows the structure of the gift insofar as it is intended to satisfy the obligation of quittance placed on Levi by Il Tischler’s birthday gifts of apple slice and learning. But Levi’s quittance is at once too much and too little: too much in light of its semantic richness; too little in that its validity does not require fidelity to the man incinerated in Auschwitz. “Lilít” commits a further aesthetic betrayal because Levi’s mourning evokes aesthetic delight, not unlike Ungaretti’s poems on the atrocities of war. In “A Definition of the Esthetic Experience,” Eliseo Vivas defined the aesthetic experience as one of intransitive absorption, which “means to signify that attention is esthetic when it is so controlled by the object that it does not fly away from it to meanings not present immanently in the object; or in other words that attention is so controlled that the object specifies concretely and immediately through reflexive cross-references its meanings and objective characters” (Vivas and Krieger 408). Il Tischler is woven among a tapestry of contextual ironies created by those immanent meanings and “reflexive cross-references.” That is, his figure is composed of the traces of every other element of the *racconto*, contributing to a “poetic experience of language.”

The reader’s aesthetic incorporation of Il Tischler, once again, leads to her disregard of the empirical Il Tischler. Thus, the more the *racconto* evokes an experience of rapt attention to imminent meanings – intransitive absorption – the more it compromises Levi’s ideal of witness. The verbal artwork puts forth the tacit claim that what it presents is sufficient, requiring no documentary corroboration. Simple testimony, which can be falsified, cannot lay claim to such sufficiency. On the other hand, this aesthetic sufficiency is open to further aesthetic sufficiencies as one rereads, re-contextualizes and grows in appreciation of its ever-changing complexity. This, in turn, looks forward to a kind of apocalyptic sufficiency *à venir*. Each reading bears one farther away

from the kind of univocal reading transparent to history that is the ideal of certain naïve historicisms. It could accordingly be said that Il Tischler remains alive to us as dispersed and variously resurrected in Levi's text, emerging from among the *offuscamenti* and *estetismi*, only alive as capable of repetition and reinterpretation, his protean identity a consequence of difference. True, the emergence of the Il Tischler of "Lilit" depends upon those words in that order, but on those words and that order in all their endless mutability, variety of contexts and historical *offuscamenti* – their openness to a future. Thus does Il Tischler emerge from/disappear into the complex irony of a work of witness so absorbing as to defeat the reductive and definitive.

What is more, on account of its satisfaction of the will, "Lilit" attenuates moral outrage. Levi the narrator could accordingly be understood to model one response to the *racconto* when he concludes "Lilit" not with rage, but with a mournful reminiscence on *civiltà perdute*, inspired by the funeral and his mild, understated and euphemistic acknowledgment of Il Tischler's death: "La stella è stata abbastanza buona per me, non per Il Tischler" (390). Nor will Levi mention how those *civiltà* were lost and how Il Tischler died. I shall: in the first case, bloodthirsty destruction by the *Einsatzgruppen*; in the second, gassing by the SS directing the *Sonderkommando*. But such atrocity is a matter for the *pagina documentaria*; "Lilit" is the place for Levi-*drammaturgo/poeta*. This history/art distinction is hardly unique to "Lilit"; his Chaim Rumkowski from "La zona grigia" of *I sommersi e i salvati* differs from the earlier, more overtly documentary Chaim Rumkowski of "Il re dei Giudei" in that it passes from chronicle to art.¹³ Insofar as "Lilit" is "infected" by art, it leads its reader to mourn a past that was never present, if only because "Lilit" incorporated and recreated the past it required.

If the *aporia* of mourning is that one loses the singularity of the absent one by incorporating him/her, but remains more faithful to his/her singularity if one lets him/her go, then art, which fashions the mourned into an object of aesthetic fascination by both incorporating and releasing, is particularly suited to mourning. That is, "Lilit" arises from Levi's negotiation between the "documentary page" of his experience and the work of his art. As a consequence,

Levi can only do justice to Il Tischler by betraying him. This problem is encapsulated in the game itself: to receive Il Tischler's gift of Judaica Levi must first assume the pose of scoffing unbeliever. This is theater – the stuff of the *drammaturgo*. Properly to reciprocate it – for the aporia of the gift is that however gratuitous in intent, it nevertheless creates an obligation of reciprocation in its recipient – Levi must betray the historical Il Tischler with the loss and addition that art occasions. Thus, Levi will repay Il Tischler for the apple, the learning and the fellowship with a work that, however rooted in the historical, is their irreducibly new, hence utterly incommensurate and disadjusted representation. The *racconto* speaks and performs the impossible possibility of requital, of quittance, of commutative justice. Perhaps Lilít, enemy of justice, hence of doing justice, made it so.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Primo Levi. I Racconti. Storie naturali; Vizio di forma; Lilít*. Hereafter, all citations from “Lilít” are taken from this volume and will be noted parenthetically. On “Lilít,” see Andrea Rondini, Yaffa Eliach, and Giuseppe Mazzotta.

² On these subjects, see Levi's journalism and occasional pieces in Marco Belpoliti's *Primo Levi: L'asimmetria e la vita*.

³ A scholar who is so minded might take the notion of mourning a step further and find in Levi's “Lilít” a symbolic sitting shiva (as symbolic twin, Levi assumes the *halakhic* status of *avel*, a first-degree relative), thus providing Il Tischler proper mourning.

⁴ John D. Caputo observes: “It is impossible to address the singular in an absolutely singular way. Storytelling, like every form of discursivity, slips back inevitably, structurally, into the element of the universal, of the iterable and repeatable” (*Demythologizing Heidegger* 192). Of the same author see also (“Before Creation”). Of Il Tischler, one is tempted to append as gloss the final verses of Ungaretti's 1916 “In memoria”: “E forse io solo / so ancora / che visse.”

⁵ Here is the full text of “Lilít” from the collection *Ad ora incerta* (547): “Lilít nostra seconda parente / da Dio creata con la creta stessa / che servi per Adamo./ Lilít dimora in mezzo alla risacca, / Ma emerge a luna nuova / E vola inquieta per le notti di neve / irrisolta fra la terra e il cielo. / Vola in volta ed in cerchio, / Fruscia improvvisa contro le finestre / Dove dormono i bimbi appena nati. / Li cerca, e cerca di farli morire: / Perciò sospenderai sui loro letti / Il medaglione con

tre parole./ Ma tutto è in vano in lei: ogni sua voglia. / Si è congiunta con Adamo, dopo il peccato, / Ma di lei non sono nati / Che spiriti senza corpo né pace. / Sta scritto nel gran libro / Che è donna bella fino alla cintura; / il resto è fiamma fatua e luce pallida.” 25 maggio 1965.

⁶ Jacques Derrida on the death of Jean-Marie Benoist in *The Work of Mourning* :
To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other, and so will carry the other within him a while longer, his eyes following without seeing... (107)

⁷ Levi wrote in *Se questo è un uomo* (and repeated later in *I sommersi e i salvati*): “Oggi io penso che, se non altro per il fatto che un Auschwitz è esistito, nessuno dovrebbe ai nostri giorni parlare di Provvidenza: ma è certo che in quell’ora il ricordo dei salvamenti biblici nelle avversità estreme passò come un vento per tutti gli animi” (140). This may be Levi’s most frequently quoted statement. Read retrospectively, via the cabbalists’ stories of God’s fall and redemption, “Lilít” furnishes an explanation for the exhaustion of Providence as proven by the existence of Auschwitz. The depraved God of oral tradition in Il Tischler’s recounting is unfamiliar in the Hebrew Scriptures, that is, unfamiliar in the prophets and in the psalmist, and, on account of the Holocaust, could hardly be called a savior of Israel. First, Il Tischler’s narrative sets the Creator into an infinite regression that can only climax with the advent of a more perfect God, one free of defect, with the role of Savior of the Creator. Second, He is actually a Holocaustal God, since discord and unspeakable atrocity arise from His defects of vice and passion – versions of privation, i.e. absence. Third, He is a God without unity; one could say, as if in travesty of the first commandment, that, on account of His lack of power and virtue, there is another God to be set before Him. He most certainly is not the most high. If there is no Providence, it is because this narcissistic God has not provided for His people. He is the Creator and Guarantor of mourning.

⁸ Il Tischler’s cabbalistic notion of the “lussuria di Dio” (390) occurs throughout classical Roman literature, most preeminently in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (I, 38-45), as when Jupiter chases Io, crying vainly “nec de plebe deo, sed qui caelestia magna / scepra manu teneo, sed qui vaga fulmina mitto. / ne fuge me!” (vv. 595-597) (“Nor am I of the common gods, but I am he who holds high heaven’s sceptre in his mighty hand, and hurls the roaming thunderbolts. Oh, do not flee from me). This Jupiter will transform himself into a bull, a shower of gold, a swan, and, indeed, into a woman, to seduce whom he chooses. Suspicious Juno exclaims, “aut ego fallor, / aut ego laedor” (vv. 607-608) (“Either I am mistaken or I am being wronged”), a sentiment she shares with Lilít and with the *Shekinà*. Apollo, god of reason, prophecy and song, fares no better: see verses 515-518. Thus, Il Tischler’s narrative of the enfeeblement of God is not without august – and comic – precedent. This tragicomic tale of a messianic savior/rehabilitator of

God is polytheistic even if recorded, “è scritta” nei libri dei cabalisti” (389), by cabbalists.

⁹ For an insightful and useful study of Judaic thought and Judaism after the Holocaust, see Josh Cohen.

¹⁰ On mourning, see Jacques Derrida (*Specters of Marx*), Drucilla Cornell, Henry Staten, J. Hillis Miller (“Derrida’s Others” and *For Derrida*), John D. Caputo (*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*), David Farrell Krell, and Nouri Gana. See also Sorcha Fogarty’s brief and useful introduction to Derrida on mourning. I owe a special debt to Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh. Their words encapsulate my project in this paper: “The work of mourning is essentially the desire to do justice to the *other*” (Dooley and Kavanagh 107). See also Mark Dooley. See also James T. Chiampi (“Un dolore pacato e eguale”).

¹¹ Nancy Harrowitz: “In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi analyzes theories of the incommunicability of language. He there states unequivocally that language must and does communicate, and rejects wholeheartedly the theories that would claim otherwise. There is an anxiety here about what language can do and must do, as the survivor depends upon it for survival and the writer depends upon it for salvation” (36).

¹² See also Victor Brombert’s excellent insights on the episode of “Il canto d’Ulisse.”

¹³ See James T. Chiampi, “The Exemplary Chaim Rumkowski in Primo Levi’s ‘La zona grigia,’” forthcoming in *Romanic Review*.

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