

## Io sono un centauro: Betrayal in Primo Levi's *Quaestio de Centauris*

This essay will examine the fantastic tale of Primo Levi – “*Quaestio de Centauris*” – in which I contend that the author narratively re-elaborates successive traumatic events concerning Jewish Italians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the process of systematic de-Italianization implemented by the Fascist Regime against the community, whose sense of Italianness was destabilized through policies of socio-cultural ostracism; and the repression of these policies from the collective memory in the postwar period. As a product of generations of Jewish adaptation to predominant bourgeois ideology, Levi became fully conscious of his ethnicity only after the anti-Semitic laws of 1938 and later articulated in his fantastic work attempts to deal with these exclusions, experienced as profoundly traumatic events. This essay is grounded precisely on the theoretical stance that in Levi the trauma of social and ethnic marginalization, the dehumanization of the Jewish Italians, and Italy's subsequent revisionist approach to this marginalization were expressed by means of a *marginalized* literary mode,<sup>1</sup> the fantastic, commonly considered beyond the parameters of canonical literature, especially in Italy, to the extent that it is deemed to possess an inherent “vocation to marginality” (Lazzarin 257). For Levi, the fantastic did not constitute a flight from reality but was supplemental to his realistic literature on the traumatic experiences of the 1930s and 1940s. Through the fantastic image of the centaur, he was able to convey with poignancy a pervasive sense within the Jewish Italian community of multiple betrayals, one of the major hidden themes of this corpus of his works.

The overwhelming moral and aesthetic restrictions which a depiction of any event connected to the Shoah entails, and the hostility towards any non-experience based narrative associated with it, have been noted by those who defend the liberatory nature of Imagination as a means to achieve an understanding which might elude memory and historical representations (Appelfeld, Semprun and Lyotard<sup>2</sup>). It is possible, therefore, to theorize a disjunction of narratives dealing with the Shoah from the realm of history, so as to

attain a deeper comprehension of the events, to retrieve their “deep memory” (Friedländer *Trauma* 41). Rather than capitulate to the temptation to embellish imaginatively the pre-1938 communities with an halcyonic aura, i.e. to convert an “ontological absence into historical lack” (LaCapra 47),<sup>3</sup> through the fantastic Levi is able to transcend the overwhelming historical facticity imposed by canonical Shoah literature and demonstrate that, in order to become a “begetter of truth” (Felman and Laub 16), it is not *imperative* that the narration adhere unwaveringly to the canons of realism. The passage from the constrictions of Shoah literature on artistic license to a greater degree of freedom allowed by the fantastic may engender various condemnations from those who consider the fantastic to be a shockingly inappropriate mode (a criticism initially made against Spiegelmann’s *Maus*) in that it merges apparently incompatible areas (history/art, popular/elite culture). However, freed from the burdens of historical representation, Levi effectively enacted precisely such a demolition of boundaries in his attempt to counter a hegemonic “genocide of creativity”<sup>4</sup> (Hyde 154).

The history of Italian Jewry is somewhat distinct from that of other Diasporic communities, considering the long established presence of Jews in Italy, especially in Rome, where the existence of a Jewish community dates back to antiquity. Following their general emancipation during the Napoleonic era, Italian Jews had increasingly integrated, and generally had been accepted, into Italian society throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Notwithstanding the anti-Semitic stances of the papacies of Pius IX and Leo XIII (1846-1903), this process of integration reached its symbolic climax with the construction in 1904 of the Great Synagogue of Rome over the ruins of the razed older ghetto, an act that metaphorically marked for *all* Jewish Italians an end of homeless Exile and the recognition of a new homeland in Italy (Lerner 19). Italian Jewry of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries thus underwent the historical phenomenon described as “angst of assimilation” (Camerino 193) or “assimilationist alienation,” a process that at least in part reflected an insistence within the Catholic Church on the social integration, i.e. eventual conversion, of the Jewish Italian community and entailed the gradual eradication of any form of authentic Jewish identity (De

Angelis 13; Ben-Ghiat 262). Fervently desiring incorporation into the hegemonic host culture and driven by *Selbhass*, the contemporary Italian Jew was willing to obliterate *ethnicity* in exchange for social integration and bourgeois *propriety*, i.e. “those expressive and situational norms ubiquitously if informally institutionalized in the social interaction ritual of our modern Western societies” (Cuddihy 4). In this manner, the Jewish Italian became the embodiment of the “Other-directed” individual who, through the Other, derives identity and seeks to attain (self-)knowledge, precisely by means of a process of imitation (Bloom 144-6).

One of the major consequences of this integration was the fragmentation of Jewish communities, physically rendered manifest with the division of the single community into those who continued to reside within the walls of the historical Jewish district – the Ghetto – and those who instead left it to establish their residence beyond its walls. Furthermore, following the lines of this internal migration, a social transformation also occurred, as those Jews who integrated into the extramural Italian society became ever more bourgeois, a process that reached its paradoxically absurd culmination in the 1920s, with the quintessentially bourgeois support that many Jewish Italians offered the Fascist Regime in its earliest phases.<sup>5</sup> Thus, by the late 1930s, in the eyes of Jewish Italians, no differences existed between them and their Gentile fellow countrymen.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely for this reason that the 1938 Racial Laws,<sup>7</sup> which defined Jews as inferior, excluded them from public life and restricted their education, destabilized a well-established identity and had such devastating effects on the members of the communities.

After World War II, Italian political institutions touted the myth of “italiani brava gente” while simultaneously promoting a covert erasure of the events described above from historical memory (Antonucci and Camerano 112). Indeed, in the years immediately following the war, Italian society was marked by a desire to distance itself from – and minimize its role in – the Shoah and the racism behind the Fascist anti-Semitic Laws. For instance, successive governments of the Italian Republic persisted in the exclusion of Jewish Italians from the category of “politically persecuted” (Toscano 61). Levi himself was compelled to admit that

in the decade following the war, at least in Italy, the topic of the extermination camps had been almost completely erased. According to the Turinese author, to speak of the Lagers invited accusations of paranoia of persecution, or gratuitous infatuation with the macabre at best; at worst, allegations of deception, or even gross indecency (*Opere*<sup>8</sup> II 1113-1114). The attempted removal from the level of collective memory of the events which occurred between 1938 and 1944 also produced contradictions in the process of restoration of Jewish Italian rights. The legal procedures for the abrogation of anti-Semitic legislation and the complete reintegration of Jewish Italian civil rights were concluded only in 1997. Moreover, there were enormous delays in the reintegration of persons expelled for racial reasons from the armed forces, the public offices, and the educational institutions. Most significantly, following the birth of the Republic – there was never any “solemn act” in recognition – not to mention contrition – of the crimes committed by the Italian state against so many of its citizens (Franzone 29; Procaccia 18). On the contrary, univocal and peremptory defenses of the Italian State continued well into the 1980s. In 1988, for instance, Giovanni Spadolini categorically affirmed during a ceremony marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the anti-Semitic laws: “La nostra Repubblica... oggi ha saldato per intero il proprio debito con gli ebrei” (Toscano 16). In Spadolini’s statement it is possible to discern a desire to close definitively the matter of Italian anti-Semitism, to lay to rest

issues of Italian complicity in Jewish persecution during the war and the continuation of Fascist attitudes in the postwar period, as well as the persistence of the more ancient sentiment of anti-Judaism. (Ben-Ghiat 262)

Moreover, in postwar Italy Jewish Italian survivors of the Shoah belonging to Levi’s generation generally acquiesced to dismissals of Italian anti-Semitism due to apprehensions regarding discrimination and a renewed social ostracism. However, if interviewed, foreign Jews enthusiastically expressed gratitude for the assistance offered by Italians during the war – thereby confirming the myth of “italiani brava gente” in the collective memory – the statements of Jewish Italians denote a greater criticism, at times even resentment, towards

their fellow countrymen, who had acted only to save human lives but had remained silent when “merely” human dignity had been at stake (Caracciolo). Any postwar narrative concerning Italian-Jewish relations centered on the heroism of non-Jewish Italians who had, at risk of death, protected the members of the Jewish communities. Indeed, most Italians perceived themselves *as* the victims of the war. In these years, a combination of guilt, shame and remaining anti-Jewish prejudices led to a sense of resentment *vis-à-vis* Jewish Italians, who were constant reminders of Italy’s alliance with Nazi Germany and its participation in the Shoah (Ben-Ghiat 256).

Levi alluded to a fundamental inexpressibility of the trauma of the Shoah, the perverse culmination of the aforementioned socio-cultural exclusion, in *Se questo è un uomo*, when he stated: “Allora, per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo,”<sup>9</sup> a degradation which had begun for Levi as for other Jewish Italians in 1938 and in a certain sense continued after 1945. This ineffability connects to the intrinsic difficulties of expression in trauma, as has been extensively explored by theorists studying the psychological implications of the Shoah. According to one definition, trauma is a response to a devastating event or series of events that consists “solely in the structure of the experience or reception” (Caruth 4-5): in other words, the subject is unable to comprehend completely a traumatic event at its occurrence. Rather, the impact of trauma is characterized by a latency period, a belatedness,<sup>10</sup> by obstacles impeding a precise location of the event. Indeed, it is only belatedly that the consciousness, which has experienced a traumatic violation, undergoes a process of re-organization *vis-à-vis* the traumatic event, whose overpowering immediacy precludes its registration, thereby rendering it an ever-present destabilization of reality. In other words, trauma

takes place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of otherness. (Felman and Laub 69)

This “quality of otherness” that Laub mentions has been discerned by other scholars, for instance Saul Friedländer who has emphasized the need for a renewed aesthetics devoted to the representation of the Shoah’s “uncanny” history (*Trauma* 55). It is significant that the Israeli historian should use the Freudian term that has become commonly associated with the fantastic. In his 1919 essay, Freud uses his etymological analysis of *das Heimlich* and its extension into its antonym *das Unheimlich* to define the uncanny as the coexistence of the familiar and the strange: the uncanny is not something new or foreign, but something familiar and well-known that the mind has estranged, the revelation of what should have remained concealed (90). The uncanny thus may reside in what is repressed in the narrative, in the unsaid or “non-presence” of the story, which may be determined by collective historical and political experiences of class, race, age or certain specific features of culture (Lloyd Smith 285). Moreover, just as the uncanniness of trauma may have detrimental effects on an individual, it may have those same effects on a collectivity and indeed can *create* community as much as common language, culture and kinship<sup>11</sup> (Erikson 185-86).

My reading of the story’s protagonist, the centaur Trachi, posits the character as a representative of the uncanniness of the Jewish Italian community, whose members have always incarnated, simultaneously, familiarity for their long history in Italy and mystery as a result of their historically imposed segregation: the Other which remains Other notwithstanding millennia of cohabitation and remains *heimlich* and *unheimlich* at the same time. Jewish Italians were therefore representations of an abnormal hybridity, an Other whose hybrid incongruity and complexity was the result of both familiarity and transgressive nature, a combination of quotidian features and menace to normalcy (Werbner and Madood 4). The *Unheimlich* of Jewish Italians thus arises both from difference and uncanny resemblance, even from an intergenerational point of view (Huet 108). In the fourth book of *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle wrote “Anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type” (401-3). Although the Otherness of the Jews marked them in popular legend as monsters, according to

Aristotelian tenets the true monsters are the deviations from one generation to the next. In this light, it may be said that Levi and his assimilation-prone predecessors, representatives of the tendencies present within the Jewish Italian bourgeoisie, and not Trachi, were embodiments of Aristotelian monstrosity because of an abandoned ethnicity, a conscious distancing from parental paradigms which ultimately led to the trauma of 1938.

Upon returning to Italy from Auschwitz, Levi felt the irresistible urge to write about the trauma of the Shoah for himself and for posterity,<sup>12</sup> although he was tormented by the fear of not being believed. Yet, his first literary piece was not a piece of testimonial literature but the fantastic short story “The mnemagoghes”, subsequently included in his first anthology of fantastic tales – *Storie naturali*, which appeared after his critically acclaimed *La Tregua*. By the mid-1960s, Levi had achieved literary and critical recognition with his narratives centered upon the Shoah and consequently was considered by many an author tied to a single theme. Einaudi therefore forced Levi to publish *Storie naturali* under the pseudonym of Damiano Malabaila, apprehensive as to how his readers would react to the difference of genre, on the surface so distant from his previous work. This apprehension led Levi to defend – in the book’s presentation<sup>13</sup> – his anthology of fantastic short fiction, generally ill received by critics who considered it frivolous and unengaged. The importance of this defense resides in the fact that, on the one hand, it represents a literary stance that was never subsequently contradicted,<sup>14</sup> as the fantastic gradually became one of Levi’s literary models; and on the other, it excluded any dichotomy<sup>15</sup> between his fantastic literature and his literature based in the Shoah (Grassano 122).

Although some Italian critics (e.g. Scarsella), have associated Levi’s fantastic to Massimo Bontempelli’s “realismo magico,” in the case of the Levian fantastic it is more correct to speak of *magical narratives* (Jameson *The Political Unconscious*), or *immersive fantasy* (Mendlesohn xiv), in that Levi immediately introduces the reader into a fantastic heterocosm in which the narrative elements are not necessarily *unheimlich* transgressions of the laws of the diegetic world. It is for this reason that a Todorovian approach to any analysis

of the tale would be inappropriate since Tzvetan Todorov would not have judged it compliant with *his* definition of the fantastic, which can only occur in “a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, without devils, sylphides, or vampires” (*The Fantastic* 25). In his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov famously propounded the eruption of the fantastic across the boundary of reality onto the character’s and the reader’s plane of existence. The fantastic is consequently defined *vis-à-vis* the parameters of the laws of reality with two possible outcomes: either this eruption is an illusion, and in this case the laws of reality remain unaltered, or the eruption truly occurs as an integral part of reality, whose laws at this point must be changed to accommodate the new phenomenon. In Todorov’s theoretical framework, the first situation described above is classified as the strange and the second as the marvelous, while the fantastic occupies the space of hesitation between these two options.

A common singularity of Levi’s immersive fantasy in comparison to the general framework of his *oeuvre* is that these narratives are centered upon situations of upheaval in which characters associable to Jewish Italians function as the nexus between consensus reality and the fantastic, a role of mediation between worlds that has traditionally been attributed to Jewish communities. For instance, in the Introduction to Giacomo DeBenedetti’s *Otto ebrei*, Ottavio Cecchi draws attention to the “nomadic truth” of the Jewish community whose historical intermediary role emerges wherever there is a crossing of boundaries or a meeting of differences. This role was gradually lost in the Jewish Italian communities, firstly as a result of assimilation and secondly as a result of their marginalization after 1938 and 1945. From a position of coerced marginality, of ethnic subordination that was never completely overcome even after 1945, Levi returns to this function precisely by resorting to a literature of liminality (Spariosu 39).

The fantastic emerged historically as a consequence of industrialization and the first instances of Western embourgeoisement, i.e. subsequent to the imposition of a scientific conception of the world and a structuring of existence into an order from which miracles had been banned. In spite of this, or perhaps due to it, the mode is, and

traditionally has been, on an essential level contrary to the rationalism of Western capitalist society and indeed goes against the fundamental nature of that society because it remains outside its grasp (Caillois 87-88). Indeed, the fantastic is an inherently subversive mode, by its very nature contrary to all ideological absolutisms, a liberatory process that leads the reader across thresholds and in so doing calls into question the very existence of those boundaries. It is true that certain forms of the fantastic have at times been used to reinforce the more reactionary facets of society, e.g. speculative fiction in the Victorian age (HG Wells' work satirized rather than criticized) and Italian fantasy literature in some of its manifestations of the last thirty years. However, the fantastic remains fundamentally subversive of capitalism and modern bourgeois culture that generated Fascism because it represents the negation of conventional notions of subjectivity based on the canons of formal realism, which has at its core a "rationalization and disenchantment" of the quotidian (Venuti 197; Elkins 27). In sum, the mode constitutes a historically parallel literary tradition that functions as specular double of realism but eludes the ensnarement and gross over-simplifications of ideology (Hutcheon 77; Le Guin 174).

Levi's tale includes two *topoi* which are recurrent in immersive fantasy: the Arcadian setting and the monstrous. Regarding the former aspect, Levi's use of an "archaic utopia" (Belpoliti 76) aligns his diegetic setting with the archetypal pastoral heterocosm which is characteristically pre-modern and atechological, with themes and narrative structures derived from European folk tradition (Attebery 2-3; Jameson "Radical Fantasy" 274). At the center of this type of narrative is the human relationship *to* this Secondary World, a world not to be physically altered but only contemplated, whose protagonists possess the traits of solidarity, self-denial and a sense of internal wonder, since it is through the protagonists' captivity with the phenomena of the fantastic heterocosm that the readers' response to the diegetic world is developed (Senior 118 and Manlove "Elusiveness" 54-61). In opposition to the social ostracism he endured, both before *and* after World War II, Levi in essence creates at the opening of his text a compassionate utopian Golden Age, a world which starkly contrasts with the brutality of capitalism: "an

idealization, based on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time” (Williams 45). However, in Levi’s pastoral Secondary World, humanity is not hyperbolically enhanced – as in traditional Golden Age texts – with qualities no longer present in contemporary society (e.g. augmented strength or longevity). On the contrary, humanity in Levi’s tale appears diminished, both physically and morally, in comparison to the monstrous centaur, and will by the end of the short story shatter the utopian harmony premised at the opening. In other words, Levi’s Arcadian Utopia does not constitute a more traditional suggestion of a heterocosmic alternative to a hegemonic system but is conducive to a reflection on the reasons underlying the *creation* of that Secondary World (Jameson *Archaeologies* 232).

In creation myths, the Edenic, the earthly paradise of idyllic harmony, is often an inherent component of the compositional beast-man and in the exploration of the society that had refuted him, Levi posits a new creation myth centered precisely on the figure of the monstrous centaur, one of the most deeply embedded human-animal combinations (Lawrence 57), a hybrid creature whose duality always implies a corresponding liminality,<sup>16</sup> indeed whose very existence was conducive to speculations about boundaries and kinds (DuBois 31). This association with liminality may be traced back to the iconographic origins of the centaurs as protectors of borders and as guardian spirits (Kollman 225-6), while a dichotomy civilization-savagery was already present in ancient Greek<sup>17</sup> conceptions of the creatures. As representations of man’s bestiality, centaurs traditionally incarnated the instinctual, especially evident in their depiction as sexually threatening beings in many ancient Greek myths, several of which concern centaurs who are perpetrators of rape.<sup>18</sup> The centaur thus exposes the ambiguity of human achievement and progress and stands as a reminder of possible human degeneration (Milling 110-114).

Notwithstanding its general acceptance in the diegetic world of the short story, the centaur remains a prime example of the monstrous, whose absolute Otherness renders it a quintessential polysemic representation of what is repressed by a hegemonic and falsely homogeneous culture (Punday 820). It is the irredeemably

alien *contra naturam* (Foust 441), and indeed does not occur in nature but is created exclusively in the human imagination through *fusion*, i.e. the conflation of dissimilar elements present in nature into single spatio-temporally continuous entity (N. Carroll 44-46). It is thus possible to discern in Levi's tale what has been theorized in regards to the monster figure in literature, a figure representing a scandalous interstitiality, a physical as well as a conceptual menace to the structures of consensus reality. The fundamental compositionality of the monster is a perversion of logic and its heterogeneity represents a destabilization of an ostensible inflexibility in the natural order. Its transgression of culturally determined biological categories confers upon it a sense of impurity and repulsiveness in the eyes of the community, which relegates the monster beyond its borders (N. Carroll 45; Girard 33; Huet 4). While the area to which the monster is consigned ensures the safety of the community because of its distance, that distance is never so great as to remove the existence of the monster altogether from the collective memory (Cohen 15). The expulsion of the monster to the periphery of cultural space confers upon it a function of delimitation of social spaces, a demarcation not only between the real and the imaginary, but also between the permitted and the forbidden (White 1). The monster thus conveys the consequences of transgression and in this way embodies an admonition against inquisitiveness, a limit which must not be transcended as it entails punishment (including contamination) for any transgressors. In other words, as it allures, the monster also warns the curious to remain safely within the confines of the *Heim* (Cohen 12).

Due to Trachi's physical transgression of seemingly inviolable paradigms, and indeed by his very existence (as a mythical creature alive in contemporary Piedmont), Levi's compositional creature, an indisputably interstitial, yet superior hybrid, conforms to the connotations of the Greek term for monster – *teras*, meaning a warning or portent – an acceptance also present in the origins of the English and Italian words, which both derive from the Latin *monstrum*, stemming from the root *monere*, meaning to display or admonish (Cawson 1), an interpretation adopted by St. Augustine in *City of God*. In turn, *monstrum* originates from the Indo-Iranian root

“men,” which also forms “memory” and “strum,” which is a wishful form (Bompiani 265). Thus, in the very *naming* of the monster, there is an implicit conjunction of different temporal connotations, past and present.

Traditionally, the monster has been a representative of discord, chaos and malevolence, the stereotypical adversary to order and progress in social life<sup>19</sup> (Campbell 222). However, in this short story Levi inverts these characteristics as well as several theories, e.g. of Lamarque (“How Can We Fear;” “Bits and Pieces of Fiction”), according to which at the center of any narrative containing a monstrous figure is the symbolic potential for harm that this figure represents for the reader. Significantly, in this piece, it is not the monster but humanity that constitutes an aberration, as Levi goes out of his way to direct the readers’ sympathies towards the apparently monstrous. In his portrayal of Trachi as a sympathetic victim, Levi depicts the man-beast as it struggles for survival in a hostile environment, thereby removing from the creature the threat of spiritual alienation it historically represents for civilization, a narrative choice that is recurrent in fantastic literature (Milling 103-4). The monster, the *topoi* of literature of the fantastic and the resonant legacy of Jewish legends and oral tales, allows Levi to place at the center of his tale the construction of a *collective* memory as it connects to *historical* memory of the community, both locally and nationally. Levi’s tale thus reveals covert truths regarding anti-Semitism in Italian society as he bears witness to a collective memory in which the author is forced to confront an uncannily traumatic historical, social, and political situation. Indeed, I contend that Levi produces his text through the narrative elements of the monster in order to express the angst of Jewish Italian existence in the 20th century.

As a monster figure, Trachi also represents the transcendence of the limitations of humanity, a facet from which another paradox concerning the monster emerges: its common association, since antiquity, with the divine.<sup>20</sup> This combination of contrasting features creates a contradictory dichotomy that is implicit in the monster - disempowered<sup>21</sup> and marginalized, yet also venerated. The monster’s traditional superiority in size and ability inspires, alongside fear, a

nearly mystical worship within the community against which it is set. The circumspection and revulsion that it arouses are accompanied by the envy of the community members, also due to the freedom<sup>22</sup> that the monster embodies in its existence beyond societal confines.<sup>23</sup> It is an extension of (an Other) self that enthralls the members of the community and creates a dislocation of perspectives permitting speculation on the prohibitions that exist within the community itself (Cohen 17). Thus the monster incarnates simultaneously an object of aberration for its physical deformity and presumed malevolence but also, paradoxically, an object of reverence<sup>24</sup> (N. Carroll 182; Braidotti 78-79; Gilmore 12).

“Quaestio de Centauris” first appeared on April 4, 1961, in the periodical *Il Mondo* with the title “Il centauro Trachi.” It remains a highly significant and poetic tale and was one of Levi’s more favorably received stories at the time of its initial publication (it was subsequently included in *Storie naturali*). Given the centrality of the centaur within the frame of Levi’s work – he considered the mythical being a symbol of mankind,<sup>25</sup> torn between its bestial and human nature,<sup>26</sup> as well as a symbol of Jews, simultaneously belonging to their own ethnic culture and their host culture,<sup>27</sup> and even a symbol of himself<sup>28</sup> – it is surprising that the short story has not garnered greater critical attention. My examination of this tale, and my positioning of it at the center of the Levian fantastic, is based precisely on the identification of the author with the mythical being.

Starting from the image of centaur, Levi centers the tale upon the concept of hybridity, which for him was never synonymous with inferiority but by its very essence of melding at times divergent components – in other words by its very impurity – represented something that was inherently greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>29</sup> For Levi, the course of evolution is never univocal or linear nor is it necessarily ascending but may indeed correspond to a *devolution*. The evolutionary *impasse* that Trachi represents is an element upon which Levi concentrated in all his fantastic, and in his poetics, based on a notion of reality that privileges process as opposed to essence. Nor did Levi consider man, an animal only slightly more evolved than others, the ultimate goal of the evolutionary process. Rather, he thought humanity on a path towards the creation of new hybrid

forms (artificial, biological, etc) and symbiotic structures (Belpoliti 83; Antonello 99-100).

There are two opposing and recurrent approaches to the relationship between humanity and the monstrous Other: the anthropocentric and hierarchical Ladder of Being – commonly used in racist ideology, and based on the assertion of the uniqueness of humanity, created in the Divine image; and the Tree of Life, which denies any hierarchy and posits the acceptance of humanity's direct descent from, and therefore kinship with, the beast (Andriano ix-xv), an approach clearly consonant with Levi's thought. In this dichotomy, the function of the monster is to contrast anthropocentrism and expose the essential hypocrisy of all classificatory boundaries, highlighting the arbitrariness and fragility of culture and indeed the volatility of any categorical differences, including racial. The existence of the monster is thus a condemnation of the boundary, a perturbing disintegration of cognitive barriers, that simultaneously imprison and exclude the antithetical Other. At the same time, while exiled beyond societal boundaries, the monster draws attention to the borderline it inhabits (in a sense it *is* the boundary itself), a "gray area" or a middle place where anomalous hybrids may facilitate encounter and change (Uebel 265).

Levi thus incorporates into this narrative a fantastic transformation and condemnation of an element traditionally associated with Jewish existence: a variation on the *Übermensch* theme seen in the light of genetic (racial) purity. Levi combines classical mythology with Biblical references as he emphasizes the essential hybridity of all creation, in a revisitation of the ark myth and a description of the post-diluvian surface of the Earth, an extremely fertile *panspermia* in which interspecies fertilization was possible,<sup>30</sup> as it was between animate and inanimate objects,<sup>31</sup> a fecundity reminiscent of the sexual promiscuity during the first days of the liberation present in *La Tregua* and *Se non ora quando*: a liberatory explosion of *eros* following a cosmic catastrophe comparable to the Shoah: "In entrambi i casi il caos è inebriante, fecondo, rigeneratore indispensabile a ricreare un mondo distrutto – ma sfocia poi inevitabilmente nel disordine e nel peccato" (Neppi 132).

It is from this primordial *panspermia* that the central figure of the narrative emerges: the centaur, whose origin Levi traces back to Ham, son of Noah, a cursed son of a drunkard father and a symbol of exclusion. In the text, however, these hybrid creatures incarnate nobility and strength, retaining the best of human and equine nature (Levi underscores how an impure,<sup>32</sup> hybrid race possesses qualities lacking in the “pure” races that compose it). The narrator’s words are particularly significant in this sense: “Pareva anzi, come avviene nei connubi più felici, che le virtù dei genitori si esaltassero a vicenda nella prosapia” (121).<sup>33</sup> Thus what in the Bible had been the cause of the divine punishment – the intermingling of different species<sup>34</sup> – assumes in Levi positive connotations.

Levi begins the tale with an incipit in Latin:

*Quaestio de Centauris et quae sit iis potandi, comedendi et nubendi ratio. Et fuit debatuta per X hebdomadas inter vesanum auctorem et ejusdem sodales perpertuos G.L. et L.N.*<sup>35</sup> (119)

The initials at the end of the incipit refer to Levi’s oldest friends, Giorgio Lattes and Livio Norzi. Although Angier dismisses the idea that the three might have debated the centaur’s “explosive rapes” (540), it seems only logical that Levi should have discussed with them the nature of centaur, as mentioned previously, symbol of Jewish Italian community, especially since Lattes and Norzi were very much like him, “from very similar backgrounds: well-brought up over protected Jewish boys from good Turinese families” (Angier 83), and had undoubtedly undergone the very same traumas described in the short story.

Levi places Trachi’s birth in Colophon – the ancient Greek city indicated by Lucian as possible birthplace of Homer – from the union of a man with a Thessalian mare. In the wild, the herbivorous centaurs live mostly in solitude, dedicating themselves above all to the peaceful search for food. The narrator’s family receives Trachi as a gift from a sea captain, who had in turn *bought* him in Salonika, a provenance that confers upon his spoken Italian a slight Levantine accent. The references here are canonically significant for two reasons. Negatively, the centaur clearly is defined as a possession,

the human part of him denied, and treated as if he were a horse, thus reducing the living and thinking being to an object to be traded in commerce or given away, in other words a *Stück*, the term used in Auschwitz in reference to the interned. This aspect associates the creature, and by extension Trachi, to the concept of the *homo sacer* described by Agamben: an absolute Other, alien and inhuman, whose life could be taken without punishment. The *homo sacer* was totally insignificant, utterly external to human society and excluded from all responsibilities and respect due to the rest of humanity (Bauman 249). As a modern incarnation of the soulless *homo sacer*, Trachi may thus be eliminated with impunity because his interstitiality and physical deformity posit a resistance to any form of integration and render him aberrant for the community members.

On a positive note, however, the association of Trachi with Salonika is reminiscent of the Greek Jews of *Se questo è un uomo* and Mordo Nahum of *La Tregua*. Whereas the latter became Levi's "maestro di vita" after liberation from Auschwitz, the former are described with considerable admiration as a cohesive national community – and the "most civilized" – within the confines of Auschwitz. With a description that could be just as easily applied to Trachi, Levi judged these Greeks remarkable for being

i depositari di una concreta, terrena, consapevole saggezza in cui confluiscono le tradizioni di tutte le civiltà mediterranee... la loro ripugnanza dalla brutalità gratuita, la loro stupefacente coscienza del sussistere di una almeno potenziale dignità umana, facevano dei greci in Lager il nucleo nazionale più coerente, e, sotto questi aspetti, più civile. (OI 75)

Almost at the very beginning of the tale, Levi emphasizes that the collective memory of the centaurs is quite distinct from the official history that has been recorded by humanity. The discrepancy extends to the point that the centaurs attribute different names to human historical figures e.g. Noah is known to them with Egyptian-sounding name of *Cutnofeset*. As a symbol of the Jewish Italian, the centaur would naturally provide a different perspective on history than would be known by the narrator, symbol of Gentile society,<sup>36</sup> just

as Jewish Italian historical perspectives diverged from hegemonic interpretations of the “italiani brava gente” myth in postwar Italy. The historical in the case of the centaurs blends with the mythical and in fact it is Trachi who recounts of the *panspermia* to the narrator during a metadiegetic tale. In order to substantiate this tale on the nature and the habits of the centaurs, Levi connects Trachi to traditional representations of the man-beast by citing classical and medieval sources, some historical (the Venerable Bede) and others fictitious (Ucalegon of Samos), thereby compounding the levels of the fantastic in the story by using invented sources to support the existence of mythical beings, a “retorica documentaristica” recurrent in fantastic narratives which serves to confirm seemingly miraculous events or characters (Lazzarin 25).

The author places the incongruous figure of the centaur in the midst of a chronologically indefinable Piedmontese pastorality<sup>37</sup> and purges him of the characteristics of violence, dissolution and savagery present in the classic and medieval traditions, to the extent that Trachi is disconcerted by the memory of the behavior of his ancestors Nessus and Pholus (122), the “fiere isnelle” present in Dante’s Canto XII of the *Inferno*. Levi further overturns the notion of racial purity as equivalent to a superiority by underlining the enhanced qualities of Trachi, 260 years old but youthful, and in intimate symbiosis with nature.<sup>38</sup> If, following the author’s own indications as described above, we are to consider the centaur a symbol of the Jewish Italian community, then it becomes evident that the superior qualities attributed to Trachi constitute a veiled exaltation of that same community which, freed from the Ghetto, had achieved considerable success (in finance, politics, and academe) in the eighty years between the *Risorgimento* of Italy and the enactment of the anti-Semitic Laws of 1938.

The savage traits of tradition re-emerge, however, after this intellectually and morally superior hybrid suffers the betrayal of his closest human friend: the anonymous homodiegetic narrator. The anonymity of the narrator serves the function of having him represent the Italian Everyman, thereby attributing a collective Italian guilt for the experiences of the Jewish communities in Italy before and after World War II. In the analeptic tale, the narrator is

initially prohibited from getting too close to Trachi in that the centaur represents a threat, a reference to the fictitious threat that Jewish Italians posed the Italian state in Fascist ideology. Nonetheless, the narrator establishes a rapport of friendship with the centaur, or rather a relationship of student-master as he learns from all that Trachi – a repository of wisdom – has to teach. On the one hand, the aspect of wisdom connects Trachi to one of common characteristics of Jewish life in the Ghetto,<sup>39</sup> even though Trachi's imposing size and superior strength, prototypical traits of the monster, are a marked contrast to the caricature of Ghetto Jews: "gracili, ricurvi, naso adunco" (Pederali 7).

On the other hand, notwithstanding the *Unheimlichkeit* produced in the reader by fantastic creatures born from metamorphoses such as the centaur (Belpoliti 134-5), Trachi's comportment and role as mentor to the narrator clearly connect him to the classical and Dantean figure of Chiron. According to classical sources (Ovid *Fasti*; Statius *Achilleid*; Apollodorus *The Library*), Chiron was distinct from his ilk for origin – the immortal son of the Titan Kronos (therefore a half-brother of Zeus) and Philyra, a daughter of Oceanus – and demeanor, as he was characterized by wisdom and benevolence. From his dwelling on Mount Pelion in Thessaly,<sup>40</sup> he mentored many of the great heroes of ancient Greece, including Achilles, Jason, and Asclepius, in such disciplines as ethics and medicine.<sup>41</sup> Trachi therefore mirrors Chiron as a wise-hearted, paternal figure whose instruction centers on the preparation of his pupil for experiences to be faced in maturity (Stewart 20). From the classical tradition Levi also employs the aspect of an existence rendered unbearable due to an incurable wound that leads to the voluntary relinquishment of a previously peaceful existence. As for Dante's *Comedy*, Levi possessed a profound knowledge of it, as emerges in chapter 'Il canto di Ulisse' of *Se questo è un uomo* in which he desperately attempts to explain the Dantean figure of Ulysses to his companion Pikolo, to make him understand that even individuals reduced to *Stücke* may once again regain their humanity. In the *Comedy*, Chiron appears in Canto XII as figure of great dignity and solemnity, more attentive and reflective than the other Centaurs (Bosco 214), and earns Virgil's courteous and decorous

tone, completely devoid of any disdain or superiority.

Levi returns to the above-mentioned connection between the centaurs and sexuality in the tale and relates it to an explicit act of betrayal against Trachi on the part of the narrator who allows himself to be seduced by Teresa De Simone, daughter of neighbors, with whom Trachi is impossibly<sup>42</sup> in love. Levi renders the admission of betrayal evident as appears in the following words of the narrator: “Non tradii le confidenze del mio amico: ma feci peggio” (127). The seduction occurs as the centaur, in chains (an evident symbol of restriction and incarceration), is being shod by a blacksmith (*maniscalco*), thereby emphasizing his diversity, his bestiality, which emerges with fury as he symbiotically perceives what has happened. Trachi then begins to destroy the surrounding countryside, lashing out in seemingly wanton destruction against the environment he had thought his home and the seat of his affections, and continues do so as he travels throughout Italy in direction of the Levant, inflicting a symbolically collective punishment on the land that had refused him. Levi does not include descriptions of Trachi’s acts of destruction but only their consequences, thus conferring to his centaur another of the monster’s *unheimlich* characteristics: an immateriality that seems to be in strident contrast with the overwhelming physicality that is usually associated with it (e.g. the common trait of an intimidating monstrous size) and allows the creature to perpetrate an evasion of immediate detection. Although the consequences of the monster’s deeds are evident, the being itself is only observed indistinctly and fleetingly, with minimal contact between it and the community, yet irremovably embedded in collective memory (Cohen 4).

The senselessness of the ostracism endured by Jewish Italians as well as an indication of the level of their assimilation into Italian society is further emphasized in the tale by the fact that, as Trachi travels the length of the peninsula on his Eastward journey, he inseminates mares that then give birth to perfectly normal offspring. When the narrator returns to the meadow where he and Teresa had intercourse, he describes what he finds:

E proprio qui, per tutta la notte, Trachi doveva aver celebrato le sue nozze gigantesche. Vi trovai il suolo scalpicciato, rami

spezzati, crini bianchi e bruni, capelli umani, ed ancora sangue. Poco lontano, richiamato dal suo respiro affannoso, trovai lei, la giumenta: giaceva a terra su di un fianco, ansimante, col nobile mantello sporco di terra e d'erba. Al mio passo sollevò a stento il muso, e mi seguì con lo sguardo terribile dei cavalli spaventati. Non era ferita ma esausta. Partori dopo otto mesi un puledrino: *normalissimo*, a quanto mi è stato detto. (130, emphasis mine)

The *normalcy* of reproduction again reinforces the notion of the *indistinguishability* of Jewish Italians from their Gentile counterparts prior to the laws of 1938. Furthermore, the elimination of the human component in coupling with a horse implies a hypothetical corresponding elimination of the equine component had the inverse occurred: in other words, had Trachi inseminated Teresa, the result would not have been a monstrosity but a normal child, *indistinguishable* from any child she may have had with the narrator. It is my contention therefore that Trachi's desire for union with Teresa refers to the Jewish Italian desire for acceptance into Italian society, which was denied in 1938 and remained difficult after 1945. Meaningfully, Teresa bestows her affection not upon the hybrid, the impure, who has no choice but to return to his Eastern place of origin, but to the racially pure narrator. Thus, in the story the centaur becomes a symbol of exclusion and is forced to return to his native land, a return to the origins, to a new potential *panspermia* of bounty and fertility in the East. In this way, Levi illustrates a *punctum* of the Utopian fantastic: the "right of migration" whose functional originality is the attainment of freedom in that it

answers the nagging question often labeled totalitarian; or in other words, what to do about Utopias one personally finds unpleasant and suffocating, if not fear- inspiring... According to this fundamental principle, you simply leave, and go to another Utopia. (Jameson *Archaeologies* 219-220)

In my reading, Levi shares Trachi's anger and perhaps even a desire for this right of freedom. However, notwithstanding his profound admiration for the state of Israel (Nezri Dufour 77),<sup>43</sup> he remained

too tied to the Turinese *milieu* to even consider abandoning it (it is important to recall that he lived and died in the same house in which he had been born), he remained too Italian and could not bring himself to leave towards a theoretical utopia of the Levant, to the place of “ancestral” origin. Although Levi transposed his feelings of betrayal into Trachi, he ultimately did not possess the same courage he had attributed to his character but was only able to express these veiled aspirations through the fantastic, which is particularly effective in its function as the manifestation of a desire that constitutes a destabilization of cultural order and stability (Jackson 4).

With the end of the tale, Levi posits a dual transformation: firstly of the Gentile, who in his act of betrayal irrevocably loses a millenary component of his culture,<sup>44</sup> the assimilated Jew, a bridge between two worlds, whose duality and existential complexity are symbolized by the centaur. The attainment of sexual awareness thus marks the end of the narrator’s childhood with the irretrievable expulsion of the mythical, represented by Trachi and a diegetic world that also included dragons, minotaurs and giants. The Levian fantastic in this way functions as a *modus significandi*, used to indicate the eruption of a deeper dimension into the quotidian through contact with destabilizing objects, images, situations and thoughts (Van den Bossche 30-1). The transposition of a collective angst of ostracism precisely by means of the fantastic allows Levi to describe also the other side of this process, i.e. the definitive maturity attained by the Jewish Italian, simultaneously sage and pariah, only after the infantile dream of integration has been shattered by pre- and post-war experiences (Borioni 50).

In sum, the fantastic in Levi functions as an attempt to span the permanent schism of the Jewish Italian community, the seemingly insurmountable division between the *inside* and *outside* (Sodi 40), to convey Levi’s witnessing of an uncanny history of repetition (Felman and Laub 67): the irreparable wound created in the collective past of the author’s community by the Shoah was compounded with the trauma of the author’s present, i.e. the postwar repression of Italian anti-Semitism. For Levi, a traumatically repressed ethnicity re-emerges transformed in his fantastic text, which assumes a

role comparable to that of the medieval Jewish Midrash, i.e. the extrapolation of meaning from the interstitial space, in this instance of simultaneously being and not being Italian. In other words, the fantastic acts as a commentary on his de-Italianization and the difficulties of postwar reintegration, not by means of a distortion of history, but according to Levi's own definition of his fantastic as "racconti morali travestiti" (*Conversazioni e interviste* 104).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The denomination of mode stems from the fact that the fantastic refers to a literary discourse not indissolubly connected to any specific historical period: rather, it has been, and continues to be, used in a variety of different genres (Jameson "Magical Narratives" 142).

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Philip Roth, Appelfeld insists on the power of the imagination: "I removed the story of my life from the mighty grip of memory and gave it over to the creative laboratory. There memory is not the only proprietor"; "[Given] the limitation of memory and representation in general, Semprun vigorously defends the use of the imagination in general and the writing of fiction in particular as the means for overcoming the shortcomings of first person testimony and the restrictions of conventional historical representation" (D. Carroll 69). Lastly, Lyotard underscores the need of recourse to non-historical representations in order to attain "unknown possible meanings... not presentable under the roles of knowledge" (55-57).

<sup>3</sup> See the words of Löwenthal: "Che sapore ha, infatti, la nostalgia per un luogo e un tempo che se ci offrissero di rivivere non accetteremmo per nemmeno un'ora? Chi di noi sarebbe disposta a tornarci davvero, dentro il ghetto, dentro le mille e mille restrizioni, divieti, e angherie. Eppure la scrittura ebraica d'Italia torna al ghetto con un occhio quasi languido, con il senso di qualcosa che purtroppo è andata persa. È davvero una specie di schizofrenia" (155).

<sup>4</sup> "We tend to think of genocide as the physical destruction of a race or group, but the term may aptly be expanded to include the obliteration of the genius of a group, the killing of its creative spirit through the destruction, debasement or silencing of its art" (154). Further protestations against the fantastic might envision a narrative form characterized by a structural frivolity. On the contrary, however, several theorists (e.g. Tolkien and Jackson) have emphasized that, far from representing an escapist literature, the fantastic is intimately connected to "consensus reality" (Hume *Fantasy and Mimesis* 21; "Postmodernism" 174) and must entail a stringency of plot in order to attain the "cognitive coagulation of

the imaginary,” in which the author realizes a complete modification of existence and a fundamental transformation of the fictitious into the factual, a process considered indispensable for the successful creation of the fantastic text i.e. the acceptance of the unforeseen and the incredible whilst retaining a suitable measure of plausibility (Iser 238, 245). See Borges “It [the fantastic] must have a rigid plot if it is not to succumb to the mere sequential variety of The Golden Ass, the Seven Voyages of Sinbad, or the Quixote” (6).

<sup>5</sup> See the words of Cavaglion “Gli ebrei sono esseri umani come tutti gli altri, la loro storia è fatta di luci e di ombre. Nel rapporto che in Italia essi ebbero con il fascismo, per esempio, le ombre sono più numerose delle luci” (216). See also De Felice: “Many Jews were present in the ranks of the Fascist Party from its earliest days and their presence was a sort of guarantee of loyalty and patriotism of their fellow Italian Jews [many of whom] also contributed financially to the Fascist Party” (58).

<sup>6</sup> See Levi: “avevo sempre considerato la mia origine come un fatto pressoché trascurabile ma curioso, una piccola anomalia allegra come chi abbia il naso storto o le lentiggini; un ebreo è uno che a Natale non fa l’albero, che non dovrebbe mangiare il salame ma lo mangia lo stesso... che ha imparato un po’ di ebraico a tredici anni e poi lo ha dimenticato” (OI 770). The Jewish Italian poet Umberto Saba considered himself “un italiano fra italiani prima che la pazzia e la disperazione degli uomini facessero [dell’ebraismo] una tragedia” (30). Della Pergola recalls that “The majority of Italian Jews rediscovered their Jewishness only in solemn religious occurrences” (173). See also the words of Giuseppe Pederiali’s character Settimia in *Stella di piazza Giudia* when she asks herself “cosa volesse dire esser ebrei se nessuno se ne accorgeva?” (14).

<sup>7</sup> While, prior to 1938, any white person born in Italy was considered Italian (Delzell 87), De Felice (221) has speculated that the first indications of a racial policy emerged in Fascist doctrine with the increasing numbers of colonists and soldiers in Ethiopia, which led the Fascist Regime to the conclusion that measures were required to prevent extensive miscegenation. Paradoxically, it was only after the Racial Laws that many Jewish Italians, known as *ebrei di ritorno*, recovered their previously abandoned sense of Jewishness, lost in their ancestors’ drive for assimilation. Therefore, one of the psychological consequences of the Racial Laws was to convince Jewish Italians that their “Otherness,” as propounded by the Regime, was at least partially accurate.

<sup>8</sup> Herein after referred to as OI (Opere vol.1) and OII (Opere vol.2).

<sup>9</sup> OI 20.

<sup>10</sup> It is significant that “Quaestio de Centauris” first appeared in print only fifteen years after the end of the war, on April 4, 1961, in the periodical *Il Mondo* with the title “Il centauro Trachi.”

<sup>11</sup> See Levi: “Non stupisce che l’eccidio hitleriano abbia rinsaldato i legami fra gli scampati, facendone potenzialmente una nazione...” (OII 1171).

<sup>12</sup> This stance connects Levi on the one hand to Walter Benjamin’s figure of the storyteller, in whom memory creates a chain of tradition from one generation to the next. On the other, the overwhelming necessity in Levi to recount his tales allows

a comparison, made by the author himself, with Coleridge's ancient mariner.

<sup>13</sup> "Ho scritto una ventina di racconti... cercando di dare forma narrativa [alla] percezione di una smagliatura nel mondo in cui viviamo, di una falla piccola o grossa, di un *vizio di forma* che vanifica uno od un altro aspetto della nostra civiltà o del nostro universo morale... io sono entrato (inopinatamente) nel mondo dello scrivere con due libri sui campi di concentrazione; non sta a me giudicarne il valore, ma erano senza dubbio libri seri, dedicati a un pubblico serio. Proporre a questo pubblico un volume di racconti-scherzo, di trappole morali, magari divertenti ma distaccate, fredde: non è questa frode in commercio, come chi vendesse vino nelle bottiglie dell'olio? Sono domande che mi sono posto, all'atto dello scrivere e del pubblicare queste "storie naturali." Ebbene, non le pubblicherei se non mi fossi accorto (non subito, per verità) che fra il Lager e queste invenzioni una continuità, un ponte esiste: il Lager, per me, è stato il più grosso dei *vizi*, degli stravolgimenti di cui dicevo prima, il più minaccioso dei mostri generati dal sonno della ragione."

<sup>14</sup> Later, in an interview which appeared in *Il Giorno* (12 October 1966), the author reacted with greater strength to those critics who posited a divide between Levi the memorialist and Levi writer of fantastic tales: "Per parte mia, non sento alcuna contraddizione fra i due temi, e onestamente non credo di aver tradito nulla e nessuno; credo anzi che non sia difficile ritrovare in alcuni dei racconti i segni del Lager, la malvagità accettata, il cosmo "preposterò," la follia geometrica..."

<sup>15</sup> The tendency of some Levian scholars to consider his fantastic short stories as inferior to his other works has been countered by other critics (e.g. Belpoliti 76; Geerts 100) who see the fantastic not as a transitory phase but as an integral narrative vein of the author's literary project, present in all his work, including that based on the Shoah. Nor, in Levi's opinion was there any contradiction between his scientific background - he earned his degree in physics from the University of Turin in 1941, albeit with the words "di razza ebraica" printed on it - and his fantastic production: "Uno scienziato moderno *deve* avere fantasia, e... la fantasia si arricchisce prodigiosamente se il titolare dispone di una formazione scientifica" (OII 1504).

<sup>16</sup> Kerman underscores the similar connection between the fantastic and the liminal: "The fantastic helps us to manage the anxieties created when we explore the thresholds of our categories, cross the boundaries that we have created and considered absolute" (184).

<sup>17</sup> According to Haraway (*Simians* 180), the Centaurs of ancient Greece established the limits of the centered polls of the Greek male by their boundary pollutions with animality.

<sup>18</sup> Possibly, the most famous of the myths concerning the Centaurs, one which reassumes all of these traits, is recounted by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (12.112-544): that of the wedding of Pirithoüs of Thessaly.

<sup>19</sup> As the embodiment of a certain cultural moment (literally it is a *Zeitgeist*: a Ghost of the Time), a fantastic amalgamation of displaced phobias, passion and angst produced within the context of social and cultural relations (Cohen 21), the monster often appears during a time of crisis. Its perception as a harbinger of

depredation and destruction requires a response from the unified community that opposes and marginalizes it in order to return to a state of normality.

<sup>20</sup> Several authors from ancient Greece - e.g. Pindar and Diodorus Siculus - describe the divine origins of the *Kentauroi*, offspring of Ixion and a cloud (Nephele) formed in the image of Hera by Zeus.

<sup>21</sup> Humanity's fascination with monsters derives from its aspirations to categorize the incomprehensible, which in turn leads to the domestication and therefore disempowerment of the monster (Cohen viii). See the chaining of Trachi as described.

<sup>22</sup> This aspect of the monster, present also in Trachi, connects Levi's character to the wild man of the Middle Ages, physically alien and terrifying, who incarnates the fascination and the terror regarding an existence unbridled by society (Jameson "Modernism" 49).

<sup>23</sup> The monster enjoys complete freedom within its own space, external to but intersecting the human community (see Uebel 266, Gilmore 12).

<sup>24</sup> There is a long tradition in Judeo-Christian mythology of this reverence for the monster which has been expressed, for instance, in biblical texts and exegeses. According to the Jewish Kabbalah, God first created a monstrous mankind which He then replaced with a lesser form of humanity (Huet 238). Chapter six of Genesis speaks of the Nephilim - often translated as giants or alternatively as "the fallen" - an antediluvian race of beings that coexisted with humanity, not only tall in stature, but violent and savage in disposition.

<sup>25</sup> "...[p]oiché l'uomo è centauro, groviglio di carne e di mente, di alito divino e di polvere" (OI 746).

<sup>26</sup> The struggle between the human and the feral, between reason and instinct, is a constant in Levi's writing.

<sup>27</sup> "Il popolo ebraico è per Levi un centauro, perché eternamente diviso in se stesso, tra l'appartenenza alla religione dei Padri e l'identità del luogo in cui vive [ma] è proprio questa natura centauresca che ha permesso agli ebrei di vivere il doloroso conflitto ricavandone una saggezza" (Belpoliti 41). Other Jewish authors have also centered their works on the figure of the centaur, e.g. Bernard Malamud's "The Talking Horse" and Moacyr Scliar's "A Small Farm in the Interior."

<sup>28</sup> "Io sono un anfibio, un centauro (ho anche scritto dei racconti sui centauri)" (Ferrero 9). "The centaur [is] his image for himself. The centaur is the result of crossing the gap between species" (Angier 694).

<sup>29</sup> See Levi's definition of himself: "Io credo proprio che il mio destino profondo (il mio pianeta, direbbe don Abbondio) sia l'ibridismo, la spaccatura. Italiano, ma ebreo. Chimico, ma scrittore. Deportato, ma non tanto (o non sempre) disposto al lamento (*Conversazioni e interviste 1963-1987* 186).

<sup>30</sup> Here Levi the scientist fantastically transcends the confines of scientific possibilities with the transgression of the laws of genetics, which deny the possibility of successful interspecies reproduction.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. butterflies are the offspring of flies and flowers and turtles the descendants of frogs and rocks. "La soluzione narrativa più interessante [nei racconti] si rivela essere l'ilozoismo grazie al quale la materia si anima trasformandosi in organismo

vivo e vitale.” (Santagostino 129). See the tale “Disfilassi.”

<sup>32</sup> See Antonello: “Il centauro è simbolo di un pensiero ‘meticcio,’ antidoto ad ogni purezza troppo certa di sé e sempre pronta a espellere il diverso (la logica del pensiero leviano è quella di integrare e mai di rifiutare, di discernere, mai di discriminare)” (84).

<sup>33</sup> All references to the short story will be taken from the following text: *I racconti, Storie naturali - Vizio di forma - Lilit*.

<sup>34</sup> Between the Nephilim and humanity, see above.

<sup>35</sup> “The Question of Centaurs; of what they eat, drink and desire, being a subject debated for ten weeks by the present author and his lifelong companions” (Angier 540).

<sup>36</sup> See The words of the narrator: “[Le] leggende che si tramandano fra loro sono molto diverse da quelle che consideriamo noi classiche” (119).

<sup>37</sup> See Rabkin: “The fantastic does more than extend experience; the fantastic contradicts perspectives [through] the dis-expected” [i.e. the diametric contradiction of fundamental consensus reality laws] (4, 9).

<sup>38</sup> In the tale, centaurs possess prescience of the approximation of storms, the germination of the grain and the births of animals and human beings. “Così, mi disse, tutti i centauri son fatti, che sentono per le vene, come un’onda di allegrezza, ogni germinazione, animale, umana o vegetale. Percepiscono anche, a livello dei precordi, e sotto forma di un’ansia e di una tensione tremula, ogni desiderio ed ogni amplesso che avvenga nelle loro vicinanze; perciò, quantunque abitualmente casti, entrano in uno stato di viva inquietudine al tempo degli amori” (124-25). See Suvin: “In supernatural fantasy proper, the supposed novelty rejects cognitive logic and claims for itself a higher ‘occult’ logic — whether Christian, or a-Christian, or indeed atheistic the central postulate of this type of writing is the existence of a ‘sympathetic’ quasi-electric fluid pervading both Man and Nature, so that an adept can command this Principle of Existence or ‘Soul’ of the Universe” (51). Here, Levi seems to indicate the limitations of a knowledge based exclusively in science. In this vein, he reiterates the words of Hamlet: “...vi sono più cose in cielo e in terra di quante la nostra filosofia ne abbia sognate” (123).

<sup>39</sup> As Levi’s describes in his tale *Il servo*: “la sapienza e la saggezza sono virtù a buon mercato. Sono talmente diffuse che anche il ciabattino e il fachino le potrebbero vantare, e appunto non le vantano: quasi non sono neppure più virtù, come non è virtù lavarsi le mani prima di mangiare” (338).

<sup>40</sup> The progenitrix of the centaurs in Levi’s tale is a mare from Thessaly, as is Trachi’s mother.

<sup>41</sup> In reference to Chiron, Machiavelli recalls in *The Prince* that a teacher who is half animal and half man will impart to the prince the advantages of both natures, a knowledge without which survival will not be possible (81).

<sup>42</sup> “[Trachi] conosceva la vanità dei suoi sogni nell’atto stesso in cui li sognava” (127).

<sup>43</sup> “Quello è uno stato fondato da chi era con me nei Lager. Un paese di commilitoni, di compagni... Magari sono saranno solo venti su tre milioni, ma quei venti erano prima ad Auschwitz con me, e dopo hanno trovato una loro patria, una loro terra.” (“Io sono un ebreo” 60).

<sup>44</sup> See the words of the narrator: “È una storia della mia giovinezza, e mi pare, scrivendola, di espellerla da me, che dopo mi sentirò privo di qualche cosa forte e pura” (126).

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