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PRIMO LEVI, THE HEBREW BIBLE AND DANTE'S *COMMEDIA* IN *SE NON ORA, QUANDO?*

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Primo Levi's 1982 novel *Se Non Ora, Quando?* is a fictional version of the partisan activity of Eastern European Jews during the Second World War. Through allusions, echoes, parallelisms, and specific references to the Hebrew Bible and to Dante's *Commedia*, Levi systematically turns his story of these humble Eastern European Jewish peasants, craftsmen, artisans, and other fellow travellers into heroic narrative. He adapts the self-questioning and attempt at self-understanding of the Hebrew Bible to this contemporary story of loss of homeland and desire for a future home. By bringing this humanistic cultural legacy into the framework of a historical novel or fictionalized history, Levi transforms history into literature while using the western sacred and secular literary legacy to provide a matrix to organize what on the surface appears as the random and cruel unfolding of history.

L'opera di di Primo Levi *Se non ora, quando?* (1982) è una versione romanzata dell'attività dei partigiani ebrei dell'Europa orientale durante la seconda guerra mondiale. Attraverso allusioni, echi, parallelismi e precisi riferimenti alla Bibbia ebraica e alla *Commedia* di Dante, Levi trasforma sistematicamente in una narrazione eroica la storia di questi contadini e artigiani, ebrei dell'Europa orientale, e dei loro compagni di viaggio. Adatta l'esame personale e il tentativo di autocomprensione della Bibbia ebraica in questa storia contemporanea di perdita della patria e di desiderio di una futura casa. Inserendo questo lascito culturale umanistico nel quadro di un romanzo storico o di un resoconto storico romanzato, Levi trasforma la storia in letteratura mentre usa l'eredità letteraria occidentale sia sacra sia profana per fornire una matrice per organizzare ciò che sulla superficie appare come lo svolgimento casuale e crudele della storia.

Chi ha detto che i morti non hanno più potere?

PRIMO LEVI, *Se non ora, quando?*,
Torino, Einaudi, 1982, p. 200

I INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi's 1982 novel *Se Non Ora, Quando?*¹ is a fictional version of the resistance to Nazism by Eastern European Jews during the Second World War. Although it had been well-received in Italy, the novel was not particularly applauded in the United States² in contrast to *Survival at Auschwitz*, the original American title of Levi's first work, *Se questo è un uomo*,³ published in English in 1955. Through allusions, echoes, parallelisms, and specific references to the Hebrew Bible and to Dante's *Commedia*, Levi systematically turns his story of these humble Eastern European Jewish peasants, craftsmen, artisans, and other fellow travellers into heroic narrative. He adapts the self-questioning and attempts at self-understanding of the Hebrew Bible to his contemporary story of loss of homeland and desire for a future home. By bringing this humanistic cultural legacy into the framework of a historical novel or fictionalized history, Levi transforms history into

1 PRIMO LEVI, *Se non ora, quando?*, Torino, Einaudi, 1982.

2 JONATHAN USHER, *Primo Levi, the Canon and Italian Literature*, in ROBERT S. C. GORDON (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 171-188, p. 172.

3 PRIMO LEVI, *Se questo è un uomo*, Torino, De Silva, 1947.

literature while using the western sacred and secular literary legacy to provide a matrix to organize what on the surface appears as the random and cruel unfolding of history.

Levi's novel thus deliberates on actual historical events through a fictional narrative. In so doing he straddles the fiction-factual dichotomous view of history,⁴ using the Jewish partisan activity on the eastern front and the partisans' sojourn to Italy and thence on to Palestine as the facts of the narrative while adopting fiction to enter their daily lives, their struggle to survive, and their joys and pain. The novel, in fact, recounts the history of Eastern European Jewish partisans as fiction (for all the characters are fictional) through two of the most revered texts of the western humanistic tradition, that is, Dante and the Bible. The Bible and Dante are neither in the background nor the foreground but provide the context that frames present experiences and concerns against those of the past and gives the foundation that connects the fundamental philosophical questions of the past, such as why evil exists and how do we manage to survive it to the present.

Critical assessment of Levi's work has consistently maintained that despite the horrors of twentieth-century historical failure (the Shoah, specifically), Levi rejected the pessimism current in twentieth-century literature (Pirandello, Proust, Musil, or Svevo, for example) and remained committed to Enlightenment values and to a secular version of humanism.⁵ In a provocative study of Primo Levi, Jonathan Druker defines this humanist commitment as

Levi's type of humanism positions man, not God, at its center; it rediscovers human genius in centuries of European art and literature while marginalizing the religious content of these works; it subscribes to Enlightenment universality and the rights and dignity of the individual; it has faith in reason and in the capacity of the human mind to understand the material world; it has faith in the ability of language to convey meaning transparently, and [...] it remains at least partially optimistic about human nature and the prospects of social progress.⁶

Druker goes on to evaluate Levi's work in terms of what he calls posthumanism, linking this with postmodernism and thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as Theodor Adorno, all of whom «understand the Holocaust as a break in the expected trajectory of European civilization».⁷ For example, Jean-François Lyotard wrote of "Auschwitz":

- 4 MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *History: Science and Fiction*, in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 199-221, p. 200.
- 5 JOSEPH FARRELL, *Introduction*, in *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist*, ed. by JOSEPH FARRELL, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2004, p. 9. See also, among numerous others, GIAN-PAOLO BIASIN, *The Haunted Journey of Primo Levi*, in *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, ed. by ROBERTA S. KREMER, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 2001; GIAN-PAOLO BIASIN, *Till My Ghastly Tale is Told: Levi's Moral Discourse from Se questo è un uomo to I sommersi e i salvati*, in SUSAN R. TARROW (ed.), *Reason and Light. Essays on Primo Levi*, Ithaca / New York, Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 127-139; BRYAN CHEVETTE, *Appropriating Primo Levi*, in GORDON, *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, cit., pp. 67-85.
- 6 JONATHAN DRUKER, *Primo Levi and Humanism After Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 5.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the name "Auschwitz" to signify just how impoverished recent Western History seems from the point of view of the "modern" project of the emancipation of humanity. What kind of thought is capable of "relieving" Auschwitz – relieving (*relever*) in the sense of *aufheben* (i.e., overcoming) – capable of situating it in a general, empirical, or even speculative process directed towards universal emancipation.⁸

This frontal attack on Enlightenment values violently brought into perspective because of the Holocaust contrasts radically with the kind of humanism to which Levi remained committed for the remainder of his life. The consequence of this interpretation of Levi against posthumanism produces a paradoxical pairing of newly recuperated Enlightenment optimism with the irruption of methodical and irrational violence perpetrated by Nazism.

The philosophical and historical probing of Western civilization in the wake of the Second World War by figures like Adorno, Foucault, and Lyotard severely questioned its humanistic legacy as well as the optimistic scientific teleological ideas of progress that the Enlightenment had promoted. Yet, one of the most remarkable features of some of the scholarly and intellectual awakening to the unspeakable horrors of Fascism and Nazism was a renewed engagement with the literary, artistic, and philosophical traditions of the West rather than a repudiation of them.⁹ One can think immediately of a number of German Jewish intellectuals steeped in the European humanist traditions who found themselves exiled in the wake of the Nazi hegemony. Some of the most brilliant "English" intellectual work on the European Renaissance in the United States was indeed that of German Jewish refugees, all trained in German philology, whose scholarly work is carved into Renaissance Studies: Hans Baron, Ernst Cassirer, Felix Gilbert, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Erwin Panofsky, and of course, Erich Auerbach. In fact, in his *Epilegomena to "Mimesis"*, which appeared in 1953, six years after *Mimesis*, Auerbach responded to one of the many criticisms of *Mimesis*, a work not just steeped in the Western canon, but in a sense consecrating it:

Mimesis attempts to comprehend Europe, but it is a German book not only on account of its language. Anyone who is a little familiar with the structure of the humanities in various countries sees that at once. It arose from the themes and methods of German intellectual history and philology: it would be conceivable in no other tradition than in that of German romanticism and Hegel. It would never have been written without the influences that I experienced in my youth in Germany.¹⁰

8 JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *Note on the Meaning of 'Post'*, in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, ed. by JULIAN PEFANIS and MORGAN THOMAS, trans. by DON BARRY, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota press, 1993, p. 78.

9 JANE O. NEWMAN, *The Present Confusion Concerning the Renaissance: Burckhardtian Legacies in the Cold War United States*, in *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature*, ed. by BRENDA DEEN SCHILDGEN, GANG ZHOU, and SANDER L. GILMAN, New York, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006, pp. 243-26.

10 ERICH AUERBACH, *Epilegomena to "Mimesis"*, trans. by JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI, in ERICH AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by WILLARD R. TRASK. Fiftieth Anniversary Edition with an introduction by EDWARD W. SAID, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 559-574, p. 571.

In Auerbach's both sad and affectionate concluding words in the *Epilogue*, written in 1945 in Istanbul, where he had fled from Germany as a refugee, he wrote,

I hope that my study will reach its readers – both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. And may it contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered.¹¹

This sentiment and this reverence represent a commitment to an enduring value in literature and art and the human spirit that produces them, and that survives and thrives despite the degradations of history. It is the same spirit that characterizes Primo Levi's work, what has been called his «moral poise» revealed in his «miniature of moral striving and reflectiveness»,¹² even while he never loses sight of the catastrophe and offense. For example, in chapter two of *Se Questo è un' uomo, Sul fondo*, an allusion to *Inferno* that would liken Auschwitz to hell, when Levi details how the Nazi officials in the camp systematically confiscated the prisoners' human dignity and identity, he adopts a language of inexpressibility akin to Dante's to evoke the indescribable,

Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo. In un attimo, con intuizione quasi profetica, la realtà ci si è rivelata: siamo arrivati al fondo.

But this allusion is not an ironic inversion of Dante's apophatic experience when words fail the poet at the moment of the heavenly vision, «Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco/ al mio concetto!» (*Par.* XXIII, vv. 120-121). Levi, with humility and without irony or hyperbole, likens the incommensurability of Auschwitz to divine ineffability. Experiences of both transcend speech and words cannot express either. Levi moves the transcendent to the immanent, Dante's sense of mystical incomprehension to the recognition that language can only fail any attempt to speak of the offense of the Shoah. Similarly, in *Se Non Ora, Quando?*, when the main character ruminates about human suffering, about which Levi writes, «Il mare del dolore non ha sponde, non ha fondo, nessuno lo può scandagliare» (187), he seems to reverse Dante's lines about the inscrutability of the divinity, «Però ne la giustizia sempiterna/ la vista che riceve il vostro mondo,/ com' occhio per mare, entro s'interna» (*Par.* XIX, vv. 58-60). In both allusions, Levi turns Dante's view of divine transcendent incommensurability into immanent human incomprehension but without irony or despair.

2 SE NON ORA QUANDO?

Breaking from concrete personal experience, in this work Levi chose to respond to the question as he put it, «Did [the Jews] really allow themselves to be led to the slaughter without resistance?» His answer to this rhetorical question was «In my opinion, this discussion is unhistorical and polluted by prejudices».¹³ This novel features the heroic

¹¹ AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, cit., p. 557.

¹² IRVING HOWE, *Introduction*, in PRIMO LEVI, *If Not Now, When?*, trans. by WILLIAM WEAVER, New York, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1985 (rept. Penguin, 1995), pp. 3-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

resistance of partisans who, like the Dante of history, are permanent exiles, victims of loss of family, home, possessions and citizenship because they can never return to their homes. In a *Nota* that follows the novel, Levi wrote that his inspiration came from a story a friend had told him of the Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who reached Milan in 1945. He says of these men and women, «che anni di sofferenze avevano induriti ma non umiliati, superstiti di una civiltà (poco nota in Italia) che il nazismo aveva distrutto fin dalle radici, stremati ma consapevoli della loro dignità» [261]). Despite enormous suffering, they were not humiliated but survivors and while Nazism had destroyed their civilization, Yiddish culture endured in them to preserve their dignity. The novel explores the dignity, culture, and self-understanding of these exiled and homeless men and women who trek across Europe to Italy, striving to reach Palestine

Levi had taken the title *Se Non Ora, Quando?* from the *Pirké Avoth, The Sayings of the Fathers*, a second-century collection of famous rabbinical quotations. In the novel, the quotation appears as the refrain in a “canzone” that summarizes the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe. One evening, the narrator tells us, Gedale, the leader of the Jewish band of partisans, a skilled violinist, who regularly plays for the group, accompanied by his violin, sings the following in Yiddish, although it appears in Italian in the text:

Ci riconoscete? Siamo le pecore del ghetto,
 Tosate per mille anni, rassegnate all'offesa.
 Siamo i sarti, i copisti ed i cantori
 Appassiti nell'ombra della Croce.
 Ora abbiamo imparato i sentieri della foresta,
 Abbiamo imparato a sparare, e colpiamo diritto.
 Se non sono io per me, chi sarà per me?
 Se non così, come? E se non ora, quando?
 I nostri fratelli sono saliti al cielo
 Per i camini di Sobibór e di Treblinka,
 Si sono scavati una tomba nell'aria.
 Solo noi pochi siamo sopravvissuti
 Per l'onore del nostro popolo sommerso
 Per la vendetta e la testimonianza.
 Se non sono io per me, chi sarà per me?
 Se non così, come? E se non ora, quando?
 Siamo i figli di Davide e gli ostinati di Massada.
 Ognuno di noi porta in tasca la pietra
 Che ha frantumato la fronte di Golia.
 Fratelli, via dall'Europa delle tombe:
 Saliamo insieme verso la terra
 Dove saremo uomini fra gli altri uomini.
 Se non sono io per me, chi sarà per me?
 Se non così, come? E se non ora, quando? (119)

This song that Gedale insists is not an “inno” or hymn (120) synthesizes a central characteristic of the novel. Just as the Hebrew Bible represents a people’s history, memory, and self-understanding in the face of repeated exile and oppression, here the Bible’s core narratives provide the cultural means for these Eastern European Jews to place themselves in a biblical history that is ongoing. The first stanza situates them as the tailors, scribes, and cantors of Eastern European ghettos, the second as victims and survivors of Nazi atrocity, and the third, as sons of David, as resisters against oppression, all carrying within them the stone that killed Goliath, who now, as then, search for the “promised land” and a restored dignity: «Saliamo insieme verso la terra/ Dove saremo uomini fra gli altri uomini», that is Palestine.

Carlo de Matteis emphasizes the singular importance of the biblical and Talmudic texts to the self-understanding of the main character (Mendel) in *Se non ora, quando?* – even if Mendel is a non-believer – a Jewish self-understanding expressed in this canzone that Gedale sings. He writes,

L’intero libro è impregnato dello spirito di questa civiltà che ha il suo fondamento nelle sacre scritture della Bibbia e del *Talmud*, di cui vengono ripetutamente citati passi, formule, preghiere e compaiono personaggi – Mosè, Caino e Abele, Giacobbe, Sansone, Nabucodonosor, Raab ed altri – esemplari di gesti e situazioni che tornano ad attualizzarsi nel presente. Il riferimento alle scritture, tuttavia, non comporta sempre il riconoscimento della loro verità da parte di coloro che le citano, come è il caso del personaggio principale, Mendel, che se ne serve per ritorcerle contro un Dio nel quale non crede più, ma che continua a invocare in quanto nutrito di una religione che è parte di se stesso, connaturata al suo essere, finendo per assumere una dimensione culturale senza più fede nei suoi principi di origine divina.¹⁴

Furthermore, the refrain in the “inno” and also the title of the book, *Se non ora quando?* expresses Jewish apocalyptic thought, and in fact goes against historical materialism (whether of the Marxist or Fascist variety). Walter Benjamin, writing between 1939-40, explored this apocalyptic approach in his essay on the “concept of history.”¹⁵ Written in the winter of 1939-40, this last essay that this philosopher of material culture wrote before the fateful events on the Spanish border that led to his suicide, confronts the question of how history can be understood. Composed when Hitler’s Germany had initiated its invasions, Benjamin’s essay responded to a critical time in history, and to an apocalyptic moment to think about history. Examining the theory of historical materialism, Benjamin linked it to the theory of messianic expectation that turns the past into a mere citation, thus rendering history in the service of winners,¹⁶ making it akin to a type of “epochal” historical theory.¹⁷ Benjamin instead advances an apocalyptic theory of history: «The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the exceptional state in which we

14 CARLO DE MATTEIS, *Il romanzo dell’epos ebraico: Se non ora, quando?*, in «Italianistica Ultraiectina», VIII (2014), pp. 79-96, p. 84.

15 WALTER BENJAMIN, *Sur le concept d’histoire*, trans. by PIERRE MISSAC, in «Les Temps Modernes», III/25 (October 1947), pp. 623-634.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 625-627.

17 For this idea of history, see ROBIN GEORGE COLLINGWOOD, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1956, pp. 49-50.

live is in reality the rule. We must form a concept of history that corresponds to this».¹⁸ Benjamin argues that because the revolutionary or subjugated elements in society are uniquely able to recognize the apocalyptic moment, not just at the point of crisis in 1940 but throughout history, it is they that must assume an intense commitment to historical action.¹⁹ This view closely parallels the Pauline apocalyptic approach to history, as expounded by Giorgio Agamben in his essay on Paul's Letter to the Romans.²⁰

Turning back to the "inno" that is not an "inno," we see this same apocalyptic consciousness at work in the refrain: the voices understand themselves in a long history of suffering and resistance, but the history is not completed, it has not reached a terminus, as they act "ora" on behalf of themselves. They do not go without resistance. In another essay titled *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that concerns how to understand and act in the historical moment, Benjamin seems to cry out for action. Before the enemy would destroy all past legacies and the dead, living traditions and the future, this past must be seized for the present:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the traditions and its receiver. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from conformism that is about to overpower it [...] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.²¹

This is the same sentiment expressed in this "inno," which is a historical lamentation, a search for historical self-understanding, and a call for action. It provides a fitting title for the novel, which follows a similar trajectory. It expresses the losses and aspirations of a defeated people, whose link to biblical narrative gives them the "spark of hope" to possibly survive their enemy.

In the remainder of this essay, I will be discussing how Levi employs biblical narratives and Dante's *Commedia* to situate fictionalized historic events in the sacred and secular literary traditions of the West.²² In this process, while never denying the cen-

¹⁸ BENJAMIN, *Sur le concept d'histoire*, cit., p. 628.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 632-634.

²⁰ For this interpretation of Paul, see GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Il tempo che resta: un commento alla lettera ai Romani*. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2000, pp. 60-84.

²¹ WALTER BENJAMIN, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. by HANNAH ARENDT, New York, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253-64.

²² On Levi and the Hebrew biblical and Talmudic canon, see DE MATTEIS, *Il romanzo dell'epos ebraico: Se non ora, quando?*, cit.; TERESA AGOVINO, *Se non ora, quando? Citazioni talmudiche e bibliche nell'opera di Primo Levi*, in *I cantieri dell'italianistica. Ricerca, didattica e organizzazione agli inizi del XXI secolo. Atti del XVIII congresso dell'ADI - Associazione degli Italianisti (Padova, 10 - 13 settembre 2014)*, ed. by GUIDO BALDASSARRI et al., Roma, Adi editore, 2016, <http://www.italianisti.it/upload/userfiles/files/AGOVINO%282%29.pdf>. Others have written on Dante's poetry in Levi's work as well as on Levi's use of the Italian canon. See for example, for Dante and Levi, LYNN M. GUNZBERG,

tral importance of “ora,” he still contrasts the ephemerality of humans and their history to the quasi permanence of this cultural tradition,²³ the means whereby we can both interpret history and its horrors and also survive it. These intertextual references and allusions to Dante and to the Bible undergird the thematic threads of exile and Jewish-self-understanding that traverse the novel.

The novel begins with what we might identify as a twentieth-century *topos*: the clock. The mechanical clock, in the urban setting of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* or Charlie Chaplin’s metropolitan *Modern Times* symbolizes man ruled by machine. In a village in Western Russia, quite the opposite to these visions of twentieth-century metropolitan “progress” and simultaneous mechanization of the human, the clock on the church steeple had stopped working during the Russian Revolution, and even the bell ringer, after the bell rope broke could only use the radio and his gun to announce the time. But when the Germans came, they confiscated the gun, «e il paese è rimasto senza ore» (3). In the village from which the main character, Mendel, Menachém, which means “consolatore,” even though «non ha mai consolato nessuno» (4), he was «l’orologiaio» (4), a “watchmender,” the one who metaphorically starts time up again. But his village had no time. Just like Eden, this stopped time provides a fitting beginning for a novel that asks about the time of now, “ora.” In his village that «era Strelka, perché questa Strelka non c’è più» (4), he had a wife who «sta nella fossa» of Jews and Christians, and when he thinks about it now, «sembra il Giardino dell’Eden, e mi taglierei una mano perché il tempo camminasse all’indietro e tutto tornasse come prima» (4). This nostalgic evocation of Mendel’s village of Jews and Christians, synagogue and church, and ducks and goats as a pre-lapsus timeless Eden is characteristic of Levi’s systematic juxtaposition of the revered texts of the West, in this case, the Bible and Dante’s *Comedy*, against the current historic events.

Levi returns to the bell tower that signals the renewal of time later in the novel when the war ends. As Mendel wakes:

Ma poi il suo orecchio, acuito dal silenzio, colse un suono improbabile, infantile, non sentito da anni. Campane: erano proprio campane, uno scampanio tenue, fragile, filtrato dalla terra che li seppelliva; un carillon giocattolo che suonava a festa e voleva dire che la guerra era finita.

Fu sul punto di svegliare i compagni, ma si trattenne: più tardi, c’era tempo, ora aveva altro da fare. Che cosa? Fare i conti, i suoi conti. Si sentiva come sfuggito a un mare in tempesta, e approdato solo su una terra deserta e sconosciuta. Non

Down Among the Dead Men: Levi and Dante in Hells, in «Modern Language Studies», XVI/1 (1986), pp. 10-28, a discussion of *Se questo è un’uomo* and Dante’s *Inferno*; also, see her essay, “Nuotando altrimenti che nel Serchio”: *Dante as Vademecum for Primo Levi*, in TARROW, *Reason and Light*, cit., pp. 82-98, which looks at Dante in *Survival in Auschwitz*; also RISA B. SODI, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz*, New York, Peter Lang, 1990 and *La terza via: Dante and Primo Levi*, in «MLN», CXXVII/1 (2012), pp. 199-203; LINO PERTILE, *Songs Beyond Mankind: Poetry and the Lager from Dante to Primo Levi*, Binghamton, NY, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013; STANISLAO PUGLIESE, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. On Levi’s use of the Italian canon in general, see USHER, *Primo Levi, the Canon and Italian Literature*, cit.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

pronto, non preparato, vuoto; tranquillo e scarico, come è tranquillo un orologio scarico (199).

«Si sentiva come sfuggito a un mare in tempesta» alludes to the common image captured in the first simile of the *Commedia*, when Dante-pilgrim looks back «E come quei che con lena affannata/ uscito fuor del pelago a la riva/ si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata» (*Inf.* I, vv. 22-24) as well as to the beginning of *Purgatorio* when the poet refers to the inferno, which he has just left, as «il mar sì crudele» (*Purg.* I. 3). This echo ties Mendel's reverie to Dante the pilgrim's retrospective gaze to what might have drowned him and to his survival at the beginning of the poem. But Levi's literary move brings Dante's otherworld journey (recounted as actually looking backward to the experience) alongside Mendel's thoughts about the horrors of the war he seems about to leave behind. Thus, deploying the humanistic poetic and religious traditions to frame contemporary history, Levi alludes to the escape from suffering and hell in Dante's poem to characterize the Second World War and the experiences of this band of Jewish exiles.

A major feature of Levi's style in this novel is the recourse to typology, a standard medieval and specifically Dantean literary technique. Typological epic patterns of exile and return pervade the novel. The work actually begins in a dark wood, evoking the post-lapsarian un-Edenic beginning of *Inferno*, with the main character Mendel, having lost everything in mid-life: his wife, his work, and his natal village. As in the *Commedia*, Levi situates his main character, who, like Dante, finds himself exiled without family, friends, home: «Tu lascerai ogne cose diletta/ più caramente; e questo è quello strale/ che l'arco de lo essilio pria saetta» (*Par.* XVII, vv. 55-57). Mendel, exiled from his village and wandering in a dark forest alone meets a man, Leonid, who will become his companion. Like Dante in *Inferno* I in a biblical wilderness, Mendel understands his loss of his natal village as parallel to the human exile from Eden, saying of his erstwhile village, «e adesso a pensarlo mi sembra il Giardino dell'Eden» (4). When he offers hospitality to Leonid, Mendel likens this nomadic encounter to that of the patriarch of exile, Abraham, «Avrei dovuto anch'io fare quattro porte alla mia casa, una per ogni parete, come aveva fatto Abramo» (7); and why four doors? So other wayfarers (viandanti) could find entrance. Levi has here linked several typological narratives of exile (Eden, Abraham, and Dante), establishing the main theme of the novel, the journey from home as an exile and towards another home.

In tying the exilic condition in this novel to the search for a homeland, Levi can move beyond the lachrymose history that is the story of the Jewish people, focusing instead on the journey away from exile. Mendel's ruminations and self-understanding of his experiences and situation are informed, as he says, less by the Bible than the Talmud and the Mishnah, «Da bambino ero allievo di quel rabbino che ti ho detto. Ma adesso sta nella fossa anche lui, e io ho dimenticato quasi tutto. Ricordo solo i proverbi e le favole» (7).

Mendel specifically evokes biblical narratives of exile and new life as patterns of repetition whereby he understands his own experience and those in the same situation. Thus, he is an exile from Eden, or is Abraham the nomad, as discussed above. When the partisans in the band, particularly the old face more tribulations, Mendel is reminded of

Moses in exile. They would return to the ghetto and face tribulations they know rather than the unknown:

Preferivano la servitù e il pane scarso del nemico: come dargli torto? Tornò a mente a Mendel una voce terribile di tremila anni prima, la protesta che avevano rivolta a Mosé gli ebrei incalzati dai carri del Faraone: Mancavano dunque le tombe in Egitto perché tu ci conducessi a morire qui? Servire gli Egizi era per noi sorte migliore che morire nel deserto – Il Signore nostro Dio, il Padrone del Mondo, aveva diviso le acque del Mar Rosso, e i carri erano stati travolti. Chi avrebbe diviso le acque davanti agli ebrei di Novoselki? Chi li avrebbe sfamati con le quaglie e la manna? Dal cielo nero non scendeva manna, ma neve spietata (62-63).

Mendel equates the wandering band of Jewish exiles typologically to their progenitors in the desert of Exodus. Divine intervention in the Bible brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, but no divinity saves Mendel's world. The Hebrews in the desert, even after God had divided the Red Sea so they could flee, grew disgruntled. Why wouldn't these refugees from Nazism, who had no manna from heaven and only the miserable snow do the same? And indeed they chose «il proprio destino» (63).

In another example of a biblical narrative providing a typological reference for self-analysis, when Leonid distances himself from Mendel, Mendel ruminates «che lui non era responsabile di quanto Leonid faceva o non faceva, ma mentre diceva così percepiva come un prurito intorno al cuore, perché si era accorto che le parole che gli erano uscite di bocca erano quelle che aveva dette Caino quando il Signore gli aveva chiesto conto di Abele» (52). When Mendel and Line, Leonid's woman, make love and Leonid surreptitiously abandons the partisan group, this likening of Mendel's relationship to Leonid as Cain to Abel returns to the novel. Again, Mendel wonders,

Leonid non era morto [...] e lo sai, tu, se non è morto? Se non lo hai ucciso tu, che eri il suo fratello, e che quando ti hanno chiesto conto di lui hai risposto con l'insolenza di Caino? Forse gli hai tolto la sola cosa che aveva (141).

Here the character sees himself as a “new Cain,” a betrayer of his brother. But Line, on the other hand, Mendel likens to Raab, Raab of Jericho, «Di nessuno e di tutti» (139), «Raab: la santa peccatrice di Gerico» (236), she who opened the gates to Jericho, the “new life,” so that the Hebrews could finally find a home and return from exile. The value of typology here is that it facilitates the character's moral inventory, offering a means for self-scrutiny and also a means for understanding the present in terms of a catena of biblical and Talmudic texts.

The Bible and Dante, thus, give the literary means for historical questioning and for self-understanding that establishes a continuity with the past and its legacy. This turn to the humanistic and sacred canons cannot thwart the sufferings of the present, but it can introduce questions, that is, raise perplexing problems with which humans perennially wrestle. Among these and central to this novel are why evil exists and why revenge might be wrong. The Book of Job could be considered the supertext that informs the entire narrative, and Job-like questions occur at the very beginning of the novel with Mendel asking:

... sono cose incomprensibili, perché i treni corazzati li hanno fatti i tedeschi, ma i tedeschi li ha fatti Dio; e perché li ha fatti? O perché ha permesso che il Satàn li facesse? Per i nostri peccati? E se un uomo non ha peccati? O una donna? E che peccati aveva mia moglie? O che forse una donna come mia moglie deve morire e giacere in una fossa con cento altre donne, e con i bambini, per i peccati di qualcun altro, magari per i peccati stessi dei tedeschi che le hanno mitragliate sull'orlo della fossa? (9-10)

The historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible, that is the Deuteronomic histories (Joshua-Kings), when “God” frequently intervenes in human affairs, pose these same questions. The central tenet in these narratives is that because of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God, the Israelites can have the promised land, but breaching this covenant will result in the people’s destruction and exile. The answer to the question, «Why are we constantly oppressed» assigns blame to the Israelites: «Once again they did wrong in the eyes of the Lord» (for example, *Judges* 3.7, 3.12, 6.110.6, 13.1, *passim*; or *1.Kings* 15.34, 16.30, 22.52). In this simplistic “sin-punishment” historic theory, failure to do as the Lord demands will result in suffering and exile.

Mendel, “the consoler,” however, is asking Job-like questions, in which answers are more elusive. The Book of Job was likely written at the time of a national disaster, probably the beginning of the Babylonian exile. Like Mendel, Job refuses to accept the simple pieties that assign blame. The biblical text offers four explanations for why Job suffers: a) he really wasn’t pious enough; b) he has done wrong and is being punished; c) God has withdrawn from human affairs and suffering is therefore random; d) God’s ways are incommensurable.²⁴ The first two express the simplistic view, as proposed by Job’s friends. As Mendel puts it, «Per i nostri peccati?» or «per i peccati di qualcun altro, magari per i peccati stessi dei tedeschi che le hanno mitragliate sull’orlo della fossa?» just as found in the Deuteronomic histories, where innocent and guilty suffer alike in the collective punishment. The latter two raise the question of God’s absence, and here Mendel’s answer is «sono cose incomprensibili», that his innocent wife and all the children should die. Mendel, one assumes asking the question that anyone with such an experience might ask, understands that innocents have died, that God is absent, there was no manna, no divine intervention, no reward and punishment, just incomprehensible sacrifice. By having Mendel ask Job-like questions, Levi follows in the typological reading of these fictional characters in a historical setting to mount an inquiry into the nature and reason for suffering. But he does not give the answers provided by the sacred text. The sacred text, however, gives him the means to connect these current historic events to the fundamental questions they raise about the nature and reason for suffering but with no answer other than that they cannot be explained. Suffering follows from systematic acts of meaningless violence.

²⁴ Still the most provocative discussion of the Book of Job is MARTIN BUBER, *The Question of the Generation of Job*, in «Moznayim», XIII (1941), pp. 322-331, actually written before the atrocities of the Nazi regime had begun in earnest, but already for-seeing what would occur. For Buber, unlike Levi, the answer to the question why is God absent, came in God’s presence and response to Job to remember the great gift and wonder of creation.

Confronting the experience of such senseless suffering also raises the issue of “vendetta.” The question, “Why us?” perhaps calls for “vendetta.” If innocents have been killed, why should not the guilty pay for their crimes? This is another question for which the Bible offers innumerable answers. But Levi, with no divine apparatus to adjudicate, swerves far from Dante’s just universe where wrongdoers pay and are punished for their actions. The band discusses this desire for revenge, initiating it with a humorous question, «ammazzare di sabato non è peccato?» (166). Ròkhele Bianca responds instantly, «Ammazzare è peccato sempre» (166). But when the question arises of whether killing an SS is a sin, Ròkhele Bianca, whose rabbi husband was killed by the SS, reveals her ethical confusion – after all, Samson, a hero, killed a Philistine, and the SS are like the Philistines. This theoretical discussion becomes an ethical test later in the novel when Ròkhele Nera, she who had survived the ghetto, Treblinka, and the war, is shot in a German village when the war is over: «Una donna, di venti’ anni, neppure una guerriera; una donna scampata al ghetto e a Treblinka, uccisa in tempo di pace, a tradimento, senza motivo, da una mano tedesca» (225-26).

The band, almost without thinking, decides on instant revenge, while Mendel, again in typological fashion calls up a biblical parallel:

[...] mentre a Mendel tornavano a mente immagini lontane, sbiadite et importune, immagini che ti inceppano invece di sospingerti. Simone e Levi che vendicano col sangue l’affronto fatto dai Sichemiti alla sorella Dina. Era stata giusta quella vedetta? Esiste una vendetta giusta? Non esiste; ma sei uomo, e la vendetta grida nel tuo sangue, e allora corri e distruggi e uccidi. Come loro, come i tedeschi (226).

In other words, he raises the typological parallel of Jacob’s sons Levi and Simone, who avenge their sister Dina against the Sichemites, one of whom had raped their sister. But, Mendel asks, is this just? Seeking ethical self-understanding, he conjures yet another biblical narrative that actually does not provide the model answer. Worse, he asserts that taking vengeance makes them just like the Germans, killing and destroying. After the successful raid in which they kill ten Germans, Line says that «Vanno sul conto dei milioni di Auschwitz» (227). But this does not satisfy Mendel. For him,

Il sangue non si paga col sangue. Il sangue si paga con la giustizia. Chi ha sparato alla Nera è stato una bestia, ed io non voglio diventare una bestia. Se i tedeschi hanno ucciso col gas, dovremo uccidere col gas tutti i tedeschi? Se i tedeschi uccidevano dieci per uno, e noi faremo come loro, diventeremo come loro, e non ci sarà pace mai più (227).

This brave statement stands against the fact that as he says, «a Dresda sono morti centoquarantamila tedeschi in una sola notte» (227). But facing the punishment visited on the German cities «Glogau, Neuhaus, Dresda, Berlino, e Amburgo di cui avevano sentito con raccapriccio» (228), «la vera Germania, quella che si era ubriacata di sangue e aveva dovuto pagare» (228), Mendel recalls the story of Noah, «Nudo: insieme con l’allegria barbarica della rivincita, provavano un disagio nuovo: si sentivano indiscreti ed impudichi, come chi scopre una nudità vietata» (228). Like Noah’s son

seeing his father's drunken nakedness (*Gen.* 9.23), the band experiences a new uneasiness caused by their «l'allegria barbarica della rivincita». Levi's literary expression of the shame of this revenge against the Germans is confirmed by W. G. Sebald's historic description of the devastation of Germany in the last years of the war when the «Royal Air Force alone dropped a million tons of bombs on enemy territory,» attacking 131 towns and cities, killing 600,000 civilians and leaving seven and a half million people homeless.²⁵ Vengeance may not be the Lord's in Levi's post-God world, but neither is it man's, according to Mendel, who is schooled on the self-understanding of the Hebrew Bible's lachrymose history of the Jewish people.

With allusions to the “epic narrative” of Hebrew biblical history, Levi likens the Jewish band to the Hebrews wandering in exile and their escape from captivity and slavery into the promised land, and the end of the war to «After the flood». Train-bound for Italy, in the way forward (as opposed to Auschwitz and revenge, the way backward), from whence they hope to go to Palestine, the band of survivor-partisans listen as Gedale plays his violin, «un ritmo danzante, lieto,» and the rest of the band follow along. Levi here turns to images provided by both the Bible and Dante's *Commedia*. The radical unmoving negativity of the lake of ice in lower hell that precedes the exit from *Inferno* provides an important literary reference through which to interpret and understand the narrative movement of the novel:

Finite le insidie, finita la guerra, la via, il sangue e il ghiaccio, morto il satàn di Berlino, vuoto e vacante il mondo, da ricreare, da ripopolare, come dopo il diluvio. In risalita, in allegra salita verso il valico: salita, *alià*, si chiama così il cammino quando si esce dall'esilio, dal profondo, e si sale verso la luce (237).

The end of the war leaves the blood and ice of Hell behind, just as in Dante's *Commedia*. Dante's powerless Satan remains motionless in Hell only able to flap his wings; Levi's Satan is dead and powerless, and the world is ready for recreation, repopulation, just as after the Flood. The band, like Dante in the *Commedia*, quits Hell and the depths of exile and climbs towards the light, «E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle» (*Inf.* 34. 139). As Dante has his main character confront the failures of history in *Inferno* to journey towards the light and as “il diluvio” freed the world of evil, Levi's novel leads his readers on the path from the suffering and exile of Eastern European refugees while its main character, having lost all, travels steadily towards the light.

3 CONCLUSION

In this novel, Levi adopts the traditions of grand narrative with its mixture of myth, history, and fiction to mount a far-ranging literary-philosophical inquiry into suffering and survival in which its main character seeks historical and self-understanding through the lens of biblical narrative. Levi situates this inquiry within the framework of epic narratives of exile, most pointedly Dante and the Hebrew Bible, the literary grounding for exploring perennial occurrences of both human malice and human resilience.

²⁵ WINFRIED GEORG SEBALD, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by ANTHEA BELL, New York, The Modern Library, 2004, pp. 3-4.

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PAROLE CHIAVE

Hebrew Bible; Dante; Exile; Eastern European Jews; Partisans; *Se Non Ora, Quando?*; History and fiction.

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PER UN BILANCIO SUI DESTINI DELLA FORMA SAGGISTICA

a cura di Federico Bertoni, Simona Carretta, Nicolò Rubbi

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