



“A very long, unpredictable, and illogical route.”
The Cosmogonical Mash-Up of Primo Levi’s *The Truce*
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Abstract

This article highlights and analyzes the cosmogonical motifs in Primo Levi’s *The Truce*. Based on six different motifs, it underlines the role of creation myths in Levi’s attempt to polymerize his cultures. Levi sets a temporal concept “figure” and, by fusing different mythologies, epitomizes the epochal shift between pre- and post-Auschwitz, between Poland and Belarus. The intertextual dialogues between Biblical and classical literature create a significant and highly symbolic backdrop for Levi’s picaresque adventures during his return to Turin, signifying his first attempt to combine reality with literature, myth, and fiction.

Keywords

Primo Levi; Holocaust Literature; Cosmogony

Introduction

Yes, I had other stories to tell. My liberation was not followed by a speedy return home. Instead of being repatriated by the shortest route, along with tens of thousands of other former prisoners of the Germans, military and civilians, Christians and Jews, French, English, Americans, Greeks, etc., I was sent to the interior of the Soviet Union, where I spent the entire summer of 1945. (“The Path of a Jewish Writer,” *USE*, 1982, III: 2647)¹

¹ Almost all of the quotations taken from Levi’s work come from his three volumes (2015). These quotations will be introduced by the Roman number of the volume and followed by these acronyms: ITIAM = *If This Is a Man*, T = *The Truce*, NH = *Natural Histories*, CP = *Collected Poems*, PT = *The Periodic Table*, LOS = *Lilith and Other Stories*, W = *The Wrench*, OPT = *Other People’s Trades*, SE = *Selected Essays*, DAS = *The Drowned and the Saved*, and USE = *Uncollected Stories and Essays*. The same format applies for the interviews quoted, most of which come from Levi (2018). I have included the name of the interviewer, the title, the date, and the reference to the Einaudi volume. Some come instead from *Echi* = Calcagno, G. & Poli, G. (1992), and

In his 1982 article “The Path of a Jewish Writer,” the Italian chemist-writer Primo Levi expressed his burning desire to record his extraordinary experience of living outside the fences of Auschwitz. He had already written about the Lager in his first book *If This Is a Man*,² but things were different back then. As he once stated, “encouraged by the success of the new edition of my first book, in 1961 I began writing a memoir of my return: in the evenings, on Sundays, during the breaks in my job as a paint technician” (“The Path of a Jewish Writer,” USE, 1982, III: 2647). Working primarily as a chemist during the 1960s, Levi started to carve out time from his main job in which to recollect his memories of the fall of Auschwitz and shape them into a story. This was the dawning of his literary career as he experienced the power of writing once again. His need to abandon the stifling memories of the Lager (from which *If This Is a Man* originated) was turning into an incredibly new and almost everlasting “power of speech.”³ This is how *The Truce* was born, which Levi describes as “no longer the painful journey of a convalescent, no longer a beggar seeking compassion and friendly faces, but a lucid construction,” leading to “a complex, intense new pleasure” (Chromium, PT, 1975, II: 878). As Rachel Falconer (2015, p. 59) maintains, it was “the practice of lucid, precise, and rational experimentation which finds its metaphorical analogy in clear writing”. In other words, *The Truce* was Levi’s personal attempt to portray the rebirth of post-war Europe by taking advantage of the metaphorical power of words⁴ as a skillful narrator.

show the original date (when clarified) before the reference to the volume. All translations of Italian are my own.

² *If This Is a Man* was first published by De Silva in 1947 and then by Einaudi in 1958. Tesio (1991) and Fadini (2008) studied and compared the variants between the two editions, proposing valid and interesting observations.

³ In *The Complete Works* translation by Nathaniel Rich, the original “power of speech” had become a “power of words” (*W*, 1978, II: 997). In fact, this phrase comes from *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (l. 587) by the English poet S. T. Coleridge, as Levi himself underlined in the interview by D. Amsallem, *Il mio incontro con Primo Levi* (1980) and in Levi (2018, p. 878): “‘A strange power of speech,’ it’s exactly a quotation from Coleridge.”

⁴ “It is through and in the slipperiness of the metaphorical exchange that we both face up to, and escape from, the Others that seek to bind us [...] metaphor becomes a metaphor for the creation of intimacy between strangers, for the discomfiting recognition of one’s own face in the face of an Other” (Falconer, 2015, p. 53). This is

Indeed, as he was traveling back home through the Soviet Union, Levi felt that he was contributing to the birth of a new cosmic order, or to the renaissance of a whole continent. Levi thus turned to writing once more to communicate the uniqueness of such an event, this time more proficiently to craft a temporal concept “figure” which represented the epochal shift between pre- and post-Auschwitz. As he claimed in an interview, he “[w]ho wrote *If This Is a Man* was not a writer according to the common sense of the term, he wasn’t determined to achieve literary success, he didn’t have any [...] he had no illusions, no literary ambitions to make a nice manufact” (A. Bravo & F. Cereja, “Intervista a Primo Levi, ex Deportato,” in Levi, 2018, p. 934). All this would change with *The Truce*, in which Levi set down his memories in writing to experience the power of literature again.

By considering *The Truce* as a symbolic story about the restoration of an order, this article wishes to pinpoint and analyze the six cosmogonical *tópoi* (creation/counter-creation, divine void, high wind, flood, mud, and chaos) which Levi took from the Bible and Greco-Roman literature creation myths to inform his book. To portray the circularity of birth, life, and death, order, disorder, and chaos that Levi had experienced, it will be argued that Levi used these six motifs as literary tools to characterize and enhance his account; to depict the “real legendary dimension” (P. Roth, “A Man Saved by his Skills,” in Levi, 2018, p. 1081) which temporarily existed between Poland and Belarus. In this way, Levi mixed his cultural background and adopted creation myths with their semantics as archetypal rhetorical referents.

On the basis of these allusions, *The Truce* will be presented as a postmodern cosmogony of post-war Europe in prose.⁵ Intertextuality will therefore be considered as a paramount feature of Levi’s literary

how Levi uses metaphors in his Holocaust narratives: to recreate the experience that he had lived for his readers, drawing on their cultural and literary archetypes.

⁵ Remarkably, Charles Long argues that “[c]osmogonic myths refer to that power or force which centers and gives definiteness to the life of a human community. It is through a creative event that a new world, a definite order, is given to the stuff of history, the environment, and the psyche. In the cosmogonic myth these elements are centered and personalized—which is to say, they are represented in a new form. Creation means the modification of reality in terms of a particular structure” (1963, p. 23).

production. For instance, in *If This Is a Man*, Levi takes inspiration from cosmogonical texts, alludes to their lines, and skillfully hybridizes their motifs in his writing. It is thus no surprise that, drawing an allegory with the epic facts depicted in the Bible, Levi presents such renaissance as the result of a mythical depurative Flood halfway between fiction and reality. Finally, Levi incorporates the creation myths which belong to his cultural and intellectual traditions into his writing, thereby enhancing his story and creating a literary equivalent of the post-apocalyptic reawakening in which he had taken part. Overall, this essay aims to shed light on how Levi thoroughly characterizes his report in a postmodern, original, and vivid style.

1. *Genesis*

As Anna Baldini points out, *Genesis* is one of the most important hypotexts to which the intertextual dialogues of *The Truce* are linked.⁶ Although Levi was an atheist and became convinced of God's non-existence during his time in Auschwitz,⁷ he was nevertheless fascinated by the themes and motifs played out in *Genesis*, including the condition of the universe before creation, the condition of the Earth uninhabited by humankind, the creation of man, and the myth of the Flood. *Genesis* contains the Judeo-Christian creation myth,⁸ and Levi saw it simultaneously as an account of creation, a primeval chronicle, and a planetary catastrophe. It therefore becomes clear why he borrows its cosmogonical archetypes and motifs to characterize his own story. Engaging with a text which is so deeply rooted in Italian culture and consciousness, Levi created rhetorical and intertextual referents to

⁶ "The end of the Lager and the rebirth of humanity have the creation of *Genesis* as allegoric referent," writes Baldini (2003, p. 52).

⁷ Judaism was a putative tradition for Levi. As he claimed in an interview, it was a "field in which I am not interested religiously, but culturally." (A. Audino, "Io un poeta? Scrivo soltanto per gioco," 1984, in Levi, 2018, p. 473). Regarding the Bible, he declared that he "read it, I appreciate it as literature, but I don't believe in it" (M. Machiedo, "La parola sopravvivrà," 1969, in Levi, 2018, p. 33).

⁸ As stated by J. W. Rogerson (2014, p. 22), "[m]yths, as found in the Bible and in texts from the ancient Near East, are narratives that contain ambiguous symbols in order to explore the ambiguities of human life—and human fate." See also M. S. Smith (2014) on whether *Genesis 1* is a proper creation myth.

depict the primordial atmosphere which he felt he had been living in. Thus, his book contained much more than a mere report of his experiences.

1.1. Counter-Creation

The first motif from Genesis to note is one of the most memorable in the Bible. In the second verse of the account of man's creation, "the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). On the one hand, Levi seems to twist the anthropogonic episode from the first verses of Genesis and create a linguistic conglomerate to epitomize it in *The Truce*. On the other, one must also consider an earlier allusion to this passage in *If This Is a Man*:

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn't easy, it wasn't quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile, under your gaze. From our side you have nothing more to fear: no acts of revolt, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment. (*ITIAM*, 1947, I: 143)

As if they were gods, the Germans attempted to erase the humanity of their captives through a specific and meticulous process. They repeated God the Father's creation of the first man, jeopardizing and undoing his primeval act. The Lager was inhuman and forced the prisoners into a struggle to survive within the fences, thereby depriving them of their values, their strength to react, and even of their power to silently show disapproval. This is the "demolition of a man" (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:22) to which Levi refers in his first book. In another passage, he describes it in the terms of a radical deprivation of every human feature:

no human condition more wretched exists, nor could it be imagined. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listened, they would not understand. They will take away even our name; and if we went to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name

something of us, of us as we were, remains. (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:22–23)

The image which Levi uses to describe the exhausted captives is highly evocative. He writes that they were “empty inside, no more than a husk, like the slough of some insects that one finds on the edge of a pound, attached to the rocks by a threat and shaken by the wind” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:40). As Cavaglion highlighted in his commentary on *If This Is a Man*, “the image indicates that the protection barrier wasn’t useful at all, the explosion has already happened [...] there’s nothing more to see but remains, abandoned shells which stay still” (Levi, 2012, p. 71, n. 3). Through their extreme conceit, the Nazis destroyed the souls of the captives, erased their humanity, and transformed them into something akin to primeval animals driven only to survive. Levi observes “the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:85).

It is only in *The Truce* that Levi both illustrates this process and understands, once outside the fences and once he has regained his humanity, that the Nazis’ plan was not just to annihilate *man* but also everything else. Indeed, their template for annihilation was suitable for humans and non-living things alike. When the dispersed find shelter at the end of a rainy night, they stare at the damaged and abandoned Soviet barracks where they sleep and realize that the Germans have not limited themselves to carry out their plan only in Auschwitz:

All the buildings had been ransacked and plundered in the meticulous German manner. The German armies in retreat had carried off everything that could be carried off: windows and doors, grates, railings, the entire systems of lighting and heating, water pipes, even the fence stakes. The walls had been stripped down to the last nail. From an adjacent railroad junction, the rails and the ties had been torn up – with a machine just for the purpose, the Russian told us. More than a sack, in other words: the genius of destruction, of counter-creation, here as at Auschwitz. (*T*, 1963, I: 318–319)

When Levi bitterly contemplates the outcome of the Nazis’ plan, he cannot but think of the Lager as he explicates in the clear comparison towards the end of the passage: “here as at Auschwitz.” The author would

also comment on his own words in the scholastic edition of *The Truce* in 1965, in which he writes that it is the “contrary process of creation, the integral destruction. It is, in other words, another aspect of the total war, of the ‘pestilence’”, or again, “the terrible illness of the total war, which had never occurred in the history of humankind: the war that not only kills but also destroys, corrupts, and spreads humiliation, slavery, and falsehood” (Levi, 2016b, p. 1395). A war aimed not just at annihilating millions of people, but which is “total” insofar as it touches and threatens everything, including buildings and material things, which are deprived of their vital parts and left in a state of sorrowful nothingness.

Consequently, by implicitly referring to the Genesis passage in which God creates man out of nothing following a methodical plan, Levi appropriates this primigenial paradigm and sets up an intertextual dialogue aimed at portraying the evil and the cruelty of the camps. Besides reminding the reader that the *Häftlinge* were nothing more than “rigid puppets made only of bones,” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:155) “counter-creation” gives a clear idea of the blasphemy and destruction of the Nazi death machine.

1.2. Divine Void

Despite these observations, Levi’s intertextual dialogue with Genesis begins *The Truce*. The story continues from where it ended in *If This Is a Man*, and the author makes another crucial allusion to the Judeo-Christian creation myth to describe the remnants of Auschwitz.

The very first moment of *The Truce* (when the Red Army reaches the dismembered bones of Auschwitz) focuses on the anxious emptiness which oppresses the survivors who have waited so long for their release. This is intimately linked to the “counter-creation” to which Levi refers throughout the novel, and is its most relevant effect. When the Russian soldiers ride into the Camp, they find not Germans but walking skeletons who wander in a deadly atmosphere:

They seemed to us miraculously physical and real, suspended (the road was higher than the camp) on their enormous horses, between the gray of the snow and the gray of the sky, motionless under the gusts of a damp wind that threatened

snow. It seemed to us, and so it was, that the *void filled with death* in which for ten days we had wandered like spent stars had found a solid center, a nucleus of condensation: four armed men, but not armed against us; four messengers of peace, with rough boyish faces under the heavy fur helmets. (*T*, 1963, I:216, italics mine)

To express such a feeling, Levi explicitly refers to a “void filled with death.” This echoes a highly significant image from the second verse of Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (Gen 1:1–2)

Levi’s expression recalls the cosmogonic frame described in Genesis. Undeniably, he quotes the second line above as he tries to portray his release from Auschwitz by the Red Army. On the one hand, he relies on his scientific education and compares the prisoners to stars and planets, while on the other he alludes to the basic text of the Jewish tradition to depict the sidereal nothingness of his liberation from hell. In both cases, the image that the author wishes to convey relates to the birth of a cosmic order out of nothing, owing to the influence of a compelling external force that passes by and gives rise to a new period.

Before such new creation, however, there was only void. Levi would shed light on this condition in 1986, more than twenty years after *The Truce*. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he describes it as one of the most common feelings among the captives even several years after their release:

everyone suffered from an incessant malaise that poisoned our sleep and has no name. To call it “neurosis” is reductive and ridiculous. Perhaps it would be more accurate to see it as the atavistic anguish that reverberates in the second verse of Genesis: the anguish, inscribed in each one of us, of the *tohu vavohu*, the formless and void universe, crushed beneath the Spirit of God, but from which the spirit of man—as yet unborn or already dead—is absent. (*The Shame, DAS*, 1986, III:2469)

Apart from being a characteristic condition of the Lager, the disease still deeply affects the prisoners after their release, turning them into scattered, injured, wretched, and weakened bodies with shattered souls. Therefore, the overwhelming sense of anxiety caused by the devilish aftermath of the Lager is compared to the oxymoronic “absence of presence” that populated the nothingness of the empty universe before creation (or after a catastrophic destruction). Both allude to that “void filled with death,” to that dreary, “formless and void universe, crushed beneath the Spirit of God.”

While such a mental and spiritual condition seems to be irreversible in *If This Is a Man*, it becomes the condition that precedes the renaissance in *The Truce*. Populating the “formless and void universe,” life can come to run its cycle again from where it had been interrupted. Playing with such opposite motifs, Levi attempts to depict the Soviet primeval atmosphere and, thanks to the rhetorical referents he draws from Genesis, writes his own cosmogony. As in many of these texts, *The Truce* deals with the nothingness out of which life is formed. Readers can appreciate such motifs thanks to their jarring contrast. For instance, from the ashes of Auschwitz after the Nazis’ attempt to erase a significant part of humankind, life generates once more and the renaissance begins. The lines to which Levi alludes were paramount references from which he could take inspiration, raw material to reforge in his new, conscious, and exciting career as a writer in the early 1960s.

1.3. “High wind”

The third cosmogonical *tópos* of *The Truce* that comes from the Bible is the “High Wind,” a fundamental feature of God in Genesis and another symbol of man’s erased presence on Earth. Levi explicitly refers to this *tópos*, presenting it as a highly symbolic part of the Belarusian landscape: “In those days and in those places, shortly after the front passed, a *high wind* blew over the face of the Earth” (*T*, 1963, I:235, italics mine). Indeed, as Mattioda argues, “*The Truce* should have been titled [...] with

a reference to the wind that God blows on Earth.”⁹ If the editor had chosen differently, it would have been entitled “High Wind” (or “*Vento Alto*” in Italian) in a direct allusion to Gen 1:1–2, where we read that “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Alternatively, the allusion could have been to Gen 8:1:

And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged. (Gen 8:1)

This is the moment in which God blows his sacred breath over the Earth to dry it after the Flood. Remarkably, such holy wind is called “*rùakh*” in Genesis. As we know from *Argon* in *The Periodic Table*,¹⁰ Levi was aware that while this word can mean “wind,” it also refers to God’s vital puff insufflated into clay to animate it into the form of a man. By mentioning this concept, Levi draws an allegory between the Polish wind and the biblical *rùakh*, the former being a sort of divine regenerating spirit which blows over the remnants of the Lager during the renaissance and assures the regeneration of life. In this way, it seems unquestionable that Levi explicitly refers to this cosmogonical motif, which is itself a typical feature of the creation myth played out in Genesis.

In summary, the wind is arguably one of the most important elements for Levi’s commitment to the story. He seems to have endorsed it to create a metaphorical equivalent of his experience, thereby opening another intertextual dialogue with the biblical account of creation.

1.4. The Flood

As has been made evident, the biblical motifs of the *tohu vaholu* and of the wind do not exist in isolation in *The Truce*. In fact, they are

⁹ There is also the wind or divine breath in Gen 1:2, right after the creation of Earth and Sky. See also Belpoliti (2015, p. 92), Baldasso (2007, p. 187), and Levi (2016b, p. 1493).

¹⁰ Levi’s definition in *Argon* is very clear: “From *rùakh*, plural *rukhdòd*, which means ‘alito,’ an illustrious word that can be read in the marvelous mysterious second verse of Genesis (‘The wind of the Lord breathed over the face of the waters’), came *tirè ‘n ruàkh*, ‘a wind is blowing,’ in its various physiological meanings: here one recognizes the Chosen People’s Biblical familiarity with their Creator” (*PT*, 1975, II:762).

physically and allegorically linked to the ancestral catastrophe that expurgated the Earth in Genesis: the Flood.

Despite being a less explicit *diminutio*, the motif of the Flood is repeatedly echoed throughout the novel. For instance, “The rain soon became a deluge” (*T*, 1963, I:291) and stopped the football match which celebrated the Victory Day; “In L’viv, a skeleton city devastated by bombing and by war, the rain stopped in the night in a downpour;” (*T*, 1963, I:308) or at the river Berezina, “in the middle of the night, at the peak of a violent storm. We were made to get out in the downpour, in absolute darkness, broken here and there by lamps” (*T*, 1963, I:318). These heavy rainfalls are typical of the Belorussian climate and are symbolically linked to a myth rooted in several traditions (popular, biblical, and classical). To an Italian reader, it is no coincidence that Levi always uses the same word “diluvio” to indicate these rainfalls, thereby echoing the well-known biblical catastrophe. This choice cannot but fortify the allegory that the writer depicts for a world emerging out of war; a place that survived the depurative Flood, the unavoidable phase preceding the rebirth of life.

Through this word, Levi thus characterizes Belarus as a new world rising from the ashes of Auschwitz. Despite the deadly catastrophe, he alludes to the motif of the Flood metaphorically, and the ancestral narration played out in the Bible (but also in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*)¹¹ resounds in his words. Consequently, the real “truce” between World War II and “the hard time that was to follow” (*T*, 1963, I:256) (the Cold War) could be seen as a dynamic and lively frame in which life is set anew. As if to suggest that nature can erase the ugliness of the death camps through rain (which washes everything away, and quenches and greases the earth to make it produce new fruit), Levi reshapes and retells the Flood tale to create a suitable allegory, thereby representing what Baldini calls “the epochal shift between ‘pre-’ and ‘post-Auschwitz’” (2002, p. 166).

¹¹ In *Metamorphoses* III, ll. 309 and following, Ovid (whose verses Levi very probably knew) tells Pyrrha and Pygmalion’s myth, which also implies a world flood.

In addition to this, there is also a specific character in *The Truce* who embodies the renaissance in a very symbolic manner and whose name unmistakably echoes a key character in Genesis. Consider the following:

Noah didn't live in our room; rather, he lived in no place and in all places. He was a nomadic, free man, happy in the air he breathed and the earth he walked on. He was the *Scheissminister* of free Auschwitz, [...] there was nothing base about him, or, if there was, it was overcome and cancelled out by the force of his vital strength. Noah was a very young Pantagruel, as strong as a horse, greedy and lewd. [...] Noah wanted all women: [...] high-flying bird [...] [he] wandered through the women rooms like an oriental prince, wearing a varicolored jacket with an arabesque design, covered with patches and braid. His love meetings were like hurricanes. The flood was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz Noah saw the rainbow shine, and the world was his, to repopulate. (*T*, 1963, I:231)

Allegory, analogy, and metaphor all collide in the character of Noah, just as the plot of *The Truce* does with the archetypal (re)creation myth of Genesis. Levi clarifies this link in the school edition of *The Truce*, referring to his “biblical allusion, suggested by the name of the character: Noah is the Jewish form of *Noè*, actually” (2016b, p. 1386). This is an allusion to the patriarch who in Genesis (beginning in Chapter 6) is charged by God to build an ark and safeguard the living species from the purifying Flood that is to be brought on the Earth. As the biblical Noah must guide the repopulation of Earth after the catastrophe (in Gen 6, 17), Levi's Noah is the symbolic father of the “many-sided rebirth of humanity after the Flood” (Baldasso, 2007, p. 124).

The motif of the Flood, therefore, further showcases Levi's literary genius. Selecting the motif from the biblical (or classical) creation myth, Levi transformed his real experiences into stories with mythical features. Correspondingly, Levi was able to achieve a combinatory and intertextual style aimed at giving vivid power to his narration.

2. Mud

After the Flood comes the mud. As Belpoliti argued, this motif is “obsessively present in Levi’s first two books” (2015, p. 92). While in *If This Is a Man* it seems to be a symbol of the *Häftlinge*,¹² in *The Truce* (as well as in other works) mud is linked to the rebirth of life.

On the contrary, in *If This Is a Man*, mud is a typical element of the captives. Levi characterizes mud in a slightly different way when he writes that they are comparable to “mud puppets” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:127) emerging from a “world of mud” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:110) within the “horizon of mud” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:67) of the Lager. Moreover, mud was an unavoidable and omnipresent part of the Soviet landscape, as it was when Levi returned to Birkenau in the 60s: “And yet when I entered the Birkenau Lager, which I had never seen as a prisoner, I felt a violent anguish. Nothing had changed there: there was mud, and there was still mud, or suffocating dust in summer [...]” (*ITIAM*, Appendix to 2016b, I:178). As Mario Porro suggests, in the Lager “the banality of evil is distorted order, regression to Chaos, to primordial mud, to hell, to darkness; and it is about reconstructing the order of the living, for which it is necessary to make the effort to return from darkness to brightness” (1997, p. 457). Thus, mud was a “predominant element” (Baldini, 2003, p. 52) within the fences and was part of the “counter-creation” process discussed above, thereby constituting the antithesis of God’s anthropogonic act *par excellence*. In *The Truce*, mud is also present in an

¹² The man described in “Shemà”, the poem that opens *If This Is a Man*, sinks in the mud: “Consider if this is a man | Who toils in the mud | Who knows no peace” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:7, but see also *CP*, 1984, III:1887). Mud is a “monotonous horror” in the poem “Buna” (*CP*, 1984, III:1881), the factory in which Levi worked when he was held prisoner, a “huge tangle of iron, concrete, mud, and smoke, [which] is negation of beauty” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:68). The mud is so “soft” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:63) and viscous that it malevolently sticks onto the deportees’ feet. They were “muddy, ragged, and starving” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:115), “non-men” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:85), wearing “filthy [clothes], stained with mud, grease, and blood” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:136), forced to put on “wooden clogs [...] intolerably noisy and [...] encrusted with alternate layers of mud and regulation grease” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:136), or the “shoes sucked in by the greedy mud, by this ubiquitous Polish mud whose monotonous horror fills our days” (*ITIAM*, 1947, I:63). Attention should also be drawn to the correlation with *If This Is A Man*, whose words are literally repeated: this is one of those “short, bloody poems” (*Chromium*, *PT*, 1975, II:876) of the “1945–46 ‘bunch’” (G. Nascimbeni, “Levi: l’ora incerta della poesia,” 1984, in Levi, 2018, p. 469) which preceded the writing of the book (see Pepe, 2016).

excerpt which unmistakably frames the element in the primeval atmosphere: “It was all deserted, silent, crushed under the low sky, a place of mud and rain and abandonment” (*T*, 1963, I:222).

If mud was a symbol of death and annihilation in Levi’s first book, it becomes the emblem of the post-catastrophic rebirth in his second. One of his principal aims here was to record what the Soviet Union looked like at that time, and to describe the uniqueness of the landscape as well as the bizarre historical period. As he declared in a comment on *The Truce* during an interview, those territories were “nobody’s land, stomped, destroyed, set on fire, tortured, devastated, [their] villages and communities massacred, but miraculously rich and prolific, full of ferments as the earth after the flood” (*Echi*, 1976, p. 25). The comparison drawn by Levi is clear and thorough, crucial to understanding the way in which he takes advantage of the cosmogonical archetypes of which he is aware. In those days, the Soviet Union was a land to be repopulated, a place where life was going to rise again from the ashes, or better yet, from mud. To this end, Margaret Hagen asserts that “Europe covered with mud is an image of the consequences of war: the necessity to start all over again, to reconstruct humanity once more from the mud of possibilities” (2011, p. 114). This is because mud contains the buds that will bloom during the universal renaissance. In this way, mud can be considered as the element which brings back to life what had perished in the catastrophe.

Nevertheless, although mud (or clay, both a mixture of earth and water) was the raw material used by God to shape the first man in Genesis, it is not portrayed as the vibrant alcove of life which is described in *The Truce*. For this reason, Levi must have derived this characteristic of mud from another source. This could arguably have been Ovid, whose creation myth has several themes and motifs in common with the Bible as well as offering a characterization of mud which is very close to that in *The Truce*. Indeed, the tale of a depurative flood is also played out in *Metamorphoses*. When Jupiter, enraged by Lycaon’s impiety, decides to punish the inhabitants of the world, he unleashes a cataclysm aimed at

destroying humankind over the Earth and in the skies.¹³ As in the biblical tale, only a few beings can escape the catastrophe, such as Pyrrha and Deucalion, who are charged by the Delphic oracle to generate new men and women by throwing rocks over their backs. But what about the animals?

The other animals, in their various forms, were produced spontaneously by the earth, when the lingering moisture had been [warmed] by the sun's fire, and the mud and the damp marshes had swelled up in the heat, and the fertile seeds of things nourished in the life-supporting earth, as if in a mother's womb, waited and grew and took on a particular likeness. [...] So, when the earth, muddied by the recent flood, was warmed again by the ethereal sunshine, by the heat on high, it gave forth countless species, partly restoring ancient forms, partly creating wonders new.¹⁴

Levi was undoubtedly aware of Ovid's version of the flood. He had studied *Metamorphoses* in high school and may well have taken inspiration from it while writing *Trachi the Centaur*,¹⁵ a fictional short story he was composing at the same time as *The Truce* in the early 1960s. Therefore, it is no coincidence that one of the main topics of this short story is the flood (and what happens after it). Trachi is the narrator's imaginary friend who tells the creation myth of his species. As in Genesis, (and in *The Truce*), in the tradition of the centaurs there was also a flood after which life originated anew:

¹³ "*fit fragor: hinc densi funduntur ab aethere nimbi*" (l. 269, but see the whole tale told at ll. 260–312). Furthermore, Jupiter's condemnation is very similar to God's in Genesis. On the one hand, the former wants that "*genus mortale sub undis perdere et ex omni nimbos demittere caelo*" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, ll. 260–261). On the other, the latter warns Noah to save himself, his family, and the couples of animals: "I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die" (Gen 6:17).

¹⁴ "Cetera diversis tellus animalia formis | sponte sua peperit, | postquam vetus umor ab igne | percaluit solis, caenumque udaeque paludes | intumuere aestu, fecundaque semina rerum | vivaci nutrita solo ceu matris in alvo | creverunt faciemque aliquam cepere morando. | [...] Ergo ubi diluvio tellus lutulenta recenti | solibus aetheriis altoque recanduit aestu, | edidit innumeras species, partimque figuras | rettulit antiquas, partim nova monstra creavit" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, ll. 416–437).

¹⁵ Then published as *Quaestio de Centauris* (without any variations) in *Natural histories* in 1966: see *NH*, I, pp. 510–521.

Remarkably, their traditions also begin with a highly intelligent man, a Noah-like inventor and savior called Cutnofeset. [...] How, then, did these species come about? Immediately afterward, legend says. When the waters retreated, a deep layer of warm mud covered the earth. Now, this mud, which harbored in its decay all the enzymes from what had perished in the flood, was extraordinarily fertile: as soon as it was touched by the sun, it was immediately covered in shoots from which grasses and plants of every type sprang forth; and even more, within its soft and moist bosom, it was host to the marriages of all the species saved in the ark. (*Quaestio de Centauris, NH, 1966, I:511*)

It was, as Levi wrote, a “panspermia,” (*Quaestio de Centauris, NH, 1966, I:512*) and it was consumed in “[t]he sea of warm mud, which concealed the cold and prudish face of the earth” (*Quaestio de Centauris, NH, 1966, I:511*). The centaurs were born out of these conditions. The first examples were generated by Cam (a man, Noah’s son) and a Thessalian horse (saved in the ark) who were pulled to breed by panspermia when the Earth “was a single immense nuptial bed” (*Quaestio de Centauris, NH, 1966, I:511*).

It is difficult not to recognize the same scenario in *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, the two tales share many characteristics and fit perfectly with one another. In Trachi’s myth we find “mud and the damp marshes” (*caenumque udaeque paludes*, l. 418) which inflate the immense swamp full of turbid and fecund primordial mud, “boiling over with desire in all its recesses, and teeming with jubilant germs” (*Quaestio de Centauris, NH, 1966, I:511*). This process is activated and continuously stimulated by father Sun’s action, who fertilizes the worldly bog: “when the earth, muddied by the recent flood, was warmed again by the ethereal sunshine, by the heat on high” (ll. 435–436). This is mirrored in Levi when he writes: “as soon as it was touched by the sun, it was immediately covered in shoots from which grasses and plants of every type sprang forth.” The same “fertile seeds of things” (*fecunda [...] semina rerum*, l. 419) shine “when the lingering moisture had been warmed by the sun’s fire” (ll. 417–418). Furthermore, there is also Great Mother Nature’s “soft and moist bosom,” (*Quaestio de Centauris, NH, 1966, I:511*) which corresponds to the Ovidian “mother’s womb” (*matris ... alvo*, l. 420). This

“[brings] forth” (*edidit*, l. 436) the “shapes changed” (*mutatas [...] formas*, ll. 1–2) of which the poet will sing while the world, to use Levi’s words, is “swarming with deformed, deflective, abnormal human examples” (*T*, 1963, I:235). “Such was the original of every form, whether living today or extinct,” (*Quaestio de Centauris*, *NH*, 1966, I:512) wrote Levi in his short story; whence it generated “countless species, partly restoring ancient forms, partly creating wonders new” (ll. 436–437), as Ovid had explained.

As Belpoliti reports, *Trachi the Centaur* was published in April 1961 in the newspaper *Il Mondo*, at the same time that Levi was writing the first chapters of *The Truce*. Given that Levi was working on *Trachi the Centaur* and the first chapters of *The Truce* simultaneously, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* might have had an important creative influence in the recreation of the Soviet Union’s primigenial atmosphere, encouraging Levi to see mud as an element of paramount importance for terrestrial cosmogonical processes.

3. Chaos

Last in the narrative comes chaos, the primeval energy over which creation succeeded. It is a dark force that threatens the world with disorder and whose name Levi derives from Greco-Roman literature, thereby giving the closing of *The Truce* a personal meaning. Moreover, because of their simultaneous composition, it is no wonder that chaos is another motif that *The Truce* shares with *Trachi the Centaur*. In the latter, the narrator explains that panspermia “was a time, never again to be repeated, of wild, ecstatic fecundity in which the entire universe felt love, so much so that it nearly returned to chaos” (*Quaestio de Centauris*, *NH*, 1966, I:511). Likewise, in *The Truce* Levi writes:

the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, deflective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion, anxiously searching for his own place, his own sphere, as the cosmogonies of the ancients say, poetically, of the particles of the four elements. (*T*, 1963, I:235)

Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly what Levi's source was for the "cosmogonies of the ancients," one might think of Empedocles (whose lesson Levi could find in Dante's *Inferno*)¹⁶ or Lucretius (one of Levi's major spiritual fathers),¹⁷ both of whom sang the origin of the cosmos in their verses. In this way, Levi could build on the idea of a struggle between the primordial four elements to either stay separated or combine. What is more, both ancient authors wrote a *De rerum natura*, an epic poem in which they speculated on nature and wondered about its mechanics. Crucially, both gave paramount importance to the earliest moment of creation,¹⁸ the concept to which Levi alludes when he depicts the "primal Chaos" in the days of *The Truce*.

Furthermore, both authors were aware of one fundamental truth concerning the elements. Namely, as they combine and form matter to come alive, their compounds naturally perish when they split. Life and death, then, are intimately linked to each other, so that one cannot exist without the other. This is the case with Empedocles' concept of *Sphairos*, where Love and Strife form the cycle of life and continuously compel the natural elements to either combine or separate. Similarly with Lucretius' Epicurean theory of the *clinamen*, where atoms incessantly fall to the bottom of the universe and form or split the bodies of both living and non-living things.

¹⁶ "da tutte parti l'alta valle feda | tremò sì, ch'i' pensai che l'universo | sentisse amor, per lo qual è chi creda | più volte il mondo in caòsso converso" ("on every side the deep and foul abyss | so trembled that I thought the universe | had felt the love, whereby, as some believe, | the world to Chaos hath been oft reduced") (*Inferno*, XII:40–43). Dante's source was Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where "Empedocles' doctrine is summoned" (Mattioda, 2011, p. 76).

¹⁷ See Cravero (2021).

¹⁸ Ovid also alludes to this at the very start of the *Metamorphoses*, I:ll. 5–9: "Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum | unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe, | quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles | nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem | non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum" ("Before the sea and the lands and the sky that covers all, | there was one face of nature in her whole orb | (they call it Chaos), a rough unordered mass, | nothing except inactive weight and heaped together | the discordant seeds of unassembled things,") (Ovid, 1985, p. 13). Ovid is probably quoting Hesiod, who first used the word "χάος" in his cosmogony, imagining it as a primordial divinity. Nonetheless, no direct quotations of Hesiod have been detected in Levi's work.

For Levi, by contrast, nothing lasts but the chaos, where chaos refers to the Lager. This is what the author writes in the mournful closing of his book, where he describes the nightmare which haunts his dreams after his release. This is the “dream filled with fear” (*T*, 1963, I:397) which closes *The Truce*, worth quoting in full:

It's a dream within another dream, varying in its details, unique in its substance. I am at the table with my family, or friends, or at work, or in a verdant countryside—in a serene, relaxed setting, in other words, apparently without tension and pain—and yet I feel a subtle, profound anguish, the definite sensation of a looming threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, little by little or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and is destroyed around me, the scene, the walls, the people, and the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Everything has now turned into chaos; I am alone at the center of a gray and murky void, and, yes, I *know* what this means, and I also know that I have always known it. I am again in the Lager, and nothing outside the Lager was true. The rest was brief holiday, or trick of the senses, a dream: the family, nature in flower, the house. Now this internal dream, the dream of peace, is over, and in the external dream, which continues coldly, I hear the sound of a well-known piece: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, “*Wstawać.*” (*T*, 1963, I:397–398, italics original)

As Levi explains in his commentary on the school edition, (2016b, p. 1406) the Lager broadens into a universal meaning. It becomes the symbol of the human condition itself, representing death, the ultimate threat from which no one can escape. This is an end that is inevitable, irresistible, and inscribed in life, an implicit part of human destiny. This dream marks the circular return to the previous situation; despite the renewal and rebirth, Levi understands that the real truce is ephemeral just as the moments of reprieve were in the Lager. This unsettling analogy relates the whole world to Auschwitz, a hell where the possibility of dying was very high and where the captives had to face a daily ruthless struggle for survival. The risk was ceaseless, and Levi compares this everlasting condition to the entropic tendency that

threatens everything that exists. Nothing lasts outside the great chaos of the Lager but the Lager itself, because existence must come to an end one way or another. As in the Lager, it is unmistakable that the end is the ultimate truth about existence—an essential part of everyday life, if not its major premise.

Conclusion

Levi seems to underline that life could not be understood without considering its opposite, death, which gives life even more value and importance. As in Genesis, life succeeds to nothing and unto nothing it finally returns. This is the closing message of *The Truce*, which would become a pervasive and perturbing thought in Levi's work until the 1980s. In *Carbon*, Levi's most famous short story, which seals his *Periodic Table*, the protagonist (a nomad atom that dwells in the cosmos) experiences the "perpetual frightening round of life and death" (*Carbon, PT*, 1975, II:899), characterizing terrestrial existence:

"That's life," although it's rarely described that way: an insertion, a descent to its own advantage, a parasite on the downward path of energy, from its noble solar form to the degraded state of low-temperature heat. On this downward path, which leads to equilibrium, that is, to death, life draws a curve and nests in it. (*Carbon, PT*, 1975, II:897)

Unsurprisingly, this theme also appears in another contemporary text, *The Molecule's Defiance*, a short story in which Levi directly quotes Lucretius and uses the Latin poet's lines to intimate the ultimate secret of existence. There, Levi writes that we are constantly threatened by "ugly things [*bruttare*] without reversal or remedy that obscure our future, [...] the prevalence of confusion over order, of unseemly death over life" (*The Molecule's Defiance, LOS*, 1981, II:1508). This idea might be an allusion to Lucretius' theory of *clinamen*, but also to the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi's cosmic pessimism which particularly influenced Levi's last period. In Levi's vision, as Anna Baldini shrewdly maintains,

The path of abjection going from order to chaos, from life to inorganic, is the "obvious," natural and ordinary path; the opposite path, against entropy, demands energy, and so it is

continuously in danger of falling through or behind, going backwards. (2003, p. 172, n. 29)

Leopardi had already successfully theorized about all this. Levi cites him when he refers to the spontaneous or induced stupidity of matter, thereby appropriating his lines. For Levi, history and the universe are governed by that “force that is not invincible but perverse, that prefers disorder to order, jumble to purity, a tangle to parallelism, rust to iron, a pile to a wall, and stupidity to reason” (*The Brute Power, USE*, 1983, III:2630). He would call this force a “brute power” (*The Brute Power, USE*, 1983, III:2629–2633) in the 80s, explicitly quoting Leopardi’s poem “To Himself”. Levi was fascinated by the poet’s intuition of “that blind, brutal power | That rules and ruins all” (2019, p. 189), and saw the ultimate truth of nature mirrored in it, as well as the *ratio* underlying the Lager. In fact, in the 1960s Levi had already foreseen that this strong and dark power was the “looming threat” of the traumatic dream in which he was compelled to compare human finitude with the Lager.

“Everything has now turned into chaos;” “everything collapses and is destroyed around me [...] and the anguish becomes more intense and more precise.” Levi’s words here are unambiguous: because of entropy, chaos seems to be the ultimate truth on which his novel sheds light, it being also the first cosmic phase which preceded creation. It is the start from whence everything came and the end towards which everything heads. Thus, if *The Truce* celebrates the rebirth succeeding to death, it also presents the world’s propensity for disorder and death, along with the awareness that everything could return to nothing (as it did in the Lager). As stated by Mattioda, it is therefore no wonder that the novel contains “thoughts about rebirth that [...] constantly fight with the other thoughts peculiar of Levi’s last period” (2011, p. 72). Indeed, *The Truce* is an ancipital, centauresque, double-faced novel in which the motif of rebirth is always threatened by the toxic exhalations of the “black hole of Auschwitz” (*The Black Hole of Auschwitz, USE*, 1983, III:2740–2743). As with Trachi the centaur’s two halves—the rational one and the darker, more instinctive one—*The Truce* both celebrates life and acknowledges its *mise an abyme*. This apocalyptic revelation of mortality is the author’s envoy, revealing that the chaos that undercuts order is a hostile

and ever-lasting condition in which Levi felt inescapably immersed, or, better yet, drowned.

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