

# Furio Jesi and Judaism

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**Abstract.** This discussion examines Furio Jesi's theory of the "mythological machine" as he elaborates its workings in its anti-Semitic manifestations. The very mechanism Jesi describes as operational in the non-genuine, "technicized" mythology directed toward a political objective can be found in anti-Semitic mythology ever since the medieval legend of the Wandering Jew, the blood libel, and its correlated myth of the Jewish Vampire; in sum, the myth of the Jew as other and powerful. At the same time, Jesi recognizes in these figures who stand at the border between life and death (the Wandering Jew, the Vampire) a figure of the poet in general and of himself. Jesi obliquely represents himself standing at the border between Judaism and Christianity, mortality and immortality, creative writing and critical analysis, and between wisdom and darkness.

**Keywords:** Jesi, Judaism, Antisemitism, mythological machine, vampirism, exile.

**Riassunto.** Al potere del poeta di andare alle fonti del mito, di manipolare la forza vitale, che è anche il suo come poeta, Furio Jesi oppone o piuttosto affianca nella sua opera la necessità di «raccontare», nei saggi critici, il mito stesso, genuino o tecnicizzato, per poter far parte di una comunità di conoscenti capace di capire il funzionamento di una pericolosa «macchina mitologica». Jesi elabora la sua teoria della «macchina mitologica» guardando all'uso di questa stessa in senso antisemita. Lo stesso meccanismo che riconosce legato al mito non genuino, tecnicizzato e diretto a un fine politico, lo riconosce nella macchina mitologica antisemita fin dalla leggenda medievale cristiana dell'ebreo errante, nell'accusa del sangue rivolta agli ebrei e al mito correlato dell'ebreo vampiro, in senso rituale e sociologico-economico, e dell'ebreo diverso e potente. Contemporaneamente Jesi riconosce in queste figure ("l'ebreo errante", il "vampiro") sul limite tra la vita e la morte la figura del poeta e di se stesso.

**Parole chiave:** Jesi, ebraismo, antisemitismo, macchina mitologica, vampirismo, esilio.

Furio Jesi (1941-1980) was a poet, mythologist, archeologist, historian of religion and ideas, and a scholar of the survival of myths in the modern era. The scope of this discussion is to examine Jesi's theory of the "mythological machine" (Jesi, 1980 [1973], pp. 105-109):<sup>1</sup> as he elaborates its workings in its antisemitic manifestations. The very mechanism Jesi describes as operational in the non-genuine, "technicized" mythology directed toward a political objective can be found in antisemitic mythology ever since the medieval legend of the Wandering Jew, the blood libel, and its correlated myth of the Jewish Vampire; in sum, the myth of the Jew as *other*<sup>2</sup> and *powerful*<sup>3</sup> in both a ritualistic and socio-economic sense. "The documentation relative to the 'blood libel'," writes Jesi in his 1973 article *L'accusa del sangue. La macchina mitologica antisemita* [The Blood Libel. The Antisemitic Mythological Machine] permits us to observe a specific functioning of the 'mythological machine'.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Jesi recognizes in these figures who stand at the border between life and death (the Wandering Jew, the Vampire) a figure of the poet and of himself. In a letter to Gershon Scholem written in 1966 (cited in full below), Jesi obliquely represents himself standing at the border between Judaism and Christianity, mortality and immortality, creative writing and critical analysis, and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Manera 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See the unpublished essay by Jesi *Il cattivo selvaggio. Teoria e pratica di persecuzione dell'uomo "diverso"* (1973), in Jesi 2011 [1973]: 266-283.

<sup>3</sup> See Jesi's unpublished *Cultura di destra e paura dell'ebreo*, in F. Jesi (2011), pp. 78-90.

<sup>4</sup> Jesi 2007 [1973]: 40. In two parts: I. *Il processo agli ebrei di Damasco* [The Trial of the Damascene Jews], II. *Metamorfosi del vampiro in Germania* [The Metamorphosis of the Vampire in Germany].

between wisdom and darkness. This darkness characterizes a God whose Name is inpronounceable, to which people, individually and collectively, may tell their own stories and those of others, and in so doing may “pray.” (Jesi, 2013 [1980], p. 104).

At the end of the Seventies Jesi would choose to abandon poetic writing (having previously theorized such a choice), which goes to the source of myth, in order to write essays (telling as knowledge shared) to be able thus to participate in and commit himself “morally”<sup>5</sup> to the collectivity, by “recounting” myths.

## 1. The Letter to Scholem, 1966

Furio Jesi’s relationship with Judaism immediately appears fundamental in his literary and critical writings, but it emerges even more strongly in his personal and family relations. Son of a Jewish father and a Christian mother, Jesi recognizes that he is not “technically” Jewish (Jewishness is conceived as transmitting matrilineally), that is, not according to *Halachà*, the Law of orthodox Judaism. Nevertheless, more than once he says that he is “not Christian”.<sup>6</sup> He raises this subject with Gershom Scholem, the “sacred monster” of studies in the history of religion and Kabbala, to whom he writes in 1966. Jesi would receive a response from Scholem only after a second letter, which he sent along with a copy of his book *Mitologie intorno all'illuminismo* [Mythologies of Enlightenment]<sup>7</sup>, in 1973:

Turin, 26 November 1966

Via Principi d’Acaia, 7

Professor, I take the liberty of addressing you because the study of your works has opened up to me the depths of the Jewish spirit which I—son of a Jew and a Christian, raised in Christian culture—only dimly felt and saw on the dark horizon of my nature and my hopes. I am a historian of religions, specialized in the fields of Egyptian and Greek: the principal object of my work is the survivals of the myths and religious experiences of the ancients in modern cultures. But an impulse which I can only call religious has pushed me to undertake the study of Hebrew, to read in the language of my fathers the texts that have been the source of their spiritual life. And now I can read the Torah and am preparing myself to read (for the first time in Hebrew) the Talmudic texts and the Zohar. At this point I noticed that my atheism was becoming more and more a hesitation to give a name to the darkness that I perceive at the depths of being; the refusal of a denomination that seems blasphemous to me. I have studied Jewish mysticism in the scientific works (but not yet in the original texts), and in such study I have been your pupil. I have received illuminations that have healed my spirit, but I have had trouble with all the claims of the mystics about the nature of God. Is it possible to speak of God? This is my question and my problem. I observe only that God is darkness, and I would like to remain silent. The reason for my letter is the following: can you tell me, in your expert pedagogical benevolence, whether my thinking is completely remote from the Jewish religion, or whether there is a place for me in orthodoxy? You will say that this problem must be resolved in my conscience. But my doctrine is so weak that I seek a teacher capable of guiding my thought or my emotion. I have addressed myself to you because you are yourself a historian of religions and speak my language. But I beg you, if you wish not to take on this task, to suggest to me the name of a person who, whether by vocation or intent, would like to instruct me. In Israel, there certainly is. I thank you in advance and I beg you, Professor, to take this as an expression of my most sincere feelings. Furio Jesi<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See F. Jesi 2002: 168-170. See also Tenuta 2010: 8.

<sup>6</sup> See F. Jesi 2007 [1973]: 41: “We recognize that for a Christian reader, our expression “the myth of Christ’s blood” will sound disagreeable and blasphemous. For a historian of religions who is not of the Christian faith, however, this is the only possible definition.”

<sup>7</sup> F. Jesi 1990 [1972]. See in particular *ivi*, pp. 17-41 (Il miracolo secondo ragione).

<sup>8</sup> Furio Jesi letter to Gershom Scholem (1966), in A. Cavalletti, E. Lucca (eds) 2013: 108 (french original version ).

This letter, to which Scholem does not respond, was found in 2013 in the Scholem Archive by Enrico Lucca and published in a *Dossier Jesi* together with a reply from Scholem dated 1973, after he had received Jesi's *Mitologie intorno all'illuminismo* (1973), to which letter Jesi would in turn respond. Andrea Cavalletti, editor with Lucca of this correspondence, comments on Jesi's letter, highlighting the influence of Martin Buber and his dialogical principal in the opposition Jesi posits between remaining silent and "speaking of God".

"One may speak with God, one may not speak of God". [. . .] The influence of Buber was decisive for Jesi, as it was earlier for Kerényi. And by taking up Buber's *La via della comunità* [The Way of Community] he was able to define—in the 1965 essay *Mito e linguaggio della collettività* [Myth and Language of the Collectivity]—the genuine myth in a truly collective sense, as a myth that surfaces in the Heraclitean "waking state" and the "world in common" (Cavalletti, 2013, pp. 97-98).

For Buber, "speaking about" means distancing oneself from God, considering God as an object, while the apparent detachment is a characteristic of turning to, of telling of oneself, of "speaking with God". In his Introduction to Buber's *I racconti dei Chasidim* [Tales of the Hassidim], speaking of Buber and Rosenzweig's translation of the Bible, Jesi connects narration, storytelling, and belonging to a common cosmos, a collectivity:

Translating the Bible [. . .] does not mean writing another book to be read, but making the spirit of narration resonate in its purest sense [. . .]. As long as one is narrating, as long as the telling is an I-thou dialog, an experience of a community of people "in a waking state" (as Buber said, paraphrasing Heraclitus), one is speaking with God. When one merely writes, one is directing one's words to a multitude of people "in a somnolent state" [. . .] and one is seeking not to speak with God, but to speak about God (Jesi, 1979, p. XII).

Thus, following in part Buber's admonishment, Jesi will dedicate himself primarily to narrating, to writing essays, to critical analysis, in order to be able to participate in a world held in common, the world delineated in his 1966 essay *Mito e linguaggio della collettività* (cfr. Jesi, 1968 [1965], p. 35), which explicitly cites Buber's *La via della comunità*, published in 1960 in *Tempo presente*.

## 2. Atheism and Jewish Mysticism

In the abstract of one of his essays in the same issue of *Dossier*, Enrico Lucca precisely delineates Jesi's position with regards to his own atheism, which is linked to Jewish mystical-kabbalistic doctrine: "His studies on myth and mysticism, the mediation of Scholem, do not serve Jesi solely to get to the root of his own biography as a "half-Jew". The God of the Jews, his unpronounceable and concealed being, appears to Jesi as a possible means to legitimate and provide a motive for his research into religious belief without presupposing a god" (Lucca, 2013, p. 111). Jesi's atheism, in other words, reveals its profound religiosity (or theological seeking) in citing the doctrine of Isaac Luria, received through Scholem's writings (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in Italy in 1965), of a God who retires into the abyss of his Nothingness, contracting himself (withdrawing through *Tzimtzum*) so as to make space for Creation, and thus for a relation between mankind and the world, between one individual and another, and between the individual and a transcendent and absent God. In a letter to Giulio Schiavoni explaining why he is "not a Christian", Jesi makes reference to Luria's doctrine: "But I am not a Christian, and exactly because I reject with sincere repugnance a God who is not "Gott als ganz Anders" to the point of "exiling himself in the depths of his nothingness

(this the formula of a Jewish kabbalist from seven hundred years ago).”<sup>9</sup> Lucca focuses on the “existential” content of Jesi’s letter to Scholem, the tone of a person going beyond the simple study of religions to seek a “guide”, both spiritual and “religious”, in the paradoxical sense opened up by Luria’s doctrine:

In the effort to speak of a god impossible to speak of, Jesi discovers the nucleus of mystical claims regarding divine nature.<sup>10</sup> How is it possible to speak of a god who hides in the abyss of its own nothingness? The young Jesi demonstrates having grasped the paradoxical condition of the mystical, the profundity of its implications, and at the same time the difficulty, in the modern era, of having to confront these matters with another language, that of the historian of religion. Jesi feels able to turn to Scholem with these questions because, he confesses, he has received “illuminations” from the elder scholar that have healed his spirit. Jesi in fact does not err in appealing specifically to Scholem, given that these same problems had assailed the German scholar since his own youth (Lucca, 2013, p. 113)

Lucca continues, repeating Jesi’s search for a spiritual guide “in the direction of a possible recuperation of his Jewish roots” (Lucca, 2013, p. 116) (in an orthodox context), which finds in the only text by Scholem then available to him a quality that is not merely of intellectual interest:

Although it may appear ironic to anyone familiar with Scholem’s relations with rabbinical thought, the reference to “orthodoxy” should not be surprising. After all, it was probably by reading Scholem that Jesi had begun to grasp the complexity and variety of the Jewish world, thus using the term in the broadest possible sense. As illustrated by his correspondence with Kerényi, Jesi would not negatively characterize *a priori* (accepting the unavoidable negative consequences of such a position) that which the Hungarian scholar had rather scornfully described as “an abstruse orthodoxy that wants [. . .] no other state than the messianic one.” (Lucca, 2013, p. 116)

In Jesi’s polemical answer to Kerényi (“the adjective ‘abstruse’ surprised me a little in your letter (...) because it seems to stress a certain distance between that orthodoxy and a genuine exercise of humanism”),<sup>11</sup> we notice a certain attention, a certain pride in his origins which returns repeatedly (also in a letter to Tito Perlini),<sup>12</sup> a need to defend himself from ironic or dismissive observations that

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<sup>9</sup> Furio Jesi’s Letter to Giulio Schiavoni, 26 January 1970, in Schiavoni 1999.

<sup>10</sup> See Jesi 1972: 11: “All the techniques of Jewish kabbalistic discipleship aim precisely as this: to speak of the god who is not, in such a way as not to speak of god and yet to speak of him.”

<sup>11</sup> Jesi – Kerényi (1999): 106: “I confess however [. . .] the survival in me of that which you define “abstruse Orthodoxy”. The adjective “abstruse” surprised me a little in your letter not because it is pejorative (I don’t doubt your understanding!) but because it seems to stress a certain distance between that orthodoxy and the genuine exercise of humanism.” Jesi discusses the Six Day War with his interlocutor. On Jesi’s position in this matter see also the documents in Belpoliti, Manera (eds) 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See also the unpublished letter to Tito Perlini dated July 13, 1970, included in Giulio Schiavoni’ 2009: 91-92: “Dear Perlini, your arrogant interpretation of my biography calls for a prompt reply: not only do I stress, to your further shock, my stay in 1957 at the Monastery of the Metamorphosis (the Meteora in Thessaly), but I also send you in a separate package my just-published book of poetry. It should be very much to the purpose (regarding the considerations on esotericism and enlightenment in your last letter) if for no other reason than for its title, which is *Exile*, that is, *Galuth* in the language of my rabbinic ancestors. There really were these rabbis in my family (not merely a generic reference to Jewish ancestors) at least on my grandmother’s side, and perhaps today they are a bit horrified by their descendant. In any case I do not know whether they were conventionally observant or mystical-enlightenment-oriented. [. . .] As for your letter, on a more serious consideration, the reference to Benjamin can only bring me cheer [. . .] Besides his relations with the quite venerable Scholem, Benjamin is a self-evident example of those strange people who, two or three generations before, wrote their testaments evoking Kant and Shabbetai Tzevi as tutelary divinities. I recently gave Mannucci an essay on this subject for *Comunità*, and it is entitled, “The miracle according to reason – He who is powerful during exile [cfr. *Il miracolo secondo ragione*, in Jesi 1990: 24: “He who is powerful during exile contributes to emphasizing the tragic character of exile: exile is that much more tragic, since as long as it endures, miracles can happen. In total frankness, it is the tragedy of the religious man who finds himself capable of making miracles without the aid of God.”] [. . .] As you

might conceal a note of subtle antisemitism. Jesi himself describes his identification with his origins as a fact, a necessity of “blood” (his Jewish unconscious).<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of his 1966 letter to Scholem, as in his 1965 letter to Max Brod,<sup>14</sup> he is anxious to communicate his paternal Jewishness, taking pains to tell Scholem that rabbis number among his ancestors. The need to go deeper into his sense of Jewish belonging, which on multiple occasions he describes in terms “of blood”, lead him to study Scripture and Talmudic texts in the original (both Hebrew and Aramaic) and to conceive of Hebrew as a language that is both “precious and perilous”.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. The Family

His relationship with his father appears at the base of an exploration of identity that allows Jesi to investigate the “mythological machine” that produces the blood libel and, at the same time, to confront his complex affective relation with his father. A non-religious Jew from Turin, Bruno Jesi was an enthusiastic fascist who was gravely wounded in Africa, where he fought as a volunteer. He retired from combat in 1939, and although “aryanized” for his military achievement when the racial laws were imposed, he lived the last years of his life in bitter disillusionment. Furio Jesi was born in 1941 and was only two years old when his father died due to injuries received and the morphine addiction acquired as a result of them. Jesi speaks of the emptiness he feels at his father’s absence in poems written between 1962 and 1969 and published a year later in a volume entitled *Exile*, in particular the poem *Katabasis*. He stopped writing poetry after the release of this book, instead continuing to tell stories and recount his own story in essays, fragments, collections of fragments, and collections of essays, adopting Benjamin’s practice of montage and, “learning by writing”<sup>16</sup> found in the work of Bachofen: “There is writing there, and that pleasure in learning by writing that Benjamin celebrated with the words ‘a scientific prophecy’.” (Jesi, 2013a [1980], p. 230)

In an October 21, 1972 letter to Giulio Schiavoni, Jesi provides a moving and deeply-felt portrait of his father:

Any general will snap to attention at the mere mention of the name of my father, Bruno Jesi, who died in 1943 but not too soon to achieve a lasting place in the annals of the army (especially the cavalry), having been decorated with gold, silver, and bronze medals and numerous other distinctions and cavalry orders. It is particularly remarkable and memorable to consider that my father died at the age of twenty-seven. [ . . . ] My father was a Jew on both his father’s and his mother’s sides, of an exceptional line of rabbis, as well as, on his father’s side, of bankers. Concerning religion he was entirely agnostic (he wrote Gozzano-style poetry), but during the fascist period he was a member of the [Jewish] Community Council (which was not fascist). – That’s where the ‘marrani’ turn up!<sup>17</sup>

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see, exile or *galuth* is a formula congenial to me. The first stimulus for the work on Kierkegaard comes from there; now it is a question of adapting it wisely to affairs in the kingdom of Denmark (where, as is known, ‘something is rotten’).”

<sup>13</sup> See Lanfranchi 2020: 174.

<sup>14</sup> F. Jesi letter to Max Brod (January 15, 1965), in A. Cavalletti, Lucca (eds.) 2013: 101. Brod had written, and Jesi takes up this idea, in *Germania segreta* (1967), that Kafka’s castle (the obscure God) is not impossible, but merely extremely difficult to reach (*ibidem*).

<sup>15</sup> See the letter to Rex E. de Wit, June 23, 1967, in M. Belpoliti, Manera (eds) 2010: 45: “for research purposes I had to learn to read hieroglyphics and for the demands of “blood” I committed myself to learning Hebrew [ . . . ] Hebrew is a precious and perilous language.” See Lucca 2013: 114.

<sup>16</sup> See the *Prefazione*, in Jesi 2001: 355-356: “The ‘I’ who is ‘secure’ must interweave his discourse [ . . . ] with an I who not only is not secure, but strongly doubts he ever might be. At the base of the technique of awareness for composition stands this interweaving of two voices [ . . . ] [‘dialectic’ and ‘dramatic’] [ . . . ] The logic carried out [ . . . ] is therefore in the intentions of the author – [ . . . ] which, it is opportune to clarify –, is of a paradoxical scientific and artistic nature. To the question, Don’t you get the desire to write a novel? The author of this book can only answer, I never stop writing it.”

<sup>17</sup> Letter of October 21, 1972, in Schiavoni, 1999, pp. 180-181, cit. in G. Schiavoni 2009, pp. 94-95.

The subject of marranism,<sup>18</sup> present in *Mitologie intorno all'illuminismo* [Mythologies of Enlightenment] (where both Jewish and Christian marranism is discussed),<sup>19</sup> runs throughout Jesi's work and life: his father an enthusiastic fascist but also participant—despite his agnosticism—in Jewish religious and community life; Furio Jesi himself a “half-Jewish” communist, syndicalist, scholar of right-wing myth and culture; his interest in myth and the “moral” need for a liberatory criticism;<sup>20</sup> his critique of political Zionism in favor of a spiritual and cultural Zionism inspired by Achad Ha-am<sup>21</sup> and Buber's “Zionism of telling stories” (Jesi, 1979, p. XI). All these factors led to a continuous ‘marranism’, a necessary dissimulation with respect to his own authentic (ideological and/or literary) creed and its rejection. At the beginning of his essay *Un figlio dell'esilio*, Schiavoni himself mentions Jesi's marranism as a way to maintain a certain distance from his origins, from both a religious and a political point of view (political in terms of his position toward Israel), but also as central to his examination of Sabbatean antinomic doctrines:

In his thoroughgoing investigations, Furio Jesi did not fail to challenge his own Jewish religious heritage, familiar to him primarily through his cultural rapport with great Jewish masters (*in primis* Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber) and, on a personal and biographical level, in the memory of the uncomfortable Jewish patrimony of the paternal figure. Whoever wishes to look into this component of his personality must take account of an attitude—rarely explicit—of empathy combined with distancing, and with a series of themes and motifs that surface repeatedly in his writings and that function simultaneously as the *Grundton* (the underlying tone) of many of his arguments and analysis. Think for example of two of his major areas of research: the deconstruction of the *blood libel* (that is, the aged accusation against Jews of ritual vampirism, the suspicion that they used the blood of Christians as “ingredients and prescribed drinks for the pesach feasts”),<sup>22</sup> and his reflections on the tensions between orthodox rabbinical Judaism and the currents of Jewish mysticism in their relationship to Enlightenment thought,<sup>23</sup> starting with the two figures of Shabbatay Tzevi and Jacob Frank, who gave voice to an apostate antinomism that could be aligned to paradoxically ethical positions such as ‘marranism’. Think also of his explicit, polemical taking sides during a delicate political juncture such as the Six Day War between Arabs and Jews in June, 1967 (Schiavoni, 1999, pp. 87-88).<sup>24</sup>

After having presented the complex viewpoint of anyone who wishes to confront the subject of Judaism in Furio Jesi's work, Schiavoni offers an interesting and compelling reconstruction of the figure and political sympathies of Bruno Jesi, citing an unpublished text by his son:

It may be useful to point out an interesting unpublished text found in the Jesi Archive entitled *La religione degli ebrei dinanzi al fascismo* [The Religion of the Jews in the Face of Fascism].<sup>25</sup> It

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<sup>18</sup> For a historical introduction to the subject of marranism, see C. Roth 1987 and Di Cesare 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Si veda F. Jesi 1990: 26-29.

<sup>20</sup> In a letter of August 4, 1970 Jesi writes to Giulio Schiavoni: “I have now learned another technique: that of the *essay* more or less encrypted, which is well-accepted even by serious people who are not exactly papyrologists. [. . .] They accept style, tone, and notes, and they go into action to combat anyone who attributes a value to them. [. . .] [I profess] a ‘programmatic marranism’ [capable of] undermining at the root that which we don't believe just.” (in Schiavoni 1999:177-178. Cit. in Manera, 2019: 11).

<sup>21</sup> Scholem himself (and Benjamin, partially) had great hopes for this spiritual and cultural Zionism in the Thirties, but had seen it defeated in the Brit Schalom movement, with the pogroms of Arabs against Jews in 1929 in Palestine. See Tagliacozzo 2015: 160-162.

<sup>22</sup> Jesi 207 [1973]: 3.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jesi 1990: 17-41.

<sup>24</sup> Jesi advocates a spiritual Zionism against political Zionism, linking himself to the ideas of Buber and Achad Ha-am in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to which Benjamin and Scholem has also connected to between 1916 and 1929. Cfr. Traverso 1994; 58-65.

<sup>25</sup> Now in Jesi 2011: 255-261. In this text one can appreciate Jesi's non-judgmental attitude: “The shame of the victims falls upon the oppressors”: the great words that served Silvio Pellico are particularly appropriate in our discourse, which has no intention to put on trial the weakness and compromises of those who, in the final analysis, obtained only suffering

deals with the complex attitude of Italian Jews and the “crisis of their religious conscience” in the face of an impending tyranny “ignorant of the very concept of religion”, exploring the position of some of those who advocated the “italianness” of the Jews and supporters of national Catholicism such as Ettore Ovazza and Guido Liuzzi, principle exponents of the Jewish ideological movement of the “New (Our) Banner”, centered in Turin. It is significant that Jesi individuates in the form of that movement a way to “overcome the anguish of being eternally without a fatherland” (p. 4 of the typed manuscript), all in all a self-destructive attitude with which to flee from exile (Schiavoni, 1999, p. 95, note 9).

### 3. Vampirism

Another recurrent theme throughout Jesi’s work, bound to the questions of Judaism and exile, is that of vampirism. Judaism and vampirism unite in the study of the antisemitic *topos* of the blood libel and the conception of the eternally Wandering Jew who transforms into a vampire who sucks Christian blood for reasons both theological (thinking thus to be accepted into God’s benevolence through a negative imitation of the Eucharist) and economic (the capitalist Jew sucks the resources of the workers, finally sucking their life away). Between 1960 and 1972 Jesi would write a “vampire novel”, *The Final Night* (Jesi 1987), which would be rejected by Italo Calvino at Einaudi but posthumously published in 1987. The novel parodically recounts the battle of the vampires for the reconquest of Earth dominated by human beings.

In the Premise to the volume *L'accusa del sangue. La macchina mitologica antisemita* (The Blood Libel. The Antisemitic Mythological Machine, 1973), which contains two essays, «Il processo agli ebrei di Damasco» (The Trial of the Damascene Jews) and «Metamorfosi del vampiro in Germania» (Metamorphosis of the Vampire in Germany) (Jesi 2007 [1973]), Jesi delineates his project, writing,

“The blood libel” is the Jewish expression that Jews here have been constrained to learn for almost a thousand years. The term elliptically designates the accusation against the Jews that they use the blood of Christians as an ingredient in the food and drink prescribed for the paschal holidays. In this study, the libel has been investigated both (in the first part) in the context of the 1840 trial of the Jews of Damascus accusing them of this ritual crime, and (in the second part) in the context of the mythology of blood and vampires in German culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Jesi, 2007 [1973], p. 3).

The antisemitic mythological machine is the “subject that Furio Jesi worked on for years and which was systematically theorized for the first time in his essay *L'accusa del sangue*, later to be structured into the category of the “mythological machine”.<sup>26</sup> By “mythological machine” Jesi means a mechanism that produces historically verifiable materials, epiphanies of myth, sometimes characterized by the technicized myth directed at a political objective. Jesi posits that this mechanism conceals within its impenetrable walls a secret place enclosing the myth, its invisible motivating center.<sup>27</sup> The conclusion to the first part of the essay summarizes Jesi’s conclusions, which see the same mechanism functioning in the reversion of the myth (from positive to negative):

The documents relative to the “blood libel” permit the observation of a specific functioning of the “mythological machine”: a deliberate reversion of the myth that takes place in parallel with the conservation of the myth itself on a sacred level. The Christians continue a sacral evocation of the

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multiplied by their own errors: errors, precisely, of victims incapable of lucidity and heroism. Our study exclusively concerns religious phenomenology and proposes neither judgment nor condemnation.” (*ivi*, p. 256).

<sup>26</sup> D. Bidussa 2007: XXVI.

<sup>27</sup> In F. Jesi 1980 [1973]: 105, the author considers the mythological machine to be an “image [. . .] to define the form of a device that produces forms of epiphany of myths and whose inner workings, within its impenetrable walls, may contain the myths themselves – the myth—, but may also be empty.”

Eucharistic sacrifice, but at the same time they reverse it in a negative sense, attributing the inversion to the “others” – to the Jews. Beyond the “libel” of blood it is possible to descry the “mythological machine” functioning in relation to two elements: 1) the experience of the “other” (the *one who is different*), resolved in the configuration of a difference which is a symmetrical contrapositioning, such as that between Good and Evil. The “other” is not only *other*, but *the opposite*; 2) the external expression of the impulse to reversion of the Eucharistic mystery and the sacrifice of the Cross. Unachieved and unachievable in religious practice, this impulse is enacted through an actual *transfert* – imposed on others, and punished in others. From a psychological point of view, the “blood libel” and the punitive massacres that follow in its wake are presumably the result of the reversal onto the Jews of decadent factors in Christian mythology [the myth of the blood of Christ] and the anguish of guilt that these factors provoke in Christians themselves. [. . .] The trial in Damascus demonstrates with remarkable clarity how diverse historical factors are woven into such a phenomenon, traceable more to the economic, social, and political development of the ostracization of the “different” than to the psychological-religious aspects of the story of the Christian approach to the mystery of the blood of Christ (Jesi 2007 [973], pp. 41-42).<sup>28</sup>

In the second part of the article “Metamorfosi del vampiro in Germania” [Metamorphosis of the Vampire in Germany], Jesi returns to the blood libel, linking it to the theme of vampirism in general and to self-vampirism in the work of Heine:

The novel *Der Rabbi von Bacherach* [is] the story of a rabbi who flees from the small city of Bacherach on the Rhine when he discovers that the Jewish community is about to be accused of ritual vampirism and therefore massacred. The accusation of ritual vampirism (the ritual use of Christian blood, which the Jews are believed to use in the preparation of matzoh, etc.) is one of the most ancient antisemitic calumnies. For Heine, this circumscribes the exterior surface of Judaism; the face of the Jew as seen by non-Jews. The Jew is a blood-sucker, the vampire *per excellence*, according to an antisemitic tradition that makes ritual vampirism coincide with “economic vampirism”: the Jewish usurer sucks the blood of Christians, just as rabbis kill a Christian child to use its blood during the Pesach ritual (*ivi*, p. 56).

According to Jesi, Heine himself is at one and the same time a vampire—because a poet, intimate and manipulator of the vital force of blood in his art—and a victim of himself in his self-vampirism, which reveals a self-censorship linked to the blood libel:

The necrophiliac vampire, the self-vampire who is necessarily necrophiliac, the dead person whose victim is himself, punishes himself in the very moment when he does not come into contact with living blood (because his victim is himself: a dead person, a “beautiful cadaver”) and in this way also saves himself from the accusation of ritual vampirism cast upon the Jew. His need for an alibi (he does not suck the blood of the living) is a reply to the millenarian accusation against the Jews; his self-punishment (dead, he vampirizes his dead self) is a reply to the power to manipulate the vital element, a power he has as poet. [. . .] [In Nazism] the mythic hero—in this case the negative hero, the vampire—gives way to he who governs or believes himself to govern the operational center of the myth: the mythological machine.<sup>29</sup>

Against or perhaps alongside the power of the poet, and of Jesi himself as poet, to go to the source of myth and manipulate its vital power, Jesi posits throughout his work the necessity to “speak about”, in his critical essays, the myth itself, whether genuine or technicized, to be able to participate in a community of thinkers capable of comprehending the power of such a dangerous “mythological machine.”

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<sup>28</sup>. See *ivi* note 49 where Jesi writes, repeating his distance from Christianity, “We are aware that, for a Christian reader, our expression “the myth of the blood of Christ” may sound offensive and blasphemous. For a historian of religion who is not of the Christian faith, this is in any case the sole possible definition.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, p. 61. Jesi refers her to Heine’s poems *Für die Mouche* and *Traumbilder*.



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