

Berto's Judas: Embracing Liminality

Gregory Conti
Università di Perugia

For Jackson Lears

La gloria is Giuseppe Berto's testamentary novel. Published just one month before the author's death in 1978, the first-person narration of the Gospel in the voice of the twelfth apostle, Judas Iscariot, constitutes Berto's closing argument in a life-long debate with Christianity. With Judas as his protagonist and alter ego, Berto's interpretation of the gospel story is certainly unconventional, even oppositional. Rather than a rejection of the Christian faith in which he was raised and educated, however, Berto fashions an alternative account to the four canonical gospels that incorporates most of the same events and scenes recounted by the four evangelists, but that ultimately constructs a competing view of the human condition and of humanity's prospects for redemption.

As Alessandro Vettori has observed, *La gloria* and other Bertian revisitations of Christian beliefs, "can be classified under the category of parody . . . the rewriting or refashioning of a text . . . from a different point of view . . . which, by virtue of the new perspective, contributes to a greater and deeper understanding and assimilation of the original" (Vettori 150).¹ In Berto's parodic rendition of the Christian gospel, Judas, and in the last analysis Berto himself, after a lifetime of tormented interrogation, decides to embrace the ambiguity of the human condition, which is, as he describes it, a liminal existence played out over a long and trying transition of unknown and

¹ "Si possono rubricare sotto la categoria della parodia . . . la riscrittura o rifacimento di un testo . . . da un punto di vista diverso . . . che, proprio in virtù della nuova prospettiva, contribuisce a una maggiore e più approfondita comprensione e assimilazione dell'originale." (My translation. All subsequent translations from Berto's novel or other Italian sources are also mine.)

unknowable duration, between the original paradise of the Garden of Eden and the final redemption at the end of days; a period otherwise known as history.

History is introduced into the narrative in its very first paragraph as the narrator, who is not yet known, places his story in the context of the collective, political and religious history of Israel: “Never, at no time in our arduous history, our enslavement in Egypt or Babylonia, our harrowing walk toward the Promised Land, or Saul’s mortal war against the Philistines, never had we been so lost and divided, never had our souls been so fallen in the dust, and loomed over by the shadow of death” (Berto 9).² Israel is now under the oppressive domination of pagan Rome and the spiritual state of the nation is weak: “many children of Israel were, in the present, distant from their God, with hardly any fidelity to the pact” (Berto 11).³

This is the state of things in the capital city, Jerusalem, “the holy.”⁴ The situation is somewhat different in the provinces. In Judea and Galilee people live “outside of history,” understood as national and imperial politics, but “inside the pain of living”⁵ and in the quintessentially liminal situation of expectant waiting for the coming of the Anointed, the one that the Book had been promising for centuries, the Savior who would take the people back to the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Here, unlike in the capital, God is present in every aspect of the people’s daily lives (12-13).

In its larger sense, therefore, history also involves the everyday life of provincial communities, and, as we learn from the opening lines of chapter three, history also extends to biography and autobiography:

I, Judas Iscariot, born in Jerusalem to a merchant father, raised in the shadow of the Temple, instructed in the Law and the Scriptures, observant

² “Mai, in nessun momento della nostra dura storia, servitù d’Egitto o di Babilonia, travagliato cammino verso la terra promessa o mortale guerra di Saul contro il popolo dei filistei, mai eravamo stati così smarriti e divisi, mai le nostre anime tanto cascate nella polvere e sovrastante l’ombra della morte.”

³ “Molti figli di Israele erano, nel presente, lontani dal loro Dio, poco fedeli al patto.”

⁴ “La santa.”

⁵ “Vivendo fuori dalla storia ma dentro il dolore di vivere.”

of the rules and precepts, tied to the zealots for conspiracy and fled from the holy city to avoid the cross, was traveling the lands of Israel, anxious that the Eternal Adonai should show me a sign of his mightiness, or of his vanity. I was young, and impatient. (13-14)⁶

What binds these three levels of history together in the specific moment that Judas is writing about – the first decades of the Christian Era, around the year 3788 of the Jewish calendar – is the pervasive sensation that Israel has entered a liminal phase of its history, a period of expectation preceding an epochal transition. There is a general feeling abroad in the land that the nation of Israel is on the threshold of redemption.

At the same time, however, there is considerable divergence concerning the form that the longed-for redemption will take. The best youth of Jerusalem, the self-defined zealots of which Judas himself has been a member, is expecting a military commander and political leader who will liberate them from Roman occupation. The simple folk of the provinces, on the other hand, imagine a return to Eden, where there will be no more pain of living and fear of death. Finally, the intellectuals, faithful to their class's penchant for obscurity, spend their time talking of vaguely defined goods "having to do with an eternity of eternities" (32).⁷

Judas intertwines these multiple layers of human thought and action in a narrative whose organizing principle is his search for the solution to the mystery of redemption. His multi-layered narrative strategy, like his use of the first person, distinguishes his account from the more straightforward, third person narratives of the canonical gospels. The first person point of view and his reliance only on his own eye-witness testimony lends Judas' narrative authenticity and reliability, and he proudly contrasts his version of events with the gospels of Luke, "a bare bones, precise account, which, however, does not recount the truth . . . instead it bears witness to the

⁶ "Io, Giuda Iscariota, nato a Gerusalemme da padre mercante, cresciuto nell'ombra del Tempio, istruito nella Legge nelle Scritture, osservante delle norme e dei precetti, legato agli zeloti per cospirazione e fuggito dalla città santa per scampare alla croce, percorrevo le terre d'Israele, ansioso che l'Eterno Adonai si manifestasse mostrandomi un segno della sua potenza, o della sua vanità. Ero giovane, e impaziente."

⁷ "Che comunque avevano a che fare con un'eternità di eternità."

rumors, by then crystalized by the years.” Mark and Matthew, “equally conventional . . . their Judas does not have the complexity of a man, but the abstractness of a symbol,” and John, who “recounted the facts, but not all of them honestly” (146-48).⁸

Aside from supporting his claim to greater reliability, Judas’ comments on the evangelists also alert his readers to his status as a self-conscious narrator, who has deliberately chosen to fashion his narrative in a certain way. His readers are put on notice that we must not only pay attention to what he is telling us but to how and from what perspective he has chosen to tell it. If Judas is able to comment critically on the canonical gospels, for example, then certainly he has had the chance to read them. His narrative was not written while he was alive, since the gospels themselves were written years after the events they recount, including Judas’ suicide by hanging.

Several Berto scholars have commented on the fundamental importance of Judas as narrator. According to Francesco Ciabattoni, the narrator is “the most innovative and provocative” aspect of *La gloria* (84). More recently, Alessandro Vettori has claimed that the narrative voice “seems to have to do with . . . an atemporal dimension, the confessional voice of Judas seems to come from beyond time” (188).⁹ Francesca Parmeggiani compares Judas to Dante’s damned souls in Hell who are given a last chance to proclaim their truth before falling back into timeless eternity (Parmeggiani 101). Further evidence of this distant, post-mortem perspective comes from Judas’ references to the Epistles of St. Paul or modern works by the likes of Friedrich Engels, Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Albert Camus, and Saul Bellow.

While these critics are certainly right to underline the innovative quality and decisive role of Judas’ narrative perspective, the narrator himself indicates that his voice does not come from “beyond time,” nor has he re-emerged from “timeless eternity.” Three comments by Judas, in which

⁸ “asciutto e preciso ma che non racconta una verita . . . ma piuttosto testimonia le voci ormai cristallizzati negli anni, . . . altrettanto convenzionali, . . . Giuda non vi ha la complessità di un uomo, ma l’astrattezza di un simbolo. . . .” [Giovanni] raccontò le cose, ma non tutte onestamente.”

⁹ “sembra trattarsi . . . di una dimensione atemporale, la voce di Giuda che si confessa sembra provenire da oltre-il-tempo.”

he uses the present tense, provide clues as to where and when he may be located. In the very last line of the book, Judas beseeches the Eternal “I cry out to you from depths too deep . . .” (Berto 194),¹⁰ placing himself as all Christians would expect, in Hell. But while he may be in Hell, and therefore *outside* of earthly time, it seems that Judas is not yet *beyond* time. Rather, he is in a position that allows him to observe the continuing unfolding of human history and to speculate about its and his own future. Commenting on the failure of Jesus’ death on the cross to bring about the promised redemption, Judas says, “Thus, mankind is still here, toiling away between the pain of living and the anguish of death, but You are called Lamb of God, Redeemer, Savior, while I bear a name that signifies betrayal” (31).¹¹ Furthermore, during his account of the crucifixion, Judas raises the hope that even he may still have a chance for redemption after the Second Coming: “now You will vanquish life, so that all will be one with You and with Your father. All but me, perhaps . . . Will there still be a resurrection on the last day?” (191)¹²

Judging from these hints and from his comments on works by nineteenth and twentieth century writers and philosophers, it seems much more probable that Judas, though certainly condemned to Hell, is not beyond time, but that he is speaking at a time very close to 1978, when Berto was writing the novel and, suffering from cancer, contemplating his own imminent death. Judas is telling his story from the same temporal perspective that Giuseppe Berto is telling his, and though Judas may not always be a stand-in for his author, he is certainly a kindred spirit.

There is an additional complexity to Judas’ narrative that offers a key to its interpretation. Whereas most storytellers address their story to a single audience, usually one reader or listener at a time, Judas directs his voice to three different listeners. When he recounts the events of Jesus’ life

¹⁰ “. . . io grido a te da luoghi troppo profondi. . . .”

¹¹ “Così l’umanità è ancora qui, a penare tra dolore di vivere e angoscia di morire, ma Tu sei chiamato Agnello di dio, Redentore, Salvatore, mentre io porto un nome che vuol dire tradimento.”

¹² “ora vincerai la vita, affinché tutti siano uno con Te e con il padre Tuo. Tutti meno che me, forse. . . . Ci sarà ancora una resurrezione dell’ultimo giorno?”

and passion, Judas refers to Jesus in the third person. Beginning in Chapter 14, however, and continuing throughout the remaining 87 chapters, Judas alternates his use of “he” and “him” with the Italian counterpart to the English biblical thou – Tu with a capital T. In these “Tu” or “thou” chapters, Judas addresses Jesus directly, not in the form of a prayer but as a meditation or reflection on the implications of the events of the time, whose narration is addressed to his other audience of readers. Tu, like thou, is both intimate and reverential, and its use here indicates that Jesus, like Judas now living in the after-life, is a privileged interlocutor. Judas uses the Tu form to address to Jesus his deepest-felt doubts, his longing for faith in the divinity of Jesus, and his queries about the nature of the redemption that is the objective of Jesus’ earthly life and death; of his entry into history.

Judas’ third interlocutor, addressed only a few times in the course of his narrative, is Adonai, the Eternal, or in Christian terms, the first of the three persons of the trinity, God the Father. When he addresses the Eternal, in prayer or as he sometimes calls it, “interrogation,” Judas again uses the “tu” or “thou” form, but this time with a lower case t. This occurs for the first time when Judas, after meeting John the Baptist but before either of them has met Jesus, begins to wonder if he himself might be the Messiah. He exhorts the Eternal to let him hear his voice in reply, but when he hears no answer, Judas is left to ask: “Or is your voice the silence?” (21)¹³ The last time Judas addresses the father comes in the very last line of the novel, which I’ve already mentioned, and about which I’ll have more to say below.

At this point, however, I would like to discuss how Judas uses his chapters addressed to Jesus to draw back from the events of Jesus’ public life and crucifixion in order to examine or reflect on the question of Jesus’ humanity and/or divinity and his role in God’s plan for humanity. In these reflections, Judas enlarges his range of vision, adopting a kind of wide-angle lens that takes in all of Judeo-Christian history, from the Garden of Eden to the present day. This wider view

¹³ “O la tua voce è il silenzio?”

extends the focus of his story beyond the brief period covered by the gospels and suggests that all of history since Eden, the human condition itself, has been and remains a liminal existence lived between nostalgia for paradise lost and yearning for a future paradise still to be regained.

In his reflections on Jesus and redemption, Judas demonstrates that he is well-versed not only in the Old and New Testaments but also in nineteenth and twentieth century literature, psychology, and political economy. His second meditative chapter brings together Qoheleth (author of the book of *Ecclesiastes*), Saint Paul, and Saul Bellow in a discussion of the proposition that the meaning of Jesus' life, and perhaps of all human life, is to be found in death. Judas quotes Bellow's *Herzog* responding to a request to define the philosophy of his generation, "Not God is dead, that point was passed long ago. Perhaps it should be stated Death is God." Thus, Judas concludes, Jesus is "splendidly modern," (29)¹⁴ and will continue to be so until humanity will not have found a way to reach the end of days, or as Jesus used to say, glory (*ibid.*)¹⁵ Judas refers to the glory to be achieved by the death of Jesus, or the God-death, as the ultimate fulfillment of the biblical promise of redemption. The question that still haunts him, that "we cannot stop asking ourselves," is "why wasn't it achieved then?" (*ibid.*)¹⁶ Judas agrees with St. Paul that Jesus had an earthly life that was bound, right from the beginning, "to be condensed in death," (33)¹⁷ and it is Judas' sensation that Jesus is indeed heading for a meaningful death that makes Judas decide to follow him.

In seeking to identify the motivation behind Jesus' death, Judas examines a hypothesis raised by Albert Camus, in his novel *The Fall*. Camus, as Judas interprets him, had proposed that Jesus chose his passion and death out of guilt for the slaughter of the innocents ordered by King Herod, a slaughter that Jesus was spared because of his divinity but that as a man he could never forget. Judas compliments Camus on his insight into Jesus' humanity but he discards his hypothesis

¹⁴ "Non che Dio è morto, un punto come questo è già stato sorpassato molto tempo fa. Forse bisognerebbe formularlo così la morte è Dio." The original quote is to be found in Bellow, 315.

¹⁵ "finché l'umanità non avrà trovato il modo di raggiungere la fine dei tempi, o, come dicevi più volentieri Tu, la gloria."

¹⁶ "splendidamente moderno."

¹⁷ "a condensarsi nella morte."

as too simplistic. Jesus' feelings of guilt did not lead him to die in atonement for the slaughter but to make it so that such slaughters would never happen again: "Your dimension was always universal" (Berto 35).¹⁸ But despite the universality of the end, the evil of the suffering produced by the slaughter is no less real.

Saint Paul's insistence on Jesus' death as the source of new life comes to the fore again after Jesus miraculously brings Lazarus back to life. A resurrection must be preceded by death and the resurrection of Lazarus was meant to show the power of God over death and over the pain of those who suffer because of it. "But," Judas comments, "what of the infinite other dead to whom nobody said: arise?"(70)¹⁹ Reflecting further on this mystery, Judas refers to an Austrian Jew, "he too the preacher of a new gospel" (71)²⁰ who explained that the delusion of grandeur leads to the negation of everything, the final solution. Judas sees Freud's notion of the deathly power of delusions of grandeur working itself out in Jesus' idea of the glory that will come with the redemption produced by his death: "You conceived salvation as glory, and glory is the reality of the end of days, the immensity of the end of everything, the entering into God, forever and for everyone" (ibid).²¹

At this point, about one-third of the way through his story of his quest for faith, Judas says that this mystery of glory coming at and from the end of everything has only barely touched him. He realizes that Jesus is "aiming higher" than what was said in his earthly words, but he doesn't yet know how to follow him. But as he accompanies Jesus through the rest of his public life and into the passion of Holy Week, Judas keeps moving closer to faith. After Jesus gives him the piece of bread at the Last Supper, signaling his betrayal, Judas takes steps to carry out his assignment, and he has become convinced of Jesus' divinity. "I, by now, believed" (157).²² The realization that his new-found faith is the basis of his decision to embrace his evil destiny leads Judas to re-examine the

¹⁸ "La Tua dimensione fu sempre universale."

¹⁹ "Ma gli infiniti altri morti ai quali nessuno diceva: risorgi?"

²⁰ "Molti secoli dopo, un ebreo austriaco, anche lui predicatore di una nuova novella . . ."

²¹ "Tu la salvezza la concepivi come gloria, e la gloria è la realtà della fine dei tempi, l'immensità del tutto finito, entrare in Dio, per sempre e per tutto."

²² "Io, ormai, credevo."

interrelationship of good and evil and to enlarge Qoheleth's formulation of that relationship in *Ecclesiastes*: "Words of Qoheleth: but there is no man on earth capable of doing good without doing evil. Perhaps the Eternal had also ordained the contrary: that there was no capacity to do evil without doing good" (ibid).²³

The paradoxical symbiosis of good and evil, life and death, is also at the heart of Judas' last discussion of modern interpretations of Jesus. This time, the question Judas poses to Jesus, to himself, and to his readers, is "Was your death sacrifice or murder?" (169),²⁴ the very same question that could be asked of Judas' own decision to deliver Jesus to his executioners. Two other modern thinkers, Friederich Engels and Wilhelm Reich, like Freud, prophets of new religions, addressed this question. The author of the Communist Manifesto called Jesus' death a sacrifice deriving from his intimate essence, and Judas (this time clearly speaking for Berto) comments, "and this, Marxistically speaking, doesn't mean anything, because intimate essence either comes from God – and in that case we're completely off track – or it comes from environmental and psychological influences, which, with respect to such an important question, it would have been well to illustrate" (170).²⁵

According to Reich, on the other hand, Jesus – despite his sexual position being even more obscure than everything else about him – was a "life force" and consequently, he was murdered by the "emotional plague" (ibid).²⁶ Once again, Judas has identified the tendency of human thinkers to simplify complexity by disjoining the contrasting constitutive elements of reality as we know it: good and evil, choice and destiny, life and death. He concludes his comments on Engels and Reich with a rejection of this mode of reasoning: "but Your case, Jesus, is much more complicated. Indeed it happens that the life force which You personify is, in the final analysis, a death force; the only life

²³ "Parole di Qohélet: ma sulla terra uomo non c'è capace di fare bene senza fare male. Forse l'Eterno aveva disposto anche il contrario, che non ci fosse capacità di far male senza far bene."

²⁴ "Fu, la Tua morte, sacrificio o assassinio?"

²⁵ "questo, marxisticamente parlando, non significa nulla, poiché l'intima essenza o viene da Dio – e allora siamo completamente fuori strada – o viene da condizionamenti ambientali e psichici che, in una questione di tanta importanza, sarebbe stato bene illustrare."

²⁶ "peste emozionale."

is eternal life,” (ibid)²⁷ leaving unsaid what he has told us before: that there is no resurrection without death, no eternal life without the end of earthly life.

The narrative has now come to the eve of the crucifixion. Jesus has allowed himself to be arrested and taken away without a word of protest, his disciples all having run away in the dark, leaving him alone. He wants to die. It is time for the final act. The moment of redemption is at hand. It is time for Judas’ final reflections on faith and redemption.

As he recounts the interrogations by Pilate and Herod, the derision and contempt of the people Jesus wants to die for, it is evident that Jesus has changed Judas. Having signed on as a disciple in the hope for political liberation, looking to Jesus to lead him and the zealots in the attack “for the cause of freedom, truth, and justice,” (13)²⁸ Judas has grown to accept the universality of Jesus’ mission and to share his conviction that his death will bring an end to history, to earthly life, to the human condition. Jesus wants to die so that all the people on earth will become one with Jesus and the Father. Looking back on this moment from long after both of their deaths, Judas sees how the other accounts of Jesus’ passion and death have all failed to understand and convey the truth of his sacrifice. The four evangelists’ accounts are factually accurate, or accurate enough, but their conclusions remain confused, and the nature of their confusion is crucial to the formulation of Judas’ own conclusion. The evangelists’ conclusions are confused because:

good and evil, light and darkness, God and Satan, heaven and hell – You
Jesus and me Judas – remain oppositional and separate, conceived in a way
that is not the way of being of living beings, All of us are a blend of good
and evil – the insufflated soul was marked by ambivalence, or became ambivalent
by mixing itself with dust – and You died thinking about this: that Your death
would eliminate the negative aspect, rid the soul of sin – all that is evil and has

²⁷ “però il Tuo caso, Gésu, è molto più complicato. Infatti accade che il principio vitale che Tu impersoni è, a conti fatti, un principio di morte: l’unica vita è la vita eterna.”

²⁸ “per la causa della libertà, della verità, e della giustizia.”

the capacity to do evil – leading us back to the garden or to nothingness. (171)²⁹

Unlike the evangelists, Judas does not portray Jesus and himself as oppositional and separate. Indeed, he remarks frequently on the many things they have in common. They are both religious Jews, the same age as each other and as John the Baptist, each captivated, though Judas only briefly, by the idea that he is the messiah. But the special bond between them, as Judas sees it, is their conscious and paradoxical voluntary choice to follow out their destinies. For his part, Judas acknowledges that his betrayal of Jesus is his destiny, and at times he entertains the idea that he should therefore not be held responsible for it. Ultimately, however, he does accept responsibility for it and even claims credit for it: “I, by betraying You, helped You die in the way You wanted, because I finally believed in your mysterious divinity. I did what I could” (172).³⁰

As for Jesus, Judas repeatedly comments on the various occasions he had to escape his predestined death on the cross. Indeed, he points out that “nobody wanted to kill you,” (171)³¹ both Herod and Pontius Pilate would have been happy if Jesus had just disappeared from the scene, simply withdrawn from public life. But, Judas insists, Jesus wanted to die and he may even have been made more steadfast in that desire by Judas’ own decision to carry out his duty:

But why then, already conscious of the abandonment [by the apostles],
did You refuse every opportunity to save Yourself, continuing obstinately
to want death? Maybe because by then, I having carried out my duty,
You had to carry out Yours? (173)³²

²⁹ “bene e male, luce e tenebre, Dio e satana, paradiso e inferno – Tu Gésu e io Giuda – restano contrastanti e separati, pensati in un modo che non è nel modo d’essere degli esseri viventi. Tutti siamo una mescolanza di bene e di male – aveva il segno dell’ambivalenza l’anima insufflata, o divenne ambivalente mescolandosi alla polvere – e Tu sei morto pensando a questo: che la Tua morte avrebbe eliminato il senso negativo, tolto di mezzo il peccato – tutto ciò che è male e ha capacità di far male – riconducendo al giardino o al nulla.”

³⁰ “Io, tradendoTi, Ti aiutai a morire nel modo che volevi, perché finalmente credevo nella Tua misteriosa divinità. Feci quel che potei . . .”

³¹ “In realtà, nessuno voleva ucciderTi . . .”

³² “Ma perché allora, già consapevole dell’abbandono, rifiutasti ogni occasione di salvarTi, continuasti con ostinazione a volere la morte? Forse perché ormai, avendo io portato a termine il mio dovere, Tu dovevi portare a termine anche il Tuo?”

Judas' suggestion that his choice may have had some influence on Jesus comes in the form of a question. He is much more certain about the other factor that helped Jesus maintain his commitment to dying: his feeling that he would never be abandoned by his father. After his tormented dialogue with his father in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was certain, as Judas tells it, that his father would not abandon him. He could feel the father's presence within him, and his words never lacked the loftiness of the thoughts that came to him from the father.

These are Judas' thoughts on Thursday night, the night of his betrayal and the night before the crucifixion. The stage is set and "humanity has never been so close to its salvation, or to its end" (ibid),³³ the "or" here being not a disjunction between two mutually exclusive alternatives but a conjunction between two different ways of describing the same outcome. Jesus' death would bring humanity salvation, but it would also bring its end.

Despite the great expectations of Jesus and his followers, however, nothing happened. That is, the crucifixion was carried out according to the scriptures, but humanity was not redeemed. Jesus did his duty but, as Judas comments, looking back on the event from nearly two thousand years later, "It wasn't enough, and in fact we are still here, in this vale of tears. In the act of redemption, something went wrong" (172).³⁴

To understand what went wrong, we have to return to the final lines of the narrative when Judas again directly addresses first Jesus and then the Father. Despite Jesus' trust that his father would not abandon him, he does, or at least so it seems from Judas' account. Judas' response to the father's abandonment of his son is to cry out again to the Eternal from the depths of Hell, but to demand that his cry go unheeded.

The chalice is done, You are about to die. Where is Your father?

David's lament issues from Your mouth, "My God, my God, why

³³ "L'umanità non era mai stata tanto vicina alla sua salvezza, o alla sua fine."

³⁴ "Non bastò, e infatti siamo ancora qui, nella valle di lacrime: nell'opera della redenzione, qualcosa non ha funzionato."

have you forsaken me?”

There is no answer.

Then, with a cry, You render up Your spirit.

The earth quakes more powerfully, the veil of the Temple is rent
in two, I run to my final desperation.

O Eternal, I cry out to you from places far too deep.

Lord, do not listen to my voice. (193-194)³⁵

Here again, Judas (and Berto) shows his thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. Judas’ final plea to the Eternal reverses David’s prayer from Psalm 130:

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord

Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive

To the voice of my supplications . . .

Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there
is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption.

And he shall redeem Israel from all its iniquities. (1-2, 782)

Like so many of Judas’ reflections, this final plea – “do not listen to my voice” – is enigmatic. Francesco Ciabattini has interpreted it as Judas’ request for eternal punishment.

Indeed, if, . . . Judas’ betrayal ‘has paradoxically
caused Christian salvation,’ such betrayal must be
punished *in aeternum* for man’s salvation also to be
eternal. . . Judas paraphrases David but asks he Lord *not* to heed
his plea so that human history can have a positive outcome,
(Fontanella and Vettori 84).

³⁵ “Il calice è finito, stai per morire. Dov’è il padre? Ti esce dalla bocca il lamento di Davide, ‘Dio mio, Dio mio, perché mi hai abbandonato? Non c’è risposta. Allora, con un urlo, rendi lo spirito. La terra di scuote più forte, il velo del Tempio si squarcia, corro verso la mia disperazione finale. O Eterno, io grido a te da luoghi troppo profondi. Signore, non ascoltare la mia voce.”

To be sure, this interpretation seems to be in line with orthodox Christian doctrine: Jesus died for our salvation, Judas betrayed Jesus and by doing so, he helped bring about Jesus' death; therefore, Judas has paradoxically caused Christian salvation.

On the other hand, this interpretation does not seem to fit with the rest of Judas' narrative. After watching Jesus die and hearing his unanswered cry of abandonment, Judas runs off in desperation to commit suicide, not because his betrayal has led to redemption but because it has not. Something has gone wrong. The father's abandonment of Jesus has prevented redemption from coming to fruition. Indeed, Judas' entire tale, intricately constructed in opposition to the canonical gospels, has been inspired by this failed redemption. It seems much more likely, therefore, that Judas' reversal of David's plea signifies a reversal in the outcome of his own quest for faith. As he told Jesus earlier, Judas finally believed in His mysterious divinity (Berto 172), and so he had decided to act in the only way he could to help Jesus bring about redemption, to achieve glory.

When Jesus fails to redeem humanity, Judas knows that his act, his sacrifice and his betrayal, the evil deed that was intended to achieve good, what he was destined to do and chose to do, has also failed. From this perspective, Judas' final plea that the Lord not listen to his voice seems more like defiance or refusal of divine intervention rather than acceptance of eternal punishment. Jesus' failure seems to have convinced Judas that his newly won faith in Jesus' mysterious divinity was misplaced, and so he has returned to embrace the liminality of the human condition.

It is helpful, I think, in confronting the enigma of the book's final words, to recall a passage from Judas' account of Pilate's final interrogation of Jesus. When Pilate asks Jesus "What is the truth?" (180)³⁶ and Jesus does not answer, Judas comments that perhaps Jesus did not answer because he was expecting to give an answer with his imminent death and glory, "But this not having

³⁶ "Che cos'è la verità?"

happened, we continue to ask ourselves what is the truth.” (181)³⁷ Judas then cites Saint Paul again on the question of faith and offers a response worthy of Qoheleth:

Paul later wrote that faith is the certainty of hoped-for things, the demonstration of invisible things. A satisfaction that is inscrutably given, a crossing over into the eternal spheres.

Rabbi, for us – for those to whom not enough is given – faith might consist in not asking questions, not of the Eternal, nor of You, nor of ourselves. But this, too, crosses over into the eternal spheres of non-life, and maybe the only way is not to expect answers to questions that cannot have any. (181-182)³⁸

Viewed in this light, Judas’ final cry seems to be an embrace of the position of Qoheleth, that humans can do nothing, for better or worse, that will cross over into the eternal spheres; that tormented questioning about the meaning of life and redemption is, in the end, a useless exercise. Nevertheless, Judas and Berto may be telling us, Qoheleth’s belief in the futility of questioning the meaning of life is itself a kind of faith. It may not be Christian faith, but it may be the only faith available to humanity; a faith in earthly life for its own sake, a faith that embraces the ambiguity and the liminality of the human condition, a faith, to paraphrase William James, that life is lived in the transition.³⁹

³⁷ “ma ciò non essendo accaduto, continuiamo a chiederci che cosa sia la verità.”

³⁸ “Paolo scrisse che fede è certezza di cose sperate, dimostrazione di cose non visibili. Un appagamento che viene imperscrutabilmente dato, sconfinamento nelle sfere eterne. Rabbi, per noi – coloro ai quali non viene dato abbastanza – la fede può consistere nel non fare domande: né all’Eterno, né a Te, né a noi stessi. Ma anche questo sconfinamento nelle eterne sfere della non vita, e forse l’unica via è non aspettare risposta alle domande che non possono averne.”

³⁹ “Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line, we live prospectively as well as retrospectively. It is 'of' the past, inasmuch as it comes expressly as the past's continuation; it is 'of' the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued *it*.” William James, *A World of Pure Experience* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 5 (first published in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* (1904) 1, 533-543, 561-573).

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