

An Anthropologist's Essay on  
Joshua Horowitz's *Lilith*, The Night Demon

By Michael Fahy, Ph.D.

*Some qualifications: A good bit of my response may be idiosyncratic (if not entirely off base) to the extent that it provoked a number of associations that others wouldn't necessarily share with me. On the other hand, I suppose artists neither expect nor welcome a uniform response to their work, especially when it is as complex and multifaceted as *Lilith*, which operates on so many different levels. In fact, for me, that is much of its power, and I am old enough (and young enough) to be comfortable with not being able to "get it all." I am thinking here particularly about the music which so movingly and profoundly animates and at turns propels *Lilith* and gives so much to the richness of its meanings and texture - which I experienced even before I heard the music.*

My first idiosyncratic association: *Lilith* led to my remembering reading Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* many years ago. On the most naïve level, Eco's book can be enjoyed as an historical murder mystery but, as I was reading it, I appreciated that there was an abundance of references - to Scholastic philosophy, for example - that were lost on me. Experiencing this in the encounter with a work of art doesn't have to result in shame or frustration; on the contrary, it can spark one's curiosity and the desire for "revisiting" or "re-listening." I am inclined to think that that is what good art actually *does*, in inspiring a certain sense of uncertainty, wonder and curiosity - which good teaching should do too. In any event, the enchantment of a multi-leveled, labyrinthine medieval library coupled with the looming threat of the Inquisition in the fat *The Name of the Rose* resonated, for me, with the vertiginous sweep of Jewish learning and lore coupled with the not-so-latent sense of looming danger, packed into the one-act *Lilith*.

And that is one of the first things that really grabbed me by the throat on my first reading of *Lilith*: its creation of a dramatic space of raw anxiety punctuated with relentless humor...or is it a space of raw humor punctuated with relentless anxiety? *Lilith* is - *arresting*, I think is the word - in its creation of a world of ribald laughter that one senses can, at any moment, devolve into a nightmare. Can and does.

On the initial reading, a question arose for me: What *is* this? It's kind of Brechtian: at least, the narrator conveys that kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* as he modulates between the voices of docent, circus barker and Monte Hall... But there is a bit of Dada at play here as well - *humpa pumpa humpa pumpa* - reminiscent of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and *Lilith* more broadly induces a kind of delirium: at once irreverent and deadly serious. But, wait: it also reminds me of Joyce and that kind of playing with (I *really* want to say "brilliant fucking around with") language (e.g., "a shtup and a shave") as a means of coaxing out some latent meaning that went unnoticed before. Maybe epiphanies don't always have to be good news.

And *the music!* I think I am referring to the באסמידן and “Come Poke My Ass” segments. My take: musical evocation of high culture (*I* associated to Vivaldi’s *Beatus Vir* Psalms stuff), Biblical references (some embodied in *the Lingua Classica*, Latin) interpolated with the most profane (*and* sublime) of any vulgate: Yiddish curses. Anyone who is offended by associating the Song of Solomon with ass-poking wasn’t paying attention when s/he read it.

Speaking of vulgates, here is a wild association: In the mirror of Dante’s fourteenth century text, the images are decidedly and recognizably *modern* - i.e., consummately *us*. But, to my thinking, one can also read himself into *Horowitz’s* decidedly modern, twenty-first century text that invokes a world that is at a putative primeval or mythical remove: here I am thinking particularly about the repartee between Adam and Lilith which ends with:

me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me  
you you you you you you you you you you you you you

In my mind, this broaches *the* modern malaise *par excellence*, narcissism - not in the commonly impoverished understanding of “egocentrism,” but rather in what I understand to be a more clinical understanding of *narcissistic injury*: the gaping hole of a deficient self that is somehow never filled, whose appetites are never satisfied or desires never quenched. *Adam the Narcissist (and we’re all Adam)* - my next book.

In *listening* to curses of the באסמידן “scene,” another *Dantesque* association emerged for me, also from Canto III of *Inferno*. Having just passed through the Gates of Hell (“*Lasciate ogne speranza voi ch’intrate*”) and hearing from Virgil the words cited above, Dante’s first vivid exposure to hell is emphatically *auditory*--

*Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai  
risonavan per l’aere senza stele  
per ch’io al cominciar ne lagrimai*

*Diverse lingue, orribili favelle  
parole di dolore, accenti d’ira  
voci alte e fioche, e son de man con elle*

*facevano un tumulto...*

Here sighs, with lamentations and loud moans,  
Resounded through the air pierced by no star  
That even I wept at entering.

Varied tongues, horrible languages  
outcries of woe, accents of anger

voices deep and hoarse, with sound of hands  
made a tumult...

- as is the *text* of *Lilith*: the string of curse and counter-curse has a kind of rapid-fire, relentless effect. And yet, the music propelling the repartee is a kind of operatic recitative accompanying plenty of “horrible language” and “accents of anger” in a way that is not so much tumultuous as incongruent - or *dissonant*. Or something. (Actually, there is plenty of tumult in *Lilith*.) In any case, opera *a la façon de* Mozart transitions into jazz in the style of Keith Jarrett, with an effect that is not at all jarring: for me, it was more like the sensation of being “whooshed” through the air.

It would have never occurred to me to associate auctioneering with davening - but this rang true for me the minute I read it in the Horowitz interview. In both instances, one is easily taken up into the rhythmic trance of language - this being yet another example of how in *Lilith* the sacred cohabitates with the profane. This gave me a whole new twist on Abraham’s *bargaining* with God to spare Sodom:

Abraham: If I find 50 righteous men, will you spare the place?”

God: If you find 50, I will spare it.

Abraham: [imagining his having an auctioneer’s voice] I got 45, 45, 45, 45!

God: 40!

Abraham: And I got 40, 40, 40, 40, 40, 40!

God: 35! etc.

And those angels: a lot of bargaining going on there as well.

I was particularly intrigued by the “Names” section, which, I imagine not fortuitously, introduces us to Lilith’s sport of semen snatching. When I first opened to “Names” and saw “Ayn Sof,” I immediately associated it with the Kabbalah and the configuration of the *sephirot* or divine “attributes” as elaborated within Lurianic Kabbalah, the Ayn Sof being one of them.

By comparison to the scheme of Lurianic eschatology, the quest of Lilith seems to me thematically and ethically the mirror opposite of Lurianic *tikkun*, which is the redemption of scattered sparks through the performance of good deeds, *mitzvahs*, by all members of the community, understood to have an active role in the cosmological drama of redemption (we’re in exile because the Godhead is in exile too). Lilith, by contrast, is not about redemption but, *au contraire*, a kind of expropriation. Within the Lilith scenario, the active participants are framed as hapless victims. And what about the connection between seed and identity: what exactly is being taken away when one loses one’s seed? This is serious stuff within the Tradition - poor Onan being the only example of someone who would have beat Lilith to the punch.

On my way to leaving it to more discerning and capable minds to analyze the place of the unconscious in *Lilith*, which is huge, I will offer a few pedestrian comments

about how this aspect of the play “worked on me” so to speak. Sleep is complicated in *Lilith* but, thematically speaking, I think sleep is complicated *period*. It’s a respite and a refuge, but if it is propitious, it is also perilous. Sleep and the dreaming process kind of launches Jacob and Joseph’s careers, but it’s also the place where a guy in one of the Lord’s *tzvaot* can make a mess serious enough to have to spend an entire day doing laundry - *outside* the camp, *noch*, and it’s the when and where to which nightmares come. Sleep = unconscious = vulnerable. So: the body (ours, someone else’s), the (not-so-neatly-linear) narrative, one’s destiny: it’s all about control.

Therein lies - to my thinking - the genius of *Lilith*. I am an anthropologist by training and, as result, I am much under the sway of the import and power of what in my line of work goes under the term “ritual.” *Lilith* seems to me to have the structure of ritual. Between the child’s invocation, “Come on down and gather around,” and the final tail-of-the-tale pun, one enters a dramatic space of liminality in which discord, incongruity, jolting juxtapositions, clashing wills, conflict, the sacred and the lubricious, classical mastery and wild dissonance, laughter and terror (nothing very funny about infant mortality), negotiations, curses - all collide and commingle. One is never quite sure what is going to happen next (Jewish [and a maybe *any*] history, *tout court*). Ritual is, *constitutively*, transgressive and carnivalesque. *Lilith* is, *constitutively*, transgressive and carnivalesque. We are definitely not being given a tidy narrative which gives the audience the phony comfort of someone (e.g., the narrator or God, being in control).

Paul Rabinow, an anthropologist at U.C. Berkeley wrote a book titled *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. In it, he talks about a “night” event in a small village, in which the family of a sick child invited a group of local men to perform a healing ritual, a dramatic enactment of sorts with music and dance, to cure this young boy. It was a long and elaborate affair, with a whole array of food laid out for the performers but, as Rabinow tells us, at the end of this “night,” the performers, tired and spent, hardly touched what was put out for them, and sat to the side, silently smoking. This, he goes on to say, reminded him of seeing John Coltrane, some years before, resting between sets at a club in New York, covered in sweat and smoking as he leaned against a pillar. In both instances, Rabinow says, polished performers worked within culturally valorized idioms to explore troubling or less accessible states of mind and give them some form of release. That comes close to conveying my sense of the “liminal work” that gets accomplished in the unfolding of *Lilith*.

I was told that one person, apparently offended, walked out of the first Berkeley performance. Good: I take that as measure of great success. I say this because I am adamantly against the Jewish Diorama. Allow me to explain.

For many years, the Museum of Natural History at the University of Michigan had a permanent exhibit that consisted of a couple of dozen dioramas of Native American people - Ojibwa people, Plains Indians in their tepees, Hopi in their pueblos, etc.— until along came a Native American woman, a graduate student in anthropology

who, having got a job there, suggested that maybe that wasn't so cool, since she didn't much fancy her still-living culture (or vanquished ones) being given the equivalent of the taxidermy treatment (The dioramas are gone now).

I think something very similar goes on in a certain kind of sappy, *Oifn Pripotchek Bontsha Shveig* sentimental approach that effectively places the entirety of Yiddish culture on a pedestal that looks a lot like an old age home for *Bobbe* and *Zayde* or, at best, an entirely *parochial* Natural Park for Jewish Quaintness. To hell with that. I want the anti-romance of *Opatoshu's Horse Thief*, or the passion and, if this is the word, vehemence of S. Ansky's *The Strike*. You know, *real life*, with the full complement of human impulses and emotion.

What I *really* love about *Lilith* is that it embodies and exemplifies what is going keep Yiddish culture, following its decimation last century, alive and relevant (which Veretski Pass has done an awful lot of already). Closely associated with that, in my mind, is the sheer *vitality* of *Lilith*. For now, I will rely on memory and notes in connection to the movements beginning with the Malokhim segment. As I recall, it is shot through with different folk idioms, and the energy of folk music - I hear a snippet of something familiar, but it moves on before I can quite catch it, and another theme arises - as though each is struggling for its moment on the stage. So there is a kind of universalism at play here. It seems, musically, Horowitz casts a wide net - and that equates in my mind with relevance and vitality. The Diaspora having been what it was/is, Jews have absorbed, enriched, adapted and transformed cultures from all over the world. In a bizarre manner of speaking, Jewish cultural life is (small "c") catholic. The Yiddish language and Jewish culture in general, are fully viable vehicles of expressing universal human experience, which is in any case always refracted through a particular cultural lens.

*Lilith* is for me a tour de force because it is goddamn funny at points, terrifying at other points, makes you laugh, but it also makes you cringe - but above all it makes you feel and it makes you *think*. Not bad for an evening's entertainment.

Michael Fahy, ph.D

*Michael Fahy is a cultural anthropologist, expert on the modern Middle East and North Africa. He has designed and led numerous intercultural programs to train personnel of energy sector firms operating in the region. For the last seven years, he has been a lecturer and consultant for LDESP (Leader Development and Education for Sustained Peace), a pioneering cross-cultural, geo-political, and regional educational program of the Center for Civil-Military Relations, based at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, California. He has participated in the training of over 80,000 personnel of the U.S. military, NATO, and coalition forces in the United States and abroad. He has also given lectures at academic institutions, civic organizations and government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security. Michael has been a member of the Interactive Communications and Simulations project at the University of Michigan School of Education since 2003,*

*where he has co-designed, developed, and taught innovative, web-based simulations and learning projects involving schools throughout the U.S and abroad, and is now managing a grant funded by the Covenant Foundation. As the outreach program officer for the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the International Institute, at the University of Michigan, he devised teacher-support programs that successfully bridged academic research, updated pedagogy, and the requirements of secondary instruction. He also obtained an NEH grant and a Fulbright Study Abroad grant for outreach programs. Dr. Fahy was granted a Ph.D. by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, where he also taught graduate courses. He did research in Morocco as a Spencer and Fulbright Fellow. He speaks Arabic, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and Italian.*