

It must have started somehow

by Pietro Fortuna

Although I don't wish to stray from the object of this conversation, before I attempt a satisfactory answer, let me just express one reservation. You see, the question inquires after the beginning, after the moment in which painting disclosed itself to me in a guise that was to shape my fortunes as a painter. It is all very well, but you will forgive my difficulty in putting a date to it. We accept that all recollection is somewhat tainted hesitation, and the sobriety and alertness which the present commands have to give way to caution and reserve when dealing with the past (or is this just a ploy to buy us some time and reorder our memories?) And then again, I do *not* wish to disappoint you. 'Did it start somehow?' I ask myself. But of course, it must have. So let us go back to that time of childhood when you are engaged in something or other, as is the wont of all children, and have no notion that what you are about is in any way exceptional. You're just there, in that flow of constant wonder through which the realm of possibility is disclosed, taken by surprise. And there is the freedom, that freedom from responsibility you owe to simply not having done anything to earn it. (I was later to find out that art and freedom don't quite run so parallel as one would like to believe. But that's a different story.)

Then comes a day when you're doing exactly the same as you've ever done, but the feeling of an obstacle between yourself and that thing you want to be doing unexpectedly dawns on you, and you try to overcome it. Although it doesn't quite take the form of an actual impediment, it demands of you that you display a particular will. Without fully realising, you're faced with a problem of strategy, and elementary though it may be, there's enough for you to foresee that somewhere down the line there are values at stake which you'll have to lay down, and that meaning is involved, some question of purpose you'll have to stand up for. Once it comes to this, only time can prove you right: from then on it will just be a matter of time. Only, rather than follow the natural pace of one's most elementary needs, time is now subjected to our thoughts; the sense of time accompanies each new gaze (everything, in fact) and thus grows in strength and gravity.

With the awareness that a line has been overstepped, that a new landscape has opened up, and with the feeling of that responsibility, one is now in the position to say: 'it's early, it's late, now, or for ever'.

Well then, what I was called to do was to devise a remedy to an ailment. I couldn't sleep, you see – by the age of six I was already incapable of sound sleep. So in the night time I took to painting funerals: endless lines of mournful figures trailing grim hearses. I'd dissolve pastils of colour in water – three or four colours, no more – and paint over the kitchen tiles. Then, each morning, someone would have to wash down those walls, until the following night the processions, crosses, and coffins reappeared. Good, but nothing exceptional here, no enlightenment thus far. I'd taken to painting, true, but it was mechanical: scores of heads first, then torsos, and then again the legs, the crosses, the coffins. I had found a way of winning over the strain and lengths of enforced vigil, but that therapy had itself become insufferable. Technique had outdone meaning entirely and the elaborate representation bespoke nothing other than its own deployment.

All else was silent. The mode of the action had overtaken ideation. I had to make a decision opt for the lesser evil: should I accept the torment my own nature inflicted, or was I to find a way of being rid of the uncertain fate of being a painter? My determination not to give up was so strong that the preoccupation of dealing with my torment became of the greatest moment. It occurred to me that I might resolve the conflict by continuing in my activity as funeral illustrator if only I could open up new perspectives. That's when I painted just one funeral, with one coffin, and a single mourner. The intensity of that painting and the force it revealed, its scale thus curtailed, bore the entire weight of all the paintings that had gone before: the majesty of the subject had come to light at last. I was

nearing the answer. Good. That's how it started. It's what you wanted to know.

Perhaps I have said too little, but every beginning occurs by small measures. I believe (with Plotinus, and shall expand on the subject further down) that the work of art adheres to the plainest qualities, and that when certain bounds are overstepped its course is fated to improductivity. The very things it depends upon amount to little more than nothing: the aesthetic process that unfolds in the eye of the painter, the process of abstraction from the object, is not the added value of aesthetics; it is, indeed, something *less* than the object itself. With this reduction we must come to terms.

So it all comes to little more than nothing, as we were saying, rather like a beginning. Once again, it seems that the work of art finds in these two terms its most permanent constituents. Not just the beginning, but nothing also inhabits the work of art, each attracting the other to the point of indistinction.

The widespread and always current view whereby art should display the simulation of an action or the manifestation of a thought (thus eliciting the immeasurable question of its beginning) is indicative of the connection with something that persists in its being absent. Given that the world has undisputedly *not* been set aside, only to be replaced by some copy of itself, whatever arises with the work of art (if it is to be) has to be something of the order of a slackening that is introduced, a distraction created, initiating that peculiar transformation of perception into sensation. The interval thus created is the point where art can pick out the qualities on which it rests. So that which is absent, its Nothing, is the very promise of an impossible return to where the separation first occurred. In failing this impossible accomplishment the work of art finds its relevance – something that is irreconcilable with any diverse intention, any intent that is refractory to those qualities the work of art has drawn unto itself. In this sense, speaking of absence doesn't point to the limits of the work of art; the absent component is, in fact, a factor of strength, or quite plainly its fundamental state. The mark of its beginning persists even when the instant of inception is far behind; it bears weight, manifests itself with inert evidence. In the interplay of Nothing and Beginning, the latter outlines a promise; at the same time it generates the perception that if only this trajectory could be reversed, then a promise that points to the future – disclosed in the Beginning – would reveal the time *before* the initial moment: something like a blank memory, yet attractive nonetheless.

The relationship that binds the Beginning to Nothing is thus as hard to prove as to be undone. If we attempted to isolate the Beginning, detach it – as it were – from Nothing, we would endow the latter with perceptible qualities that distinguish it from the former.

To speak of the perceptible qualities of Nothing, however, is likely to short circuit our intellectual capacities; as for the notion of a Beginning, it derives its substance from the event it announces, but equally incorporates the incompleteness of Nothing. Again we are faced with the interdependence of the two terms, their relationship reconfirmed as an insoluble reciprocal bind.

We could conclude that their relationship lies in the distinction itself. Beginning and Nothing represent, we might say, the two fronts of the same threshold.

There is Nothing, thus, in every beginning, in the incompleteness of the present, in a gesture of farewell, in what ties us to the future. Caught up in its flow, Nothing is inseparable from Becoming: it sinks not into the void, it is the inactuality of occurrence. As Bloch put it, there is something missing in the present – the future, that is, is only thinkable in terms of that which is not yet manifest.

In its originary sense, as the modality that allows us to perceive within ourselves and beyond ourselves, Nothing follows in the wake of a movement into the beyond, a movement which requires space in which to develop and commits more time to itself. Something that is more, and not elsewhere, we may say; something that is yet to be, rather than never.

With what eyes do I behold the landscape before me? Each hill and slope, everything that crowds the scene of my vision refrains from self-narration, though in its baredness it is also a promise of further visions. In what I see there is an excess which is, as yet, nothing – so it is everything from the very start. The gamble of each beginning is in this sway between *not yet* and *for ever*. But there is something that goes deeper still, and to which I owe much of what has fundamentally defined my work: in looking, in turning to look again, certain idle thoughts arise, thoughts that fall somewhat short of ordinary expectation. With such thoughts, the gaze is drawn into the horizon before it, leaving us aimless, without target: here, a sense of passivity takes hold, predisposing us to embrace the disquiet of an awakening.

I speak not of things that are right before the eye, of those things that would deserve to be finally laid to rest (by painters, at least), but the time in which to look and turn to look again is something to which I surrender. This explains my reticence towards a relationship thus established: it is as though a modesty moved me, which gracefully alleviates the relinquishment.

Intently regarding a landscape has taught me that within the ordinary composition of a gaze (the source that feeds our visions of what they necessitate) also lies the inescapable quiet of all that remains: not as some kind of elsewhere, a sanctuary, where all residual things gather while they await to be named; nor do I mean that my thoughts, having yielded to passivity, should attempt to grasp nothingness and derive a novel identity from such unprovable segment of emptiness. What remains is the inseparable component of something greater which continues to exist beyond the field of our vision. It shall neither emerge nor sink. It is a presence that simply awaits the encounter with our gaze, and in that inevitable moment of synchrony, the Beginning, the inception, brings with it both Nothing and Becoming. And although historical time appears not to come into play, memory cannot forsake our consciousness and so deny us the most irremissible of values, responsibility.

With the responsibilities of my own time (in the same time that belongs to everyone), I am burdened by the sins of human folly: silently mourning with every new day that comes, I look and turn to look again.

I am compelled to go to the heart of all matters, not to stir the pulse of life within them, that energy that animates the universe. All things endure, indifferent to our attempts at defining identity and meaning. They announce themselves, but we must not think they come from some place, because things are *place* in themselves; nor do they rest upon anything, because they are the first and final frontier.

And thus is the misery of a small burden dispersed, a burden that gradually recomposes its exterior face in small measures: expression without privation, pointing to no end and announcing no redemption.

Try, if you are able, to forget the promises of art, the deceiving and hypocritical languages.

Their fate is to leave no more in the eyes of the beholder than a memory laid on their pupils.

Let us not forget, if we are able, the inert truth of art, even as it appears to abandon humanity. That seeming indifference is, at bottom, a restraint. Let us not drag our lives amongst the stones of which the works of art are made.