

# The scandal of exteriority

by Pietro Fortuna

That everything should begin and come to an end, that such inescapable fate should befall everything, has always been an object of philosophical reflection, and has frequently trespassed the bounds of philosophy. Confronted with the damning truth that all things appear to be caught between Being and Nothing, the West accordingly developed a body of wisdom and elaborated remedies against the angst of Becoming – which we may define as that process the unfolding of which entails its epilogue.

Within us sleeps the disquieting truth that the entire flurry of existence is bound to an end – to that one and unique moment at which death (a mere representation hitherto) shall come to touch – unmediated – our very own existence. Yet in spite of its ineluctable obviousness, such truth rests within ourselves not in the form of an awareness, but latently as an enduring threat. Sooner or later, some thoughtless moment shall spell our undoing, and the whole of our existence, with all of our thoughts, their combined weight, will not be enough to counterbalance that one instant of levity.

Thus we all of us stand like the tragic heroes in a mythology of the ordinary, sharing this awareness of being on the border of an enfolding mystery; we stand, day in day out, against the irreparable fact of existence. Bolstered by an armament of icons and thoughts, we line up to fight against the obscurity that seeps into our world, against the indeterminacy of that something which unfolds and smites our lives as it extends the boundaries of earth and time and yet still confines us on the outside; we are estranged by the very fact of being what we are, and never being anything else from the way we were cast.

Whatever the degree of our awareness; regardless of our being alone or comforted by a promise of salvation; no matter how we may try to hide behind the dealings of our consciousness, still we stand witnesses to an event which has its own unrest as an end.

The final moment, the tragedy of existence, coincides with the anomaly that life itself stands for. Life transcends all the relations and familiar attachments we might form to ensure that it stays with us, and always shall be more powerful than the length of time it has allotted itself.

As for us, what we're left with is a truce – not so that we might prepare to stand and wait, but so that we develop a tolerance, fluidify the clot of time and abandon all claims to subject it to verification.

Light, and god within light, bring the night amongst things.  
All things and creatures are at the mercy of the presence of he who has in himself the being of all things.  
Of god who is everything and leaves all things in nothingness.  
Saulus sees no other thing but nothing, for every thing and creature has been incorporated within the presence of god, who is now in light.  
From within nothing, Saulus can but receive the evidence of that light.  
Saulus stands as though spared from the despoliation of light, custodian of that nothing which brings god in a light that shines onto itself.  
The surrounding space lies bare, divested of outlines and depth, contracted and flattened into an irreducible face.  
It is an indeterminate space to which there is no access.

**The singular being**

Saulus is alone before the light, in the solitude god has reserved for him. He is a man chosen amongst men and the destined witness to all.

There is one who is talking while many stand to listen. I am before each one of you and simultaneously before all of you. Each one of you listens, but equally, all of you are listening. Likewise, each one of us stands as a single being before the things of this world, though we all stand before them too. So far, asserting our dual condition as singular individuals and part of the many hasn't amounted to much – distinct, lost into the crowd or naked before the possibility of some contact.

And yet, the sway between singular and plural does not amount to a neat contrast.

Each single existence is dependent on that common bound wherefrom the relation of all beings descends.

The others stand against that same background that enfolds the singular being of each. For our uniqueness to emerge we must distinguish ourselves from everyone, stand apart from all individualities. And always, among us, we alternate between elusion and need of proximity, no distance may cancel our condition of being inseparable individuals. No solitude may cancel our being amongst others, the tie which not even death can sever, although we are all fated to that same departure.

## **Exteriority**

Saulus is the sole witness of a fraction of objectless existence, an exteriority coinciding with its own event.

If we singularly address somebody, the sense, tone, and form of our words shall adapt to the conditions that contact commands. Likewise when a full audience of listeners stands before us. What both instances have in common is that we are first and foremost confronted by foreignness – something that exists in spite of our existence, an event that divides and at the same time includes and involves us. Without addressing us it engages our senses, it is around us and outside of us. A single glance can't take it all in, it perdures in its state, it is pure exteriority. My being before you and your being before me establishes exteriority as the order we both reciprocally depend upon; there is no tool, knowledge, nor wisdom that may avert that impact.

We are all burdened by our individuality, our thoughts seeking the space to put between our smallest atom of intimacy and the world's infection. But between all that exists and our individual lives runs the flux of exteriority, a load that keeps piling up before our bellies as though it were the substance of new encounters.

## **Things**

Well then, in seeing god within nothing, Saulus is admitted to an absolute vision, in which all individual things are reabsorbed into the setting that originated them. There is no trace of change, nor proof, nor artifice. It is act and power at once.

We look about ourselves and perceive certain things. Of others, we know that they exist, we came

across them in the past and have stored their image; others still await our visit.

There is an intellect that thinks and can form representations of things even when we are not before them. The same it can do with immaterial things, things we shall certainly never encounter, but can name and store in our language. It would seem, then, that things lie scattered as they wait for our gaze to intercept them, or as they wait to join the flow of our consciousness.

We are amongst things – the things that are given us. By this proximity we understand we share with them the setting to which we too are admitted.

A setting, I say, for it would be incorrect to think of it as a place; like the things around us, we already constitute a place: we are not supplementary objects floating in the emptiness of a space that act as a support to our presence.

We take our place among things and mingle into a whole which we perceive as a certainty. It is a certainty that rests upon our inborn capacity to regard as meaningful the things that display themselves before our intentions, give meaning to the world whose own revelation is deferred to us. It is an act of giving that addresses existence and transcends it, contributing much more than may be gleaned in the plain aspect of a presence. Pursuing this intelligible thread that transcends us, we experience our own thought as something that is not simply capable of admitting everything that may be perceived or even named, but can cast itself among things – it can think them and at once be itself one of them.

## **Nothing**

In seeing nothing, Saulus comes to meet things and sees, in all there is to be seen, the act of seeing itself. Nothing is the waning and waxing of infinite gazes, of new forms of visibility.

So what is nothing? An emptiness, an amnesia caused by the loss of completeness of the whole? Is it the interval into which the evidence of things lapses, dragging along our discontented spirit into a ruinous fall? Is it that superior level, inaccessible to the gratification of reason and reserved to that unproven and submerged part of ourselves that spells its promise in silence? Is it a late-coming future that even in misery persists in announcing a delayed gift? Is it that wherein novelty takes form? These, and all like questions, are possible when we think of the invisible in terms of the visible, and when we seek that which eludes our gaze with the knowledge that it must continue to exist somewhere.

So, we ask, by what is an absence replaced? What is it that fills the void of something that no longer is where our eyes had left it, of something that seems beyond our control? And yet we do carry a copy of things with us and are always ready, at any moment, to display it or bring it to surface as an image that is firmly impressed in our memory. The point is that the original and the originality of the instant at which things first made their impression on us is, now, no longer present: that perception has been deactivated into a mode of absence.

What remains is not a void – only an elsewhere with regards to things as we had left them. The not-being-there of those things and that occasion, the invisible that fills us with the fullness of truth, has the power to saturate our senses and perceptions; if, in fact, we think Nothing as an absence, then it draws substance and intelligibility from the very things whose privation it embodies – without, at the same time, displaying their mould, without standing as their ghost. So the disappearance inaugurates an interval that extends into Nothing and recasts the die of what is yet possible.

Therefore, nothing happens. Nor is there any Becoming of Nothing, in the sense that there is neither intrusion nor contact with the things we could once see. If it were otherwise, then there would be a provenance of Nothing, and it would have the capacity to operate.

By conceiving of Nothing an event we are distracted from truth, placing the cornerstone for our propensity to conceive of it as an absolute. It is like looking into the void where everything seems to escape our attention and fade into that background where everything is at once: well then, in the indistinctness of that vision, that's where Nothing is. Saulus, does not see Nothing instead of things; he sees that Nothing lies within things. God's presence, when it obscures all things in its light, does not deprive Saulus of their presence. It does not trade them with Nothing, but enfolds them in the light of its being, which holds in it the being of all things. A transition occurred from gaze to vision when the light invaded all things and left Saulus with nothing but itself as vision. Saulus recognised god in that pure visibility and indeterminacy within which everything can be seen. Nothing, originating as a gift, maintains god's alterity, and destines humanity, confined within the dimension of all creatures, to its freedom.